Defining ‘Female Youth’ in South Sudan

Christina Williams
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a country where 50% of the population is below age 18 and 72% of the population is under age 30, South Sudan has perhaps one of the youngest populations in the world. Along with its newly acquired status as an independent country, this puts South Sudan in the unique position of creating and enforcing an innovative new national youth policy. One simple, but perhaps largely overlooked challenge to such a policy is the very definition of youth. Currently South Sudan has no official definition. Publicly and privately, different meanings have emerged from the population and the government, as the term varies even among tribes. Unofficially it appears as though the Youth ministry believes that the age range should include people up to age 30. The lack of an official policy however, has had the unfortunate impact of allowing important youth initiatives to be donor-driven. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the policies relating to female youth.

In South Sudan, both men and women generally agree that females are not included in the term ‘youth’ since girls are often married young and thereafter viewed as adults. Those women that do not get married tend to be perceived as girls within their communities and are generally kept out of sight. Youth in South Sudan is thus less defined by age than by a stage of development or social category that people experience. In light of these different cultural perceptions of female youth in South Sudan, international aid agencies and donors have all sought different ways of ensuring gender balance in their programming. This paper sought to understand how organizations incorporate female ‘youth’ into their youth programs to determine whether a flexible definition of youth was needed to incorporate social stages of the youth population.

Through a number of interviews with practitioners in South Sudan, it was found that many international organizations defined youth as young men and women between the ages of 15-24 or 25. Many acknowledged that though they were confined to this age set, South Sudanese themselves perceived youth as anyone under the age of 30. Prior to starting their youth programs in South Sudan, approaches by international organizations to understand the cultural and economic barriers varied greatly along with efforts to encourage female participation. Likewise, organizations sought a variety of initiatives to accommodate female youth who often have to balance domestic responsibilities in addition to making time to participate in the youth programs. For instance, while one organization provided young mothers with a nursery that was in the same facility as their program, another organization worked with female youth to identify their daily responsibilities by drawing up ‘gender daily calendars.’ To ensure that young women could continue to reap the benefits of these youth programs after the training ended, organizations have also sought a number of creative ways to instill ownership such as providing toolkits that youth could use after the program or facilitating a community’s ability to create project proposals for their ideas.

Despite the ways in which organizations have sought to adapt their own definitions of youth to those constructed by South Sudanese, barriers to incorporating youth, and particularly female youth, remain. An American professor who participated in a teacher training program noted that many of the female teachers were too exhausted to actively participate because of the sheer number of domestic responsibilities they performed prior to attending the training. Without doing more to address this concern directly, donors and others run the risk of barring female youth from successful entry and completion of their programs. As seen in other countries, while private and state actors have attempted to incorporate more female youth into employment sectors, some actors have conditioned entry on overly restrictive agreements. In one example, young women are forced to sign these agreements and pledge not to get married or go on maternity leave within a certain number of years after becoming employed. Thus by not
directly addressing the domestic responsibilities of female youth, this potentially risks ingraining an attitude that forces female youth to choose between two mutually exclusive options: marriage or economic opportunity.

Moreover since many organizations focused on youth up to age 25, most had little to no idea on whether there were programs for married or unmarried female youth from 26-30. Unmarried female youth, as mentioned earlier, are often marginalized even more so than their married counterparts and are largely perceived as girls in their communities. As a result unmarried female youth are rarely included in youth programs because they are left at home. By not establishing a clear national youth policy, the South Sudanese government, donors, and international aid agencies are potentially reinforcing pre-existing social barriers that prevent unmarried female youth from having equal opportunities to build their capacities. This human rights violation will have a particularly damaging effect on long-term efforts to empower women, if youth are not defined in such a way that encompasses the social stages of development within their societies.

**Recommendations:**

**To the South Sudan Government:**

- Create a flexible definition of youth that is inclusive of young men and women in the particular social stages of development they experience.

- Create a national youth policy to establish a vision on how youth issues should be addressed. Given South Sudan’s overwhelmingly young population, this effort should be a cross-sectoral approach including the full range of South Sudan’s ministries since many of South Sudan’s current domestic issues will also inherently be youth issues as well.

- Instruct international organizations to cultivate transparency by providing their monitoring and evaluation (M&E) reports to a designated ministry within the Government. The provision of M&E reports will provide candid insight and assessments on what policies work and don’t work for youth in South Sudan. It enables the South Sudan government to take ownership of these youth initiatives and assists them in creating an effective national youth policy.

- Appoint a designated ministry with the task of collecting age and sex disaggregated data from all organizations working in South Sudan. This better enables the Government to see and understand who is being targeted and whose needs are not being met. This information would also better inform the creation of a national youth policy.

- Promote policies that ensure that local, state, and international actors are not unintentionally or intentionally promoting policies that use the social status of married or unmarried female youth as a means of inhibiting their access to programs, employment and other public and private domains.
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Almost a year after independence, South Sudan has been struggling to deal with a number of issues including border insecurity, oil disputes, and questions surrounding the citizenship of refugees and internally displaced persons. Although these issues are all inextricably linked to the overwhelmingly young population, little has been done to focus on or create a national youth policy to provide guidance to donors and non-governmental organizations. In 2011, the Government of South Sudan produced the South Sudan Development Plan 2011-2013 (SSDP) in collaboration with working groups from the Executive branches of government, state ministers from all 10 states, and international aid agencies. The plan provides a framework by which the Government will address four key sectors: governance, economic development, social and human development, and conflict prevention and security.2

While the plan outlines ideas on how to tackle certain youth issues, it also establishes that different initiatives for youth will focus on different age ranges. For instance, the Youth Ministry vows to target youth between the ages of 15-29 to promote gender balance in sports and recreational activities. Under health initiatives, the Government seeks to reduce the HIV/AIDS rate by 2013 for youth from age 15-24. Government statistics on the demographics of their population also refer to youth as between the ages of 10-25. Though not listed on their website, one practitioner noted that at the Youth Ministry, youth are generally regarded as people between the ages of 15-35, while some officials, however have also expressed that youth could include people up to age 40.3 While the age difference can be attributed to a lack of an official definition for youth in South Sudan, it also highlights the flexibility needed to address issues pertaining to the different stages of development that people experience.

In October 2010, the Child Protection Sub-Cluster in South Sudan was created by the international community to “[bring] relevant stakeholders together to ensure improved protection of children’s rights through coordination of efforts and information sharing.”4 Many organizations within this sub-cluster were contacted to understand how they defined youth and how their programs target and incorporate female youth in South Sudan. This was important in understanding whether there was a need to consider a more flexible definition of youth based on characteristics or stages of development within the youth population. Altogether over 40 organizations from the international community, United States, South Sudanese Diaspora and local South Sudanese were contacted for this paper. Among those that responded to the queries, international organizations most often defined youth as somewhere between 10-24 and included both boys and girls.

Youth Programs in South Sudan

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) which has been in South Sudan since 2004 and is a member of the Child Protection Sub-Cluster has sought to offer comprehensive programs to returnees and internally displaced persons that address food security, livelihood, shelter, education, water, hygiene and sanitation, and emergencies. For youth specifically, they have sought to support education programs for

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3 Email Interview with UNDP representative in South Sudan (Apr. 16, 2012).
teachers, children, and youth by building Youth Education Pack (YEP) centres that provide literacy and numeracy skills, life skills and vocational trainings to youth, 50% of which are female. For the YEP, NRC targets people between the age of 15-25, most of whom are returnees or internally displaced persons. When asked about youth, NRC acknowledged that “youth is a very elastic concept…and many people would say that you are still a youth up to your 40s.”

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) in South Sudan has also been in country several years prior to South Sudan’s independence in July 2011. They are currently the lead agency coordinating the South Sudan clusters on education, nutrition and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). They are also the sub-cluster lead on Child Protection. In South Sudan UNICEF focuses on providing children with educational opportunities, psychosocial support, nutrition, emergency assistance, health intervention, and preventing the recruitment of children into armed forces. UNICEF follows the interagency definition and defines youth as those between the ages of 10-24. UNICEF noted that currently their programs target rural youth, both girls and boys. In defining the criteria for youth to participate in their programs, UNICEF believes that all youth and children have a right to participate and they try to ensure that all groups of children are included. They also mentioned that the South Sudan government is making a case to consider youth up to the age of 30 and that UNICEF would try to accommodate the government in addressing youth up to this age.

Save the Children has been in South Sudan for over a decade and they are also the co-lead on the Sub-Cluster on Child Protection. As it relates to children, much of Save the Children’s activities focus on services for children separated from families during the war, and improving the quality of education and schools. Save the Children defines youth as between the ages of 15-24 and through their programs, they target children and their caregivers. They also note that youth in South Sudan is seen as anyone under the age of 30 and often tends to refer to males. Once girls are married, they are deemed women, even if they are still legally children, and thus are not seen as youth. For boys, they must earn enough bride price to marry, which can often extend the time they are seen as youth. As a result, youth often is more related to marital status than age. In acknowledging the practical differences between their own definition and the local definition, Save the Children does education work designed for children in secondary school with refugee communities, but most students are older and can include people close to age 30.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC), which is also in the sub-cluster on Child Protection, defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15-24. Though IRC does not have programs specific to youth in South Sudan, they do work with adolescent girls as part of their gender based violence programming. Since girls are often pushed into marriage and abused at young ages, IRC often targets 10-14 year olds. While many of the organizations contacted acknowledged that their definitions of youth were different from the South Sudanese definitions, one of the starkest contrasts can be seen with the position of female youth in South Sudanese societies.

Status of Female ‘Youth’ in South Sudan

Among South Sudanese, if one asks a local what they mean by youth, they will almost certainly refer to males. South Sudan, like many other African nations, believes that girls are no longer youth once they are married. Unlike western cultures, where the concept of youth “tends to be younger and narrower”, in African cultures, youth is better understood “as a stage of social development between childhood and adulthood, a time of life stretching from puberty to the acceptance of the responsibilities of marriage and family.”

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5 Email Interview Norwegian Refugee Council representative in South Sudan (Mar. 28, 2012).
6 Email Interview with UNICEF representative in South Sudan (Mar. 30, 2012).
7 Email Interview with Save the Children representative in South Sudan (Mar. 30, 2012).
8 Email Interview with International Rescue Committee representative (Mar. 30, 2012).
The short time that girls are often left to transition from youth to adults can be attributed to a number of factors pertaining to cultural norms and South Sudan’s post-conflict environment. For many South Sudanese parents, girls are considered a source of wealth and pride for her family because of the dowry the family acquires if their daughter gets married. Since families are often struggling economically to rebuild their lives after the war, daughters are often married off at a young age to ensure the families’ own survival. Upon marriage, girls are expected to learn life skills from other female members in the household and formal education is often considered an investment best reserved for boys, because males are expected to provide for the family.\(^9\)

In some South Sudanese communities, educating girls may also be viewed negatively because “an educated woman who carries a pen rather than a bundle of firewood is considered a disgrace and by virtue of her education may attract a lower dowry.”\(^10\) Because of both cultural norms and the economic plight of South Sudanese, the early marriage of young girls precludes most of them from attaining primary education.\(^11\) Existing household and child-rearing obligations can also restrict the time and ability of young girls’ to participate in youth programming.\(^12\) Moreover the perception that married girls are not youth and that formal education for girls can generate contempt, illustrates some of the pre-existing barriers organizations might face in ensuring female participation in youth-focused programs.

**Incorporating Female Youth into Youth Programs:**

For many international organizations, female youth participation appears to be a top down approach to the cultural norms that typically hinder female youth from being active participants. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on how international organizations incorporate female youth into their youth programs, as little to no information was collected on how national organizations include female youth in South Sudan.\(^13\)

In 2011, UNDP conducted a participatory exercise in Unity state urging participants to move into a group they felt best categorized them: men, women, or youth. The exercise tended to emphasize the notion that young men and not young women considered themselves youth. In the youth group, there were 20 men, who were either unmarried or in the early years of marriage. There were also 5 women who were all married, but had been married for only a few years with few or no children. Unmarried women did not participate and are rarely included in these exercises, because due to cultural norms, they are considered girls and are left at home. This particularly illustrative example highlights the context many international organizations face as they seek to tailor youth programs to a population that perceives youth not by age, but the social category they are in.

Prior to starting their programs in South Sudan, international organizations each had different ways of assessing the cultural or economic barriers that posed challenges to its youth program. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), for instance, conducted market assessments, to determine what skills were needed in those communities and what services would create opportunities to make money. By talking to local citizens, the assessment also determined whether YEP students would be able to access the market upon graduating. Before setting up the YEP centres, NRC also actively engaged the community, the Payam administration, and the state’s Ministry of Education and then proceeded to sign a

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13 Several national organizations in South Sudan were contacted for this paper but most phone numbers listed on the organization’s website did not work and no email responses were received.
Memorandum of Understanding with the community. NRC includes females, youth, and the elderly from the beginning in an attempt to foster wide acceptance from the community. The community’s understanding and acceptance becomes especially important in ensuring that 50% of those attending the YEP centres are female. As discussed later, UNDP’s Community Security and Arms Control (CSAC) Project also undertakes consultations with each county in South Sudan to gain insight into the specific challenges and barriers facing the community.

To encourage female youth to participate in their programs, international organizations have developed and implemented a number of creative ways to create a gender balance in their programs. NRC, for example, works with the Ministry of Education and other advocacy campaigns to emphasize the importance of girls’ education. They also work with local Community Education Committees to encourage community members to send girls to school.14 The Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC), in contrast, promotes equal participation of females and males in programs and services by advocating for the participation of young people in “non-traditional occupations such as heavy machinery, mechanics, electrical engineering, etc.” They also work with service providers “to encourage female youth to think outside what they might consider ‘women’s work’… [so] they can access occupations that are higher paying and more prestigious.”15 UNDP’s CSAC Project has also sought to encourage female participation by conducting consultations in each county with men, women, youth and the elderly. In each consultation, participants have sought to discuss and analyze issues related to conflict and insecurity that had the greatest impact or were of the greatest concern to them. The variety of answers illustrates the number of ways organizations try to overcome barriers relating to a different local definition of youth by seeking ways in which girls do not exclude themselves from participating.

In recognizing that female youth may have limited time to participate in programs due to domestic responsibilities and other factors, organizations have also tackled this issue in a variety of ways. NRC provides young parents, and especially mothers, an opportunity to take children to the YEP centre’s nursery for the day. WRC also tries to ensure that female youth in South Sudan are accommodated by advocating that service providers conduct “thorough participatory assessments to capture opportunities and barriers to access and based on that provide courses at alternative times (evenings, weekends) as well as provide child care.”16 UNDP’s CSAC have also sought to provide equal opportunities to female youth by identifying the different daily responsibilities women and men have in order to update their toolkits to better enable female participation. By working with the community, UNDP has facilitated their ability to “draw up ‘gender daily calendars’, which clearly outline the roles and responsibilities for women vis-à-vis men – in some cases daily calendars were done specifically for young women and young men.”17 The data illustrated that while older and younger men conduct different tasks during the day, married younger and older women typically undertake the same tasks. Based on this information, UNDP is seeking to design trainings that are more flexible and take into account the daily schedule and workload of women. Despite attempting to make these accommodations, organizations continue to face enormous challenges in incorporating female youth into their programs.

NRC notes that married female youth are still constricted in that “many men do not want their wives to attend education programs…Ithere is a belief that the women should be attending to household chores and other domestic tasks, [and] not build their capacity outside the domestic sphere.”18 One American professor who went to both Juba and a rural village in South Sudan noted that while they

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14 Community education committee” refers to a committee established to identify and address the educational needs of a community, with representatives drawn from parents and/or parent-teacher associations, local agencies, civil society associations, community organisations and youth and women’s groups, among others, as well as teachers and learners (where appropriate).
16 Email Interview with Women’s Refugee Commission representative (Apr. 17, 2012).
17 Email Interview with UNDP representative in South Sudan (Apr. 16, 2012).
18 Email Interview with Norwegian Refugee Council representative in South Sudan (Apr. 18, 2012).
sought to train teachers on how to teach students with limited resources, the few women that did participate often fell asleep during each training. When asked why, the female teachers responded that they were exhausted because they had a number of chores to do before coming to the training. It was noted that the men who showed up to the teacher trainings were, in comparison, well dressed and active participants. The professor noted that sometimes it seemed as though the men had nothing else to do and could afford to simply show up and participate in a meaningful way.\textsuperscript{19} Despite these challenges, organizations have continued to seek ways in which female youth are able to turn what they have learned into actionable items for the future.

In \textit{Creating Programs for Africa’s Urban Youth: The Challenge of Marginalization}, Marc Sommers indicates that “youth participants who are allowed to ‘own’ a program will have a greater chance of reaping lasting benefits from it, particularly those who have so often felt excluded or alienated from mainstream society.”\textsuperscript{20} Female youth, both married and unmarried, can be particularly susceptible to alienation and thus ensuring that they are given the capacity to take ownership can be particularly important in empowering them. WRC seeks to instill ownership by advocating in collaboration with microfinance institutions “to expand their services to youth so that young people can access loans and capital.”\textsuperscript{21} Similarly, NRC helps female youth take responsibility and ownership of their lives by encouraging them to become entrepreneurs, start a business with others, or seek employment in an existing business. Start-up kits are also given to YEP students should they seek to start a business. UNDP’s Millennium Development Goal Unit has also tried creating opportunities for youth employment by providing equal support for both young men and women.\textsuperscript{22} Through its county-by-county consultations, UNDP CSAC has also helped facilitate the community’s ability to come up with different project proposals. One recent example that was proposed by the community involved a youth training centre, which the community wanted in order to provide vocational skills and a youth association. The association would also be a place where youth could organize themselves, create collective enterprises, provide peer support, and distribute information on sexually transmitted infections.

Others have noted that not enough is done to create ownership or an understanding among students on the value of education or training. After a teacher training conducted in Akon, South Sudan, an American professor noted that while students would repeat the alphabet, their eyes often glazed over and they did not seem to understand the importance in learning how to read. The professor later remarked that she wished she had the time to buy soap or another item from the market to help the students read the instructions on the back of the product, so they could understand the value in reading. While the variety of methods organizations used to ensure that female youth, ‘own’ these programs vary, many organizations do not seem to have a clear idea of what happens to married or unmarried female youth between 26-30.

International organizations, as mentioned before, generally define youth up to age 25, yet recognize the flexibility needed in light of South Sudan’s own understanding of youth. Considering that the South Sudanese government thinks of youth as people up to age 30, there is little to no available information on the female age group 26-30. While NRC notes that they allow youth and adults above 25 to enroll in their literacy programs, others acknowledge that married women are “off almost everyone’s radar.” The lack of information potentially highlights a glaring gap in services and programs being provided to this demographic. If South Sudan’s population believes that once married, girls are no longer youth, it still leaves open the question of what happens to unmarried female youth that are 26-30. The lack of information illustrates the potential for reinforcing human rights violations that prevent female

\hspace{1em}\textsuperscript{19} Phone Interview with Professor at the Central Washington University (Apr. 22, 2012).
\hspace{1em}\textsuperscript{20} Marc Sommers, Tufts University, Creating Programs for Africa’s Urban Youth: The Challenge of Marginalization (2007), http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/cice/10-1MarcSommers.pdf
\hspace{1em}\textsuperscript{21} Email Interview with Women’s Refugee Commission representative (Apr. 17, 2012).
\hspace{1em}\textsuperscript{22} Email Interview with UNDP representative in South Sudan (Apr. 16, 2012).
youth from seeking opportunities that improve their status and wellbeing in society. Moreover it also highlights the importance in having a flexible definition of youth, one that is based more on the social characteristics of the population, rather than one strictly confined to age.

The responses from NGOs on the ways in which they seek to understand cultural norms, encourage and accommodate female youth, create ownership, and are inclusive of all segments of the youth population illustrate both the creativity and a lack of cohesion in approaching these issues. While many of these organizations have taken a top down approach in ensuring that females are included in their programs, it is not altogether clear that the communities appreciate and understand the differences in what NGOs mean by youth and what they understand by youth. As it was pointed out, many older female youth exclude themselves because they are not married and thus are seen as girls within the community, rather than youth or women. Moreover while some organizations may have flexible age ranges for youth participants, this does not necessarily mean that female youth nearing 30 are actively pursued to encourage participation in programs. From the responses, it appears clear that the definition of youth needs to be adjusted in a way that incorporates the cultural beliefs and practices of South Sudan. Without such an adjustment, organizations and communities may continue to struggle with unintended gaps in programs for youth.

Ultimately the Government must take a more pro-active role in creating a national youth policy and in collecting age and sex disaggregated data to understand what lessons can be gleaned from the organizations currently working with youth. While many organizations send monitoring and evaluation (M&E) reports to their donors on the value of the program and the lessons learned, it is unclear whether candid assessments are also conveyed back to the South Sudan Government. Without more transparency from the NGOs and the Government, gaps in youth programming may continue to have a long-lasting impact. Thus a flexible definition of youth becomes necessary in creating more effective programs for populations according to their social category. This also helps ensure that segments of the population are not being unintentionally excluded because of conceptual differences in what youth are.

Regional Responses to the Inclusion of Female Youth

Although there are a number of recommendations heeding organizations to recognize the differences between western definitions of youth and African definitions of youth, especially as they relate to female youth, responses among African countries and organizations working in those contexts varies widely. In Nigeria, the National Youth Policy defines youth as all young people between the ages of 18-35. Somewhat similar to South Sudan, early marriage in some parts of Nigeria is common as 48% of girls are married by the age of 15. While employment sectors in Nigeria are seeking to incorporate female youth, it also appears that some policies are overly restrictive as employers put conditions on married girls prior to entering the workforce. One such example can be seen with the New Generation of Banks, where young female graduates are required to sign agreements that they will not get married for a requisite number of years or they won’t go on maternity leave for a number of years after employment. If the girls do not comply, their jobs are terminated or promotions denied.

In Kenya, the Population Council and K-REP Development Agency (KDA) established the Tap and Reposition Youth Initiative (TRY). Their aim was to target adolescent girls between the ages of 16-22 and create a microfinance program. Due to defaults and drop outs, Population Council and KDA reexamined why there was a low retention rate and found that only 12% of the participants were living

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with parents, while others were living with a boyfriend or heading households on their own. After a second assessment, Population Council and KDA took into account what it was that the girls were looking for from their programs and adapted their original model accordingly. In Kenya, the girls were more interested in a social support system rather than the micro credit process and this aspect was strengthened and re-incorporated in the second micro credit program.26

These examples from Kenya and Nigeria are illustrative of the flexibility needed to tailor programs according to the needs of the population. Assuming that targeting a certain age group with a program that the international community finds important does not always translate into whether and perhaps more importantly, the group targeted finds this important. The Nigeria example is especially insightful in highlighting ways that governments or other private actors use characteristics of a particular group as a tool against them to ensure successful entry into their programs. Overall, while many find youth to be both a compelling problem and solution to development quandaries, it is important that agencies adapt programs to the cultural needs of a population to be more effective.

**Youth or General Societal Issues?**

When implementing programs for people traditionally defined as youth, international definitions of youth do not always translate into how locals in South Sudan perceive youth. On the other hand, if one was to use the term youth according to the South Sudanese definition, the Government and others would always be working towards rebuilding at least 70% of the population. Is it useful and productive to continue to define this segment of the population as youth or would it be better to address these issues as a societal issue?

Age is certainly a useful indicator for programming purposes. However restricting programming to certain age groups tends to ultimately focus development efforts on what the international community believes South Sudan needs, as opposed to structuring programs according to the needs of the South Sudanese. When talking about youth, South Sudanese like other African countries, talk less about age and more about the stage of social development between childhood to adulthood.

Among practitioners in South Sudan, some noted that among the challenges that organizations face in implementing strong youth programs is the country’s lack of coordination or vision on how to deal with youth issues. There are few existing youth organizations and those that do operate have little capacity to do so. Overall youth are a low priority for the new Government and this is perhaps best evidenced by the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports being one of the least funded ministries. A strong national youth policy that incorporates a flexible definition of youth would go a long way in offering clear guidance for partners and donors to ensure uniformity and cohesion among current youth programs. Moreover, in creating such a policy, South Sudan would be building a foundation that recognizes and addresses the wide-ranging impact youth have, especially as they relate to South Sudan’s most immediate and urgent concerns, including border insecurity, cattle raiding, and oil disputes.

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