**South Sudan Marks International Youth Day: What are the Challenges Facing Youth in the new Republic of South Sudan?**



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August 12th denote the annual commemoration of the United Nation designated International Youth Day (which should not be confused with the World Youth Day which is a Catholic religious holiday for the youth). According to Wikipedia, the day is “meant as an opportunity for governments and others to draw attention to youth issues worldwide. Concerts, workshops, cultural events, and meetings involving national and local government officials and youth organizations take place around the world in honor of International Youth Day.” The new republic of South Sudan joined the world, on August 12, in the celebration of the International Youth Day. South Sudanese Youth, who make up a whopping 72% of the country population according to the last census, face lot of formidable challenges in the post-independence era.

Among the myriad injustices that compelled South Sudanese under the leadership of the Sudan People Liberation Movement/Army (The SPLM/A) to take up arms against Khartoum’s successively oppressive regimes was the idea that, with political and social liberation from the North, there would be economic liberation for our long impoverished region of Southern Sudan which had been for decades, unlike the North, lagging behind in socio-economic and political development. Now almost seven years into the day that SPLM/A triumphantly entered Juba city, a year after the successful conduct of the CPA-mandated referendum in the South, and just few weeks after the official declaration of South Sudan as the newest nation of the world, nothing much has changed as far as the living standard of the Youth in South Sudan is concerned.

What are the main problems facing the Youth of South Sudan in the post-independence era and after the founding of the new nation of South Sudan? Which are the plausible resolutions that the concerned players—the government of South Sudan (GoSS), civil society, international donors as well as the Youth themselves—should seek to end the persistent socio-economic and political marginalization of the Youth in the republic of South Sudan? Actually, what has become of our economic liberation that the Youth—alongside other liberators—fought so hard for and paid such an exorbitant price in blood and flesh? What could possibly explain this absurd abnormality in the economic well-being of the Youth in South Sudan at a time when our own sons and daughters, as opposed to foreigners, are in charge of our national cake?

**The Root Causes of Youth Economic Tribulations in South Sudan.**

In spite of South Sudanese Youth partial political and social freedom, which has bestowed upon them, for the first time, the means and the necessary resources to make visible differences amongst themselves in particular and within the entire new country in general, the economic conditions amongst the Youth is still as dire as it was prior to and throughout the war. For instance, abject poverty, dilapidating corruption and nepotism in public offices, poor public infrastructure, weak educational systems, chronic diseases, pathetic health care systems, intensified inter-tribal wars and political rebellions still reign in every region of our land. These abominable factors, couple with the well-documented historical marginalization of South Sudan, have exacerbated the socio-economic and political welfare of our Youth in present day South Sudan and undoubtedly into the foreseeable future in the new country if no drastic policies are , formulated, drafted and implemented to arrest the worsening situation.

Although there is no simple or single explanatory genesis to these prevailing teething troubles confronting the Youth in South Sudan, there are, still, many contributing factors that can be postulated as possible causes of the Youth pathetic and gloomy economic conditions. Among these hypotheses are inter-tribal conflicts and political rebellions; weak public schools and poor health care systems; our government’s utter failures to enforce the rule of law; and low rates of saving and investment among the South Sudanese people, not to mention the Youth. Certainly, in one way or the other, all of these deleterious dynamics have perpetuated the vicious cycle of poverty among the Youth of South Sudan.

First and foremost, South Sudan has witnessed a consistent number of inter-tribal strife since the advent of the Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA), the subsequent constitution of GoSS in 2005, during the successful conduct of the plebiscite, and even at this instant after the proclamation of the new state. For example, reported cases of cattle rustlings by various tribal bandits are widespread across Jonglei, Eastern Equatoria, Lake State, Unity and Warrap states, among others. Moreover, some of these tribally instigated skirmishes were, and are being, fought over land, Upper Nile state between the Shilluk and the Dinka, for instance. Meanwhile, others were or are motivated by a perceived encroachment of foreigners on ancestral land, as it happened in Western and Central Equatoria when the locals felt threatened by the continuous present of the Dinka IDPs on their ancestral land. As if all of these are not enough, persistent LRA’s attacks and fresh political rebellions spearheaded by contenders of the last general election, George Athor, Gatluak Gai, Peter Gadet and David Yau Yau, have added fuel to the fire.

For South Sudan, which had just barely emerged out of a long destructive civil war, to experience such an extended period of violence, it made it virtually impossible for enough capital to be accumulated and new technologies to be imported and adopted by entrepreneurial Youth or by firms that can employ and empower the Youth. These adverse influences have made it near difficult for business-minded Youth, firms and government to initiate and conduct any meaningful type of business in order to change the economic situation in the country. Thus, there is a general stalemate in economic emancipation of our Youth and most citizens in South Sudan.

In addition to the extended period of civil strife and the politically motivated rebellions, South Sudan suffers from the presence of two other major problems that particularly weaken and economically chained the Youth: weak public schools and poor health systems. The prominent ingredient in the theory of economic development is that human capital—the accumulated knowledge and skills that workers acquire from education, training or from their life experiences—is the main determining factor of labor productivity. The higher the labor productivity among the workforce of a country, the faster and higher is the economic growth and development of the country, and the brighter is its economic future.

However, South Sudan has a weak public school system to produce such productive labor force among the Youth. As a result, large numbers of our Youth who are unable to read and write could not be useful in economic productivity since they are fundamentally incapable of obtaining the necessary skills such as the acquisition and application of the latest technology. As miserable orphans and/or tormented survivors of the long devastating civil war on the African continent, all that the Youth know or have ever experienced is war and how to fight it. Yet, the kinds of wars they had been engaging in or experienced have inadequately prepared them for this new kind of economic warfare in the post-independence era.

Consequently, this means that even if factories, machinery and computers are made available by the government or by a Good Samaritan NGOs; in most cases, many of the technical jobs would still be taken up by expatriates whose chief driving force for seeking such job opportunities runs contrary to both the Youth interests and our national economic welfare. A barely educated and inadequately trained Youth, like what we got in South Sudan, cannot be the beacon and the backbone of economic transformation in any country.

Coupled with this poor system of education is the prevalence of chronic diseases among the Youth across South Sudan. Even though many of these pervasive diseases, such as the killer malaria, waterborne diseases and tuberculosis, have long been eradicated or are easily treatable in the developed world, they are still thriving in South Sudan, maiming countless victims yearly. Others such as HIV/AIDS will soon threaten to deprive the nation of its workforce, especially the energetic middle-age Youth that is the substratum of economic growth.

This is especially true since the government, which is largely ineffective anyway, lacks the required resources to combat these social maladies by providing medical care for the sick, childhood vaccinations for newborns, or even ample nutrition for the whole population as a preventive measure against malnutrition which oft-time contribute to permanent mental retardation among the Youth. Poor nutrition, exposure to deadly diseases and an ineffective system of education have led to economic deterioration among the Youth in South Sudan as an ill-prepared and sick Youth cannot contribute fully to the success of economic liberation.

If communal wars and a poor system of education and health care are to blame for Youth dismal economic performance during the last seven years; so, too, is the utter failure of our Juba-based government to enforce the rule of law in the land so as to inaugurate, promote and maintain entrepreneurship. In order for the Youth-led indigenous entrepreneurs and start-ups firms to emerge, open and flourish in South Sudan economic setting, the rule of law–the ability of a government to enforce the laws of the land and especially with regards to protecting private property and enforcing business contracts–must be guaranteed by the government in Juba.

It is only through such execution and observance of the rule of law that private property can be guaranteed and contracts enforced. This, in turn, will signify that Youth-owned entrepreneurs and firms can feel secure in their property and confident enough to embark on new business ventures across the country. This is the prerequisite condition for progressive economic growth and development.

Guaranteeing private property rights and the enforcement of business contracts, however, calls for the establishment of an independent court system to administer the rule of law on the participants of the economic system. Unfortunately, vast parts of our country has no known functioning, independent court system that is effective enough to uphold and enforce the rule of law to make it possible for Youth-owned firms and businesses to operate efficiently. The few courts that do exist are mired down in cases of bribery of judges, pronounced inefficiency, wanton corruption, grand mismanagement and political and tribal favoritisms. If Youth-led and –owned entrepreneurs and firms in South Sudan can’t trust the public court system to uphold the rule of law, few Youth, if any, will risk starting new businesses or expanding existing ones for fear of losing their private property to economic banditry.

As a result, Youth-initiated economic growth has been, and will be, hindered in the South by the absence of an effective, functioning independent court system that can guarantee the enforcement of the rule of law. This is why it is the case that developed countries, such as the USA, that have the strongest rule of law, grow more rapidly and much greater than developing countries, such as South Sudan, that have the weakest rule of law. Clearly, the maleficent ineffectiveness of the Republic of South Sudan undermines the economic emancipation of our Youth.

Lastly, South Sudan seems to be entangled in a situation infamously described by developmental economists as a vicious cycle of poverty. Economic growth and development come about through saving and investment by the citizens of the country in business enterprises. For Youth in South Sudan to save and invest in businesses, however, they must first secure well-paying jobs, meet their basic needs and pay other expenses from their disposable incomes before they can think of saving surplus income for investment in existing firms or establishing new ones.

But the situation in South Sudan is, and will be, far from that rosy paradise where job opportunities are readily available. Hardly above poverty line, almost no Youth in South Sudan has enough basic income to make ends meet, let alone to save for business investment. It is these low saving rates amongst the Youth in South Sudan that deprive businesses of the funds to make investments in new machinery, factories and equipment that generate economic growth and jobs for the Youth.

Lack of funds for business investment leads to economic decline which means that household gross income and saving rates remain low. Hence, there will be no future funds to finance business enterprises which are essential to economic growth, and to alleviate poverty among the poor desperate Youth. Therefore, the cycle of poverty burgeons and blossoms. This is the epitome of the infamous vicious cycle of poverty—one that seems to have found a permanent dwelling amidst our South Sudanese Youth!

**Economic Liberation for the South Sudanese Youth**

To diagnose a cause of a disease, according to our medical experts, is one step toward the long pursuit of seeking full treatment. By now, we must have realized that winning the war against the enemy, that resulted in our political and social liberation, was one step toward full liberation. Now is the right time to ponder over our other socio-economic problems and responsibilities which have been bogging down the Youth all these decades: economic emancipation from abject poverty, chronic diseases, notorious ignorance and overall lamentable socio-economic underdevelopment.

As I have argued above under the root causes of Youth economic tribulations in South Sudan, the prospects of our economic transformation, as imagined and hoped by many South Sudanese in the immediate aftermath of the groundbreaking Peace Accord of 2005, were, and are continually being, hampered by numerous hurdles. Among these impediments, to summarize once more, are intra-tribal clashes and political rebellions, weak public schools and poor health care systems, government’s failures to enforce the rule of law, and most importantly, low rates of savings and investments. Given all these formidable obstacles hindering Youth in their triumphant march toward economic prosperity, is there a way out of these quagmire for them? What is the panacea, if any?

There are some encyclopedic propositions I can recommend to the Ministry of Economic Planning and National Development, the ministry of Youth, the development partners, the civil society, the business community and the general public of South Sudan to unshackle the Youth from the cruel claws of our economic bedevilment. Since it goes without saying that there are substantial payoffs to government policies that do increase economic growth rates, the most notable question in the mind of all concerned citizens become: what can the Government of South Sudan do to aggressively promote the short-term and the long-term economic policies and growth?

There are specifics, time-tested economic policies that the Government of South Sudan can, and should have long ago, implement to inaugurate, promote and maintain continued economic growth to redeem the Youth from economic destitute. To increase economic growth rates, to realize higher standard of livings in South Sudan for the Youth, and thus, to fulfill our manifest destiny of total socio-economic and political liberation of the marginalized people, the Government of South Sudan should consider to put into effect economically informed programs that would enhance the property right and the rule of law, improve health and elevate the quality of education, subsidize research and development in centers of higher learning, provide incentives for savings and investments, and most significantly, take advantage of and participate in global trade and economy.

In South Sudan, as previously explained above, the rule of law and property rights is particularly undermined by both corruption and political instability. In order to dramatically change and improve the living standard of South Sudanese Youth, there are certainly tremendous dividends and justifiable call for government involvement in a very immature market economy such as there is in South Sudan. One particular benefit of RSS intervention in the nation market economy would be the strict enforcement of the rule of law that would aggrandize the protection of the property rights. These would definitely assure the Youth of state protection and assuage their fears of economic sabotage by rogue elements.

As a matter of urgency, the principle of private property right—privileges individuals or firms have to the exclusive use of their property—as enshrined in the interim constitution of South Sudan is doomed if not uphold sternly. As an indispensable doctrine of all successful economies in the world, continued absence of strict observance of the rule of law across South Sudan signify that neither the Youth entrepreneurs would be willing to risk their own hard-earned funds to expand or commence new business enterprises, and nor would any potential investor be enthusiastic enough to invest in business start-ups in Juba or in any other city across the country. Corruption in form of bribes surreptitiously taken by government officials before issuing permits for businesses is not uncommon in Juba and so is unwarranted taxation that either scares away or unnecessarily victimizes upcoming firms by the Youth. Worse still, these taxes end up in the pockets of government officials and their surrogates rather than being utilized to build and extend public infrastructures like the much needed road network systems that would bolster economic activities in South Sudan and promote Youth economic activities in turn.

The rule of law and the protection of property rights is further severely undermines by increased political instability—civil strife by tribal bandits, rebellions spearheaded by aggrieved politicians and constant NCP brutal attacks on Abyei—that has rendered large parts of South Sudan Somalia-like. In those areas it is hard to imagine flourishing economic activities going on under frenzied banditry. RSS must prioritize the tackling of rampant corruptions and reinforce political stability in South Sudan in order to secure and boost property rights and the rule of law—the pivotal of economic development and Youth-led entrepreneurial-ship. Having established and institutionalized the rule of law by eliminating corruption and curbing political instability, RSS should then embark on providing upgraded basic education and improved health care for the population. For Youth success to be attained, educational reforms in the elementary, primary, secondary and, above all, in higher education, must be urgently carried out. This will goes all the way to combating ignorance by eliminating illiteracy and to promote technological innovations by encouraging rigorous study of STEM—sciences, technological, engineering and mathematical courses.

For that feat to materialize though, new schools should be built, more teachers trained, comprehensive new national curriculum instituted, textbooks published and distributed and teachers remunerated well and on time. Furthermore, peace and security must be created and maintained in many volatile regions so as to provide conducive environment for learning to take place. Moreover, brain drain—situation whereby highly educated and successful South Sudanese Youth leave for, or decided to remain in, high-income countries due to unfavorable conditions in South Sudan—should be combated by a combined force of halting corruption, nepotism and favoritism usually based on tribes and/or connections rather than on one’s skill and educational qualifications. There are many viable incentives for our valuable sons and daughters who might be, out of no alternatives or just oblivious of the vice, advancing brain drain process.

This could be accomplished by providing adequate secure environment, both for working and living in South Sudan, and to a great degree, by improving the Youth economic prospect in the domestic economy. Any Youth who can easily make not only a decent living but also a great name for him- or herself within his/her native country has no further motivations to seek greener pastures in foreign lands which are often unwelcoming to funny-looking aliens (as they think of us). Similarly, Youth-related health issues should be met head on since there is an unequivocal correlation between health and economic growth rate. Our sickened, malnourished Youth in South Sudan should be replaced with strong, tall, healthy, energetic Youth that would constitute the vanguards of our economic transformation. For South Sudan to achieve that accomplishment, new technological-equipped health centers should be built, more doctors and nurses trained, better drugs and medicines made available in hospitals, food and nutrition increased, access to clean water and sanitation improved, and children immunization expanded.

Budget constraints, however, might present a considerable headache. Nonetheless, if corruptions and general mismanagements are done away with, funding from development partners could be secured to smoothen out the budget constraints. Increased learning in schools and improved health conditions would produce a healthy and an efficient labor force that would ultimately ensure increased return to human capital to pull the Youth out of this extreme poverty. But increasing human capital has diminishing return. Therefore, RSS policies should, through subsidization of national education, facilitate access to crucial technology. Research and development should be financed through government’s funding as a form of investment. This is how many rich, developed countries such as the EU, the US, South Korea, Taiwan, Israel, Japan, and lately China, incubated and nursed their technological innovations over the years. The National Science Foundation in the US, for instance, was purposely established and continually being funded with a clear goal of supporting university researchers, majority of whom are Youth.

Israel, a tiny resource-less, desert country surrounded by countless adversaries, is today a global technological powerhouse owing to its government’s consistent funding of scientific research and development that cut across all aspect of the societal life ranging from the superb military to spectacular business innovations. For the sake of an efficient and productive Youth, basic education and research and development should be encouraged through subsidization by the government using petro-dollars. The subsidization of education will undoubtedly play an essential role in the promotion of economic growth that South Sudan badly need and upon which the economic liberation of our Youth depend.

In addition to a committed governmental funding, South Sudan can easily access technology, just like the Asian Tigers—China, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore etc—through foreign direct investment. This can be realized by allowing firms from developed, rich countries to build new factories or to acquire struggling domestic firms in South Sudan. Through direct foreign investment, India, a country that had until recently been as poor as many African countries, has been able to gain enviable access to the software technology of giant multinational corporations such as Microsoft, Dell and Apple among others. It is little wonder then that a today software engineer in many multinational corporations’ laboratories is highly likely to be an Indian than a British or an American. For South Sudan to achieve any remarkable break from the present day grinding poverty among the Youth, RSS policies should aid the growth of technology by subsidizing research and development and through tax breaks to those firms interested in or are already undertaking research and development to facilitate technological change.

Of all the available policies geared toward economic growth, none is more important than those that increase the incentive to savings and investments among the Youth. In order to break the vicious cycle of abject poverty, RSS should pioneer strategies that would encourage both individual and business savings and investments that could result in the increase of loanable funds for entrepreneurial ventures, especially micro-financing—the pooling of little resources by the low-income earners to help themselves by establishing small businesses through cheap loans. Tax reductions should be carried out on individuals so that their disposal income would be enough to cover both present expenditures and future consumptions—saving for future use. These funds should then be placed in a scheme—say individual retirement accounts—where the savings could get compounded over the years before retirement and where businesses can make use of them to finance their investments.

Firms too can be cajoled to save through investment tax credits which would allow firms to reduce the portion of their taxable profit provided that they are committed to invest the extra cash in business investments. These incentives, if successfully facilitated by the government on individuals and firms to save and invest, would greatly promote the prospect of economic growth and prosperity in South Sudan for the benefit of the Youth.

**Conclusion**

For much of our living history, South Sudan, and her Youth in particular, has been wallowing in despicable poverty. The war only exacerbated the already dire economic situations. Today, more than ever, we have within our firm grips the prerequisite means to change the pathetic living standards of our country Youth if only we are prepared to give little resolve to talk the talk and walk the walk.

The key to better economic prospects for our war battered Youth lie in nothing more than establishing the rule of law by curbing corruption and political instability, provision of basic education and health care systems to the people, subsidization and funding of research and development in the universities to further the cause of technological change, provision of incentives for firms and individuals to save and invest, and for the most part, participation in globalized international trade to attract foreign direct investment aids and gain access to the much needed technology of multinational corporations.

The road is wide open, the direction is obviously clear and the potentials dividends, not to mention the colossal opportunity cost of inactions, are enormous. Something urgent has to be done and now, rather than later, is the time! That something is the fulfillment of our long promised Economic Liberation according to the SPLM/A’s manifesto. The Youth are the future of the New Nation of South Sudan; we can’t afford to ignore, delay or disregard them!

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