

SUMMARY

The scope and depth of the Operation Lifeline Sudan Review has meant that any summary can only be partial. While attempting to draw out some of the key points, what follows cannot be interpreted as a substitute for the main text.

Introduction

This is the first comprehensive review of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) in its seven year history. The Review is an entirely independent undertaking, funded by donor governments and supported administratively by the UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA). The main impetus for the Review came from OLS's growing difficulties, especially associated with access, during 1995.

The Review does not attempt an exhaustive evaluation of the impact of OLS, its individual agencies, or its various programmes. Its main focus, rather, is on the relationship between OLS's creation of humanitarian space, and the flow of assistance to war-affected populations. The Review therefore sets out to assess and analyse the effectiveness of the OLS modus operandi in meeting the needs of war-affected civilians.

International Significance

OLS has regional, national, and global significance. Created in 1989, it was the first humanitarian programme that sought to assist internally displaced and war-affected civilians during an ongoing conflict within a sovereign country, as opposed to refugees beyond its borders. The experience of OLS has been important in the evolution of humanitarian policy and conflict management; it established a precedent for many humanitarian interventions that followed, for example in Angola, Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia. As such, the Review has significance beyond Sudan, and complements other debates on humanitarian aid - for example, those stimulated by the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda. In contrast to the Rwanda evaluation, however, the OLS Review examines a prolonged international response to a chronic political emergency.

While having organisational similarities, OLS is nevertheless distinct from many other integrated interventions. For example, OLS does not rely on the military protection of humanitarian aid and displaced civilians. Rather, access has largely been dependent upon the application of international pressure on the warring parties. Moreover, the ultimate sovereignty of the Government of Sudan (GOS) has not been challenged. Instead, there has been an equivocal and temporary ceding of sovereignty to the UN of parts of South Sudan that are outside government control. These characteristics mean that OLS can be regarded as an informal or negotiated safe area programme.

(End p1)

The Regulatory Duality of OLS

OLS came into existence as a result of the impotence of the international community in the face of the 1988 war-induced famine in Bahr el-Ghazal. In negotiating a conditional transfer of part of GOS sovereignty to the UN for humanitarian purposes, an operational division of Sudan into government and non-government controlled areas was created. In the first legitimate cross-border operation for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, non-government held areas were serviced from Nairobi.

While OLS agreements recognise ultimate GOS sovereignty, in practice, the Southern Sector has developed a tenuous autonomy in relation to the warring parties. In the Northern Sector, however, following conventional international practice, agencies are more directly controlled by the GOS. As a result, two markedly different contractual and operational regimes have emerged in OLS's Northern and Southern Sectors. This difference has a direct bearing on the quality of access to war-affected populations in both areas.

Within government areas, the GOS have established a restrictive regulatory environment. In the South, the UN has created a more liberal contractual system. The difference between the two regulatory regimes is marked, and has given OLS the appearance of being a structure within a structure. In terms of humanitarian policy, the North has stagnated. Many of the issues facing aid agencies remain unchanged from the 1980s. In the South, while largely ad hoc, fundamental advances have been made in humanitarian policy and conflict management.

The Political Weakness of OLS

The de facto division of OLS into Northern and Southern Sectors has produced a critical flaw in the political coherence of the operation. Access to war-affected people, regardless of where they are located, is a key OLS principle. However, this tenet has been unevenly applied. In the North, it has never been robustly pursued by the UN. For the operation more generally, an implicit understanding has emerged that OLS, as a neutral UN-coordinated operation, is confined to those non-government areas that the GOS is willing to concede are temporarily beyond its control. Following DHA involvement in 1992, OLS adjusted to this de facto situation. In effect, the equivocal autonomy of the Southern Sector has been purchased at the expense of war-affected populations in the North. In this regard, UN humanitarian policy has failed.

This failure is also related to the retention of a UNDP appointed Resident Representative in Khartoum who, as UNCERO, is also formally in charge of OLS. The Review Team felt strongly that this an unsuitable arrangement for a complex political emergency, because it creates a fundamental conflict of interests. One cannot work with the government as a development partner and, at the same time, relate to it as a warring party for humanitarian purposes. This is especially the case when, as the (End p2)

Review Team suspected, the actually existing development process in Sudan is linked to the war aims of the GOS.

Aware of this problem, but unable to tackle it directly, the reporting relations between Nairobi and Khartoum have been kept somewhat informal. While this has given

UNICEF's lead agency role some protection, the relationship between UN agencies in the two Sectors is ill-defined. This, in turn, has exacerbated the overall lack of political cohesion and clarity of purpose in OLS. In delivering humanitarian aid in the midst of internal conflict, clarity of purpose and political cohesion is essential, if humanitarian principles are to be upheld.

In terms of OLS as a potential model for negotiated safe area programmes, in its present state the Review Team regards OLS as flawed and non-replicable. While advances have taken place in the South, this has occurred, in effect, at the expense of war-displaced populations in the North. The unevenness of support for war-affected populations calls into question OLS as a model for internalising the effects of protracted political emergencies. The flawed nature of OLS in this regard led the Review Team not only to question its replicability, but also to wonder whether it can survive at all without internationally supported reform.

Southern Sector Operational Issues

From the end of 1992, there has been a significant expansion in the scope of OLS in the Southern Sector. The number and diversity of programmes has increased beyond the original concerns of food and health. Due to GOS restrictions and interfactional insecurity, since 1995 access has been steadily reduced.

As lead agency, the key functions of UNICEF are the provision of shared services and coordination. Participating agencies primarily in the form international non-government organizations (INGOs) sign Letters of Understanding (LOUs) with UNICEF that establish basic programme requirements, and secure agreement on OLS humanitarian principles. Funded through the OLS Appeal, UNICEF for its part undertakes to provide free transport, essential programme support, and overall coordination. Logistics are largely handled from the UNICEF-managed camp at Lokichokio.

Developing a security and evacuation system has also been an important task of UNICEF. Based upon free access to radios, and the cooperation of the Southern opposition movements through the Ground Rules, this system is a sophisticated and innovative response to working in conditions of ongoing and unpredictable warfare, and has demonstrated its ability to move staff according the changing dynamics of the conflict.

The expansion of OLS has tested the lead agency role of UNICEF, and exposed a contradiction between the need to provide coordination for all OLS agencies and, at the same time, support its own country programme. To a lesser extent, the same issue relates to all the UN specialist agencies involved in OLS. In a real sense, it reflects the (End p3)

great difficulties that the current UN system is experiencing in adjusting to integrated operations. Regarding OLS, while a range of UNICEF regional and sectoral coordination meetings exist, the absence of effective INGO and WFP representation has been a important weakness in OLS management.

For INGOs, this lack of representation is at odds with a growing financial importance.

While probably an underestimate of INGO funding, until 1994 the UN and INGOs secured roughly comparable amounts in response to Sudan appeals. Available figures now suggest, however, that UN agencies currently receive less than two-thirds of the combined INGO budget. Indications of this shift can be seen in the formation of an INGO Forum in 1995.

The creation of the INGO Forum can also be linked to growing problems of cargo prioritisation. This is an issue that has come to the fore as a result of the increasing programme complexity of OLS Southern Sector and the simultaneous contraction in cargo capacity. The direct purchase of cargo space has been one way in which INGOs have begun to more forcefully assert their interests.

On many fronts, there is evidence of programmatic evolution in the Southern Sector. The development of the Ground Rule concept in relation to the Southern movements is an area of particular importance. The Ground Rules were introduced to provide a framework for the regulation of relations between OLS agencies and the opposition movements. Based upon a similar principle to LOUs, the Ground Rules agreement establishes a series of roles and responsibilities. One of these, for example, is the provision of administrative and programme support - so-called "capacity building" - to the humanitarian wings of the opposition movements and participating Sudanese Indigenous NGOS (SINGOs).

The weak capacity of Southern Sudanese counterparts has been widely seen as a hindrance to the delivery of humanitarian services. While there is broad agreement on the need for capacity building for Sudanese counterparts, there is no consensus on how this should be done. Moreover, expectations of capacity building in a war situation, especially where the human resource base is extremely weak, are unrealistically high. This is compounded by the fact that the opposition movements, while having sufficient resources to sustain the conflict, make no provision for the basic running costs of their humanitarian wings. Rather, a large chunk of international support for capacity building is directed toward this end. The Review team was sceptical of the sustainability of this kind of approach.

Related to this issue is the fact that OLS has yet to develop adequate criteria to assess the eligibility of Southern Sudanese agencies for OLS support. In practice, it has proven difficult to move beyond those agencies which either existed before, or emerged during, the early years of OLS.

Besides capacity building, the Ground Rules have also been extended to include human rights. Since 1994, apart from OLS's humanitarian principles, signatories to the Ground Rules undertake to observe the Convention on the Rights of the Child and (End p4)

the Geneva Conventions. More recently, this has enabled OLS to enter into direct dialogue with the movements when it has been felt that the Ground Rules have been violated. Unusual for a relief operation, this has meant that human rights and humanitarian aid issues have been brought together. By exploiting the need of Southern opposition movements for international recognition, the Ground Rules in effect represent a move toward making humanitarian aid conditional. In this regard, the Review Team felt the Ground Rules represent a fundamental innovation in the

field of conflict management, and one that deserves greater study.

The Ground Rules have provided a forum for dialogue between international aid agencies and the Southern Movements. Whereas in the North there has been a humanitarian impasse, in the South, especially within the past year or so, the quality of the dialogue between OLS and the Southern movements has improved. The attempt to deepen civil institutions, especially within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), appears to have been influenced by the operation of the Ground Rules.

Despite the growth of the Southern Sector, however, the distribution of humanitarian assistance to affected populations has been uneven. There is a concentration, especially of INGOs, in the more secure areas such as Equatoria. Here, greater emphasis is placed on rehabilitation projects. In less secure and more vulnerable areas, such as Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and Upper Nile, the UN has remained the main lifeline, so to speak.

Northern Sector Operational Issues

In the Northern Sector, OLS as a humanitarian operation is distinguished by its perceived absence. The UN's approach of quiet diplomacy has achieved little beyond providing an impetus for the GOS to expand its mechanisms of control and regulation. In contractual terms, since 1993, INGOs function as little more than a mute extension of the Sudanese state. Indeed, the voluntary sector has no de jure or de facto existence in government areas.

In the Northern Sector, the scope and coverage of OLS is determined on the basis of GOS approval, rather than actual need. The Nuba Hills, for example, have long been excluded from OLS. Moreover, through the 1992 Relief Act, the government is able to establish legal control over OLS resources down to the level of beneficiaries. While WFP has sought to formalise contractual arrangements for relief distributions, GOS institutions largely determine the quality of international access. UN operationality is also constrained by government control over the choice of implementing partners. Within this regulatory regime, scope for the application of OLS principles is extremely limited.

Significantly, there has been a convergence of GOS and UN policy concerning the linking of relief and development in the North. There is a shared view that relief assistance should now play a developmental role. This view, however, underplays the (End p5)

issue of neutrality in a context where development partners are allied to warring parties. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge that the war originates in a long-term process of economic decline and crisis. The actually existing development process appears to be closely associated with the war aims of the GOS.

The UN has undertaken no research on the nature of the development process in Sudan. At the same time, the Review Team was unable to discover any assessment, or other evidence, which substantiated the view that emergency conditions have now passed. Urging a developmental approach to relief has been driven by changing

fashion in the aid world, rather than by any real knowledge of conditions in Sudan.

In this regard, the Review Team was concerned that the UN Humanitarian Coordination Unit (UNHCU) has been downgraded. Declining capacity within UNHCU results in a severe lack of management support for staff working within the Unit, and for the effective monitoring, assessment, and evaluation of OLS operations in the North.

The lack of UNHCU capacity also contributes to the absence of coherence in UN agency mandates and activities. This can be seen, for example, in the poor coordination and duplication of UN agency responsibilities for food security and health interventions. There are also uneven standards regarding the implementation and coverage of OLS programmes. While UN agencies are severely constrained in their choice of implementing partners, little effort has been made to develop mechanisms to ensure compliance with accepted professional standards. Apart from an abrogation of responsibility, failure in this area has serious implications for the war-affected populations that OLS can reach in government areas.

National structures in Sudan responsible for relief policy have undergone significant changes in recent years. Federalisation, for example, has increased the significance of state structures and Local Relief Committees in the control of assessments and allocation of relief. The expansion of these structures has not been matched by an increase in GOS services to the displaced, however. There is also a notable absence of representation by the displaced on those bodies which determine need and allocate resources.

Government policy is aimed at reducing the scope of INGOs in favour of Sudanese NGOs. The central dilemma for UN agencies has been whether to work with this policy, and build the capacity of those agencies selected by the GOS. Where these agencies are government-aligned, the issue of neutrality in the context of an ongoing war becomes problematic. The absence of a system of Ground Rules, as exists in the Southern Sector, is noticeable in this respect.

(End p6)

Food Aid and Food Security

Perceptions of the emergency in Sudan have changed over time. Initially, the emergency was viewed as an acute crisis of nutrition and mortality, and issues of food aid and food delivery predominated. Over time, agency views have gradually changed to encompass wider issues of food security, involving support for local food production. While there is ambivalence within the Southern Movements about the shift away from food aid, both Sectors have seen reductions in emergency food aid. This has been achieved by decreasing rations, limiting food aid to certain times of the year, and/or more specific targeting. In the North in particular, the government and UN agencies have encouraged this reduction as a measure of growing self-reliance and the move toward development.

These strategies, however, cannot be justified on the basis of information gathered, especially in the Northern Sector. No evaluations of the effectiveness of food aid

programmes or their impact have been conducted, nor has there been any systematic monitoring of inputs. Estimated needs are rarely reconciled with deliveries. Consequently, little is known about what exactly people receive. Monitoring is further hindered by unclear objectives: whether food aid is used to reduce hunger, prevent starvation, to support coping strategies, or promote self-reliance.

Of special concern to the Review Team was the apparent lowering of acceptable standards of nutrition in an effort to accommodate development thinking. Levels of malnutrition shown by nutritional indicators that would have prompted emergency intervention at the start of OLS, are now seen as somehow normal or acceptable.

Sudan is suffering from a chronic emergency. In this situation, options for the war-affected to improve their own food security are extremely limited. Crises have become recurrent. In the Northern Sector, the reduction of food aid appears aimed at overcoming so-called "relief dependency" by forcing vulnerable groups into non-sustainable labour relations. This is exacerbated by inadequate coordination mechanisms between WFP and UNICEF, and the absence of a coherent strategy for food security. Moreover, the reduction in food aid has not been matched by increases in production support.

People in Southern Sudan have survived within a contracting rural economy during the past thirteen years of renewed warfare. In part, this has been through labour migration, mainly to the North. Resource depletion, especially livestock, has also played a part. Networks of kinship exchange and assistance still operate, but at a much reduced level. OLS does not differentiate, however, between the different types and stages of coping strategies. Nor does it interpret what the adoption of certain strategies mean in relation to their possible detrimental effects.

Impartial assistance based on an objective assessment of need forms the basis of OLS neutrality. However, the identification of need is largely determined by the quality of access. Changes in assessment methodology over the course of OLS are a reflection of the differing quality of access in both Sectors. In the Southern Sector, the more liberal
(End p7)

environment has allowed progressively more detailed assessments, based on the introduction of the Food Economy Approach. An important information base has also been built up. In the Northern Sector, the quality of access has remained poor, and assessment methodology has changed little. Consequently, while the Southern Sector provides programme leadership, a coherent and unified strategy for OLS needs assessment is absent.

The Consolidated Appeal

The assessment process forms the basis of the annual UN Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Sudan. As the main UN funding mechanism for OLS, the Appeal is far from transparent. For example, the appeal incorporates all UN agency funding requirements, and is therefore not specific to OLS. Within individual UN agencies, the separation between OLS and UN country programme requirements is also unclear.

This is especially the case in the Northern Sector. Further, there is no Consolidated Inter-Agency Report on Sudan to set against the Appeal.

The relationship between the Appeal and the annual need assessment exercise is unclear. In the North, the quality of information gathered is poor, and there appears to be no link between the assessment and the Appeal. Moreover, the Appeal does not form the basis of a coherent programme strategy for OLS agencies. In both Northern and Southern sectors, the annual assessments provide no evaluation of past interventions, nor do they assess the appropriateness of implementation strategies.

INGOs are rarely involved in the planning of the Appeal process, or in its follow up. This is the case despite their central implementing role in OLS, and the fact that INGO resources form a major part of food aid and food security inputs, particularly in the Southern Sector. The lack of INGO involvement in the appeal process thus prevents the development of a coordinated strategy, and inhibits the ability of OLS to direct resources according to need. In the case of WFP, its ability to target resources is further limited by the absence of agreements with agencies providing non-WFP food.

Social Impact in the Southern Sector

OLS programming in both Sectors has borne little relation to the complex and fluctuating socio-economic reality on the ground. Attempts by the Review Team to locate a broader rationality and overall strategy in programming simply highlighted a general incoherence. Indeed, one of the few programmes that appears appropriate to the situation is UNICEF's Humanitarian Principles Unit.

Under pressure to identify and target vulnerable individuals, agencies usually resort to models of social breakdown adopted from Western social policy. While the emphasis on improving household security is general, there is no shared definition of what a "household" is in the context of South Sudan. Moreover, such definitions have changed over time. Equal shallowness surrounds terms like "female-headed
(End p8)

household" or "widow". While such images have substance in relation to Western notions of the nuclear family and vulnerability, they have little meaning in the actual social context of South Sudan.

Despite problems of coordination and perception, however, OLS programmes have had an impact in the South. The move from famine alleviation to using food aid as a means of rehabilitation, while based upon limited information, appears capable of stabilising the rural economy. This process, especially in relation to the more vulnerable areas of Bahr el-Ghazal and Upper Nile, have to be set against pressures to transform the rural population of South Sudan into a marginalised agricultural labour force. Indirectly, OLS has contributed to maintaining the integrity of Southern socio-economic structures.

This is illustrated by reference to northern Bahr el-Ghazal, an isolated and insecure area. For the Dinka here, the main effect of relief has been to enable them to return to their homes and reinvest in the subsistence economy. Northern Bahr el-Ghazal,

however, has never been properly accessed by OLS, nor has it received food aid at the level of assessed need. Some commentators have questioned why, in areas like Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, there has been no return to famine conditions despite this short-fall.

Northern Bahr el-Ghazal illustrates the complexity of a rural economy under war-related stress. Famine has failed to emerge largely because past assessments did not take into account the variety of stress foods available, resource depletion, and labour migration. Regarding the latter, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal is an area in which the war has encouraged labour flight to the detriment of the rural economy. The initial exodus began in the late 1980s. The truce between SPLM/A and the Missiriya since this period has allowed for a freer circulation of Dinka between Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and the North.

Agricultural wage rates in the North are currently at subsistence levels. While labour flight may have prevented famine, it has been at the expense of subsistence agriculture in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. As OLS access to this area began to expand during 1993, the situation began to change. Migrants started to return from the North in order to cultivate. In 1994, through the proliferation of bush-airstrips, OLS distributions were decentralised. By mid 1995, it was clear that the availability of food aid, albeit in small quantities, had encouraged labour retention and cultivation had increased. There was also a growing tendency for labour migrants to concentrate on short-term work that fitted the agricultural cycle. Less time was spent in gathering stress foods, and kinship networks were reinforced.

Since 1994, the activities of forces allied to the GOS - for example, Kerabino Kwanyin Bol, the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), and Nuer raiders - have undermined this modest recovery. At the time of writing, continuing restrictions on OLS activities in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal threaten to once again squeeze the region and promote labour flight. The increasing insecurity in the area has promoted aid agencies to develop a mobile team approach. This is especially the case in the health field. (End p9)

Radiating from a central point, groups of INGOs attempt to cover a wider area, but on the basis of a temporary presence on the ground.

The effects of the war in South Sudan are uneven. In Western Upper Nile, the agricultural economy has also shrunk, in this case due to isolation rather than insecurity. In the last several years, however, a partial recovery appears to be underway, as a result of expanding trade links with the North, Western Equatoria, and Uganda. This development has yet to be fully incorporated into OLS planning, however, for example in relation to income generation projects in the area. One reason for the expansion of trade is the improvement of links between SSIM/A and the GOS. Compared to Western Upper Nile, trade networks are more pressured in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal.

Social Impact in the Northern Sector

In North Sudan, OLS has its origins in a response to growing internal displacement.

The creation of a large, displaced population cannot be seen, however, as simply an unfortunate consequence of the war. Moreover, evidence suggests that war-induced displacement is continuing. The Review Team felt that a major failure of international and UN policy in the North has occurred in relation to internal displacement. Given the trend within humanitarian policy to internalise the human effects of conflict, this is a major flaw in the OLS model.

Since the late 1980s, the policy of successive Sudanese governments towards the internally displaced has involved combining the provision of relief, rural integration and resettlement, and the upgrading of urban settlements. In Ed Da'ein, the displaced have been settled in "paired villages". In Wau they have been relocated to "peace villages". In Khartoum, GOS policy has involved the demolition of spontaneous displaced settlements and the relocation of their populations to "peace villages" on the outskirts of Khartoum, or to agricultural production schemes in other States. In both rural and urban contexts, relief assistance is highly controlled through local government relief committees and national Sudanese and regional NGOs.

Successive governments in Sudan have promoted the modernisation of agriculture as central to national development. Under the rubric of promoting economic self-reliance, the displaced in Ed' Da'ein and Wau, for example, are encouraged to engage in agricultural activities - both as producers and contract labourers. Wage labour, once a seasonal activity in the subsistence rural economy, has now become a survival strategy of people forcibly displaced from the South and areas in the 'transitional zone'. The Review believes that the UN has worked uncritically within the policy framework established by the GOS towards the displaced. GOS definitions of the populations in need determine OLS coverage. In Khartoum and Wau the war-displaced located in peace camps are included in OLS operations. Those outside remain outside the purview of OLS.

(End p10)

In Ed Da'ein, the Review found that capacity of the UN and NGOs to sustain even minimum services has been eroded, both by a declining resource base for humanitarian operations, and by policies that have sought to reduce relief and promote self-sufficiency through agricultural production. In Wau, despite initial concern in 1992 that the formation of peace villages was clearly linked to military strategies, OLS policy has subsequently sought to support agricultural production.

Greater Khartoum has the largest concentration of war-displaced people in North Sudan. The prolonged crisis among this population, represents perhaps the greatest failure of OLS in the North. The incorporation of the Khartoum displaced under OLS has had little observable benefit. The UN strategy of combining emergency assistance, technical support to the government for urban planning, with advocacy and protection has failed to relieve the situation. In part, this is because the different components of the strategy are contradictory. In the absence of a coherent strategy, the UN has reached an impasse. In consequence, there has been a steady withdrawal and downgrading of UN involvement with the Khartoum displaced. The Review is concerned with this trend, especially given persistently high levels of malnutrition among the Khartoum displaced.

Cost Effectiveness

The issue of cost effectiveness has risen especially in relation to the Southern Sector's reliance on relatively expensive air transport. The GOS, in particular, has pressed the case for greater use of cheaper surface transport routes from the North, especially, the rail and river corridors.

In order to estimate the possible savings involved, the Review team developed a substitution model using 1995 distribution figures. Assuming free access, all cargo ex-Lokichokkio that could reasonably have been moved using Northern routes was substituted, and the whole operation re-costed. On this basis, it was estimated that a possible savings of approximately 25% could be made on total costs. It should be emphasised however, that this is a hypothetical figure. For one thing, it assumes free access in a Sector where this is not the norm; indeed, restriction on access is the largest single factor increasing unit delivery costs. At the same time, the model makes no allowance for secondary distribution beyond rail and riverside drop-off points.

In the final analysis, the Review is of the opinion that under existing conditions, the transfer of Southern Sector coordination activities to government areas would be tantamount to the cessation of humanitarian assistance to South Sudan.

(End p11)