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## **How Does Water Flow into Politics? Contested Resource Use in the Emergent State of South Sudan**

As the dust settles after the euphoric celebrations of the independence of “Africa’s youngest state” on 9 July 2011, a sober assessment reveals a fragile nation faced with a flood of challenges. Decades of civil war and violence have brought forth a state struggling with severe deficits in infrastructure, development, and good practices of governance. The question of how to provide the nation with an adequate supply of water for the livelihoods of its people and for agriculture will prove crucial for the development of the newborn state—especially since struggles over a dwindling resource base are said to have exacerbated local tribal conflicts, feeding into the Gordian knot that has been destabilizing South Sudan for decades.

Given the importance of water for the livelihoods of the Sudanese population, access to water is a highly sensitive issue. In the past, water policies and management approaches have affected traditional consumption patterns and created structural problems for various groups that impacted existing fault lines in Sudanese society. At the same time, water management has been shaped by the dynamics and considerations that have driven the center vs. periphery conflict for decades. The Ministry for Water Resources and Irrigation hopes that water in the new state of South Sudan “will be a lever for peace, not a source of conflict.” Especially in the light of current (and increasing) international assistance to (re)build the water sector in terms of policies and infrastructure, a critical assessment of the contested nature of water resource use, the underlying power structures, and the potential sources of conflict is crucial in order to avoid reinforcing existing structural problems.

The main thesis is that contestations over the use of water resources have played an important role in Sudanese history and are likely to do so in the new state of South Sudan. These contestations are shaped by local, national, and global politics and at times play out as violent conflicts between different population groups. A plethora of actors (civil society, government officials, international organizations) are drawn into this nexus between water and social conflict either as victims and/or as actors drawing on the highly sensitive and political/politicized role that water has come to play over decades of conflict and in the light of current (re)construction activities. Livelihoods research and critical development studies will serve as the conceptual background of the thesis.