

## THE SUDAN/SOUTH SUDAN SEMINAR SERIES REPORT

### *Agricultural Potential in the Sudans: Past Experience and Future Outlook*

7<sup>th</sup> Dec 2015 | Room 4429 | SOAS, University of London

**Speaker: Mohamed Al Nour Adam (Sudanese Marine Biologist)**

**Chair: Mawan Muortat (SSSUK)**

The second session of the Sudan/South Sudan seminar series under the *theme 'Agricultural Potential in the Sudans: Past Experience and Future Outlook'* took place on the 7 December 2015. The session which is one of the four Seminar Series of 2015/2016 academic year is jointly organised by the Centre of African Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and the Society for the Study of the Sudans, UK. The series is aimed at bringing together academics and practitioners concerned with Sudan and South Sudan to deliberate on a range of legal, economic, political and cultural issues whilst seeking insights into current and future developments in the two countries.

Just like the first meeting of the Seminar Series of the 16 November 2015, the room was packed with lively and vibrant participants from a range of background. It is worth pointing out that unlike the previous session, the second session attracted more attendance from the Sudanese and the South Sudanese citizens in the UK. The Chair introduced the Panellist, the theme for the seminar and informed the audience that due to visa problem, only one panellist of the planned was able to come. This therefore meant that some critical areas would not be presented.

The prospects for Sudan and South Sudan to become major agricultural producers in the continent have been deliberated for over a century. Modern schemes began in the Anglo-Egyptian period. Most have failed or have had limited success. The panellists who have been carefully selected were to be composed of experts from the field would discuss the failures and successes of these agricultural projects and evaluate the pros and cons of the continued pursuit of modern intensive crop production.

In this regards, the speaker noted that Sudans' backbone is not oil as is commonly mistaken today but Agriculture. His presentation is organised around the fundamental question of 'What happened to the Agricultural Sector and its projects? And where do the Sudan go from now?'

Taking on Irrigation and Rain fed Agriculture, the speaker embarked on a futuristic look at the Agricultural sector of the Sudan. He noted that Sudan and South Sudan shares a lot of characteristics and challenges in their agricultural sector presenting some of the fundamental and historical challenges to the Agricultural sector of Sudan/South Sudan.

He highlighted that the lack of objectivity and direction for development within the Sudans government greatly impacted on the Gezira Irrigation scheme. Gezira, until 1998, used to be the backbone of Sudans' economy and the biggest agricultural project in the continent. However, politicisation of staff recruitment, the absence of clear policies, land ownership and the decentralisation of management of Gezira to the state and privatisation and most importantly civil conflict are some of the factors

highlighted as negatively impacted on the project. Further to these challenges, the agricultural sector of Sudan faced other challenges such as;

- The lack of information/data on Agriculture including the land ownership especially in the Nuba Mountain region. This problem is manifested in the political violence/civil conflict in the region.
- The lack of reinvestment: The government of Sudan was expected to reinvest the oil moneys into the Agricultural sector but that has not happened. As a result of the lack of investment, the Gezira Irrigation scheme collapsed.
- Water shortage/the politics of the Nile waters
- Land ownership
- Government interference in crop production
- Market.

The speaker argues that the share of the Nile waters and the politics of the Nile water mean that Sudan cannot afford the water it needs to run the irrigated agriculture. In addition to the problem of the politics surrounding the Nile waters, evaporation rate of the Nile water presents another challenge, estimated at 2 billion cubic metres a year. Although the 1956 Nile Water Agreement is pointed as one point of contestation especially the share of the water which gives Egypt 55.5 billion cubic metres and 18.5 billion cubic meters, he argues that this has no potential of retarding agricultural development in the Sudan.

The speaker asserts that, to overcome the challenges imposed by these political and evaporation of the Nile waters, there is need for Sudan to embark on planning and a shift of its policy focus to alternative agricultural practices that can take advantage of the new regional realities. That is, the good market opportunities for alternatives to high water consuming crops such as Cattle/Diary farming. For example, the Gulf of Saudi Arabia, Egypt has got 90 million population, Ethiopia has got a population of 100 million people while Sudan with a domestic population of 60 million people.

However, to be able to take advantage of these regional and domestic realities, the Sudan/South Sudan has;

- To first take care of political stability which has great impact on capital and market development
- Investment in Infrastructure especially Roads, Airports, Communication and rails.
- Move away from the production of cotton in Sudan as it is no longer viable.
- Policy makers need to accept/come in terms with reality of the shortage of water.
- Sensitization of the population on the realities of water shortage and why the new policy.
- Production of wheat policy currently pushed by the government of Sudan is not feasible and more expensive compared to buying it from the international market.

During the question session, a range of questions were raised by the audience. This was an indication of the intellectually stimulating manner in which the issues were presented. As one participant put it, the presentation provided a healthy criticism to the current government approach to Agricultural sector as it provide alternative policy shift. However, one question that stood out was in regards to the absence of the underground water from the presentation as an alternative to the highly contested Nile waters. As an alternative to Nile waters/rain fed agriculture, the underground water provide a rechargeable and a wealthy alternative for desert agriculture which has been very successful in the Saudi Arabia.

Finally, the speaker concluded that, the sector policy shift towards alternative agricultural practices requires good relationships at both regional and international level and a political will to do so. Failure of Sudanese government to do so risks failing to feed its population.