



Duncan Green

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Supporting early warning systems for famine in South Sudan

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Policy impact does not always arise as a primary objective of research. LSE's Naomi Pendle, who has been researching South Sudan's local justice system for a decade, has had a significant impact on the World Food Programme's warning systems for famine in the country as a by-product of her work, with important lessons for other researchers trying to influence policy. Here's how it happened.

This post is part of a [series on public authority](#) evaluating the real-world impact of research at the LSE [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#).

The **World Food Programme** (WFP) conducts large surveys in South Sudan twice a year to assess hunger, which is chronic in the country but sometimes reaches famine proportions. During a famine in 2017, LSE researcher **Naomi Pendle** came across an intriguing aspect of the local chief-run courts, named *luok cɔk* – literally 'Hunger Courts'. South Sudanese intellectual **Luka Biong** had noticed the Hunger Courts in the famines of the 1990s but, by 2017, the aid community had given them no attention:

'What we came across by chance was that courts in one part of South Sudan were being used to redistribute food to prevent hunger during famine periods. Local

chiefs' courts are part of government structures; they suspend all but the most serious cases (e.g. murders) during a famine and become hunger courts. Courts ruled on how to redistribute within clans (a couple of thousand people), sometimes doing so by force.

Not only that. In 2018 we found that the Hunger Courts responded in May 2018, even though humanitarian agencies didn't notice the famine-level hunger until July – because they were closer to the ground, they could see the emergency coming earlier, an effective early warning system!

At this point, Naomi's networking skills kicked in. She contacted friends and contacts in the capital, Juba, working for the WFP and REACH (a UN and ACTED humanitarian analysis initiative) and set up meetings to tell them of her findings.

'They know I know the area well. REACH asked about whether famine was imminent and I said, the chiefs have known for months – why is this news?'

The outcome was that WFP in Juba agreed to include questions on Hunger Courts in their surveys, asking Naomi to help draft the text. So far, these have been included in four surveys and Naomi is currently analysing the data with the help of former WFP and current REACH staff. Plus, Naomi and her South Sudanese colleagues have recently won a new British Academy grant called *Hunger and Human Dignity* based in CPAID. Through this grant they will carry-out further ethnographic research on the courts.

One key early finding is that Hunger Courts are used in most geographic areas in South Sudan, not only in Naomi's original research site – 'a massive new finding'.

Naomi is now discussing with the UN how Hunger Courts can be used as an early warning system in the future. Hunger again seems to be at increasingly high levels in South Sudan and some people are predicting that it will reach famine-levels in certain places in 2021. There is an urgent need for the UN system to incorporate the CPAID research into its work.

Meanwhile, Naomi has committed to writing a policy paper, and (Covid allowing) is keen to do personal advocacy in Juba.

At this point, we dug into her personal advocacy style:

'Workshops are fine, but often talking over a glass of wine at the weekend works better! I do presentations in Juba a couple of times a year, that's the way to get known – but then see people in the evenings too.'

The key lesson is to invest in relationships. Longevity of working in a country also helps – I've known some of the people for many years, some foreigners stay around for a long time or leave and then come back in more senior positions.

For those who are new, me being attached to LSE helps; as an academic you have some kind of authority. But you have to have interesting things to share – people are stuck in offices in Juba and desperate to have a sense of what is going on outside the capital.'

What's interesting is the mutually beneficial nature of the collaboration, and not just for policy impact.

'The honest truth is that I need their logistical support – flights and stuff, so it makes sense for me to talk to them. I want to make sure they don't forget to put me on a flight out of the swamp! To do that, you have to tell them about your research. But then they know the research before it happens and feel a bit involved'.

Naomi's remarkable impact illustrates some important aspects of getting research impact:

- The importance of personal networks
- Working locally can be more effective than through HQs
- Involving policy targets 'upstream' so that they feel some sense of involvement/ownership with the subsequent research

And of course, Naomi is doing all that based on really good, interesting research!

Photo: UNMISS meeting in South Sudan. UN Photo Isaac Billy. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

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