

(Author Anonymized)

South Sudanese citizens are saying silent prayers that corruption, Africa's biggest development problem, does not swallow their country.

A series of interviews conducted by the People's Voice in Western Equatoria State revealed that the majority of South Sudanese are worried that their fledgling nation may follow in the footsteps of other African countries, where corruption has adversely affected economic growth and led to massive poverty among low income groups. Those questioned asserted that corruption remains the biggest monster and threat to development in most African countries.

In Western Equatoria State, citizens say corruption is already affecting government services and want the new government to take drastic action to deal with the menace, before it is too late and takes a strong hold in the culture, strangling the new nation. They claim corruption is deeply entrenched in both the government and Non-Governmental Organizations in the area. Residents here cite bribery in public offices, nepotism, tribalism, favoritism and stealing from public coffers as some of the major forms of corruption occurring in the state.

The People's Voice caught up with some villagers, most of them young people from the local counties of Mvolo, Ibba, Ezzo and Tombura. They had a common denominator in their views on corruption; it is real and threatening services in almost all sectors.

26 year old Isaac Okwera points out that there are numerous cases of corruption in the state, mostly in relation to tribalism and nepotism in most offices, especially when it comes to employment in public service. Okwera, who is a school leaver, says that employment in some offices is only guaranteed if one belongs to certain tribes or even particular politically correct families.

"Corruption is the biggest challenge and set back to service delivery in our new nation," he said.

Okwera pointed out that because of the corruption and tribalism in central government and in most states, government offices are often staffed by unqualified personnel. “As a consequence of rampant corruption and nepotism in this state, most civil servants here secured their jobs not because they were qualified but, because of how much they paid in bribes or because they had well connected relatives serving in senior positions in the government”, Okwera noted. He lamented that corruption had denied people their right to work and the possibility for community development.

Okwera also maintains that even NGOs that are supposed to check on the government are deeply engrossed in corruption, especially with regards to employment. “When NGOs have vacancies, top officials secretly shortlist their relatives then put the advertisements on notice boards just as a formality. Applicants who have no relatives or friends are merely wasting their time,” said Okwera.

Sete Elisama, a 20 year old *boda boda* (bicycle taxi) rider in Yambio town stresses that corruption is even worse in the police force. “Sometimes the traffic officers ask for bribes when they stop you. They will always demand bribes even if you have not flouted any rule,” said Elisama. He added that sometimes they asked for small amounts of money to be paid like 5 or 10 SDG and those who defy are punished. Elisama pleads with the government to discipline police officers involved in corruption.

Stephen Dema is a bus driver plying the Yambio road and is among those who allege that there is massive corruption amongst traffic police. He says that he has been a victim of police extortion where some officers demand money, as much as 100 SDG, from public service vehicles operating in the region.

“The corrupt police officers sometimes asked us to pay money for unspecified reasons and they never give us receipts,” he complains. He explained that most drivers opted to bribe traffic police because they feared losing their jobs in the bloated public transport sector. “We expect the police officers to know that we have now won independence and we are struggling to show the world that we deserve it.”

The driver asked the law enforcement agencies to give more training to traffic tax collectors in a bid to end corruption. He said that as a result of the corruption, the government does not benefit from revenues and levies collected by some of its officers. “Corruption is a deadly disease that can easily destroy our new country. It must be stopped now,” Dema stated.