South Sudan builds on customs' cash

South Sudan is barely one year old. But this new state is laying the foundations on which to build a future with a streamlined customs collection system that has increased revenue by more than 1,100% in the past six months.

“This money will help us build the nation,” says Lt. Col. Emmanuel Goya Simon at the steamy Nimule Border with Uganda, the lifeblood entry point for nearly all of South Sudan’s import-dependent economy.

“The revenue will help us in security, health and education. It will help the nation grow and breathe,” says Simon, second-in-command of Customs at Nimule. “We are already well on the way.”

Outside huge trucks carrying everything from chewing gum to electric kettles and sugar, park to begin the laborious process of registering with half a dozen authorities, declaring their contents, being inspected and paying duty.

“It’s a muddle. All the work is manual now, but not for much longer,” says Eugene Torero, the representative in South Sudan of TradeMark East Africa (TMEA), a donor-funded organisation helping the East African community modernise trade and sow the seeds of new prosperity. Across the East African community, TMEA is helping countries accelerate away from ways of doing business and trade – paperwork, and lots of it.

At Nimule, for example, TMEA is in the process of computerising form filling so that truckers will be able to sit at a laptop out of the sun, fill in one form on a screen, and slash the formalities. One keystroke will replace hours of paperwork.

“There’s been some improvements even in the last month,” said Kenyan truck driver Frank
Wafula. “I’d say the paperwork time has been cut by half since I last drove up here from Mombasa.”

Lt. Col Francis Mayiik Monyor points proudly at the white plastic ducts snaking up every office wall at the Customs HQ in Nimule. These will house the wires that will establish a Local Area Network (LAN) and relegate most paper work to history.

“This is how we do it now,” he says, pointing to a metre-wide official ledger where every form, transaction and stage of the customs clearing process is registered longhand by clerks. Around the offices, ledger sheets and records rolled and tied with elastic bands bearing handwritten dates on the outside gather dust in piles.

“And this is how we will do it in the future.” Francis beams at the space on the wall where the computer server will go, linking South Sudan to the 21st century and the prospect of joining the East African Community sometime in the future.

As in other East African states, TradeMark East Africa has helped at the most basic levels. Officers have been trained and familiarised with their duties and the processes; the organisation used money from the UK’s development arm DFID to join the dots of modernisation together.

Nearly all of South Sudan’s revenue used to come from oil but that has been the subject of conflict and contention with Khartoum since the South voted for independence in 2011 and joined the Community of Nations in July that year. “No state can exist without money to live on,” says Maj. Gen (Rtd) Fredrick Lokule, Director General of South Sudan’s Customs Service in his Juba office. “When we became independent, we scrapped all the old laws and brought in new ones and then had to train everyone and put them into practice.”

“Customs employs 547 people and we needed to modernise everything. Automation is the key, and with help from our friends, it is on the way.

“Whilst the size of the increases are probably unsustainable, there is a great deal of optimism within the Customs Service and the country as a whole that non-oil revenues will continue to grow substantially as we begin to modernise our whole approach to dealing with trade.”

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