Promoting natural resource conflict management in an illiberal setting: Experiences from Central Darfur, Sudan

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1. Introduction

The preparation of this study was initially prompted by two distinct yet related issues. The first concerns the growing interest in the environmental performance of illiberal regimes (Wurster, 2013; Zhu, Zhang, & Mol, 2015). Sonnenfeld and Taylor (2018, p. 516) define ‘illiberalism’ as “those settings, regimes, and movements that do not prioritize or protect the rights, perspectives, and interests of individuals and minorities.” After years of platitudes about ‘good governance’ that often seemed divorced from reality (Grindle, 2010), the challenge of sustainable development is now being examined within the context of a range of regimes, including authoritarian states. With few exceptions, such as Sower’s (2007) study of Egyptian nature reserves, there has been little attention to how autocratic African governments foster or undermine environmental goals, especially within development contexts. One theme that has generally emerged from this nascent literature is the need for a combined holistic and historical framework for understanding the complex interplay of political economy and cultural ecology affecting environmental performance (Sonnenfeld and Taylor, 2018). This type of framework is especially important for understanding the situation in authoritarian and heavily conflict-ridden societies such as Sudan, which will be examined in this paper.

The second issue prompting this paper concerned my desire to reflect on the possibilities of peacebuilding and recovery in the troubled western Sudanese region of Darfur, still the setting of one of the world’s biggest humanitarian operations since the outbreak of large-scale violence in 2003. It once commanded global attention, with commentators and activists routinely portraying it as the world’s first climate change-driven war or as an eternal struggle between African and Arab (Faris, 2007; also see Mamdani, 2009). Lately Darfur has faded from the view of a public prone to compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999). Disappointment with the peace processes, which yielded two significant agreements and yet no widely accepted or effective resolution, had also lessened interest. Meanwhile, Darfur’s “generalized insecurity” remains such that de Waal (2015, p. 58), a long-time observer, compared the region’s to a Hobbesian description of “warre.” He contends that this situation is the outcome of a cynical political marketplace...
rather than the inevitable outcome of social primordialism or environmental change.

Sudan is one of the world’s most illiberal countries. Freedom House’s (2018) global survey of political rights and civil liberties consistently ranks it among “the worst of the worst” in terms of the 50 leading nation-states and territories designated as “Not Free.” Journalist Robert Fisk (2005, p. 11), reflecting on Sudan’s brutal civil wars, once observed that, “This was not, therefore, a country known for its justice or civil rights or liberties.” Yet he also pointed out that “nothing in Sudan was what it seemed” (Fisk, 2005, p. 10). For example, characterizations of Sudan as a fragile state (see Fund for Peace, 2016) misses the durability of its hegeemonic Khartoum-based elite whose political role dates back to colonial days, when the country was run by one of history’s most illiberal regimes, the British Empire (Collins, 2008). The current head of government, President Omar al-Bashir, has stayed in power since 1989, despite serious internal challenges and the International Criminal Court’s (ICC) indictment for alleged war crimes in Darfur. Jones, Soares de Oliveira, and Verhoeven (2013, p. 6) place Bashir among other contemporary African “illiberal state builders” in Angola, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, regimes in which protracted violence “plays a central and ongoing role” in their system of governance.

My professional involvement with Darfur started in 2009, when the African Programme of the United Nations’ University for Peace (UPEACE) invited me to participate in a conference on the role of environmental change in the Sudanese conflict (Leroy, 2009). This invitation reflected my work, especially with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), on natural resource conflict management in Africa and elsewhere (for example, see Castro, 1988, 1991a, 1991b, 1995a; Castro and Etteneger, 1997; Castro and Nielsen, 2001, 2003; Castro and Engel, 2007). Consulting with FAO allowed me to move from being solely a conflict analyst (usually as project evaluator or academic researcher) to someone engaged in conflict training, both in devising materials and directly facilitating. Many of the UPEACE conference attendees were Darfurians, including Yassir Hassan Satti from Zalingei University. Our mutual interest in climate change and its relationship led us to work together on a study in the Zalingei area of Central Darfur, with Satti collecting field data while I focused on historical material from outside Sudan (Satti and Castro, 2012). As it turned out, the Near East Foundation (NEF), one of the world’s oldest humanitarian organizations, had just established a collaborative arrangement with my university and was starting two internationally funded projects in the Zalingei area. NEF asked me to be a consultant on its projects, dealing with both training and evaluation, traveling there in August–September 2012 and March–April 2014. The projects promoted early recovery, a supposed transitional phase from humanitarian to development assistance (see Bailey, Pavanello, Elhawary, & O’Callaghan, 2009) in the wake of the 2011 Doha Peace Agreement. Subsequent political events in Darfur, Sudan, and globally revealed this transition to be only a chimera.

A third issue which this study addresses, albeit in a limited manner and, frankly, at the insistence of reviewers, is the link between peacebuilding and natural resource interventions (Bruch, Muffett, & Nichols, 2016; Young and Goldman, 2015). My seeming reluctance to comment on environmental peacebuilding is not because I do not regard it as a vital field. On the contrary, my first African research was in Kirinyaga County, Kenya, which experienced the Mau Mau War in the 1950s, with its brutal counterinsurgency (Anderson, 2005; Elkins, 2005). As part of that study I documented the massive social engineering, including land consolidation and privatization, villagization, and commercial agriculture, that the British used in trying to shape a distinct post-conflict landscape favorable to their interests in Kirinyaga (Castro and Etteneger, 1994; Castro, 1995a, 1995b). In this paper I will argue that even in extremely illiberal settings such as Darfur that it is still possible to carry out activities that widen the scope for action by local populations. Observations of the NEF projects obviously serve as the basis for this claim. As will be discussed, the design of the NEF project offered an ambitious attempt at what Cleaver (2012) calls institutional bricolage, introducing principles drawn from Ostrom’s (1990) Mainstream Institutionalism to revitalize local resource institutions. NEF’s efforts drew on its long experience in Mali (Benjamin 2004), serving as a trans-Sahelian exchange. The NEF projects also served as conventional platform for the delivery of services and materials to its clientele. Unfortunately, severe security restrictions, reflective of both Sudan’s illiberalism and Darfur’s insecurity, made it impossible to assess either NEF’s institutional innovation or its overall effectiveness in project management as one would normally do so (for example, see Dyer et al., 2014). My limited data suggest that NEF’s overall performance was positive, a significant outcome in its setting. Yet, this is not where I wish to aim my focus. Instead, my main concern is with a particular project activity: its conflict management training, a bricolage combining external and local practices, and with what project participants did with it. They reported using the skills in both resource- and non-resource settings, and it also helped spawn a peace movement in Central Darfur with over 500 reported participants. I now appreciate, thanks to the nudge by the reviewers, that my Darfur study, despite its limitations, might be able to address some aspects of environmental peacebuilding, particularly regarding conflict resolution training. In dealing with these concerns, it is important not to lose sight of a major point: Darfur and the struggles of its people are largely forgotten. Their urgent concerns must be placed back into the global limelight. Finally, the views expressed here are entirely my own, rather than reflecting those of NEF or any other organization. I alone take responsibility for the paper’s contents.

2. The setting

Darfur covers an area as large as France. It is part of the extensive Sudanic transitional zone running along the southern edge of the Sahara. The region encompasses desert in its north, Sahelian savanna and woodland to its south, and, in the center, the Jebel Marra massif (3000 m), where orographic rains support permanent springs and seasonal streams (wadis). O’Fahey (2008, p. 5) calls it “a harsh environment, hot, dry and dusty away from the mountains… water is always and everywhere a scarce commodity.” The rains mainly fall from June to September but vary widely within and across years. Darfur is drought-prone yet wetter-than-normal streaks occasionally occur. The region is undergoing long-term shifts in weather patterns though their nature and extent are not fully understood (Satti and Castro, 2012). Desertification, whether due to climate change or human-induced land misuse, is a constant fear (UN, 2010). The two main traditional livelihood strategies, sedentary farming and transhumant pastoralism, rely on a deep knowledge of the area’s precarious environment. In the not too distant past Darfur was self-sufficient in food staples and Sudan’s largest supplier of livestock (Morton, 1996). The 2003 war greatly impacts lives and livelihoods, with large-scale terror, destruction, and dislocation. It also altered Darfur’s cultural landscape, with rapid, massive urbanization, increased pressure on water supplies, and widespread deforestation among the lasting changes (Buchanan-Smith & Bromwich, 2016; Young & Jacobson, 2013).

The region was long the site of indigenous states, the last of which, the Dar Fur Sultanate, ruled from the mid-1600s until the early 20th century (O’Fahey, 2008). Dar Fur means the domain
A politicized and polarized ethnicity now dominated discourse, fusing tribalism and racism. Local, national, and international processes combined to fuel the shift from communal coexistence to mutual hostility. El-Battahani (2009, p. 47) identified “power-hungry, urban-based ‘elite’ groups” within each tribe as key actors in driving ethnic consciousness. Political reforms—replacement of the native administration with councils in the 1970s and regionalism in the 1980s—created arenas where elites used ethnic appeals for recruitment. Darfur became engulfed by protracted war between Libya and Chad (Burr & Collins, 2006). Weak governance in Darfur allowed their forces to roam freely in the region. Both countries dispensed patronage and arms to attract local supporters. Libya’s Qaddafi also promoted a pan-Arab supremacist creed that attracted some Darfurians. National politics also mattered. The Sudanese national government increasingly sought through policy to define the country in as an Arab-Islamic state. Southern Sudanese resisted with arms this attempt at ethno-religious hegemony, increasingly defining themselves as ‘Africans’ in the process (Collins, 2008). As their civil war heated up during the 1980s, southern insurgents tried to rally support in the country’s other subaltern peripheries. Their efforts were often rebuffed but the notion of ‘African’ identity resonated with some non-Arab Darfurians (Hassan, 2009). As identities hardened, land disputes escalated into large armed conflicts between ethnic militias. This situation culminated in a series of fights in the late 1980s between Fur forces and Darfurian Arabs, including newly organized Janjawid militias. Qaddafi-allied Chadian Arabs contributed to the defeat of the Fur in the so-called War of the Tribes. Thousands died, and thousands more were displaced, their lands occupied by the victors. National dissatisfaction with the central government’s slowness in quelling the fighting contributed to its downfall in June 1989. With Omar Hassan al Bashir now in power, conflicts continued periodically until they merged into the wider 2003 war.

Polititized ethnicity overlapped with declining relations between farmers and pastoralists (Abdul Jalil, 2014; Flint & de Waal, 2008). In the past these groups generally shared complementary relations, manifested in livestock corridors, post-harvest pasture sharing, and trade. The native administration helped smooth over tensions. But in an era of weak governance, abundant weapons, and extreme ethnic ideology, armed aggression offered an expedient way of achieving goals. Land claims were now pursued by violence. Ethnic cleansing was often a consequence of the drive for land rather than a motivator of it (Daly, 2010). Other forces shaped this troubled context: rapid population growth, herd expansion, declining land productivity, and drought (Flint & de Waal, 2008; UN, 2010). Whatever the cause, pastoralists often dispensed with customary negotiations before entering new areas. They asserted their right under Sudan’s 1970 land nationalization, or they simply used intimidation. Farmers also took provocative actions, closing seasonal corridors or otherwise denying herders access to resources. Rising acts of banditry fueled inter-group tensions.

President Bashir’s aggressive promotion of the Arabization agenda troubled the country’s non-Arab population, including in Darfur. The central government’s decision to divide Darfur’s governance into three state units was seen by Fur, Masalit, and other non-Arab leaders as a gerrymandering exercise to reduce their political influence (Daly, 2010). The newly appointed state governors further fueled ethnic-based unrest by their actions and inaction. Insecurity increased as political and criminal violence merged. The Darfur Liberation Front, an anti-government group, launched attacks in 2002. Flint and de Waal (2008, p. 116) contend that Khartoum’s response was “half-hearted and incoherent” as it weighed whether these opponents posed a significant security challenge. Before long, the situation was out of control, and the government ended up accused of genocide.
4. The 2003 war and elusive peace

Darfuri rebels publicly announced their opposition to the national government for its neglect of the region in February 2003, launching a war that created a massive and protracted humanitarian crises. What set apart the Darfur War from the region's previous conflicts was the scope and magnitude of destruction, dislocation, and dislocation, especially regarding the civilian population. As with many things regarding the region, exact numbers regarding this disaster are imprecisely known (Mamdani, 2009). De Waal (2015, p. 57) estimated that from 2003 to early 2005, the time of the most intense fighting: “...the army and militia killed perhaps 30,000 civilians, caused a famine that killed several hundred thousand more, and displaced millions.” Starvation was not simply the outcome of chaos. As is typical in counterinsurgencies (Castro & Ettinger, 1994), hunger and terror, including mass rapes, were major components of the conflict. The government feared “a war of total destruction” but failed to defeat the rebels (Flint & de Waal, 2008). It all came at a very high cost. Ali (2013) estimated that the direct economic costs for Sudan from the Darfur War exceeded $30 billion by 2009. This amount included $10 billion in military-related expense, as well as billions more for the foregone lifetime earning of the dead, the lost productivity of the IDPs, and ruined infrastructure. Ali acknowledged that this valuation fails to convey the full human costs. Even with the new oil wealth that Sudan started earning at that time, it could not afford this ruinous conflict. He calculated that the government’s cost of acceding to initial rebel demands in 2003 would have been around $60 million (Ali, 2013, p. 517). Externally-brokered peace agreements between the Sudanese government and rebel groups took place at Abuja, Nigeria, in 2006, and at Doha, Qatar, in 2011. The African Union and United Nations posted peacekeepers (UNAMID) to the region. These efforts all proved highly problematic (Flint & de Waal, 2008; Hovil & Bueno, 2016; Ismail & LaRocco, 2012). The lack of widespread Darfuri participation in reaching both agreements undermined their legitimacy. Slow and incomplete implementation of their terms confirmed the peace process’ troubled status. Policy restrictions and insufficient resources limited UNAMID’s mission and impact. Meanwhile, armed conflict continued, including clashes between rebel and government forces, inter-communal confrontations, incidents of brigandage, and even fights within the ranks of the rebels and ethnic militias. According to de Waal (2015, p. 53), Darfur’s violence had become “more widespread and intractable” but also “less extreme” if measured in terms of fatalities, which averaged less than 2000 civilian and combatant deaths from 2005–2011. These deaths varied widely in terms of ethnicity and locality, reflecting the dynamism of conflict. Recently discovered gold fields of North Darfur, for example, emerged as a conflict hot spot (Bartlett, 2016). No neat division existed between war and peace; instead, instability prevailed. The ability to inflict violence, including criminal acts such as robbery, rape, and kidnapping, was a bargaining chip in national and regional political marketplaces, where identity or regional issues matter less as a motive than pursuit of international and national patronage offered through nominal peace processes (de Waal, 2015).

The ongoing impact of war and instability is readily evident in the region’s still massive population of internally displaced people (IDP) and refugees. The UN reported more than 2.1 million IDPs in Darfur and 316,000 Darfuri refugees in Chad as of October 2017 (UNOCHA, 2017). More than 1.6 million IDPs lived in 60 camps, usually situated next to towns, with the Sudanese government often exercising little control over their internal affairs. Other IDPs mainly settled in urban areas. According to the UN, as of October 2017, three million people required humanitarian assistance: the camp-based IDPs, another 600,000 Darfurians identified as vulnerable, 140,000 South Sudanese refugees, 195,500 returnees, and several thousand refugees from Chad and the Central African Republic (UNOCHA, 2017). Although some people have returned to their homes in Darfur, new displacements occurred to violence. Overall, living standards are low. In 2012, the Darfur Regional Authority, an entity created by the 2006 peace agreement, found that two-thirds of its residents fell below the national poverty line, and it had some of the worst human development indicators in Africa (DJAM, 2012).

Darfur continues to be one of the world’s largest humanitarian operations. It has been filled with challenges. Warfare, banditry, and the region’s limited infrastructure pose significant security and logistical problems for aid workers. From 2003 to mid-2013, 47 of them were killed, 139 injured, and 71 abducted in Darfur (UNOCHA, 2013). Sudanese officials hampered relief efforts with bureaucratic demands: “Aid workers needed visas to enter Sudan, travel permits to Darfur, daily travel permits to leave the state cap- itals, and fuel permits to travel!” (Flint & de Waal, 2008, p. 145). The government tightly controlled access by non-governmental organizations to the region. This was demonstrated in March 2009, when the Sudanese government expelled 13 international NGOs from Darfur and revoked the licenses of three local NGOs. It was responding to the issuing of a warrant by the ICC for President Bashir, who was accused of war crimes in Darfur. These 16 NGOs had provided nearly 40 percent of the 16,000 aid workers then in the region (Pantuliano, Jaspers, & Ray, 2009). Expulsion of NGOs has continued, adding to the uncertainties of operating in the region. A large international presence remains in Darfur, albeit with few foreign nationals. According to the UN, 60 international organizations had more than 5000 staff members in Sudan during August 2015, with 96.7 percent of their staff recorded as Sudanese citizens (UNOCHA, 2015). Numerous Sudanese and Darfuri civil society organizations also provide humanitarian and development assistance (Murphy & Tubiana, 2010).

Reconciliation and recovery have been major goals of Darfur’s peace processes. Besides pledges for humanitarian aid, each agreement has been accompanied by promises from donor agencies to support longer-term peacebuilding and economic development in the region. After the 2006 peace agreement, several European countries and the United States set up the Darfur Community Peace and Stability Fund (DCPSF), with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) serving as manager. It offered communities aid in forging trust, strengthening institutions, and building up livelihood assets as prerequisites for sustained development. The DCPSF financed relatively small-scale projects by NGOs, selected by competitive proposals, dealing with conflict resolution, reconciliation, livelihoods, and restoring public service, emphasizing inclusion of women, youths, and marginalized groups. It disbursed more than $60 million for projects by 2015 (DCPSF, 2015). An evaluation carried out in 2012 on behalf of British foreign aid, a trust fund donor, found that the DCPSF projects were largely effective in attaining their goals, despite security problems and other constraints (Coffey Inc., 2012). The DCPSF funded NEF’s Resources, Economic Security and Peace Project to be examined here.

The Doha peace process offered the possibility of international donors providing large-scale funding for moving from relief to development in Darfur. A multi-agency task force devised a detailed strategy for the ‘evolution’ of assistance, with contributions from Sudanese officials, the Darfur Regional Authority, the University of Khartoum, the African Union, several UN organizations, and American and other bilateral aid agencies (DJAM, 2012). De Waal (2015, p. 63) characterized it as “a blueprint for a technocratic governance of Darfur.” This ambitious plan called for investment of $7.2 billion over six year in the region: $5 billion
for reconstruction, $1.4 billion for economic recovery, and $845 million for governance, justice, and reconciliation. The Sudanese government pledged $2.6 billion towards this effort, with international donors expected to furnish the rest. A major donor conference in April 2013 only raised an additional $1 billion, half of it donated by the Qataris. The European Union offered $35 million. USAID offered no new pledge, despite having participated in formulating the strategy (Kushkush, 2013). This refusal departed from USAID’s pledge in 2011 to support early recovery activities in addition to Darfur relief operations, where it constituted the single largest provider of aid (Miller, 2011). More than $20 million was set aside for it by USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA, 2012). Early recovery always assumed improved security. By late 2012, however, the Americans complained about increased violence and problems of access faced by humanitarian personnel in the region (Timberlake, 2012). Spiking IDP figures exposed Darfur’s rising violence: 80,000 in 2011; 114,000 in 2012; 380,000 in 2013; 430,000 in 2014; 246,000 in 2015; and 158,600 in 2016 (UNOCHA, 2017). As troubles increased, USAID halted support for early recovery. NEF’s Resources, Livelihoods, and Security in Darfur Project, which is also covered here, was one of USAID’s early recovery initiatives. As they had done in the past (Morton, 1996), people in Darfur tried to take advantage of these opportunities while they lasted.

5. The Darfur projects

The Near East Foundation (NEF) is a US-based NGO founded in 1915 in response to the Armenian genocide within the Ottoman Empire. Since then NEF has conducted humanitarian and development activities in the Middle East and Africa. Dedicated to inclusive sustainable development, its projects focus on capacity building, community organizing, institution strengthening, and livelihood support, especially through locally appropriate economic initiatives and collaborative natural resource management (NEF, 2015). NEF has operated continuously in Sudan since 1978, and had projects in Darfur during the late 1980s and 1990s. Its in-country staff consisted entirely of Sudanese nationals. In formulating its Darfur projects, NEF planners drew on its extensive experience in the Malian Sahel, particularly with promoting community-based land management institutions (Benjamin, 2004). A NEF Malian staff member even worked briefly with his Sudanese counterparts on the project’s mobilization strategy.

National partners for the projects were Hand in Hand Organization for Peace and Development (HIH) and the Sudanese Organization for Humanitarian Aid (SOHA). These NGOs shared with NEF a strong commitment to inclusive and participatory approaches to relief and development work. HIH started operating in Darfur in 2009, with several faculty members from Zalingei University, one of three colleges located in the region, among its members. Its local activities included organizing women’s groups for training and income-generation activities. SOHA was established in 2006, engaging in a number of peacebuilding, health, and rural development activities. Both partners supplied the project’s field agents, who were based within participating communities. The agents often came from these areas. Having field agents stay within project sites was uncommon in Darfur’s humanitarian interventions. The structure of the NEF-partner relationship and the composition of its members fostered the project’s framing in terms of traditional nafeer ideas and practices – the local custom of communities working together in response to village needs.

The Resources, Economic Security and Peace Project (RESP) operated from January 2012 to April 2014, supported by the DCPSF (budget: $1 million). As per DCPSF’s mandate, it focused on fostering local reconciliation, peacebuilding, and collaborative natural resource management. The Resources, Livelihoods, and Security in Darfur Project (RLS), funded by USAID (budget: $2.6 million), ran from October 2012 to March 2015. It aimed to enhance local livelihoods, food security, and resilience with the goal of supporting peaceful and participatory economic recovery. The projects took place in 25 communities spanning nine clusters and seven administrative localities within Central and West Darfur States. This area took in Zalingei and Nertiti towns, IDP camps, rural settlements, and pastoralist groups. In most of the clusters Fur farmers comprised the largest group, though Mornel’s population was largely Masalit. Other ethnic groups, including seasonal pastoralists, also lived in the clusters. The Fur and Masalit themselves were not ethnic monoliths but had localized divisions. Some of the clusters fell within the Jebel Marra Project zone, one of the region’s few large-scale development interventions launched after independence (Morton, 1996). Extension agents from it were integrated into NEF activities. Although each project had its own distinct objectives and activities, they strongly complemented one another. RESP established NEF’s modus operandi for participatory capacity building, inclusive community mobilizing, and delivery of material to project participant for livelihood and income-generation activities.

The RESP Project unfolded slowly as the staff navigated Darfur’s extensive and complex security apparatus. Getting permission for project events and staff travel outside Zalingei town (the project’s headquarters) proved time-consuming. Armed conflicts and instability also affected activities. A dispute between the Misseriya and Salamat tribes turned violent during 2013, for example, impacting several sites. There were occasional fears that Zalingei town, Central Darfur’s capital and the site of the project’s headquarters, would be attacked, halting work. Armed robberies also occurred in the area. The region’s very poor road infrastructure added another layer of challenge. Heavy rains, when they came, added to the transport woes, and in 2012 also sparked a large outbreak of yellow fever. In general, the skill, diplomacy, courage, creativeness, and persistence of the NEF project team and their partners in navigating Darfur’s troubled setting deserves to be highlighted. Whether these helped foster a sense of ‘local ownership,’ however, is a question to be addressed later.

5.1. Community mobilization

The NEF interventions involved an ambitious attempt to recast local institutions so that they could serve an inclusive and participatory means for revitalizing local natural resource management and for delivering other project materials and services. In design they followed the principles of Mainstream Institutionalism delineated by Ostrom (1990) and others, including formalizing institutional arrangements, delineating clear jurisdiction boundaries, and transparency. Exactly how the new institutions would mesh with existing ones, the process of bricolage (Cleaver, 2012), was a feat of engineering left to the actual implementation, a common occurrence (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). Specifically, the NEF projects set up supra-village associations (SVAs), multistakeholder institutions for mobilizing project activities and providing a platform for dialogue on reconciliation and mutual problem-solving. NEF-Mali staff devised the model in the 1990s to pursue opportunities for community resource management opened by decentralization. Each of the nine clusters had a SVA executive committee, also lived in the clusters. The Fur and Masalit themselves were not ethnic monoliths but had localized divisions. Some of the clusters fell within the Jebel Marra Project zone, one of the region’s few large-scale development interventions launched after independence (Morton, 1996). Extension agents from it were integrated into NEF activities. Although each project had its own distinct objectives and activities, they strongly complemented one another. RESP established NEF’s modus operandi for participatory capacity building, inclusive community mobilizing, and delivery of material to project participant for livelihood and income-generation activities.

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from each area’s main social groups, with at least 10 percent of the executive committee drawn from IDPs or smaller ethnic groups. For example, an interviewee from Abate reported that its SVA’s conflict resolution committee was composed of members from nine of its largest groups, with all 13 tribes from the area engaged when serious matters arose. Women comprised between one-third to one-eighth of the SVA executive committee memberships, while nearly 30 percent of their member were classified as youths. Although information was incomplete, the committees clearly had higher representation among the more prominent, prosperous, and educated residents, as well as among those who were males, more senior, settled (in contrast to being IDPs), and from larger ethnic groups. Was this just another example, as Cleaver (2012) puts it, of “new arrangements, old inequalities”? Without a doubt the SVAs reflected much continuity with existing local leadership and power patterns. Yet, Morton (1996, p. 54), based on his long experience in Darfur, noted “the absurdity” of projects trying “to bypass the rural middle classes,” given their roles as “mediators of state services.” At the same time the project’s involved smaller ethnic groups, women, and youths, ensuring some wider social representation.

Interviews revealed that the executive committees varied in their procedures. Some SVAs were highly formal, holding regularly scheduled meetings with minutes taken, while others operated almost on an ad hoc basis. Thus, there was not a singular sort of bricolage that occurred but much variation within NEF’s standardized design. The SVA executive committee recruited and oversaw specialized committees which deal with reconciliation/conflict resolution, agriculture, livestock, forestry, and, in some places, specialized themes such as youths or beekeeping. With some exceptions, particularly reconciliation/conflict resolution, these committees mainly engaged in project activities, providing or selecting trainees, carrying out training (for those who attended training of trainer workshops), distributing and using inputs, and helping to monitor their impacts. The specialized committees usually consisted of 15 members, sometimes more. Project procedures stressed social inclusiveness, especially concerning tribal or ethnic affiliation, a value often appreciated within local communities. A SVA representative from Mukjar cluster, for example, proudly stated: “We have a conflict management committee. All tribes are a part, even locally. There are about five or six different tribes there.” Other committee members reported similar experiences. The contributions and limitations of the SVA committee will become clearer when seen in the context of the projects’ activities.

5.2. Reconciliation and conflict resolution

NEF’s SVA institutional strategy required attention to negotiation, mediation, and conflict response skills. In addition, project planners and staff appreciated that that the projects themselves needed to be conflict-sensitive, as their own activities could create disputes or intensify existing ones. The projects benefited from the presence of the Peace Studies Center at the University of Zalingei, where some of the staff had been trained. NEF was fortunate that the Zalingei locality commissioner during RESP’s start-up was the former Center director Yassir Hassan Satti. He officially opened the training of trainers (TOT) workshop in August 2012, its first major event. I served as a lead trainer, which featured segments on conflict analysis, gender analysis, mediation, negotiation, multistakeholder dialogue, collaborative natural resource management, reconciliation, and related topics. The involvement of the Center trainees and the workshop participants ensured that training drew on customary practices such as judiya (local mediation sessions), ajaweed (mediators, usually elders, religious leaders, or other local dignitaries), and rakobo (an agreement or settlement). The project staff emphasized building on or strengthening existing practices, rather than supplanting them with new ones. The trainings raised awareness and offered encouragement for reconciliation and peaceful solutions.

Participants at the first TOT workshop included staff from the two partner organizations; officials current and past from ministries dealing with agriculture, education, housing, planning, and forestry; faculty from the University of Zalingei; and representatives from civil society organizations, including the Women’s Union. Nearly one-third (13 of 43) of the trainees were women. The NEF staff ultimately trained more than 1300 people, half of them women, at workshops organized in the project areas. Among their trainees were farmers, herders, IDPs, members of local NGOs, and officials from line ministries. Officials from the administration, humanitarian affairs, and the military also attended workshops. A second TOT workshop was held in March 2014, which I also lead, attended by approximately 70 people, including UN and UNAMID representatives. The project also spread conflict resolution information through a radio program and public events.

The impact of this training became quickly apparent. A few weeks after the August TOT workshop an omda (a local administrator) who attended reported using its techniques to support mediation of a potentially dangerous dispute between local farmers and herders involving livestock corridors, crop damage, and forest encroachment. More than 300 camels trampled through fields and woodland. The military intervened, taking away the animals. Both farmers and pastoralist were on the verge of violence. The omda organized a reconciliation committee composed of the representatives from the disputing parties as well as neighboring groups who would be likely affected by fighting. They resolved their dispute, agreeing on compensation and reestablishing livestock passage. The community experienced no further incidents during the rest of the growing season. Similar conflicts were reported in the project areas over access to land, water, and woodland between and among farmers and herders, with similar responses aimed at multistakeholder engagement and peaceful resolution. More than 240 cases were recorded where project participants used their training to address conflicts. This number probably underreported the actual incidence of interventions.

Community members recognized that conflict management skills were applicable in many settings, ranging from intercommunal hostilities to domestic violence. An omda from Zalingei reported putting his training to use when two people from different ethnic groups were found dead outside one of the IDP camps. Their families believed they had been murdered, and they took 18 IDPs hostage, threatening to kill them. He quickly formed a reconciliation committee consisting of the disputants, tribal authorities, and local administrators. The omda reported that the emphasis on conflict analysis proved important, as he identified tensions between the two ethnic groups. A peaceful resolution was eventually reached, with compensation paid and the hostages released, some of them having been held for over a month. The Mornei SVA helped resolve a state of conflict between the Missiriya and Gemir tribes that had lasted for 14 years. One of the Mornei omdas involved in the project also intervened in a domestic violence case. He organized a meeting composed of their respective family members, sheikhs, and other local informal leaders. They reconciled, and the husband agreed to pay compensation to his wife. In Abata the SVA conflict committee organized a meeting of all the local tribes after a trader had been violently robbed and almost kidnapped. An interviewee reported that the perpetrators had fled, “Their footsteps vanished in the countryside.” However, they used the event as a means of addressing crime in general, resulting in a reduction in robberies and break-ins. Another incident was reported by an interviewee from Nertiti’s SVA illustrated the complexities arising from the combination of warfare and instability:
The Arabs attacked a convoy. The military were able to retrieve the goods and fuel. The government rewarded those who retrieved things, giving them a vehicle. A military person drove it, saying it was now my car. A man recognized that the car was his – it had been stolen months earlier. He said that his ownership could be proved, because there were three things about (within) the car that he could describe. He proved correct. The original owner was asked when he lost it – in 2013. The rebels had taken it. But the car’s new owner did not want to give it up. The SVA conflict resolution committee sat with the native administration to decide the fate of the vehicle. The two tribes of which the new and original owners belong sat down. We realized that if we did not find a solution, the trouble might escalate. The new owner of the car wanted a reward, and since the car had sustained damage, the owner wanted payment. So both sides got paid. The car went back north to the owner. If someone find it, the item has to go back, for dignity, it needs to be returned to the owner." 

This and other accounts also underscore how SVA members worked in conjunction with local administrators (with their membership often overlapping), police, and others to address conflicts. The SVA committees also engaged with the Peaceful Coexistence Committees set up earlier in Central Darfur by the Native Administration with support from UNAMID’s Civil Affairs Unit. Several participants reported that an advantage of SVA reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts was that disputes often could be handled peacefully within communities, without formally calling in external parties.

The project proved influential in the rise of a non-partisan peace-seeking group, Youth of the Tribes of Darfur. It started with a handful of individuals from different backgrounds who wanted to foster reconciliation and peacebuilding. They grew into an informal movement with more than 500 members, both women and men, from 36 ethnic or tribal groups. Some of its members received conflict management training from the project. The group’s leaders relished their informal status, feeling that registration as a civil society organization would compromise their autonomy and non-sectarian character. Members go into markets, public meeting places, and pastoralist settlements to raise consciousness about peace and reconciliation. A woman organizer stated that she made a special effort to reach other women, as they have been the ones most harm by conflict. They also target youths as well, since much of “bad behavior” that occurs such as armed robberies, burglaries, and drug abuse, disproportionately involves them. Several members have supported mediation efforts, such as Missiriya-Salamat hostilities that have caused widespread insecurity. Their leaders participated in the 2014 TOT workshop in Zalingei. They provided dramatic testimony, describing where their efforts led to reopened local markets and reduced inter-communal tensions.

5.3. Natural resource management and livelihood support

Both projects promoted peacebuilding and recovery by seeking to revive or strengthen local economies, natural resource management institutions, and food production systems. NEF introduced another innovation from its Malian experience: collaborative land use management planning (CLUMP). Like the SVAs, the CLUMP drew heavily from Mainstream Institutionalism’s view of ‘crafting’ formalized, rules-based, transparent, and voluntary institutions (see Benjamin, 2004; Ostrom, 1990). Each CLUMP is based on a convention, an agreement reached by local stakeholders, project staff, and authorities, designating natural resource practices and responsibilities at the cluster administrative level. All nine clusters adopted conventions. The process was described by a SVA representative from Nertiti: "Our meeting brought together the Supra-Village committee, relevant government departments, the locality commissioner, and security people." Women usually composed about one-fourth of the participants who prepared the agreements. Despite being signed, the elaborate, ambitious CLUMPs were very limited in their impacts due to insecurity within and across communities. Indeed, it was difficult to ascertain the extent to which they were operative at all in some areas. But they clearly mattered, at least to some extent, in some places. According to one account, a local leader known to be armed used this reputation to enforce his cluster’s convention, preventing encroachment by a neighboring group. Reduce tree cutting was attributed to the agreements, along with the operation of forestry committees.

RESP and RLS supported activities to replenish local natural resources, including tree nurseries, rangeland reseeding and temporary land enclosures to protect grazing grounds (reportedly much appreciated by pastoralists), extension services (including integrated pest management), and even rehabilitation of a dam near Nertiti. The projects funded training and materials for group and individual income-generation enterprises. As part of RESP, participants processed food oils, produced cheese, kept bees, grew vegetables, and made bricks. RLS focused on creating or strengthening existing small-scale enterprises, with project staff helping project participants with market assessments, skill-building, and mentoring. More than 2700 people received business training, of which over 900 obtained support for their activities through RLS. The project also trained 25 para-vets (two of them women), helping to restore this public service. To promote increased agricultural production, RLS also distributed at low cost or freely (to destitute households) implements, seeds, and other inputs.

Data collected by the project showed that these activities generally raised incomes and increased food access for participants, sometimes substantially though certainly not always. Because of the short time-span of the projects and the inability to evaluate the project by standard means, their long-term impact, cost-effectiveness, and sustainability could not be determined. Nonetheless, people were generally very enthusiastic about them. I was told by a small shopkeeper from Zalingei, who participated in the RLS Project, “The training was very useful for doing business, giving me new ideas and new information on how I can operate more profitably by finding new products and sources of supply.” Overall, the projects tried to reach a wide spectrum of people, seeking to overcome barriers based on gender, age, ethnicity, livelihood, residence status (including IDPs), economic status, and other variables. Despite these efforts, however, Darfur region continues mired in instability and outbreaks of violence.

6. Conclusion

Darfur in western Sudan offers one of the world’s most illiberal settings. As described in the paper’s first part, the transformation of the Dar Fur Sultanate from a powerful core to a remote, impoverished periphery was a long-time coming. Rooted in social processes already underway before the 20th century, it political and economic marginalization was accelerated and deepened by colonial and post-colonial rule. In recent decades geopolitical intrigues involving neighboring countries and state-driven institutional changes altered identities and inter-group relations in Darfur’s multiethnic society, further unraveling its social fabric. The fighting in 2003 combined a center-periphery struggle against the Sudanese state with a civil war. The region’s troubles seem intractable when viewed through the lens of its historical political economy.

The second part of this paper, focusing on two internationally-funded projects operated by the Near East Foundation and its national partners, provides another window for examining the
potential for change in Darfur. The projects, focusing on community mobilization, natural resource management, and economic recovery as means of peacebuilding. The severe security situation in the region, including in the Zalingei area, limited the quality of data that could be collected about the implementation and impacts of the projects. Nevertheless, available information, especially accounts of conflict resolution and other activities carried out by project participants suggest that much can be accomplish, even in illiberal settings, if people are given sufficient opportunity for creativity and action. NEF’s projects generally supported Darfurians in their efforts to handle conflicts and tensions peacefully. The limits of what can accomplished through such project in terms of peacebuilding, especially beyond the community level. A representative from Abata’s SVA succinctly expressed this conclusion: “In the field of conflict resolution, previously, there were lots of problems. After the training, we are now able to resolve our local problems – the small, inside ones. The bigger problems outside, we cannot yet handle.” For Darfur to achieve recovery requires breakthroughs in national and international peace efforts. De Waal’s (2015) recent analysis of the “real politics” of the Horn of Africa, including both Sudan and Darfur, suggests that elite priorities are elsewhere, while international donors often end up enabling of conflict and chaos instead of servants of peace. This stifling reality needs to be recognized and addressed. The Horn’s political marketplace will not be easily altered, given its ability to co-opt civil society rivals. Yet, as Bromwich (2015, p. 389) observed, much positive potential exists in seeking to combine “political resolution of conflict” with “new forms of environmental governance.” The efforts such as those by the Youths of the Tribe of Darfur also reveal the aspiration and capacity of the region’s residents to work towards their own solutions.

Conflict of interest

None.

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