# Resources, Development and Politics in Darfur

## Resource Paper

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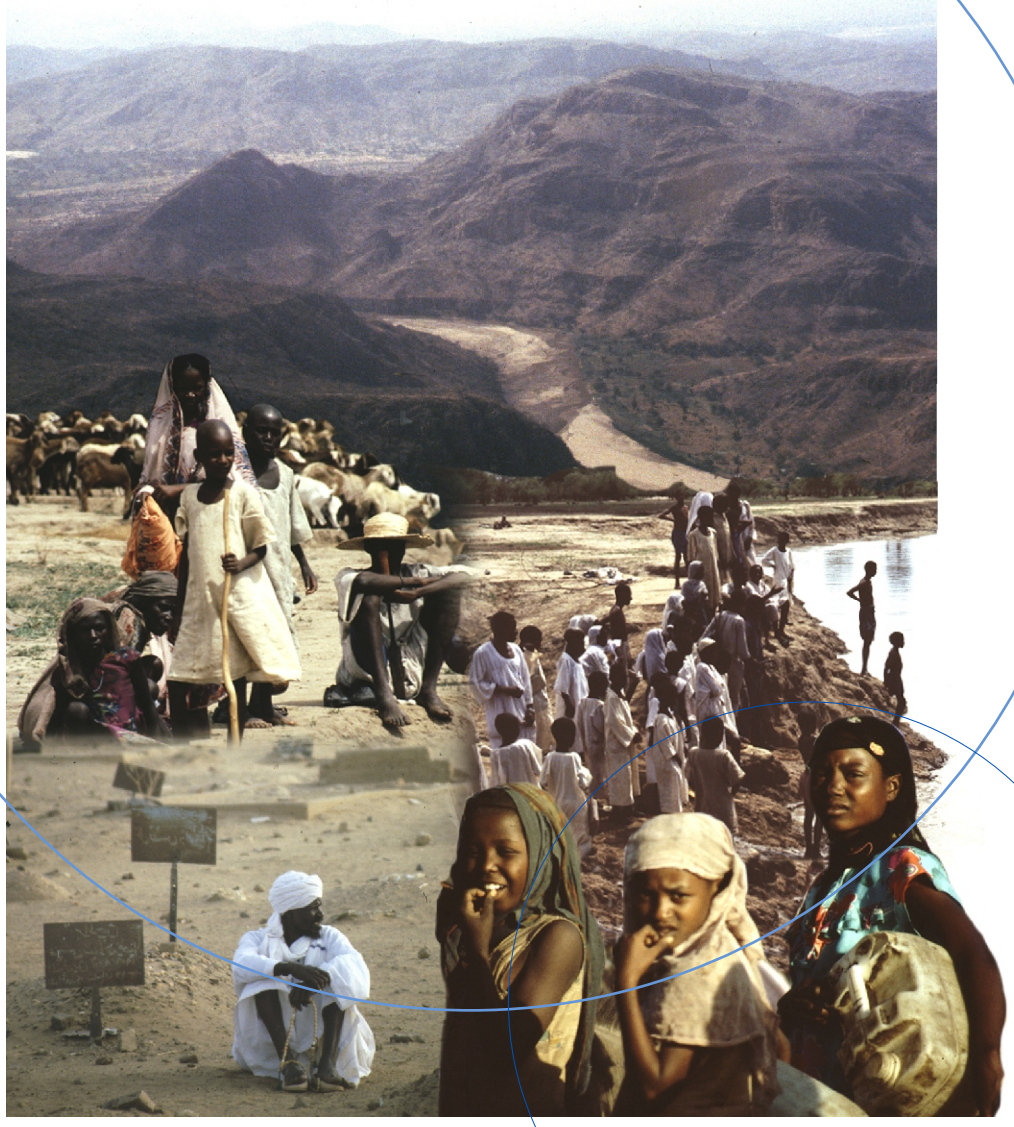

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# 1 Introduction

Conflict in Darfur is nothing new. 2004 has parallels with what happened between 1989 and 1990. Some aspects have roots as far back as the late 19th century, the point at which Darfur politics first became linked to events in central Sudan and the wider world.

Some argue that the conflict reflects a struggle for natural resources between different groups, with desertification as an important factor. The first section of the paper looks at the extent to which competition for land and water is driving what is happening.

The second section looks at governance in Darfur. Initial press reports gave an impression of a struggle against a government which has neglected Darfur; a government which is exploiting ethnic divisions to support its rule. However, Government of Sudan's capacity to control the situation may be quite limited. International pressure to force it to change its policies is unlikely to achieve much, unless there is a much clearer idea of what it should be doing instead.

As a very tentative contribution to such an idea, the conclusion sketches some thoughts about what a coherent programme to bring peace to Darfur might include.

This comes with a warning. The writer of this piece spent over six years in Darfur during the 1980s, including the last period of serious fighting. Up until 1992 he did a substantial amount of research on the region. Since then, he has been completely out of touch. Much will have changed in the last 12 years.

# 2 Development and Desertification: The Resource Balance

Life in Darfur is dominated by the rain. The second half of the twentieth century saw a steady decline in annual rainfall. In Nyala in the 1930s, the average was around 500 mm a year. In the 1970s it was 400 mm, in the early 1980s 300 mm. Darfur first came to international attention during the Sahel drought of the early 1970s. The African famines of 1984 and 1985 saw a second burst of intense interest. The rains move south to north and back again and economic activity moves with them. In a good year crops will be grown north of El Fasher, in a bad they fail south of Nyala. And every year much of the region's livestock herd – cattle, sheep and camels - follows the rain north and back again.

It is easy, therefore, to see Darfur as being divided amongst competing groups: between Arabs and Non-Arabs and between farmers and nomads. Easy also to believe that falling rainfall is driving competition between those groups over land and water. The majority of the land is open-access, with only limited, traditional controls on who goes where. All the elements of the classic Tragedy of the Commons seem to be in place.

During the 1980s Government, with support from the World Bank, the UK and Saudi Arabia among others, made substantial investments in programmes designed to counter this. These programmes gathered a great deal of information, not just about land use but also about the way society and the economy works. They also tested many ideas about how development can be supported and natural resources managed in Darfur. Some of the conclusions of this work are surprising:

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- There is no real dividing line between farmers and nomads. Many Baggara Arabs, traditionally perceived as nomadic herders, are settled farmers. Conversely, some of the non-arab Fur move with their cattle. Farmers with larger herds hire nomads to manage them, in effect investing their money with them.
- Even more strikingly, tribal and even ethnic boundaries can also be fluid. Alliances can develop to the extent that groups eventually change tribe.
- Both farmers and herders are rational and efficient. Farmers use flexible strategies to counter uncertain rainfall. Cattle may confer status and have cultural importance; but they are managed with a hard eye on profit.
- A dense network of large and small markets move Darfuri groundnuts, gum arabic and livestock to international markets. Given the difficulties of access, traders seemed to be providing a fair and efficient service.

The central development strategy of the 1980s was to prevent the predicted Tragedy of the Commons by offering farmers and herders title to their land, so that they could invest in it to raise production. This met with almost no interest. The scope for profitable investment was limited and there was little direct competition over land: for farming or for rangeland. Farmers saw no point in land title and they were right. A sign of the lack of pressure was the way groups from northern Darfur, who wished to move south, were able to negotiate with the people of the south for land to settle, without difficulty or significant cost.

None of this meant that there was not ample scope for clashes between farmers and herders; but the clashes seemed to be about managing the herds' movements, so they did not damage the crops, not about competition for land or water. Traditional rules supported by local government orders were in place to control these movements. Overall, there was no evidence of any tragedy of the commons.

Population moved from north Darfur to south for much of the 20$^{th}$ century. The movement started before the decline in rainfall. Colonial records show it from as early as the 1940s. Up until the 1980s the movement was not a response to drought. Instead, it reflected a period of simple, but rapid and powerful economic development in Darfur, and in the Sudan as a whole. In central Sudan growth came from cotton, sugar and mechanised sorghum. Darfur saw its own commodity booms: in gum arabic, where Sudan used to be the world's dominant producer, in cattle and sheep, and in groundnuts. In the 1960s, Sudan had 12% of world trade in groundnuts. The wetter regions of S. Darfur were better suited all three commodities, especially groundnuts, and this drew farmers southwards.

New technologies also shifted the balance southward. Between them, the railway to Nyala in S. Darfur and motor transport steadily replaced the vast camel herds of N. Darfur. Deep boreholes opened up sandy areas that had been inaccessible for cropping. These changes brought about substantial, albeit simple improvements to standards of living in Darfur. A people who had a bare subsistence until the middle of the century, became accustomed to imported cloth, to sugar, tea and a range of other goods. Nyala, especially, and El Fasher developed into fairly substantial towns.

Competition for resources depends on their value. Up to the 1970s, the land and water resources of Darfur became steadily more valuable as markets for their produce expanded rapidly. Yet this did not lead to conflict. That came later. From the late 1970s, Darfur's markets died away. The main reason was mismanagement of the macro economy and worsening governance at every level.

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The vital railway link became less and less reliable and many other aspects of the economy turned against the Darfuri producer. Many of the better educated left for Khartoum or overseas.

By the end of the 1980s, Darfur was undergoing a process of economic compression. Opportunities that had opened up over the previous four or five decades were being taken away and standards of living were retreating. Although drought was a factor, it was not the primary one. Darfuris have established strategies for guarding against drought. They store up to two years of grain from good harvests, for example. But they have no way to guard against the loss of the markets for groundnuts and gum arabic; or against the failures in the Sudanese economy that made staples such as sugar and tea far more expensive than they should have been.

Individual disputes over land played a part in the steadily worsening security situation in Darfur. There will always be disputes. Overall, however, it is not likely that competition for resources is a major driver of the current conflict. Darfur remains a very large region for quite a small population. Given the right support, there is room for all.

Once a conflict has started, however, burning crops, stealing cattle and driving people from their homes are the easiest weapons to hand. This makes it look more like a conflict over resources than it really is. Predictions are dangerous. If, however, there is a winning side in the Darfur conflict, I do not expect them to occupy and use the land they have won. Apart from anything else, they will not have the manpower.

## 3 Civil Administration: The Absent Sovereign

Darfuri tradition provides an established framework for dispute resolution, centred on tribal affiliation and arbitration. Mediation is also central to Islam. (The prophet Mohammad first won his position in Madina as an arbitrator.) Under colonial rule the Idara Ahlia, which was a civil administration based on these existing frameworks, played the central role in policing and in dispute resolution. The colonial government gave close attention to supporting and directing the Idara Ahlia. Nevertheless, it was recognised to be old-fashioned, even then, and attempts were made before independence to introduce elected local councils. Those attempts continued and intensified after 1956, under both military and democratic governments. Yet, none of the many political and administrative reorganisations that followed was lastingly successful. Traditional structures, on the other hand, survived. By the early 1980s, the idea of formally re-establishing the Idara Ahlia was under serious discussion. As late as 1990, the tribal conference was still the forum for attempts to resolve the major conflicts of that time. It is not impossible that the current conflict will, ultimately, have to be resolved within that same traditional framework.

Why, if an effective traditional framework for dispute resolution once existed, has Darfur been so vulnerable to severe and now escalating conflict? The answer is the failure of the post-colonial Sudanese state to meet its most fundamental obligation: to act as the arbitrator of last resort and, even more important, the enforcer of arbitration decisions. The traditional leaders who make up the Idara Ahlia can only resolve disputes effectively when there is an external, sovereign power to support them and to discipline them.

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A quotation from a tax demand of an 18th century Fur sultan sums it up. *'Royal authority exists through the army, the army through money, money through taxes, taxes through cultivation, cultivation through justice*'.

This Hobbesian statement summarises the state's most central function: to act as the sovereign power which meets 'the indispensible need of that human beings have to surrender some of their natural rights to liberty to secure their lives against death and their property against plunder'. For many years, the state has failed to provide this basic service in Darfur.

There are a number of reasons behind the failure: weak management, which is a feature of most government services in Sudan, compounded by poor pay, a lack of resources and the emigration of many educated Sudanese; an over-emphasis on economic development, which distracted the state from its more basic functions; and a feeling, perhaps, that justice and police work were colonial pre-occupations, which should not be necessary in an independent nation.

A large, remote and thinly populated area, where people travel great distances to make their living, is natural territory for banditry. Darfur is just such a landscape, especially so when large parts of Chad and Central Africa are added. Inadequate policing and a justice system without authority mean individual communities feel they must take defence against banditry into their own hands. When this happens, one of the great strengths of traditional, tribal structures becomes a weakness. That strength is communal responsibility, the acceptance that the community as a whole stands behinds the acts of one member. In a healthy traditional administration, this is the basis for resolving disputes. However, when the system breaks down, joint responsibility becomes a license for uncontrolled, tit-for-tat action between communities. Almost inevitably, it starts to drive escalation.

There were, however, two more powerful forces behind the failure of the traditional framework. The first was the fact that the Sudanese state increasingly became a provider of resources rather than services. Instead of justice and education, the state became a distributor of scarce, rationed commodities such as sugar and tomato paste, and of development funds. Competition for these resources began to drive political competition, even at very local levels. The second factor was the inevitable difficulty of dispute resolution in a young democracy. The temptation to exploit disputes for political gain is strong. Even where it is resisted, a democratic government can find it difficult to avoid a perception of bias that destroys its credentials as arbitrator. This was clearly a factor in Darfur at the end of the last democratic era.

It is doubtful whether the much quoted Black Book has really had much of an influence on what is happening in Darfur. However, it is a clear example of politics as a question of competition for state resources between different communities. At bottom, the book makes only one claim: that the three tribes of Northern Sudan, the Shaygia, the Ja'aaliyiin and the Danaaqla, have diverted Sudan's resources to themselves.

It would be naïve to suggest that the Idara Ahlia can be recreated. Many of the elite which led it have emigrated and the rewards of leading a poor people in a remote region are unlikely to draw them back. Social and economic structures have changed too much for tribal leaders to win back easily the authority they used to have. Powerful external political pressures are not going to go away. Indeed, many of them are now reflected back to Darfur by the migrant elite.

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Here too, the Black Book is a clear example. It claims to represent the poor people of remote regions yet it is clearly a weapon in a struggle for central power.

It is probable that Darfuris who live in Darfur still see what is happening in a tribal framework. Recent reports of fighting between two non-arab groups, the Zaghawa and the Gimr, show how local, tribal competition is at least as strong as the wider divide between Arab and non-Arab. Any attempt to bring peace to Darfur will need to work within that same framework, to use those elements of the Idara Ahlia that survive and strengthen them where appropriate.

# 4 Conclusion: Simple Solutions

What follows assumes that external political pressures can be controlled. Some way must be found to prevent Darfur becoming a proxy battleground for Khartoum politics, or even worse for differing international positions about relations between Islam and the west. For that reason, I would propose, as a basic principle, that no binding negotiations should take place outside the region. Negotiations on the other side of Africa between the self-appointed leaders of various movements and Government will inevitably be dominated by those external interests. A lasting resolution to the bitter conflict in Darfur cannot be achieved in such a forum.

If external pressures can be neutralised, what follows is an attempt to see how Darfuris might be helped to resolve matters for themselves. It has one major strand, reestablishing a framework for justice, security and dispute resolution, and one minor, delivering economic goods and services.

A guiding principle is to leave as much possible in the hands of Darfuris living in Darfur. As described above, the thing they need most is robust and absolutely neutral support: that 'sovereign power' to hold the ring and ensure that all parties negotiate in good-faith and abide by their commitments. In the longer-term this must be the Sudanese state's job. At present, however, this is a role that the international community could usefully play. This is a more radical proposal than it seems. It implies that instead of putting pressure on Government to change its policies, the international community should try to persuade Government to allow it to take over two functions for a period: policing and primary level justice.

For policing, a Darfur Gendarmerie would be established. The international community would train it and provide a proportion of the officer corps but all the troopers would be recruited and trained in Darfur. The emphasis would be on simple policing, with a minimum of expensive vehicles, helicopters etc. To the extent that bandits still move mostly on camels or horses, so would the Gendarmerie. Effective policing depends above all on genuine and deep local understanding. For that reason, pay and conditions should be tailored to command a long-term commitment, from expatriate officers just as much as from the troopers.

Primary justice and dispute resolution needs a bench of magistrates which balances representation and local knowledge with neutrality. A possible model would be to establish a position of Resident Magistrate, an official with legal training and the power to decide non-capital issues. The RM would sit beside local leaders who would act as lay magistrates, to represent the community and ensure that the community's knowledge of any case is available to the bench.

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For an initial period, the international community would select and finance the RM's to guarantee their neutrality. Nevertheless, both they and the Gendarmerie would report to and be responsible to Government of Sudan. Magistrate's decisions would remain subject to review under Sudan's current legal system.

These ideas will need a great deal of development and Government would have to be persuaded to accept them. Nevertheless, they offer a more positive way forward than the alternative of placing an international force in Darfur which is now being considered.

The minor strand is called Economic Goods and Services, to emphasise that development projects based on large investments are not the primary requirement. Darfur's best chance of an economic recovery lies in allowing farmers and livestock herders to regain the position they won in the 1960s and 1970s. To do this they need reliable transport, some simple inputs and markets.

For goods, priority should go to ensuring that commodity staples are reliably available in the markets. This does not just mean grain. Living standards are simple in Darfur but they depend on basics such as tea, sugar, oil and cloth. Simple agricultural inputs are also vital: especially iron and steel to make tools. Unexpected items can make a surprising difference; plastic bins to store grain are an example.

Peace is the most important service of all. In Darfur cultivation truly does 'come through justice'. After that, health and education services are extremely weak in the region. Variable rainfall and all the other risks they face, mean that Darfuri's would benefit greatly from a reliable home for their savings. Deposit accounts that are protected from inflation have never been accessible in Darfur.

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