INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL POLICY AND UNDERSTANDING

POLICY BRIEF

The Crisis in Darfur: Community Building and Identity Politics

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The crisis in Darfur receives attention around the world. The dimensions of human tragedy in terms of numbers of dead and of displaced people are staggering. The African Union, the United Nations, and many other governmental and non-governmental organizations are involved. Agencies prepare and present numerous reports and journalists from many countries regularly cover developments in this previously little-known region of Sudan.

The immediacy of the problems involved in saving thousands of lives justifiably means that some of the long term implications of the crisis get less attention. Observers and participants provide a wealth of details, but few people look at the broader implications of the nature of the crisis as a twenty-first century conflict. Finding an effective resolution to the conflict requires some sense of the historical context as it relates to the present and future, not simply as a mirror of the past. The battles in Darfur can be seen as reflecting the new nature of human group identities in the twenty-first century world of global interconnections and the new ways of defining the nature of ties of cohesion in communities and human groups.

Many observers provide an uncomplicated picture of the conflict. In a simplistic scenario, they identify the struggle as one between "Arabs" and "Africans," and view this as some type of a primordial battle. This approach makes it easy to define the "bad guys" and the "good guys" and, in this perspective, there are few difficulties in deciding what policies should be advocated for bringing the conflict to an end.

However, other analysts recognize the complexities of the situation and identify a wide range of factors which help to shape the nature of the crisis as it developed at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Historically many different factors shaped the lines of both conflict and cooperation among the diverse peoples of Darfur. In human terms, society in western Sudan is marked by diversity, with many different and culturally distinct groups existing side by side. The lines defining these groups shift and change over time and the broad categories of "Arab" and "African" each contain many groups that have been in conflict with each other at various times. The identification boundaries themselves are porous. Scholars note that in addition to intermarriage, changing lifestyles may result in a change in "racial" identification. For example, since there is some identification of the nomadic-herding lifestyle with "Arab," when an "African" group shifts emphasis from farming to herding, sometimes there has also historically been a shift in basic identification.

In this complex context, many analysts agree with the statement in the United Nations report of 2004 prepared by Francis Deng, who is both a major UN official and an important Sudanese scholar and political figure: "The causes of the conflicts that have generated displacement in Darfur are multiple and historically rooted."[1] Although there is considerable agreement that the problems have historical foundations, there is also recognition that the conflicts now have

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new dimensions that have changed the nature of the problems and their necessary solutions.

The conflicts at the beginning of the twenty-first century have important new characteristics. New forms of organization and new bases for self-identification in the region make it essential that peace making efforts do not get bogged down in solutions that are so tied to the past heritages of the groups involved that the new realities are ignored. Solutions must be a balance of recognizing the historic roots and the new conditions.

One important dimension of the situation in Darfur is ecological. In the 1980s, extended droughts and accelerated desertification created tensions between the herding groups and the settled agriculturalists. Disputes over control of water resources are not new. For centuries, settled agriculturalists and herding peoples have competed for control of water and other natural resources and open conflicts arose from time to time. However, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, three developments (among others) changed the character of inter-group fighting: the changing nature of societal authority, the introduction of more powerful weaponry, and the changing definition of the combatants.

The society had long standing mechanisms for arbitration and conflict resolution. Francis Deng's report notes: "Traditionally, relations between the herders and farmers were regulated by conventional arrangements between them and conflicts were managed and resolved by traditional leaders in accordance with the principles of customary law."[2] However, government policies reduced the authority of native administration structures and the impact of different aspects of social and economic development undermined the ability of the old established leadership of the various ethnic groups to be effective in conflict resolution. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, as tensions intensified, the old-style mechanisms for conflict resolution were no longer available and new modes of local mediation and negotiation had not

developed. As a consequence, there were few constraints to prevent intensification of conflicts that developed.

A second element in the situation that made it more dangerous is the introduction into the region of significant quantities of guns during the 1980s and 1990s. Civil wars in Chad and the prolific exports of arms from Libya into central Africa made a wide range of weaponry available to local groups in Darfur. This raised the intensity of conflict with the result that conflicts "over wells that in earlier times had been settled with spears or mediation became much more intractable in an era awash with guns."[3]

A third dangerous element in the situation is the changing identification of the local combatants themselves. While fighting among clans and ethnic groups was historically done by the young men, the young men were acting as a part of a broader pattern of established clan or ethnic group structures. Now the battles involve groups of young men identified by generic labels like *janjawiid* or an organizational name like the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) or the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). This situation reflects important changes in Darfur society. Under the pressures of increasing desertification and drought along with the economic dislocations existing in Darfur as a marginalized region in an economically changing country, growing numbers of young men have little employment and little hope for a better future. These displaced young men represent a highly volatile element in already difficult conditions. "In these conditions of deprivation and despair among nomadic and sedentary young men 'without a future,' weapons form an easy and immediate satisfaction in the quest for respect, self-identity, and a sense of control."[4]

The core of the fighting is between well-armed gangs of young men who may come from diverse ethnic backgrounds and are not directly related to or controlled by the older social and political authorities. Description of two towns in Darfur in May 2005, one controlled by the SLA and the other by a government-supported Janjawiid force, notes that they "are virtually identical. Both swarm with teenage soldiers, swimming in baggy camouflage suits and lugging Kalashnikov assault rifles."[5] The commanders in both towns were operationally

quite independent and clearly not identifiable by any local ethnic categories.

In this context, the broad and unclearly defined labels of "Arabs" and "Africans" provide a convenient set of identities for describing the conflict. However, neither identification label provides an operational basis for unity of action or community. In fact, there is conflict among groups that are within these broad generic categories. "Government-supported" *janjawiid* have attacked a government police station (among other acts of resistance to control by the central government)[6] and there are growing divisions within the opposition groups.[7] Both "Arabs" and "Africans" have long resented the marginalization of Darfur in the politics and development of Sudan,[8] which have been dominated by a political elite based in the center of the country.

Specifics of the chronology of the conflict and the historical foundations for fighting have been noted by many observers and scholars. These concrete aspects highlight important things that have to be done if tensions and fighting are to be reduced if not eliminated. It is clear that programs must be devised and implemented to help the people of Darfur cope with the dramatic ecological challenges facing the region. Similarly, education and employment opportunities need to be developed for the youth in the region. Major programs for facilitating the return of internally displaced persons (IDP) and reconstruction must be established.

The programs of rebuilding are of great importance but there is an even greater challenge: the construction of a sense of community and identity within which the currently battling peoples can come together. Effectively meeting this challenge is an essential dimension of creating long term solutions for Darfur's problems and conflicts. It is in this task that the crisis of Darfur most strongly reflects the challenge of identity and community at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It is impossible to recreate the old world of tribal chieftains, local sultans, and a Darfur divided into separate, ethnically-identifiable regions or *dar*s. The young fighters in the militias will not simply return to being farmers and herders embedded in the old life style. It is equally impossible to construct a "new" ethnically homogeneous Darfur, either by vicious ethnic cleansing or by cultural transformation. Neither a purely "Arab" nor a purely "African" Darfur is possible. The legacies of the past are important and even if a member of an historic clan or group, like the Zaghawa (an "African" group) or the Rizayqat (an "Arab" group), ceases to be a farmer or a herder, the heritage of past identity remains.

At the same time, significant new identities are being defined. New local and parochial identities are emerging. For some of the young men, the fighting group has replaced the clan as a basic unit of identity and the commander has replaced the shaykh or clan chief. For others, the ethnically-mixed groupings of IDPs in camps and new settlements become a new-style identity group. Broader identifications are also emerging as generic labels like "African" and "Arab" become accepted. R. S. O'Fahey notes what he calls this "ethnicization of the conflict," which has injected an ideological and racist dimension to the conflict, with the sides defining themselves as 'Arab' or 'Zurq' (black)."[9]

These new divisions reshape the social and political landscape. Plans for conflict resolution usually involve some sense of a "Sudanese" identity. However, this "Sudanese" framework must now make some accommodation for the new modes of identity. When a national identity began to be defined by intellectuals and early nationalists in Sudan during the first half of the twentieth century, the identity was framed in terms of modern-style nationalist conceptions. There was an emphasis on national unity and the desirability of a homogeneous independent nation-state. The political elite that assumed power with independence in 1956 largely conceived of this national identity in terms of an Arab-Muslim identity. Governments in Khartoum have, over the years, attempted to create a homogeneous "national" identity through active programs of Arabization and Islamization in the non-Arab and non-Muslim regions of the country. The most visible result was a long civil war between the central government and opposition groups in the largely non-Arab and non-Muslim southern Sudan. However, non-Arab groups in the northern provinces also protested. A major Sudanese scholar of the history of nationalism in Sudan concluded already thirty years ago that while independence had been achieved, in the following years "what eluded the new leaders of an independent Sudan was the political power to change the life of the people and to build a new, modern and united nation."[10] The conflict in Darfur is a part of the legacy of that early and continuing failure.

A shift away from the old nationalist vision of a unitary and homogeneous national identity is an essential part of a resolution to the conflicts in Darfur. However, this shift has many implications. While it means that the central government cannot expect to impose a single identity on all parts of the country, it also means that local and regional groups cannot expect to frame their identities in old-style terms of a separatist homogeneous local identity. At both the local and the national levels, people will need to recognize the pluralism of any identity. This need is reflected in experiences throughout the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as the forces of globalization and close interactions transform societies. In France, for example, the old "nation-building" task of transforming "peasants into Frenchmen"[11] has been replaced by the challenge of creating a pluralist sense of commonality among the diverse peoples who now are French citizens.

In many places in the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century, people see the importance of blending a cosmopolitan perspective with distinctive local identities. Increasingly these must be viewed as interacting parts of a distinctive identity rather than as mutually exclusive perspectives. Scholars like Kwame Appiah emphasize the significance of "rooted cosmopolitanism" as a foundation for effectively operational identities in the contemporary world.[12] Within the Sudanese context, it is important for a sense of rooted Sudanese cosmopolitanism to develop. "Arab," "African," and local identities need to be viewed as part of the

roots of an inclusive cosmopolitan Sudanese identity.

As the specific problems of economic reconstruction and humanitarian relief are worked out in Darfur, it will be important to have them framed in terms of this rooted cosmopolitanism. Establishing policies and structures to accomplish this will be difficult. However, the main lines of the North-South peace accord signed in 2005 provide good examples of the ways that policies of rooted cosmopolitanism might be implemented throughout the country.

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[1] United Nations Economic and Social Council, *Report of the Representative of the Secretary-General on internally-displaced persons, Francis Deng: Mission to the Sudan – The Darfur Crisis.* 27 September 2004. E/CN.4/2005/8, p. 5.

[2] *Report of the Representative* (2004), p. 7.

[3] R. S. O'Fahey, "Darfur: A complex ethnic reality with a long history," *International Herald Tribune*, 15 May 2004.

[4] Karin Willemse, "Darfur in War: The Politicalization of Ethnic Identities?" *ISIM Review* 15 (Spring 2005): 15.

[5] Emily Wax, "In Divided Darfur, a Shared Will to Fight," *Washington Post*, 17 May 2005, p. 1.

[6] Marc Lacey, "Chaos Grows in Darfur Conflict As Militias Turn on Government," *New York Times*, 18 October 2005, p. 1.

[7] Joel Brinkley, "U.S. Convenes Talks on Darfur, But Rebels Are Mostly Absent," *New York Times*, 9 November 2005.

[8] For an analysis of the marginalization, see Adam Azzain Mohamed, "The Problem of Uneven Regional Development in the Northern Sudan," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 30, No. 1 (Winter 2006): 41-59.

[9] O'Fahey, *International Herald Tribune*, 15 May 2004.

[10] Mohamed Omer Beshir, *Revolution and Nationalism in the Sudan* (London: Rex Collings, 1974), p. 183.

[11] See, for example, the analysis in Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchman: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

[12] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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