

CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISPLACEMENT

Social breakdown in Darfur

CASE STUDY

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What dangers does climate change pose to societies most vulnerable to changes in local environmental conditions?

Tribes and other groups have been in conflict in Darfur for as long as history records. These conflicts have largely been a function of resource competition, relative deprivation and dwindling subsistence opportunities in the face of rapid population growth. Perhaps it was this history of resource conflict that led the UN Secretary-General to identify climate change as one of the root causes of the Darfur conflict. The effects of climate change on natural systems have been well documented, and humans will inevitably be affected.

The increase in the length of drought cycles in Darfur combined with the southward expansion of the Sahara

has amplified the effect of human behaviour on the environment. Small-scale but widespread farming and cattle grazing by the groups in Darfur have accelerated desertification. Environmental degradation in Darfur is not a new process, nor is it even one that has accelerated in any meaningful way in the past ten years. What is it then about environmental change in Darfur that has led to conflict now?

Today's Darfur conflict has an analogue in the 1987 Fur-Arab war which was one of resource competition; as drought and corresponding famine sent the largely Arab pastoralists of North Darfur

southward in search of greener pastures, competition with Fur and other farmers was inevitable. Climate change not only forces migration but can also trigger conflict. However, the environmental degradation and corresponding migration in Darfur were not sufficient conditions for conflict. Conflict is rather the result of environmental pressures together with the breakdown of social structures designed to mitigate traditional resource conflict.

In the early 1970s Sudan's President Nimeiri took steps to consolidate power in Khartoum. One such measure was to abolish the tribal-based Native Administration in Darfur that had served as a venue for aggrieved parties to air complaints and build compromises that mitigated

tribal conflict. This action contributed to a cataclysmic breakdown in traditional dispute-reconciliation mechanisms in the region. By the late 80s and early 90s, Khartoum's strategy of dividing groups in Darfur

As the climate continues to change, and local environments degrade to such an extent that people feel they must move elsewhere in order to survive, the first step is to address the underlying need for

degradation will occur slowly but consistently over long periods of time. It is these situations that are the most neglected, and arguably the most dangerous types of environmental migration. As in Darfur, changing

climate coupled with changing migration patterns threatens to bring groups of people into conflict, potentially creating a cycle of violence and displacement that can easily spread, intensify and exacerbate local environmental conditions. It is easier to integrate hundreds of people displaced as a result of environmental degradation than it is to resettle, return or integrate hundreds of thousands as a result of violent conflict created by inadequate responses to the initial migration.

It is for this reason that special care

should also be taken to build up those local social institutions that allow for dialogue and dispute reconciliation where migration patterns make such disputes more likely. The causes of the Darfur crisis can be traced not only to environmental degradation and the overwhelming of local resources but also to social degradation and the inability or unavailability of local dispute reconciliation mechanisms to handle environmentally driven migration. As climate change continues to alter local environments, the international community must be prepared not only to provide the means for communities to develop in order to adapt but also to provide new host communities with the social and political resources to integrate those who have no choice but to find greener pastures elsewhere.

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Destroyed village of Kamungo just east of Kabkabiya town, North Darfur state.

had led to an unmanageable situation that, combined with resource scarcity, had created a situation where – with a history of violent interaction between tribes vying for resources – there were no mechanisms to address the underlying disputes. In 1991, the Zaghawa tribe of Darfur pleaded to President Omar al-Bashir to address the breakdown in the social order, stating: “The Khartoum government has created a major crisis by meddling with the system of native administration.”

Support to adaptation

There is no doubt that desertification and drought altered the migration patterns of pastoralist tribes into new areas. There is also no doubt that the altered migration patterns, combined with more permanent migration by people in North Darfur looking for viable land for subsistence, led to conflict. The Janjawid militia were almost certainly enticed with promises of viable land belonging to those they would force to flee.

migration. Migration as a result of climate change is less a result of the underlying change than a reflection of the ability of people and communities to adapt. The deployment of programmes designed to maximise environmental resources may mean, for example, the difference between having to migrate in the face of decreased seasonal rainfall, and being able to adapt to short-term cycles made more severe by climate change.

International aid providers should work with states to identify those groups at greatest risk of environmentally forced migration – not just those where conflict is an obvious risk – and develop long-term aid and development programmes to allow people to live in a way that is at least consistent with traditional standards of living without having to migrate.

Just as climate change occurs over long cycles, much of the migration resulting from environmental