

Darfur: a way of life lost

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The impact of displacement on Darfuris is especially severe because of the genocidal nature of the violence. It not only affects those millions who are currently displaced but will continue to shape the lives of Darfuris for generations to come.

Compared to other protracted displacement situations, the duration of Darfur's forced migration has been short. However, the fact that Darfuris have ended up in camps means that they are not able to practise the livelihoods that they have been pursuing for generations.¹

Darfuri lifestyles had adjusted to a climate of limited arable land and little rainfall. Nearly 85% of Darfuris were pastoralists and farmers and the majority of families owned livestock. Of life in the camps, an IDP notes: "How can I teach my child to look after animals that we no longer have? Or if we do have animals, how can we tend to them if we don't have the freedom to roam looking for pasture? How can I still be a farmer if I have no land to farm?"

With the death of hundreds of thousands of Darfuris, social structures have been irreparably damaged. Males from ages nine to ninety have been targeted indiscriminately, and women have had to take on new roles as heads of households and become the main breadwinners. Protracted displacement has frozen these new structures in place.

Displacement and conflict have had varying impacts on the different generations. In many ways the elderly suffer the impact of displacement most acutely. They remember a way of life and a Darfur before it became a hotbed of violent conflict and they were forced to live within a camp. They are the 'flag bearers' who both embody the culture that has been lost and serve as Darfur's historians, entrusted to pass on stories and a way of life to younger generations in a culture built on oral tradition. As the years pass, the older people will no longer be alive to pass on the way of life they have known.

Within the next generation, a substantial proportion of men have been killed, leaving a large number of women with sole responsibility for being both parents and caring for and feeding their families. Thus traditional gender roles that defined livelihoods before the conflict have been altered; a return to previous, traditional social structures will be impossible. Of this generation, many community leaders, teachers, doctors, merchants and lawyers have been persecuted and killed with the result that leadership capacity within Darfuri civil society has been severely diminished.

For children, displacement is a way of life. Most will be unable to remember a time before they lived in camps. Stories told by their parents and grandparents give them a sense of the past, of a life with livelihoods and social structures which no longer exist. These Darfuri children consider the camps their homes but they may lack the opportunity to get an education, to realise their dreams or to live a normal life. Young people, motivated by the stories of a lost way of life, may join the rebels or become child soldiers.² Social categories such as childhood, family, youth and adulthood are altered in displacement and may mean different things to different generations. This has a profound impact. Indeed, young men in camps throughout the Darfur region have started challenging the official authority structures in Darfuri society and are complicating peace efforts by their hard-line political militancy.³ Further, the character of Darfur has changed from largely rural to urban. In a post-conflict

setting, it will be critical to rebuild destroyed rural livelihoods and help develop new urban ones for those who choose not to return home.

Networks and structures have changed to the point that confidence about the future is not assured and 'warehousing' – 'the practice of keeping refugees in protracted



Young Darfuri refugees gather in Djabal camp, Chad, to register for the next school year.

situations of restricted mobility, enforced idleness, and dependency, their lives on indefinite hold"⁴ – is a normal way of life for these Darfuris. Policymakers must work first to end the conflict in Darfur. Ending a displacement that has become protracted will then require long-term investment by the international community in rebuilding a way of life that has been destroyed.

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1. <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/documents/reports/darfur-assault-on-survival.pdf> p7

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