

Assisting the return of displaced Dinka Bor

by Paul Murphy

The issues involved in supporting the return of internally displaced Dinka Bor communities highlight the complex, and often ignored, challenges of addressing the consequences of South-South conflict.

Sudan's civil war drove hundreds of thousands of people from their homes to encroach on others' resources, often sparking conflicts within and between southern communities. At the same time, traditional methods of governance and arbitration, that once kept inter-ethnic and communal disputes in check, have been severely weakened. The story of the Dinka Bor in Equatoria highlights the challenges associated with the return of southern displaced communities.

The 1991 leadership contest within the SPLM had political and military consequences that reverberated down ethnic fault lines. It triggered the flight of over a quarter of a million people, mostly from the Dinka Bor – the same ethnic group as many senior SPLM leaders – in Upper Nile. Thousands were reported to have been massacred and over a million cattle killed.

The Dinka, southern Sudan's largest tribe, are predominantly pastoralists, yet many of the displaced sought refuge in Equatoria region, an area dominated by agriculturalists. Consequently, tension followed their arrival, aggravated by the fact that IDPs came under a separate administrative structure from that of their hosts and maintained their own customary norms with little consideration for local traditions. Further complications arose as the Dinka-Bor IDPs occupied farmlands and grazing areas of Equatorian ethnic groups who felt that the IDPs were acting with impunity due to the political protection they were thought to receive.

After over a decade in Equatoria, the Dinka Bor are now thought to have vast herds of cattle – 1.2 million in 62 camps in the Mundri and Maridi areas and far more elsewhere in Equatoria. The Moro in western

Equatoria accuse the Bor camp communities of damaging their forests, croplands and water points and of lack of respect for local traditions and authorities. Since 1999 numerous attempts have been made to facilitate IDP return – rallies, peace meetings, needs assessments, flying IDPs back to Bor, providing trucks for transportation and improving some services in Bor – but without success. Equatoria offered good grazing and other economic opportunities for IDPs, safe passage was not provided and inadequate services in Bor provided little incentive to return.

In 2004, the situation worsened in western Equatoria, and law and order broke down in the Mundri and Maridi areas as conflict between hosts and IDPs spiralled out of control. The SPLM leadership took action, though without all the practical implications necessarily considered. All IDPs and cattle in Mundri and Maridi were ordered to return immediately to Bor County. Pact, an international organisation with a track record in peace building in Sudan, was asked to assist. The intervention was to be a pilot to generate approaches and lessons for the SPLM leadership and the many other Bor IDPs scattered throughout Equatoria, to ensure a broader and successful return process.

The return of the Dinka to their home areas was not a simple logistics exercise but required a multi-faceted approach and extensive dialogue between the ethnic groups, the authorities and Pact. The framework devised to guide the return process focused on:

- the causes and legacy of the breakdown in relationships, and its future political ramifications; thus the need for healing and reconciliation

- safe passage through hostile territories
- addressing reintegration challenges such as ownership of livestock, access to grazing and governance
- providing opportunities for Moro and Dinka to meet, exchange views and address the authorities
- establishing a guidance team to facilitate community dialogue
- ensuring inclusion of community-based institutions, peace committees, chiefs and civil society groups.

Central to the response strategy was the establishment of a Joint Integration Return and Rehabilitation Support Team (JIRRST) made up of Dinka Bor, Moro and later Mundari representatives. JIRRST was tasked with facilitating and monitoring return movements, anticipating new concerns, disseminating information, helping to avert conflict and ensuring communication and coordination with the relevant political and military authorities and other actors. Numerous meetings with stakeholders led JIRRST to conclude that preparations for return could not be rushed. In May 2004, however, during a Moro community meeting, a senior SPLM official ordered the displaced people and cattle to begin to return the following day.

All 62 cattle camps reluctantly started to move but only to an area in eastern Mundri County as the rains had already started. IDP leaders were concerned about keeping the most vulnerable IDPs (women with young children, elderly and the handicapped) with the cattle camps during weeks of slow travel. Many of the Dinka Bor felt pushed and feared for their security. The JIRRST continued dialogue and mediation, established local peace committees along the planned return routes and mobilised NGOs and the UN to provide humanitarian assistance.

In June 2005 chaos ensued after a Mundari military officer and some civilians were shot dead. Two advance cattle camps were robbed of livestock and personal posses-



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sions and another 32 camps quickly retraced their steps back towards western Equatoria. The JIRRST was faced yet again with having to contain rapidly deteriorating relationships between hosts and displaced. Eight camps have crossed the river to Bor County in Upper Nile and the rest are expected to stay until the approach of the next rainy season.

Conclusion

This case – though still a ‘work in progress’ – raises many issues relating to appropriate practice in supporting population movement in unstable situations. Progress has been a case of two steps forward,

one step back, yet investments made through the JIRRST have been substantial and largely effective. The overall trend is positive, if slow, and the approach has managed to raise levels of awareness and sensitivity and to draw in appropriate actors around a common framework of action. A greater commitment by the wider aid community is still needed.

Pact’s experience in conflict reduction leads us to advocate a multi-faceted and multi-actor approach, requiring facilitation that encompasses the involvement of grassroots stakeholders, support for local government officials and chiefs, and engagement with the national

leadership and the international community. The approach focuses on the aggrieved host communities, the intricacies around the safety of passage, and protection around the IDPs in their host communities, during migration and in their areas of return. It is vital to:

- understand and acknowledge the complex political environment in which return will take place
- analyse key issues affecting stability and conflict and share the analysis with all stakeholders
- facilitate collaborative efforts around agreed strategies and objectives
- encourage and enable local institutions to play active roles in mediation and advocacy.

Despite many at the grassroots fearing that the conditions for peace are being brokered by elites and that the process will be protracted, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement brings new hope for a peaceful return of the Dinka Bor and others displaced in southern Sudan. The challenges ahead are monumental but must be addressed (systematically and holistically) to bring about the conditions for a lasting peace in Sudan.

Paul Murphy has worked in Sudan since 1989 and is the Director for the NGO Pact (www.pactworld.org) in Sudan. For elaboration of the approach outlined above, and other information on Pact’s Sudan programme, please visit www.pact-sudan.org.