Promoting natural resource conflict management in an illiberal setting: Experiences from Central Darfur, Sudan

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ABSTRACT

My main goal is to draw attention to ongoing conflict and insecurity in Darfur region of Sudan, still one of the world's largest humanitarian situation. Darfur once commanded global attention but has receded into the shadows of a world suffering from compassion fatigue. This study was prompted by three distinct yet related concerns. The first is the growing interest in environmental performance within illiberal regimes. I contend that understanding the situation in authoritarian *and* heavily conflict-ridden societies such as Darfur region in Sudan requires a combined holistic and historical framework for understanding the complex interplay of political economy and cultural ecology affecting local use and management of natural resources. The second concern is a desire to reflect on the possibilities and challenges of peacebuilding and recovery Darfur, drawing on my experience there with two projects carried out by the Near East Foundation that sought to promote early recovery in Central Darfur through environmental peacebuilding. Its preparation was prompted by three distinct yet related concerns. The third concern is to address some of the links between peacebuilding and natural resource interventions. I argue that even in extremely illiberal settings such as Darfur that it is still possible to carry out activities that widen the scope for action by local populations. This finding was most evident regarding the project's conflict management training, which local people ended up applying in a range of situations, and which helped spawn a peace movement among youths. Nevertheless, project participants noted that this training and action, while helpful at the community level, could not address "bigger problems outside." Renewed national and international peace efforts are needed.

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1. Introduction

The preparation of this study was initially prompted by two distinct yet related issues. The first concerns the growing interest in the environmental performance of illiberal regimes (Wurster, 2013; Zhu, Zhang, & Mol, 2015). Sonnenfeld and Taylor (2018, p. 516) define 'illiberalism' as "those settings, regimes, and movements that do not prioritize or protect the rights, perspectives, and interests of individuals and minorities." After years of platitudes about 'good governance' that often seemed divorced from reality (Grindle, 2010), the challenge of sustainable development is now being examined within the context of a range of regimes, including authoritarian states. With few exceptions, such as Sower's (2007) study of Egyptian nature reserves, there has been little attention to how autocratic African governments foster or undermine environmental goals, especially within development contexts. One theme that has generally emerged from this nascent literature is the need for a combined holistic and historical framework for understanding the complex interplay of political economy

and cultural ecology affecting environmental performance (Sonnenfeld and Taylor, 2018). This type of framework is especially important for understanding the situation in authoritarian *and* heavily conflict-ridden societies such as Sudan, which will be examined in this paper.

The second issue prompting this paper concerned my desire to reflect on the possibilities of peacebuilding and recovery in the troubled western Sudanese region of Darfur, still the setting of one of the world's biggest humanitarian operations since the outbreak of large-scale violence in 2003. It once commanded global attention, with commentators and activists routinely portraying it as the world's first climate change-driven war or as an eternal struggle between African and Arab (Faris, 2007; also see Mamdani, 2009). Lately Darfur has faded from the view of a public prone to compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999). Disappointment with the peace processes, which yielded two significant agreements and yet no widely accepted or effective resolution, had also lessened interest. Meanwhile, Darfur's "generalized insecurity" remains such that de Waal (2015, p. 58), a long-time observer, compared to the region's to a Hobbesian description of "warre." He contends that this situation is the outcome of a cynical political marketplace

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rather than the inevitable outcome of social primordialism or environmental change.

Sudan is one of the world's most illiberal countries. Freedom House's (2018) global survey of political rights and civil liberties consistently ranks it among "the worst of the worst" in terms of the 50 leading nation-states and territories designated as "Not Free." Journalist Robert Fisk (2005, p. 11), reflecting on Sudan's brutal civil wars, once observed that, "This was not, therefore, a country known for its justice or civil rights or liberties." Yet he also pointed out that "nothing in Sudan was what it seemed" (Fisk, 2005, p. 10). For example, characterizations of Sudan as a fragile state (see Fund for Peace, 2016) misses the durability of its hegemonic Khartoum-based elite whose political role dates back to colonial days, when the country was run by one of history's most illiberal regimes, the British Empire (Collins, 2008). The current head of government, President Omar al-Bashir, has stayed in power since 1989, despite serious internal challenges and the International Criminal Court's (ICC) indictment for alleged war crimes in Darfur. Jones, Soares de Oliveira, and Verhoeven (2013, p. 6) place Bashir among other contemporary African "illiberal state builders" in Angola, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, regimes in which protracted violence "plays a central and ongoing role" in their system of governance.

My professional involvement with Darfur started in 2009, when the African Programme of the United Nations' University for Peace (UPEACE) invited me to participate in a conference on the role of environmental change in the Sudanese conflict (Leroy, 2009). This invitation reflected my work, especially with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), on natural resource conflict management in Africa and elsewhere (for example, see Castro, 1988, 1991a, 1991b, 1995a; Castro and Ettenger, 1997; Castro and Nielsen, 2001, 2003; Castro and Engel, 2007). Consulting with FAO allowed me to move from being solely a conflict analyst (usually as project evaluator or academic researcher) to someone engaged in conflict training, both in devising materials and directly facilitating. Many of the UPEACE conference attendees were Darfurians, including Yassir Hassan Satti from Zalingei University. Our mutual interest in climate change and its relationship to conflict led us to work together on a study in the Zalingei area of Central Darfur, with Satti collecting field data while I focused on historical material from outside Sudan (Satti and Castro, 2012). As it turned out, the Near East Foundation (NEF), one of the world's oldest humanitarian organizations, had just established a collaborative arrangement with my university and was starting two internationally-funded projects in the Zalingei area. NEF asked me to be serve as a consultant on its projects, dealing with both training and evaluation, traveling there in August–September 2012 and March–April 2014. The projects promoted early recovery, a supposed transitional phase from humanitarian to development assistance (see Bailey, Pavanello, Elhawary, & O'Callaghan, 2009) in the wake of the 2011 Doha Peace Agreement. Subsequent political events in Darfur, Sudan, and globally revealed this transition to be only a chimera.

A third issue which this study addresses, albeit in a limited manner and, frankly, at the insistence of reviewers, is the link between peacebuilding and natural resource interventions (Bruch, Muffett, & Nichols, 2016; Young and Goldman, 2015). My seeming reluctance to comment on environmental peacebuilding is not because I do not regard it as a vital field. On the contrary, my first African research was in Kirinyaga County, Kenya, which experienced the Mau Mau War in the 1950s, with its brutal counterinsurgency (Anderson, 2005; Elkins, 2005). As part of that study I documented the massive social engineering, including land consolidation and privatization, villagization, and commercial agriculture, that the British used in trying to shape a distinct post-conflict landscape favorable to their interests in Kirinyaga (Castro and

Ettenger, 1994; Castro, 1995a, 1995b). In this paper I will argue that even in extremely illiberal settings such as Darfur that it is still possible to carry out activities that widen the scope for action by local populations. Observations of the NEF projects obviously serve as the basis for this claim. As will be discussed, the design of the NEF project offered an ambitious attempt at what Cleaver (2012) calls institutional bricolage, introducing principles drawn from Ostrom's (1990) Mainstream Institutionalism to revitalize local resource institutions. NEF's efforts drew on its long experience in Mali (Benjamin 2004), serving as a trans-Sahelian exchange. The NEF projects also served as conventional platform for the delivery of services and materials to its clientele. Unfortunately, severe security restrictions, reflective of both Sudan's illiberalism and Darfur's insecurity, made it impossible to assess either NEF's institutional innovation or its overall effectiveness in project management as one would normally do so (for example, see Dyer et al., 2014). My limited data suggest that NEF's overall performance was positive, a significant outcome in its setting. Yet, this is not where I wish to aim my focus. Instead, my main concern is with a particular project activity: its conflict management training, a bricolage combining external and local practices, and with what project participants did with it. They reported using the skills in both resource- and non-resource settings, and it also helped spawn a peace movement in Central Darfur with over 500 reported participants. I now appreciate, thanks to the nudge by the reviewers, that my Darfur study, despite its limitations, might be able to address some aspects of environmental peacebuilding, particularly regarding conflict resolution training. In dealing with these concerns, it is important not to lose sight of a major point: *Darfur and the struggles of its people are largely forgotten. Their urgent concerns must be placed back into the global limelight.* Finally, the views expressed here are entirely my own, rather than reflecting those of NEF or any other organization. I alone take responsibility for the paper's contents.

2. The setting

Darfur covers an area as large as France. It is part of the extensive Sudanic transitional zone running along the southern edge of the Sahara. The region encompasses desert in its north, Sahelian savanna and woodland to its south, and, in the center, the Jebel Marra massif (3000 m), where orographic rains support permanent springs and seasonal streams (*wadis*). O'Fahey (2008, p. 5) calls it "a harsh environment, hot, dry and dusty away from the mountains… water is always and everywhere a scarce commodity." The rains mainly fall from June to September but vary widely within and across years. Darfur is drought-prone yet wetter-than-normal streaks occasionally occur. The region is undergoing long-term shifts in weather patterns though their nature and extent are not fully understood (Satti and Castro, 2012). Desertification, whether due to climate change or human-induced land misuse, is a constant fear (UN, 2010). The two main traditional livelihood strategies, sedentary farming and transhumant pastoralism, rely on a deep knowledge of the area's precarious environment. In the not too distant past Darfur was self-sufficient in food staples and Sudan's largest supplier of livestock (Morton, 1996). The 2003 war greatly impacts lives and livelihoods, with large-scale terror, destruction, and dislocation. It also altered Darfur's cultural landscape, with rapid, massive urbanization, increased pressure on water supplies, and widespread deforestation among the lasting changes (Buchanan-Smith & Bromwich, 2016; Young & Jacobson, 2013).

The region was long the site of indigenous states, the last of which, the Dar Fur Sultanate, ruled from the mid-1600s until the early 20th century (O'Fahey, 2008). Dar Fur means the domain