

# SUDANWORKINGPAPER

## Is it the Fault of NGOs Alone? Aid and Dependency in Eastern Sudan

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# Is it the Fault of NGOs Alone? Aid and Dependency in Eastern Sudan

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## Abstract

Scholars of development studies have long debated the efficacy of humanitarian assistance in the Sudan, especially in eastern Sudan, where humanitarian agencies have been working for more than two decades. Questions about the importance of humanitarian assistance to recovery and, hence, development, are central in the debate. Does humanitarian assistance end up creating dependence, not development? This study suggests that humanitarian assistance, often carried out in contexts of complex emergencies and fragile livelihoods, has little chance of achieving recovery and eventual development. Using qualitative data from the Red Sea State in eastern Sudan, this article argues that the failure to achieve recovery and development is not the fault of NGOs alone. Chronic susceptibility to droughts and famines, wars, and lack of coordination among NGOs and between NGOs and local authorities are some of the local level problems that negatively affect humanitarian work in eastern Sudan. The local level problems that impede achieving self-reliance are entangled with the discursive national and international politics of humanitarian assistance in ways that cast doubts about the positive role of aid agencies. The presence of NGOs certainly led to changes in many structures, but this is not reflected positively in people's livelihoods. Instead of achieving recovery, communities in eastern Sudan are moving from positive coping strategies to negative adaptive vulnerabilities, exemplified by dependence on NGOs. The recently signed peace agreement in eastern Sudan offers opportunities for more inclusive planning, but without national commitment and international support it might accelerate conflict and vulnerability and hence deepen dependency.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The debate about the efficacy of humanitarian assistance for the Sudan has been going on for a long time among scholars of development studies. Some of these debates are focused on eastern Sudan (Pantuliano 2007, 2006, 2005, Babiker and Pantuliano 2006, Abdel Ati 1999, 1996, 1993, Manger et al 1996, Haaland 1990). Since the 1980s, humanitarian assistance has been a dominant feature in eastern Sudan, particularly in the Red Sea State. The significance of NGO interventions can be envisaged through the fact that their contribution to the different sectors in the Red Sea State during the first quarter of 2006 amounted to SDD 370 millions or USD 1.7 millions (HAC 2006). This figure might seem insignificant, but at the local and state levels it certainly is an important contribution. For instance, the total budget of the Red Sea State for the year 2007 was SDD 70 billion (USD 35 million).<sup>2</sup> This means that the contribution of NGOs to the different sectors in the

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.akhbaralyoumsd.net/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=5934>

first quarter of 2006 was 5 % of the state's budget. The support that targets water, agriculture, fisheries, training, health, education, food, and microfinance, is provided by 12 national and international NGOs. Apart from international and local NGOs, there are a number of UN agencies that operate in the region. In addition to the WFP and FAO, the UNDP started a project on 'Good governance for development' in the Red Sea State early 2006.<sup>3</sup>

One of the main questions related to the presence of NGOs in the Red Sea State is how far these NGOs succeed in assisting the recovery of local livelihood systems and in reducing vulnerabilities. Many scholars of eastern Sudan contend that after decades of presence, foreign NGOs are still doing the same projects. In other words, their interventions have not been sufficient enough to enable people to become self-reliant. This article is an attempt to probe more deeply into neglected dimensions of humanitarian assistance beyond local level challenges that are well documented by earlier scholarship. By fleshing out some earlier studies and engagement in debates about the politics of humanitarian work, the article is also a contribution to the debates on humanitarian assistance and development in Sudan.

The analysis in the paper is based on information obtained through fieldwork in the Red Sea State in 2006, where interviews were conducted with traditional leaders, and leaders of incipient community based organisations.<sup>4</sup> In addition to analysing qualitative interviews and one specific case, the overall analytical thrust will be to comment on humanitarian assistance generally. Specifically I will discuss political aspects and conditions on disbursement of money intended for humanitarian and post-conflict recovery projects. The paper comprises four parts. The first part provides contextual and background information about the Red Sea State. The second part looks at the ways humanitarian assistance works in the local context. The third part of the paper looks at humanitarian assistance through the eyes of NGO staff, communities of beneficiaries, the authorities, and leaders of incipient civil society organisations. Finally, the fourth part takes the analysis further by engaging with the debate about the politics of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian assistance is increasingly becoming part of foreign policy of donor countries, where politics, development and security are increasingly entangled. This reality is referred to as the 'new humanitarianism' (Devon et al 2001). This aspect has not received sufficient attention and most often the analysis of humanitarian assistance focuses on the NGO side (cf. Duffield 2002), thus blaming NGOs and local level structures for the failures of aid projects and dependency. National governments and donors also have their share in this failure, albeit unwittingly.

The main argument of the paper is that the failure to assist communities in attaining recovery and development in eastern Sudan is not the fault of NGOs alone. This is an obvious argument, but to the extent that the literature on aid industry and humanitarian assistance is skewed toward blaming NGOs, there is a need to emphasise the obvious. While local level problems (see below) contribute to the re-creation of dependency, the blurred lines between humanitarian assistance, security and development affect the ways aid agencies carry out their work. One example of this in the context

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<sup>3</sup> This project, which is a partnership between the UNDP and State authorities, is supposed to last for four years. The UNDP pledged USD 1.5 million, while the government of the Red Sea State pledged USD 600,000.

<sup>4</sup> The fieldwork on which the material of this article is based was carried out during two periods in 2006. The first part was carried out in August 2006 and lasted for three weeks, in which interviews were conducted with government officials at the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), head of UNDP mission in the Red Sea State, ACORD project manager, group discussions with beneficiaries of a fishery project funded and implemented by ACORD, and group discussions with leaders of two local NGOs (Organisation for Women Development in eastern Sudan and Abu Hadiya Organisation). The second part was done in December 2006 where some of the earlier interviews were followed up, and additionally interviews were conducted with the officials at the Planning and International Cooperation Unit, State Ministry of Finance, and the deputy of the Hadendowa Nazir. Documents were collected from NGOs and the Humanitarian Assistance Commission (HAC). Moreover, NGO and UN reports also provide part of the data on which the paper is based. In addition to qualitative interviews, the article also looks at one project funded and implemented by the Agency for Cooperation in Research and Development (ACORD).



of the Red Sea State was the donor conference held in Port Sudan in June 2006, where post-conflict recovery funds were conditioned on achieving a peace agreement in eastern Sudan, thus curtailing funds for NGOs. Instead of achieving recovery and self-reliance, communities in eastern Sudan are moving from coping strategies to adaptive vulnerabilities, as will be shown later in the case of a fishery project supported by one of the NGOs working in the area. As used in this paper, adaptive vulnerability refers to the condition of dependence on the resources availed by NGOs, without achieving a livelihood threshold independent of NGO support.

Before moving further, it is important to stress the point that by humanitarian assistance I mean the engagement of both national and international NGOs in the various activities that are geared toward livelihood recovery in eastern Sudan.<sup>5</sup> While there is a tendency in development studies generally to differentiate between development aid and humanitarian assistance, the line between the two is not as pronounced as it might appear. This is the case in the Red Sea where humanitarian assistance in the form of relief food goes in line with other recovery efforts (capacity building, good governance, rehabilitation, etc) that are undertaken by NGOs. Capacity building, good governance, and rehabilitation are certainly developmental activities in the long-run. Whether their implementation leads to development or not is debatable, however. For many years, Sudan has not been receiving development assistance from international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank. However, following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the World Bank resumed its support through managing the Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF). Yet, the financial support is not forthcoming in a significant manner and therefore the existing assistance is in the form of projects undertaken by NGOs. A report from the Ministry of International Cooperation (April 2008) covering the period 2005-2007 shows that the rate of the implementation of MDTF projects was 39 %, while it is 35 % for EU commitments during the same period.<sup>6</sup> One problem here is that different government institutions provide different figures when it comes to projects implemented through donor support. The various humanitarian interventions that are carried out by NGOs and UN agencies take place in an environment where conflicts are protracted. While conflict is certainly one factor that impedes recovery efforts, the Red Sea is not in a generalised state of conflict, compared to Darfur for instance. The interventions of NGOs cannot be considered critically developmental because of conflict alone. NGOs are trapped in attempts to fill gaps in areas where the government is absent. Sadly, the government is absent almost in all vital sectors, following the adoption of economic liberalisation policies in early 1990s. This trap erodes the capacities of NGOs which declared, as early as in the late 1980s, a shift from relief to development. This shift, exemplified by the activities of OXFAM and ACORD in rural areas (Red Sea Hills and Halaib), involved substantial reduction in relief food distribution. More emphasis is put on activities that are considered developmental, e.g. training, capacity building, credit and microfinance projects, and gender mainstreaming for pastoralists and migrants to Port Sudan.

## Background information and context analysis

The Red Sea State falls between latitude 16 and 22 north and longitudes 35 and 37 east. Its total area is about 218,887 km<sup>2</sup> with a total population of about 728,000 persons, representing 2.7 % of

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<sup>5</sup> There are many different conceptualisations of humanitarian assistance. Middleton and O'Keefe (2006: 543) argue that humanitarian assistance is broadly understood in two distinct ways: "one is to see it as a part of foreign policy, which is the customary position of donating states; the other is to see it as independent of governments and a matter of relieving suffering without distinction and is embodied in the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross/Red Crescent family." Middleton and O'Keefe (ibid. p. 544) maintain that humanitarian assistance is an increasingly important part of international politics, and that assistance often has more to do with politics than with the alleviation of suffering.

<sup>6</sup> *Al-Sahafa Newspaper*, issue 5317, 11/4/2008.

Sudan's population (UNDP 2005).<sup>7</sup> Average population density is about 3.3 persons per km<sup>2</sup>, though this varies considerably between the different localities of the state. The state has a low growth rate according to a UNDP study (2005): "the state, with an annual population growth rate of 0.52 %, records the lowest growth rates in the country." But the low population growth is paralleled by a rapid urban growth. The growth of urban population from 38 % in 1993 to 61.2 % in 2003 (TANGO 2005), is due to deteriorating living conditions in rural areas. The state is basically inhabited by the Beja who occupy the Red Sea hills and the eastern desert that extends from the Eritrean border northward to Egypt. The Beja are comprised of four major groups each with a separate traditional administrative system (nazara): the Hadendowa, the Bisharin, the Bani Amir, and the Amar'ar. A nazir is the head of each one of these groups, which are in turn divided into smaller units.<sup>8</sup> Besides the Beja, there are other non-Beja groups, which come from different parts of Sudan.

The Red Sea State is one of the most marginalised parts of the Sudan. According to the World Bank (2003), neonatal, post-natal and infant mortality in the Red Sea State are the highest in the country. Annual income per household in rural Red Sea is USD 93 (TANGO 2005: 28). Since 1984, there have been changes in both the demographic and economic structures in the Red Sea (Manger et al 1996), manifest in increasing rates of urbanisation (Abdel Ati 1999), erosion of livelihood systems (pastoralism and agriculture), and changes in the structure of traditional leadership (Assal 2006, Ahmed 1990).<sup>9</sup> Due to the difficulties brought by the erosion of livelihood systems, people's choices have dwindled. Many people have found that they are trapped in a state of crisis and those who are living in rural areas have become dependent on food aid provided by WFP agencies and foreign NGOs.

The traditional livelihood strategy, combining livestock rearing and agriculture, has been undermined by the impact of drought and conflict, and is no longer adequate to ensure household food security. The massive loss of assets people experienced as a result of the famines during the 1980s and 1990s made people not only dependent on NGOs, but also vulnerable to future disasters. Reduction in animal holdings, as animals have been sold to pay for food, means that households are less able to cope with the impact of drought. This has been the case since the 1990s (Haaland 1990, Egemi 1995, Manger 1996). Poverty in the Red Sea State has increased the vulnerability to food insecurity of a substantial portion of the population, and people are eking out their living under difficult and unstable conditions. The World Food Programme is still distributing food to people in the Red Sea State, and the EU is also funding food aid projects that are implemented by a consortium of NGOs.<sup>10</sup> This condition has in turn resulted in the adoption of alternative strategies, represented by the increasing reliance of households on other income sources, particularly labour migration and selling fire wood and charcoal.<sup>11</sup> However, these alternatives cannot be sustained in the long run: job opportunities are shrinking in Port Sudan due to the mechanisation of the port,

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<sup>7</sup> Until 2004, the Red Sea State was made up of four localities (mahaliyat). In 2005, these localities were subdivided and currently the State is made up of eight localities: Port Sudan, Suakin, Gunub, Aulib, Sinkat, Hayya, Halaib and Tokar. While the UNDP (2005) provides a figure of 728,000 for the total population of the State, the Red Sea State Socioeconomic Development Plan 2005-2008 depicts the total population of the State as 846,113 persons.

<sup>8</sup> These groups differ from each other with respect to occupation, customs and traditions, but they still exhibit many similarities: they are predominantly of Hamitic origin and except for the Beni Amir, speak TubDawi, a Cushitic language, and most of them practice nomadic pastoralism (El Hassan 1998: 107).

<sup>9</sup> Azza M. Babiker (2008; forthcoming) offers interesting insights about changes in leadership contours, particularly the appearance of youth groups which are breaking away from traditional leadership.

<sup>10</sup> The EU funded project is called RRP (Recovery and Rehabilitation Project). Started early 2006, the funds for this project are channelled through the UNDP and implemented by three NGOs: ACORD, IRC and SOS Sahel. Food distribution is a major component of the project.

<sup>11</sup> These practices are used by the Hadendowa since the mid 1980s. For more on labour migration and charcoal making, see Manger (1996: 130-4).

while firewood cutting and charcoal making cannot be sustained without serious environmental impacts.

The Red Sea State is marginalised today because it has been marginalised for a long time. In other words, what is taking place now has roots in the different policies that have been adopted since Sudan got its independence. As far back as 1958, the Beja Congress was established to address the question of marginalisation in eastern Sudan. With the protraction of marginalisation, the Beja Congress evolved into the Eastern Front in 1995 and engaged in military confrontation with the government. However, following a short round of negotiations between the government and the Eastern Front in Eritrea, the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) was signed in October 2006. The agreement offers opportunities to address poverty and marginalisation as well as inclusive planning. But without strong political will and national commitment, the agreement will not address chronic problems in the Red Sea State.<sup>12</sup>

## A critical look at aid agencies: some recent views

A great deal of academic work has already been published on NGO activities in the Red Sea State. Abdel Ati (1993, 1996, and 1999), Pantuliano (2002, 2005, and 2007), Babiker and Pantuliano (2006), El Hassan (1998), Manger et al (1996) and Haaland (1990), are among the scholars who have touched on the various local level aspects related to relief or humanitarian assistance generally.<sup>13</sup> One aspect which is central in these studies is whether the activities of NGOs contribute to recovery and development. In this regard, most studies are critical about both the approach and role of aid agencies. As early as 1990, Haaland (1990: 114) noted that aid agencies in eastern Sudan pay little attention to the maintenance costs and the problems of recovery cost after aid. The different proposals and projects suggested by aid agencies to rehabilitate drought victims do not consider the fact that households will not pay for maintaining recovery unless recovery leads to increased cash income sufficient enough to cover their expenditure. Haaland's account is a critical contribution that calls for considering the sustainability of recovery efforts and costs before allocating money for projects aimed at rehabilitating drought victims.

Abdel Ati (1996: 116-119) discussed NGO interventions in the Red Sea, noting that most NGOs working in the region have declared a shift of focus from food relief activities to long-term recovery and development programmes. A key statement made by Abdel Ati (*ibid.* p. 116) is that "irrespective of the effectiveness and/or wisdom or otherwise of that shift, the impact of NGOs intervention was considerable on various elements of Beja life and hence behaviour." But such impact mostly lies at the less positive side of the continuum of change. While relief food distribution saved human lives,<sup>14</sup> NGOs' attempts to move to long-term development achieved no significant results. According to Abdel Ati (*ibid.* p. 117, *emphasis original*), two key factors contributed to the failure of NGOs:

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<sup>12</sup> One challenge that is already facing ESPA is the issue of political representation of groups that constitute the Eastern Front in both eastern Sudan and at the national level. The Eastern Front mainly represents the Hadendowa and the Rashaida. One of the major groups (the Beni Amir) has been left out. A more recent development is that cracks are appearing in the alliance. The Hadendowa claim that smaller groups like the Rashaida have received more representation than their actual size. The Hadendowa also claim that the agreement leads to their marginalisation within eastern Sudan. For more on the challenges facing the agreement, see Assal and Ali (2007).

<sup>13</sup> During the course of working in the project of which this article is part, I came across a lot of consultancy surveys and evaluation reports. However, the question is whether such knowledge contributes to positive changes in people's lives or not.

<sup>14</sup> Gelsdorf et al (2007: 52) provide a different argument with regard to the importance of food aid: "in many cases food aid is not even the factor most central to the survival of crisis-affected groups... Kinship networks were ultimately much more important than external assistance during the 1998 Bahr el Ghazal famine."

“the fundamental principle underlying most NGOs’ developmental endeavours in the area was that the crisis was related to drought and the problem of environmental degradation, not recognizing the deeper processes of *negligence* of the pastoral sector.....Another misconceived idea was that of putting the Beja back where they were before the drought, thus overlooking the changing parameters such as population growth, technology, urbanisation and migration.”

Other factors mentioned by Abdel Ati which contributed to the failure of the NGOs’ developmental interventions include lack of coordination and integration of NGO activities with those of government departments, technical problems inherent in the structures of NGOs, and the localised vision of problem solution. Abdel Ati (ibid. p. 118) summarised the changes that were brought by food aid and NGO intervention as follows: (i) increasing state, as well individual, dependence on food aid. Most government departments completely surrendered their duties to NGOs; and (ii) important shifts in power structures, away from the state and traditional leadership in favour of the educated urban-based Beja who have access to NGO resources.<sup>15</sup>

In the same critical line Pantuliano (2007: 77-90) examined the role played by food aid in addressing vulnerability in eastern Sudan. Pantuliano argues that in spite of continuous food aid, livelihoods have not improved and vulnerability to crisis, particularly for pastoral communities, remains unacceptably high. What is needed, argues Pantuliano, is a re-engineering of economic and safety net options, with food aid being just one of a panoply of required measures and a measure that, if used in isolation as it has been in the past, simply serves to mask the most extreme destitution and draw attention away from the need for reform.

Other recent studies, e.g. Babiker and Pantuliano (2006), Middleton and O’Keefe (2006) also tackle problems of humanitarian assistance, particularly the fact that the overwhelming part of assistance is in the form of direct food aid. During the period 2000-2004, international donors allocated USD 1,155,250,114 for the Sudan. 66 % of this fund was used for food aid (Middleton and O’Keefe 2006: 554). Addressing this question and the issue of chronic vulnerability in the Red Sea State, Babiker and Pantuliano (2006: 18) found out that there is a general consensus among the Red Sea State government, international organisations operating in the region, and the donor community that the interventions carried out so far have not been strategic enough to tackle the causes of food and livelihood insecurity in the state and that the current capacity to support local livelihoods is generally inadequate.

The different accounts on aid in eastern Sudan indicate that humanitarian assistance in eastern Sudan is still far from achieving its objectives. NGOs are trapped into serving a considerable proportion of the population that is declared vulnerable. A government tendency to abdicate its responsibility and leave the welfare of vulnerable citizens to NGOs compounds the situation. One implication here is that the talk about recovery and rehabilitation is premature in the context of chronic food insecurity and eroded livelihood systems. The engagement of some NGOs in training and capacity building programmes is one positive step, but for local communities such soft programmes do not make sense when there is no food on the table. Some NGOs are, however, experimenting with activities that could be part of an integrated development approach, as shown in the following example.

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<sup>15</sup> Abdel Ati noted that although native or traditional leaders’ effectiveness in resource allocation and use aspects has been significantly reduced, it remained in demand for conflict resolution and mediation. For more on the shifts in political power in the Red Sea State see Ahmed (1990: 7-10).

## From relief to development: ACORD's fishery project

ACORD has maintained a presence in Sudan since 1974 when it started working with the returnees in southern Sudan following the Addis Ababa Agreement and with the Ethiopian refugees in eastern Sudan at the same time. In the Red Sea State, ACORD is involved in supporting fisheries, agriculture, water, micro credit and training. In 2005, ACORD assisted a total of 14,500 beneficiaries in Halaib province and 3,000 in Port Sudan town with direct micro finance (credit) support and vocational training. The programme purpose is to establish interventions in environmental rehabilitation, skills training and credit/revolving funds that are financially and technically sustainable. For ACORD, the key factor of success is the active participation of local communities (ACORD 2005). All activities include an integral gender strategy that advocates for and promotes equal participation at all levels through community gender training.

Most people in the villages along the coast of the Red Sea (Halaib) depend mainly on fishing as a source of income. ACORD supports different activities in the field of fishing based on the demand of the community. The support includes fishing materials, helping in marketing fish products, boat rehabilitation, and training in the field of boat building and oysters farming. Instead of giving food to people, ACORD is providing means of production through buying boats, maintaining old ones, and helping in marketing products. This type of intervention is one commendable step toward recovery, and if coordinated with other similar efforts of NGOs or local authorities, it can lead to results that would consolidate livelihoods and this would be a major step towards sustainable development. However, as will be shown later, coordination at the local level between the different actors is one absent aspect in humanitarian work or assistance in eastern Sudan in general. In spite of the ambitious nature of this project, and despite the fact that beneficiaries talk positively about its importance in improving their lives, there are both internal and external problems that thwart its development. Internally, local traditions inhibit ACORD's efforts that aim at gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment.<sup>16</sup> A stressed relationship with local authorities is another factor that affects not only the fishery project but the overall activities of ACORD in the region.<sup>17</sup> Problems of marketing the product feature as one challenge facing beneficiaries. A group of beneficiary men from Ocief area had this to say:

“To us, the support we are getting from ACORD is really important. ACORD provides fishing nets through our village development committee and the committee distributes these to us. The nets are given only to people who are sharing boats not to individuals. For three years we worked together, sometimes during the winter when the sea is not easy to access. Some times we get a good catch. Our problem is that prices of fish are low, and we cannot travel far to sell what we get. We cannot afford to buy an ice box in which we can store the fish.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Over the years, ACORD developed methodologies that involve gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment at all levels of the project cycle. Most of its projects in the Red Sea State, as well as in other areas where it has projects, are specifically oriented towards the emancipation of women through training, income generation activities, and capacity building. In adopting such methodology, however, ACORD is faced with cultural problems that limit the involvement of women in some activities. This problem questions the relevance or usefulness of methodologies and approaches adopted by foreign NGOs in local contexts. For more details on cultural constraints facing aid agencies in the region see Sahl et al (2004).

<sup>17</sup> During my field research (August 2006) the relationship between the State Government and international NGOs was at its lowest. The State Wali (governor) formed a committee whose mandate was to investigate and assess the activities of foreign NGOs, and provide specific recommendations to the governor. The assessment of ACORD's activities by the committee coincided with my field research. The committee's report on ACORD was positive. All in all, however, not a single foreign NGO was expelled as a result of the committee's investigation.

<sup>18</sup> Group interview with migrant fishermen from Halaib, Port Sudan, August 2006.

External factors also affect the success of such ambitious projects. The irregular flow of funds from donors is one critical problem:

“Since last year the programme has been experiencing delays of cash flows which affected the implementation of the programme work-plan. This had negative effects, since the programme is engaged with local partners to implement joint projects. This led to the failure of the programme to fulfil its commitment towards its partners. The programme encourages and supports seasonal activities such as traditional farming and fodder support in the dry season, so the delay of cash always make us lose the opportunity to catch the season. This year, the delay of cash affected the implementation of the Food for Work (FFW) project. To deal with this problem, the programme encourages the local community to contribute to and implement their projects by themselves. Also, the programme encourages its partners to increase their contribution in supporting the planned activities. As a result of cash delays, we could only distribute six fishing nets to the fishermen in Halaib”<sup>19</sup>

The fishery support project in Halaib has been going on for many years, and ACORD has been supporting it continuously. The understanding is that ACORD will phase out its support when beneficiaries become able to sustain fishing activities without recourse to external assistance. Instead of achieving self-reliance or sufficiency, fishermen in Halaib became dependent on ACORD, which continues hitherto to provide them with all the necessary fishing inputs. Instead of becoming self-reliant, fishermen in Halaib are just adapting to the condition of being dependent, something which explains the lengthy presence of ACORD and its continuous support.<sup>20</sup>

But the story of the fishery project does not only depend on ACORD alone. An employee with ACORD traces the project’s history to a time when the fishing boats were owned by a company called al-Sharq, which used to rent boats to fishermen. The company was declared bankrupt and fishermen no longer pay the company. ACORD had negotiated with the company the possibility of representing fishermen in the company’s board, but this proposal was rejected by HAC in Khartoum. HAC’s position was that since ACORD is a non-profit organisation, it should not be part of projects that might bear losses or profits. In 2006, the UNDP came in to rescue the situation but its intervention did not help since its project ended after a short time.

It is ironic that foreign NGOs, like the people they are serving, are also incorporating adaptive strategies in their pattern of activities and working modalities. The current capacity of ACORD is simply inadequate to address the problem of livelihood, since activities implemented are small in scale and cannot address the underlying causes of livelihood erosion. The challenges facing ACORD’s fishery project are not instances of conventional project failures because such challenges cannot be looked at as isolated problems that ACORD is facing. They are part of a bigger picture of challenges facing foreign and national NGOs working in the region. They are also part and parcel of a situation characterised by lack of development and chronic poverty and vulnerability (the World Bank 2003). The story of the company which was involved in renting boats to fishermen shows many policy gaps with regard to supporting livelihoods. These problems are, in turn, a product of other structural problems in the Red Sea State.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the politics of humanitarian

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, Project Manager, ACORD Red Sea, Port Sudan, August 2006.

<sup>20</sup> In 2006, the UNDP embarked on a project whose aim is also to support fishery activities in Halaib. While the sustainability of this project is doubtful, it must be mentioned that ACORD succeeded to phase out one of its projects, and managed to create a local micro finance NGO called PASED (Port Sudan Association for Small-Scale Enterprise Development). PASED is one of the very few visible success stories in the Red Sea State.

<sup>21</sup> One structural problem relates to the lack of representational policies: “the lack of genuine representation at the local level has translated into an almost total absence of investment in services and productive infrastructure as well as in the

assistance at the national level and beyond is a critical factor that is no less detrimental than local problems to the success of aid agencies. This issue will be analysed in the last part of the article. For now, I shall elaborate on the local level problems of humanitarian aid, as seen by the different stakeholders.

## Local level problems of humanitarian assistance

Presently there are seven international and five national NGOs in the Red Sea State, in addition to three UN agencies (WFP, UNDP, whose presence is very recent, and FAO). All these NGOs (as well as WFP and UNDP) are implementing agencies and they engage in different activities covering certain areas in the state, with some overlap in both locations and activities. Oxfam implements projects funded by the WFP in Tokar and rural Port Sudan, ACORD (Halaib and Port Sudan), SOS (Arbaat), Ockenden International (Port Sudan), MSF and ACF (Port Sudan), Islamic Forum (Sinkat), IRC (Tokar), and WFP (Tokar, Sinkat, Halaib and rural Port Sudan). Bureaucratic procedures, duplication of activities, lack of coordination between government authorities and NGOs, and among NGOs, are some of the local problems that render the engagement of NGOs less effective in the different activities they undertake in the Red Sea State. Problems of priority also abound. The priorities of the government are not congruent with those of the NGOs. The government would want to see NGOs embarking on infrastructural activities, while NGOs see this as the responsibility of the government. Duplication of activities is one issue that concerns NGOs:

“One main problem with our work is the duplication of activities by NGOs. One such duplication is represented by the recent intervention of the UNDP in Halaib. ACORD has a long and well established presence in Halaib. The UNDP should have consulted us before it embarks on any project in the area. We could have shared with them our methodological approaches and lessons learned. They are talking about good governance, but they are also duplicating our activities. I believe UN agencies should channel their activities through international and local NGOs, through the already existing structures.”<sup>22</sup>

The Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) is the government agency that supervises the activities of the NGOs. In addition to its supervisory role, HAC is also supposed to coordinate efforts between government authorities and NGOs. An official at HAC acknowledges the uneasy relationship with NGOs, but is positive about some activities implemented by foreign NGOs:

“Periodical meetings are organised with NGOs to assess their work, give permission to new projects, and coordinate humanitarian work. The NGOs are required to provide quarterly detailed reports about their activities, plans, financial allocations, numbers of beneficiaries, and the geographical coverage of their activities. We also delegate one of our staff members to represent HAC in the different functions and meetings with NGOs. The representative also follows up the implementation of projects that are approved by the Commission. Some NGOs complain about our procedures and our vision about humanitarian work. What I would like to stress is that the work of NGOs is very important. One example of a good project is Oxfam’s cash for work project in Tokar, which is a good example that is contributing in the provision of employment opportunities.”<sup>23</sup>

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absence of appropriate policies in support of the rural and urban economies of the region” (Babiker and Pantuliano (2006: 19).

<sup>22</sup> Interview, Programme Director, ACORD Red Sea Programme, Port Sudan, August 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, NGOs Coordinator, HAC, Port Sudan, August 2006.

However, like many other government departments in the Red Sea State, HAC is poorly equipped and seriously understaffed. Lack of coordination between HAC and the planning unit at the State Ministry of Finance is also a problem:

“We do not have enough vehicles and communication appliances through which our staff members can move around and follow up the work of NGOs. At times we request the help of NGOs for movement, something that affects and erodes our credibility. The working modalities of NGOs are different from those of UN agencies, where HAC has no authority. UN agencies liaise and coordinate with the Planning Unit at the State Ministry of Finance. There is no coordination between HAC and the Ministry of Finance. This creates confusion and leads to duplication of activities.”<sup>24</sup>

Information from NGO staff and members of community based organisations indicated that a basic step is capacity building. But there are problems of policy discourse around some mobilising metaphors and lack of mutual understanding when it comes to capacity building. Concepts like ‘participation,’ ‘partnership’ ‘good governance,’ etc. are vague, ambiguous, and lack clarity. This is one area of contestation not only between foreign NGOs and local authorities, but also between foreign and local NGOs. This leads to tensions between claimed policies and the ability to fulfil them, hence to frustration among members of local communities.

While people in the Red Sea State are dependent on NGOs, the dependency mentality is in fact entrenched even in the mind of authorities who relegate their responsibilities to NGOs and UN agencies. This was one of the factors that led to the failure of the donor conference held in Port Sudan in June 2006. Instead of providing integrated development plans and pledge sufficient financial contribution, the government in the Red Sea State came to the conference with a ‘shopping list’, and unrealistic expectations toward the donor community.<sup>25</sup> The failure of the donor conference was also partly due to donor conditionality; of linking the pledge of funds to eastern Sudan with attaining peace.<sup>26</sup> The failure of the Port Sudan donor conference led to angry reactions against NGOs operating in the region. Following the conference, the authorities in the Red Sea State toughened their language against NGOs, made restrictions on their movements, aggressively monitored their personnel, and threatened to expel NGOs that did not comply with local directives regulating humanitarian work.

While international NGOs suffer from problems related to coordination and unhealthy relationship with local authorities, community based organisations (CBOs) are also engulfed in a series of problems that are of a different nature. One of these CBOs is the Organisation for Women Development in Eastern Sudan, which was established in the year 2000 and supported by Ahfad University for Women, where the organisation’s head office is located. It was registered with HAC in 2006. My conversation with two members of the executive committee revealed that local communities are welcoming and supportive, even though people are frustrated by the lack of credibility of international NGOs:

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Notwithstanding the lack of coherent development plans, the Red Sea State produced the Socioeconomic Development Plan for the period 2005-2008. However, critics argue that while the plan indicates good intentions on the part of the State’s government in trying to address the lingering livelihood crisis, it fails to capture people’s real priorities since it was developed in a non-inclusive manner, thus not taking on board the concerns of civil society organisations and institutions representing the different communities in the State (Babiker and Pantuliano 2006: 6).

<sup>26</sup> At the time of the donor conference in Port Sudan (June 2006), peace negotiations between the government and the Eastern Front were underway in Eritrea. Four months later, the ESPA was signed. Almost one year later, no funds were forthcoming from donors. Sadly, the government is waiting for donors to provide funds.



“One reason for the erosion of credibility of international NGOs is their ventures into programmes or projects that are not relevant to local communities. The shortcomings of international NGOs create problems to local and community based organisations. Local communities are fed up with the recurrent surveys undertaken by NGOs and UN agencies, without tangible results. Our organisation is newly formed and international NGOs should support us, since we do not have financial resources, and are technically and organisationally poor. We do not receive any support from the government. The most significant contribution of the government is the formalisation of the status of our organisation, and the government does not go beyond allowing us to formally exist.”<sup>27</sup>

Asked about the impact of NGO intervention in the Red Sea State, the two members appeared sceptic about any genuine or real positive change. They argued that awareness-raising was absent from the programmes of NGOs, especially in rural areas. This stand is also echoed by the traditional authorities. The Head of the Hadendowa Shura<sup>28</sup> Council, who is also a representative of the Hadendowa Nazir, sees poverty as the real threat that not only affects ordinary people, but also the leadership:

“The reign of the incumbent government eroded the powers of traditional leaders, contributed to the emergence of new and opportunistic leadership, and led to divisions within such leadership. Due to poverty and other pressures, traditional leaders became toys in the hands of the government. The interventions of NGOs created greed among the rank and file of the Beja and eroded ethical responsibilities and commitment of both the people and their leaders.”<sup>29</sup>

The above statement of the traditional leader goes into directions that this paper cannot cover, specifically changes in traditional power and authority in the area.<sup>30</sup> Here, however, a caveat must be made regarding some of the unintended consequences of the lengthy presence of humanitarian agencies. One of these consequences is the appearance of many civil society organisations whose members are active entrepreneurs in the aid system. There is no reason to believe that the interests of the incipient civil society organisations or local NGOs in the Red Sea State are congruent with those of foreign NGOs like ACORD or OXFAM. In fact, the above interview with two staff members of a local NGO shows the rift that exists between actors who are purportedly working for the same cause. While critical about foreign NGOs, community based organisations do not appear to be much better than international NGOs. Even with the availability of funds, lack of organisational and managerial capabilities erodes the capacity of these local organisations. What these local organisations need is capacity building that responds to local needs.

Given the above complex problems, a major challenge is thus how to make use of the scattered humanitarian efforts in a long-term developmental strategy. This challenge relates not only to the context of eastern Sudan, but also to the wider regional and international context, which is marred with conflicts, conditionality, contradictory interests and donor fatigue. The critical analysis of aid agencies offered here should not lead to any impression that I subscribe to a perspective which exonerates the government, both at the state and national levels, from its failure to address conflict and marginalisation in eastern Sudan. The failure to address the consequences of recurrent droughts

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with two of the Executive Committee members, Organisation for Women Development in Eastern Sudan, Port Sudan, August 2006.

<sup>28</sup> An Arabic word that means consultation

<sup>29</sup> Interview with the Head of the Hadendowa Shura Council, Port Sudan, December 2006.

<sup>30</sup> See Azza M. Babiker (2008; forthcoming).

and poverty in the Red Sea is one example of failures from the government side. Instead of spending on livelihood projects, the government relegates such responsibility to NGOs.

## The wider context: the politics of humanitarian assistance

So far the analysis in the paper has focused on the reality of aid agencies and the problems of humanitarian assistance within the local context of the Red Sea State. The analysis draws on the author's conviction that the donor side of the equation has not received sufficient attention in the literature. The example of the donor conference cited earlier is an instance of humanitarian politics that must be addressed. It is therefore necessary to look beyond local level realities and tackle some questions that not only shape humanitarian assistance, but also affect the end result of the work of aid agencies. The lack of success of aid agencies engaged in humanitarian assistance to improve the lot of the disadvantaged is not confined to eastern Sudan alone. Such lack of success is also present in other parts of the Sudan (Duffield 2002). In explaining this, there are many dimensions that could be analysed. I have already dealt with one dimension, which is the dynamics of local level realities in the Red Sea State. Here I would push the argument further, to explain why aid agencies did not achieve their declared objective of achieving livelihood recovery and development. To do this, I will engage with two strands of debate that critically look at the political dimensions of humanitarian assistance. One such strand conceptualises humanitarian assistance as a relation of governance and a form of complicity (Duffield 2002: 83). This perspective looks at humanitarian aid agencies as colluding with repressive regimes to further marginalise and dispossess people to whom aid is provided, in which case humanitarian aid serves the political objectives of governments at the receiving end and not the interests of people who are in need of assistance.<sup>31</sup> The second strand, 'the new humanitarianism' (Devon et al 2001, de Waal 1997, Fox 2001, Atmar 2001), sees humanitarian assistance as serving the political objectives of donor countries. However, one thing which is common to both perspectives is that aid does not realise the 'humanitarian' objectives for which it is given out. In line with Devon et al (2001), I argue that the new humanitarianism is blurring the lines between politics, development and humanitarian assistance.

In looking at aid as a relation of governance, Duffield (2002: 83) argues that by encompassing a series of interventions and strategies to produce desired results, aid agencies have the power to reorder the relationship between people and things. For him, the failure of NGOs and UN agencies to improve the abject conditions of displaced persons in the Sudan is a collateral effect of aid as a governance relation. In critiquing the work of aid agencies in the Sudan, Duffield built his argument around two key statements: "the actions of aid agencies are complicit with wider systems of exploitation and oppression," and "whether aid as a technology of governance ... can ever be an adequate vehicle for common humanity and shared duty of care" (2002: 84). Furthermore, Duffield (ibid. 85-6) questions the usefulness of connecting relief to development efforts. Contrary to the popular view shared by the personnel of aid agencies, argues Duffield, the shift towards promoting development is complicit with Sudan's exploitative political economy.

Duffield's perspective certainly makes sense and is applicable to some extent to the context of eastern Sudan. By shifting from relief to development, aid agencies in eastern Sudan assumed responsibilities they cannot or would not accomplish; responsibilities that should have been taken by the government. Aid agencies did not only fail to achieve self-sufficiency – a major goal of the shift of efforts from relief to development – but also failed to positively affect policy environment in ways that make possible the introduction of new perspectives to deal with poverty in the state.

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<sup>31</sup> Complicity is not committed by aid agencies alone. Anyone can be complicit in ways that compromise the well being of people who deserve to be assisted. Researchers, consultants, government officials and bureaucrats can also be complicit. For more on this, see Chambers (1983: 34-5).

Thus, NGOs unintentionally end up following a path of thinking which is not different from that of the government, thus consolidating the status quo. In fact, notions like good governance, capacity building and participation – notions that are central in the current NGO portfolio – appear in government developmental rhetoric. In a way, the government in the Red Sea State manipulates aid agencies to realise its own objectives.<sup>32</sup> Neglecting its own responsibilities toward questions of development and looking to NGOs to do that is certainly some kind of manipulation. Moreover, putting too much hope on donors' funds is also a manipulative attitude. Yet, one also gets the impression that donors at times behave like they have money that they just want to get rid of. One fails to understand why the donors go for a donor conference in Port Sudan if only to tell people that rehabilitation projects will not be funded unless a peace agreement is signed. But again, the donors should not be blamed for things that are the responsibility of the government. Ideally, development plans should have been in place; plans in which donors' contribution should not be the main contribution.

With endemic poverty in the Red Sea State, and with the lack of genuine development intervention from the part of the government, movement is increasing towards urban areas which are seen by migrants as providing work opportunities. Due to the mechanisation of the port and the limited work opportunities in Port Sudan, migrants are in fact unable to get out of the vulnerability trap. By continuing their unsuccessful interventions, NGOs look as though they contribute to forcing people into cheap wage labour and, hence, exploitation. This is so because people migrate to Port Sudan from rural areas in the Red Sea State, where NGO interventions are concentrated (e.g. Halaib). But as repeatedly mentioned earlier, we should not be so harsh on NGOs without considering the wider political (national and international) contexts in which they undertake their activities. At the national level, NGOs go through a lot of trouble to legitimise their status and be in a position to operate, and they are required by state regulations to withhold politics.<sup>33</sup> Importantly, NGOs also struggle with problems beyond national borders; problems related to donors and, more recently, policies wrought by the new humanitarianism.<sup>34</sup>

Seen from a wider perspective, however, Duffield's notion of complicity has some problems. First, the idea that NGOs – if unwittingly – collude with the government in Sudan to impede recovery is far fetched. The Red Sea situation shows that it is the government that adopts NGOs jargon. One could also easily see how this is so by looking at the complicated government-NGOs relationship and the troubles NGOs face while implementing their different activities. Second, by looking at NGOs as complicit in oppression, one tends to ignore the fact that the activities of NGOs are often dictated by donors who want their money to be spent on financing certain projects, e.g. promotion of human rights, democracy, civic education, etc.

At the behest of new humanitarianism, humanitarian assistance is increasingly being used to achieve political and strategic goals not of communities at the receiving end, but of donor states.

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<sup>32</sup> This was very clear in the document which the government of the Red Sea State prepared for the donor conference in Port Sudan, June 2006. Issues of capacity building, good governance and community participation were emphasised in the document, thus tuning with NGOs jargon. The collusion here is from the part of the government, and therefore NGOs cannot be blamed for this.

<sup>33</sup> A new law governing the work of NGOs and civil society organisations in Sudan, the "Organisation of Voluntary and Humanitarian Work Act," was signed by the President in March 2006. The Act presents serious concerns for humanitarian actors in the Sudan. These concerns range from procedural issues to the implications of the increased levels of government control over NGOs activities including regulating funds through a governmental approval system, and the government's ability to close organisations and seize their assets. For more on the problems facing NGOs and research in the context of Sudan see Assal (2002: 80-83).

<sup>34</sup> In receiving funds NGOs must comply with certain funding requirements and procedures that may not reflect realities in areas where the allocated funds are to be used. This is the case even when funding is intended for rehabilitation. Infrastructure is one area that is ineligible for funding by the European Commission. For this and more on eligibility criteria set by the EC, see EC (2007) Food security thematic programme: guidelines for grant applications, p. 11.

Perhaps nothing is new or novel about this statement and in fact abundant examples from different countries illustrate how humanitarian assistance is reduced, curbed or even cut to realise certain objectives. Afghanistan under Taliban is one case (Atmar 2001). Adding more conditions to funding is one dimension of the new humanitarianism. More specifically, funds have been pledged by rich countries for the Sudan in 2005 but such funds will not be disbursed until certain conditions are met.<sup>35</sup> Sudan is generally described as a 'rogue state' and this means that the flow of aid is contingent on changing behaviours. Since aid evolves and explicitly attempts to change behaviour and attitudes in recipient countries, the social concerns of aid agencies merge with the security concerns of donor states (Devon et al 2001: 270).<sup>36</sup> The evidence of this is simple: NGOs undertake projects that are primarily designed and funded by donors.

As yet not a single donor has pledged significant amounts of funds for reconstruction in eastern Sudan, where a peace agreement has been signed in 2006. Unlike southern Sudan where pockets of armed conflict still exist, eastern Sudan is stable and thus offers a good case of peace building. Without significant reconstruction projects, particularly infrastructure and poverty reduction projects, eastern Sudan will likely witness the eruption of new conflicts. A key problem with the new humanitarianism perspective is that in the context of the Sudan, the international community does not know or care to prioritise its interventions. A lack of focus characterises much of the engagement with the critical issues in the Sudan. Sudan is a complex country in terms of its multi-faceted problems and challenges, and international efforts so far are not enough to deal with this complexity. It is not clear whether the focus is on peace making or peace building. One related problem is that in UN circles, Sudan is seen as a failed state. Put differently, although Sudan is under a lot of focus, the engagement of the international community is not progressing significantly. The stalemate in Darfur, a slippery CPA and reluctant donors are all evidences of the international confusion. One can hardly fail to speculate on the implication of this situation in terms of consequences.

Since the new humanitarianism emphasises achieving democracy, human rights and good governance as eligible funding projects and seeks to realise them through humanitarian aid, tensions abound and lead to confrontational disengagement between the government, represented by HAC, and NGOs. My material in this article is not about governance or human rights projects, but these projects exist and as a matter of fact the UNDP started a governance project in 2006. There is a need to look at such soft projects and their impacts vis-à-vis NGO livelihood projects. There is also a need to look at people's ideas about issues of human rights and governance. While such issues are important in the long-run, this article shows that people are less concerned with soft projects. They are much more concerned with projects or interventions that guarantee them food.

Instead of engaging government officials and training them in the different capacity building programmes, NGOs in eastern Sudan shift the focus away from state to community structures; the so-called 'non-state actors'. The irony is that these community structures, whether those which are already there or the ones created by foreign aid agencies, can only seek legitimacy from state institutions. Disengagement defeats the ultimate purpose of changing behaviours of governments in receiving states: change cannot be achieved through disengagement. One issue that needs to be emphasised is the issue of trusting local communities when it comes to implementing projects (Pantuliano 2007). By ignoring existing community structures and creating new ones, NGOs appear

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<sup>35</sup> In the context of Sudan, this is very clear. By December 2007, Sudan received 39 % of the pledged funds of the Oslo donor conference in May 2005, where USD 4.5 billion was pledged.

<sup>36</sup> This emphasises Middleton and O'Keefe's (2006: 543) argument that humanitarian assistance is necessarily a political action. Moreover, "with the new merging of politics and humanitarian action, however, the provision of assistance is restricted to countries believed to be following the correct policies. Non-conforming countries may be excluded from development assistance, shut out of politics and restricted to conditional forms of humanitarian assistance" (Devon et al 2001: 272).

as if they do not trust the ability of local communities to address their problems. But the creation of new structures is not done always and deliberately by NGOs. The change in traditional leadership and the appearance of new urban-based leaders are among the political consequences of drought and the long presence of international NGOs in the Red Sea. The appearance of local NGOs can therefore be seen as one of the unintended consequences of aid (Assal, forthcoming).

Does going back to, or asserting, the principles of neutrality, independence and universality in the work of aid agencies provide better solutions? Given the current international political order, such principles are actually under attack.<sup>37</sup> In any case, these principles are central to the success of humanitarian assistance. Efforts directed at peace building must course out new paths, may be by returning to the old philosophy of aid as simple charity. But aid as a charitable gift means that there is very little, if any, incentive for efficiency and accountability at both the levels of donors and recipient communities. It is doubtful if efficiency and accountability exist in the context of 'aid as politics.' Combined with the political challenges discussed above, the absence of efficiency and accountability casts doubts about any possible real contribution by NGOs to peace building.<sup>38</sup>

Probably the radical course suggested by some development scholars (cf. Morton 1994) is worth rethinking: that is to distribute aid as a direct cash transfer and place it directly in the hands of people at the receiving end of the continuum. This, the arguments goes, would mean abandoning all attempts to identify from without what is the key sector, what is the culturally acceptable form of equity, and what is a feasible form of social organisation. Questions of 'bottom up' or 'trickle down' will thus be irrelevant. But given that such radical turn will defeat the whole project of new humanitarianism, it is highly unlikely that it will be adopted.

## Conclusions

Since the 1980s, many aid agencies have been working in eastern Sudan. At the beginning, the work of aid agencies was mainly in the form of relief food distribution. Towards the end of the 1980s a shift from relief to development was declared. The move from relief to rehabilitation and development has not been effective due to problems that include lack of coordination among international organisations working in the region, between these organisations and authorities, and problems related to the political dimension of aid. Despite the fact that international NGOs implement projects that target many aspects of livelihoods (agriculture, fisheries, water, health, education), and some even venture in projects that aim at recovering and strengthening these sectors, their impact, particularly on livelihood, is hardly visible. Nonetheless, certainly there are a lot of changes in the societal structures in the Red Sea. Appearance of local NGOs, changes in traditional power structures, the evolution of the Beja Congress into the Eastern Front, etc. are all changes that happened as part of the presence of NGOs in the region. These changes are also part of national politics that attempt to co-opt regional support. While the presence of NGOs affects these different structures, NGOs are also affected. This will be the focus of a forthcoming article that addresses some of the unintended consequences of aid (Assal, forthcoming).

The philosophy behind NGO projects is that after a while these projects phase out and the communities assume responsibility. But in the Red Sea State, most of the projects have been run by the same NGOs for decades. In spite of the importance of supporting these different sectors for local

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<sup>37</sup> The behaviour of donors and aid agencies in Afghanistan best represents a case where such principles were completely ignored. But as Atmar (2001:321-330) shows, punitive aid conditionality punishes the victims, not the abusers.

<sup>38</sup> That the proliferation of NGOs of different types, both in the North and South, creates interest groups is one thing that did not receive attention. The sad reality is that the presence of NGOs is a *sine qua non* of disasters and the reverse is also true.

people, the small scale support does not match the levels of problems people are facing. The problems endemic to the region are further confounded by a tendency among working NGOs to prioritise the interests of donors, e.g. human rights, governance, rule of law, not those of target communities, e.g. infrastructure and livelihood support. In addition to ACORD, there are many other NGOs and UN agencies that implement projects in the Red Sea, but I cannot list all those projects here. Vague concepts like participation, partnership, good governance, and empowerment do not serve the local community in significantly positive ways, but rather conceal differences in power relationships between foreign NGOs on the one hand, and local NGOs and communities, on the other. In its current scale and modalities, assistance cannot address structural issues, like poverty, that impede recovery and development, because it neither addresses local and national structural causes of poverty that include lack of investment in development infrastructure, nor solves problems inherent in the wrap of the humanitarian aid system, including donor conditions and priorities.

The erosion of livelihoods in the Red Sea State led to a steady process of urbanisation. Urbanisation is hardly a reversible phenomenon, and therefore efforts aimed at recovery of livelihoods systems in the region should not be designed to reverse this process, but should include due consideration to the transformative nature of the changes that have been taking place over the last couple of decades. Furthermore, it is important to understand the context and cultures where humanitarian and development work take place. When there is a lack of congruence between context and cultures on the one hand, and humanitarian activities on the other, interventions might end up creating structures that have little synergy with local needs. In such circumstances, benefits of aid projects accrue to employees, not to communities where such projects are implemented. Assistance should strive to support preventive measures, mitigate negative impacts and facilitate recovery in a developmental way. How to achieve these goals is the responsibility of the state and NGOs interested in the area.

The way to recovery in the Red Sea State has still not been paved and more initiatives must be put into place in order to ensure gradual and sustainable improvement in people's livelihoods. Two decades of doing the same work is a sufficient proof of the lack of success of humanitarian work in eastern Sudan, and also a proof of the necessity to reconsider the ways in which NGOs do their work. One way could be working closely with local government structures in the Red Sea State. The big challenge for recovery is lack of food security policies and lack of capacity, not the insufficient resources of NGOs alone. In spite of these challenges, the peace agreement signed in October 2006 could provide a framework through which all or some of the problems in eastern Sudan generally, including chronic poverty and vulnerability to drought, could be addressed. Certainly, it is difficult to totally rule out the role of aid agencies and humanitarian assistance in peace building in eastern Sudan. However, if a positive role for aid agencies in peace building is required and anticipated, there is an urgent need to comprehensively assess the impact of humanitarian intervention in eastern Sudan; to avoid duplication of efforts and to make sure that we do not reinvent the wheel of dependency. More and detailed research is also needed on the question of aid and sustainable development in the context of poverty and chronic vulnerability in the Red Sea State, specifically on the domain of poverty reduction and NGOs-government relationship.

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## SUMMARY

Scholars of development studies have long debated the efficacy of humanitarian assistance in the Sudan, especially in eastern Sudan, where humanitarian agencies have been working for more than two decades. Questions about the importance of humanitarian assistance to recovery and, hence, development, are central in the debate. Does humanitarian assistance end up creating dependence, not development? This study suggests that humanitarian assistance, often carried out in contexts of complex emergencies and fragile livelihoods, has little chance of achieving recovery and eventual development. Using qualitative data from the Red Sea State in eastern Sudan, this article argues that the failure to achieve recovery and development is not the fault of NGOs alone. Chronic susceptibility to droughts and famines, wars, and lack of coordination among NGOs and between NGOs and local authorities are some of the local level problems that negatively affect humanitarian work in eastern Sudan. The local level problems that impede achieving self-reliance are entangled with the discursive national and international politics of humanitarian assistance in ways that cast doubts about the positive role of aid agencies. The presence of NGOs certainly led to changes in many structures, but this is not reflected positively in people's livelihoods. Instead of achieving recovery, communities in eastern Sudan are moving from positive coping strategies to negative adaptive vulnerabilities, exemplified by dependence on NGOs. The recently signed peace agreement in eastern Sudan offers opportunities for more inclusive planning, but without national commitment and international support it might accelerate conflict and vulnerability and hence deepen dependency.

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Research addresses main challenges to peacebuilding in Sudan, with a particular focus on (a) the political economy of the transition, including institutional and governance issues, and (b) the role of third party engagement and issues related to the management and coordination of aid. The programme is multidisciplinary and combines macro level studies with research in selected localities and states. It covers basic and policy-oriented research as well as competence building.