

Desertification Series

Desertification in Sudan

Author: Meike Scholz

Translation & Adaptation: Julia Heyde

Presenter's Intro:

More than 3.5 million people in Sudan, almost all of them Black Africans, have been victims of genocide, civil war, displacement and other human rights violations over the past 15 years.

The wars have left their mark on the country. The lack of infrastructure and recurring natural disasters hinder the country's development. The Kordofan region in the centre of the country has one of the hottest and driest climates in Sudan. Water is scarce and therefore very valuable.

Progressive desertification is depriving the people of their future. A feature by Meike Scholz, adapted by Julia Heyde.

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Fatma Bashir is standing at the well. She is looking at some young girls who are drawing water from it and frowns.

Sound bite Fatma:

"The future looks glum for us. On what shall our children live? There are no jobs to be had here."

The old woman points around herself. In front and behind her sand is piling up to menacingly high mountains. Here in Sudan, in North Kordofan - and every day the shifting sand dunes come a bit closer, says Fatma Bashir.

Sound bite Fatma:

"This area used to be thickly green with plants. But now everything's gone: the trees, the bushes, the grass. We have cut the trees ourselves in order to survive. We didn't have anything else left."

Mohammed Mahmoud knows these stories very well. For almost 20 years he has been working for the organisation *SOS Sahel* in Sudan against the desertification and for a better conflict and environmental management. But he says he reaches his limits.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"Deserts are now developing in regions, where there is not even sand. Elsewhere the Sahara is expanding. The dunes shift. In North Kordofan both are happening."

Therefore, Mohammed Mahmoud visits his projects on a regular basis. One of them, for instance, is a village, out in the desert, where he helped the inhabitants to build a Hafir: a collecting pond for rain water. Mohammed knows, that this is just a small step, but it is one that makes life for the people a little bit easier.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"The people here who are dependent on natural resources have become very poor. They are dependent on a subsistence economy. The soil is not very fertile here. Nevertheless, the people are waiting for rain. They buy seeds and prepare their fields, without knowing whether they will be able to harvest. In the end it could happen that they have invested their work and money in vain and should rather have eaten the seeds themselves."

Sound bite Hafir:

Fati el Nema Isa is one of the farmers, who waits for rain every year. Often in vain.

Sound bite El Fati Nema Isa:

"The desert is now right behind us. Look, there are no trees anymore. There is nothing here anymore."

All his life Fati has spent in his village. Sometimes he goes to town to look for a job as day labourer. He can't sustain his family anymore on his land alone.

Sound bite El Fati Nema Isa:

"Once we planted rubber plants. But then the price for rubber went down. So, we cut down those trees and planted sesame trees. But then also the price for sesame went down. The work didn't pay off anymore."

Mohammed Mahmoud of *SOS Sahel* tries to help in exactly this kind of situation. Collecting ponds or re-forestation projects. And if it's just a few bushes, whose roots keep some of the fertile soil - well, sometimes small things can change a lot.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"But all these efforts are nothing, if you look at what we still need here. The government needs to help, too. We want them to consider the fight against desertification as one of their first priorities."

But the government doesn't seem to do that. Even though there is a national plan. There is also a commission. More than 10 years ago the government in Khartoum also signed the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. But since then nothing much happened, says Mohammed Mahmoud, even though the problem becomes more and more urgent.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"15 million people used to live in Sudan. Now the number has risen to 35 million. That means that also the livestock of the farmers has grown. There are more camels, more cows, more sheep. The people need more energy and therefore more charcoal. And the animals need more pastures to graze on. All this has led to over-use of the lands."

Hamad lives in a place which others have left a long time ago. With several goats and dogs, and his sons and daughters. Nothing more is left to him.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"We have very few animals. That's why we go into the woods and cut down trees to sell them as firewood."

But now, there are not many trees left. Hamad knows what he is doing. And he listens when people like Mohammed explain to him, that he is not allowed to cut trees anymore. But he retorts:

Sound bite Mohammed Hamad:

"What else should I do?"

Hamad points at his children.

Sound bite Mohammed Hamad:

"Sometimes there is not enough food for all of us. And the situation is getting worse. There is less and less rain and we don't have enough water. That's why everything here is drying and silting up."

Mohammed listens and is worried. He knows what it means when people don't have enough supplies anymore for feeding themselves let alone their families.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"Through the cutting of resources there is more competition and that triggers arguments between individual persons or even conflicts between ethnic groups."

The war between the North and the South of Sudan began, before the first oil production started. It lasted for more than 20 years. In the East of the country a new conflict is flaring up. Again and again it comes to violent protests in that region, whereas in the West - in Darfur - a bloody war has been going on for three years already, which even the international community was unable to end so far.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"What is happening in Darfur, began in the same way. It is a conflict about natural resources. Now the nomads are called Arabs and the farmers Africans."

Said knows these wars, that are not about ethnic or religious differences but about resources. Said is a nomad from the Shenabli tribe. For years he has been migrating from Kordofan

in the South up North, always on the look-out for water and pastures for his camels.

Sound bite Said:

"What do we do when water is scarce and we are having conflicts with the farmers? Then we move on. We move somewhere else."

On his way between the North and the South Said has crossed many regions. And he has learnt to avoid conflicts that he cannot solve. But that's not always possible.

Sound bite Said:

"In the past we had a war in the South. That is our homeland. We come from there. We only move up here during the rainy season. But there was violent fighting everywhere. Since then we carry weapons."

Now this war is over. Around a year ago the government in Khartoum and rebels from the South signed a peace treaty. But there are still conflicts - especially between the farmers and the nomads, says a colleague of Said's.

Sound bite Abdallah:

"Here in North Kordofan we can solve the conflicts with the farmers ourselves. We get together and discuss. In the South this is still not possible. We had a war there. It has destroyed everything."

Martha Iar Deng is a Dinka woman, a nomad. She is sitting in the South, several hundred kilometers away, in a camp for

displaced persons. She is waiting for her return home - to eventually find peace there.

1. O-Ton Martha (arab):

"There were a lot of arguments. Where we were and on the way here, too. We have lost many of our brothers and sisters. They have been killed."

They had arguments especially with the farmers, says Martha. That's why she walked away again - she needed two months and made half the distance: around 200 kilometres through scrub land and areas with land mines.

2. O-Ton Martha (arab):

"It was terrible. I mean, to be displaced is one of the worst things that can happen to you. I only have these two bundles left. Those are the blankets for covering ourselves. Here are some cooking utensils. I carried that on my head, the children held on to my hands and on my back. That's how I walked, being pregnant in the ninth month. That was hard."

3. O-Ton Atmo: IDP-Lager

Some women are singing a song. It is a praising song for the cows, that they don't have anymore. They died on their recent flight: some died due to sickness or hunger, others were stolen on the way. Eunice Wamomba has observed this for several months now. She works for the United Nations in Southern Sudan, her task is to ensure the safe return of the displaced people to their homes. But that is very difficult.

Sound bite Eunice:

"I am not so sure whether it is really the Dinka that are creating these conflicts. I mean, they are traversing the

country with several thousand cows. Many people on the way could get the idea to help themselves and steal some cows, that happened quite often. It can even happen that children are being kidnapped.(...)"

That is why Mohammed Mahmoud believes: It is good to have a peace treaty with the South, but that alone doesn't solve the problems.

Sound bite Mohammed:

"The government has spent quite a lot of money in the South, first to pay for the costs of war, then to finance the peace. All this also affects people here. The cost of living are rising because the government doesn't have enough money to satisfy the basic needs of the people: education, health or water. So the war has consequences everywhere: in the South and in the North."

In one of the villages in the North - between the encroaching sand dunes - we find Rabeh, an old man. He is lamenting.

Sound bite Rabeh:

"The young people are leaving us. In our village there are only old people and children left. The young are going and no-one is left to care for us."

That is why he is praying, says Rabeh. And a neighbour adds:

Sound bite Mohammed Auadalla:

"We hope that the government will act soon. At the moment we are sitting in our houses and wait for the rain, so that we can work on our fields. We try to keep animals in order to

stay alive somehow. But maybe the government will help us one day."

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