

Cooperation with Local NGOs in Environment Conservation - Experiences from the Sudan

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Introduction

"Bilad as-Sudan", Land of the Black, the Arabs called the areas beyond the great desert on the upper course of River Nile. This finally developed into the name Sudan for the actual country, which is the biggest in Africa in terms of size, covering an area of 2.5 million square kilometres. The borders of the Sudan were drawn during the 19th century, following the Egyptian drive for expansion of its territory. Objectives of this policy were the wish to control the upper course of the Nile and the prospect for profits from the rewarding trans-Saharan trade. The two major goods in this trade were ivory and slaves. Without being able to go into detail, this does already touch upon some of the problems determining the historical development of the Sudan to this day, namely the definition of the boundaries through a foreign power, the rigorous exploitation of the natural resources at the cost of the local population, as well as the problematic feature of cohabitation of different peoples, who had in the past been facing each other as victims and profiteers of the slave-trade.

Today, the Sudan comprises almost 30 million inhabitants, divided into nearly 600 different ethnic groups with some 100 distinct languages. Around 23 million are living in Northern Sudan, which is dominated by Arab groups. The wide spread of the Arabic language and the prevailing affiliation to Islam have connected most of the peoples of Northern Sudan to a certain cultural identity, clearly distinguishable from Southern Sudan. One of the longest and bloodiest wars in Africa has emerged from the manifold contrasts of history and culture, ethnic origin, language and religion, as well as economic and political domination, leading to the actual bipartition of the country. Even within Northern Sudan, development did not proceed peacefully; the majority of government heads came from the armed forces. Likewise, the present government representing an islamistic policy has come to power by a military coup in 1989. Currently, there seems to be no solution for the long-lasting civil war, although both parties know that the conflict could not be decided by military means.

Land use is determined by clear regional differences, dependent on the climatic conditions. From south to north, annual precipitation is decreasing from around 1600 mm along the watershed to the Kongo, 800 mm in Southern Darfur and Southern Kordofan to absolute dryness on the border to Egypt. Accordingly, there is a sequence of different vegetation zones from tropical rain-forest through high-rainfall savannah, low-rainfall savannah and thorn-scrub savannah to semi-desert and desert. Opportunities for rain-fed farming are limited to the north by lower amounts and higher variabilities of precipitation, allowing finally only nomadic livestock-keeping with goats, sheep and camels. Land use forms also show differences: in the southern regions of Northern Sudan, extended mechanized farms with export orientation have developed, while further north traditional subsistence-oriented farming is carried on. The war-affected areas of Southern Sudan are dominated by subsistence-oriented shifting cultivation systems and cattle ranching. An exception to this climate-based zonation is formed by the course of the Nile and its tributaries coming from the

Ethiopian highland, allowing a large-scale irrigated agriculture, which for a long time has formed the backbone of the Sudanese economy.

Considering the problematic environmental conditions and the long distances within the country, even under more favourable political frame conditions it would require enormous efforts to liberate the Sudan from its continuing crisis. The expenses for the civil war and the high external debts further reduce the opportunities for own development efforts. Lack of infrastructure, a mostly ineffective bureaucracy, and a tendency towards large export-oriented projects especially exclude numerous peripheral regions from sharing any possible improvement of the economic conditions. The federal system, which has been introduced in the year of 1994, has not initiated the expected progress either. Most of the now 26 states are not able to exist on their own, being pushed to make up for the missing alimentation through the central government by the short-term exploitation of the natural resources and by additional taxation, which has considerably affected the health and educational sectors. Large-scale environmental destruction can be observed as a result, casting additional shadows on the perspectives of agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry, and increasing the risk of another famine in case of a drought year. Migration from the ecologically endangered and economically depressed peripheral regions to the agglomeration of the capital Khartoum are challenging the administration there with hardly solvable supply problems. The belt of displaced camps, surrounding the three cities Khartoum, Omdurman and North Khartoum, gives evidence of the increasing migration out of the rural areas, and can by no means be explained as a consequence of the civil war alone. To a probably even higher degree than by Southern Sudanese, these migration movements are caused by population groups from all parts of Northern Sudan, particularly from the poverty-stricken regions of Darfur and Kordofan, but also from the mountain areas of Eastern Sudan and even from the smallholder villages of the Nile oasis in the north of the country. The availability of even the poorest infrastructural requirements, the vague option to find employment in the informal sector, and the presence of international relief organizations make the situation in the unplanned settlements on the outskirts of the city appear much better than in the areas of origin of the migrants.

Consequently, it seems to be specially important to direct measures of development cooperation to these areas of origin, in order to allow potential migrants to develop alternative strategies of survival. Special emphasis should be put on the incorporation of women into the development process, as in most regions of the country they are carrying out the major part of agricultural work, while they are hardly involved in the economic and political decision processes. The promotion of an autonomous organizational set-up should also receive due attention, as sustainable improvements may only be achieved through a stronger participation of the local populations.

The large-scale absence of governmental organizations for international development cooperation in Northern Sudan has resulted in an increased demand for assistance from non-governmental organizations. National NGOs are of course to a high degree objects of critical observation through the government and the security forces. Nevertheless, several, in some cases quite big organizations have emerged during recent years. Smaller local NGOs are rare, but promising signs are existing in many regions. Projects should accordingly attempt to promote such prospects for self-help groups, if necessary with assistance in capacity-building, with support in administrative affairs, and with procurement of legal advice.

Cooperation with the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society

The concept of sustainable development, which has been the dominant aspect of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, has influenced considerably the development policies in both North and South. This has also had its effects on the Sudan, where the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society (SECS) gained importance in the field of public awareness activities, especially in the organisation of seminars and workshops related to environmental issues. Likewise, several donor organisations shifted their programmes towards natural resource management. As there was a marked change in the attitudes towards the relevance of non-governmental organisations at the same time, it was not a surprise that the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society was selected as a suitable partner by several international organisations. For my personal assignment, the Sudanese side wished to receive assistance mainly in the use of audio-visual means and in the establishment of an environment-related databank. As an NGO with a broad and qualified membership, it offered to the donor organisations the opportunity to operate under difficult political frame conditions in an area which was seen as most important for the future of the country, namely the combatting of desertification, the conservation of the natural resources and the awareness on environmental causes and consequences of poverty.

Figure 1. History of SECS

History of SECS

1975	academic circle of 50 scientists
1975 - 1990	discussion forum on environmental issues
1990 - 1994	own office with full-time executive director increase in activities expansion of membership establishment of branches starting of small-scale projects



Effects of the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development 1992

- increased public awareness on environmental issues
- attention of donor organisations on natural resource management
- acceptance of relevance of NGOs

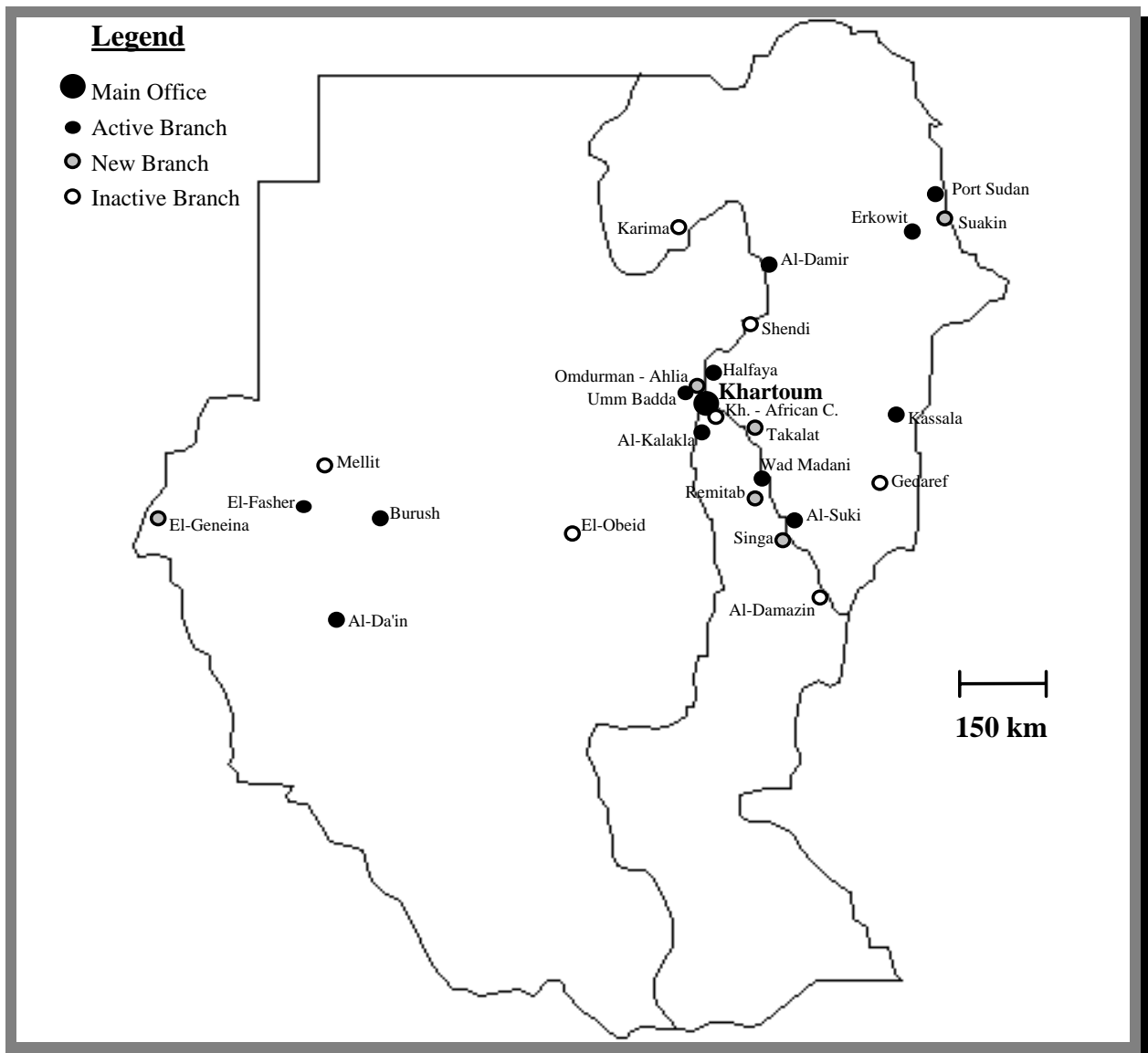
1994 - 1998	cooperation with foreign donor organisations rapid expansion of activities dramatic increase in number of branches and in membership availability of volunteers execution of environmental projects
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SECS had originally been founded in the aftermath of the big Sahel drought in the early 70ies, when some scientists in the University of Khartoum recognized the need to start action against the continuous deterioration of the environment. This original membership did not comprise more than 50 highly-qualified persons from different sciences. During the first 15 years of its existence, SECS remained a small academic circle, which discussed current environmental issues from a scientific point of view and which organised some workshops from time to time. This started to change around 1990 for several reasons. The most important was of course the scientific discussion about the concept of sustainable development, which promoted the expansion of the membership base. The second point was the military coup in

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1989 which left SECS as one of the few institutions in the Sudan where a spirit of freedom could still be preserved, so that more and more disappointed intellectuals became attracted. This went parallel to a shift in the selection of partners on the donor side. With a grant from a Danish development organisation, SECS managed for the first time to recruit a permanently employed executive director and to rent a small office. The organisation knew how to make use of this unique chance. With a systematic expansion of their activities, with an active involvement in the establishment of branches, and with the starting of own small-scale projects, it has since developed to an organisation of more than 5,000 members in approximately 40 branches, covering most areas of Northern Sudan. Even the complete retreat of the Scandinavian donors from the Sudan was overcome successfully.

Figure 2. Map of SECS Branches



More and more, SECS also became attractive to students and graduates who could not find suitable work opportunities within the declining economy. The availability of a big number of

qualified and committed volunteers has developed into a specific asset. Especially young women, who find extremely difficult conditions for a professional career in the Sudan, use the free atmosphere of SECS to improve their skills and to gain work experience. The range of activities of SECS has reached a considerable level, addressing all kinds of environmental problems. Workshops and seminars are emphasizing the linking of scientists with decision-makers on local, regional and national levels, targetting on an effective environmental legislation and finally leading to the active involvement in the designing of the National Action Plan. At the same time, training courses are addressing media specialists, artists and teachers, who should serve as multipliers for environmental issues. Additionally, a weekly radio programme is produced, exhibitions are organised, and scientific studies on specific problems are presented. Through the network of branches, it has also been possible to implement own small-scale projects, mainly in the fields of community forestry and environmental sanitation. The list of activities of the year 1992 may serve as an example for the wide range of issues covered by the SECS.

Figure 3. List of SECS Activities

SECS Activities in 1992
Northern Darfur - Development and the Environment
The Higher Council for Environment and Natural Resources
The Use of Video Filming in Environmental Information
Recycling of Waste Oil
The Woman and the Environment
Environmental Issues of Gedaref Area
Issues of Environment and Development in Darfur
The Media and Environmental Issues in the Sudan
Expected Environmental Impacts of the Proposed Hamdab Dam
Environmental Change and its Impact on Women
The Role of Traditional Administration in Environment Conservation
Obstacles to a Sound Exploitation of Fisheries Resources in the Context of Balanced Development
What after Rio / Brazil?
The Phenomenon of the Death of Trees in the Streets of the Capital
Import and Use of Chemical Pesticides in the Sudan
The Role of Arts in the Consolidation of Environmental Education
Issues of Environmental Sanitation in Melleit
Environmental Education and Primary Schools Instructors
The Role of the Range and Fodder Administration in Environment Conservation
Environmental Deterioration on Small Farms in Khartoum State
Environment, Migration and Human Settlements
Environmental Issues and Legislation in the Sudan
Regeneration of Used Lube Oils
Pastures: Environment Conservation and the Development of Animal Wealth
Methods of Desertification Evaluation and Mapping in the Sudan

When I mentioned the request for assistance in the use of audio-visual means and in the establishment of an environment-related databank before, I referred to a request which had,

however, not been properly evaluated by both sides. The actual occupation of two, later only one expatriate within SECS has quickly led to a shift from the original work description. It proved to be a necessity to view these two aspects as parts of a general capacity building process within the Sudanese partner organisation which found itself in continuous development. Office space had to be enlarged, management structures had to be adjusted, communication with and assistance to the increasing number of branches had to be taken care of, volunteers had to be trained and supervised, permanent staff had to be employed for specific projects and so on.

SECS tried to involve the capacities of the expatriate staff in all this restructuring process, so that additional tasks had to be included in the work. Still the intervention from outside did only cover one part of the activities, but the link between the different tasks and between this external intervention and the overall organisational development became obvious. Following two years of planning and adjustments, the organisational set-up for the work included the collaboration with five permanently employed staff members, responsible for the documentation of the activities, the communication with the branches, library services, the establishment of a databank and the effective use of audio-visual equipment. All these tasks were seen as parts of a common objective, requiring coordination both among this group of "counterparts", as well as with the various committees addressing specific environmental problems and the numerous volunteers available. Since the main objective had been identified in the spread of environmental awareness, the output was seen as a service to offer information and advice to interested members, to researchers and journalists, to project staff and, last not least, to the branches. The last point has proved to gain special importance, so that my successor now is mainly occupied with the assistance to the branches all over Northern Sudan.

Experiences from the Cooperation with the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society

After four years of work within the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society, I am highly satisfied with the results achieved so far. When trying to assess the experiences, it has become obvious that the example of the cooperation with this local NGO could well serve as a model for future cooperation in other countries in Africa. Among the positive experiences gained are the high commitment of SECS members and staff as well as the appropriateness of the project in terms of applied technologies and cultural relevance. Due to the high quality of the work, which has partly been achieved through some outstanding individual members, the organisation has even been incorporated into the political process again, for example in the creation of an Environmental Action Plan. The existence of a network of branches has furthermore made sure that the work of SECS has a considerable impact on the peripheral areas. The international cooperation, finally, proved to be of mutual benefit for both the Sudanese side and the foreign donors, as it assured SECS of a continuous focus from outside which may have prevented a stronger oppression through the government, and it left the funding organisations an outlet to assist those target groups which they were not longer able to reach themselves. This strategy has also been taken up by other donor organisations, which actively promoted the establishment of local NGOs for the execution or for the continuity of their development projects.

Nevertheless, negative experiences should not be neglected. The limited availability of own financial resources resulted in a heavy dependance on external funds and on donor policies, which can hardly be influenced. The sudden cutting of German development cooperation with

the Sudan made this dependence very obvious. Another consequence was a permanent loss of staff members, who could receive much higher salaries within international organisations or with working outside the country. Additionally, SECS also faced problems related to an administrative incompatibility. It has been an annoying discovery to find out that international organisations are sometimes not able to guarantee an ongoing commitment beyond the end of a budget year, while at the same time the local NGOs are viewed very critically in their capacities to assure the efficient project implementation and are forced to undertake considerable long-term obligations. Such irregularities had a clear negative impact on the sustainability of several activities.

Resulting Demands for Future Cooperation

Taking the positive and the negative experiences from the cooperation with the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society into account, several demands for the strategies of development organisations have to be raised, which should at least be valid for projects in environment conservation in Africa. These demands address the selection of suitable partner organisations, the definition of activities and also certain administrative changes. For a long time, international cooperation has almost exclusively been oriented to the governments of the recipient countries, not taking into account their doubtful legitimation and neglecting the productive forces of the civil society. The example of the Sudanese Environment Conservation Society clearly shows that local NGOs can be far more effective in achieving certain objectives, especially with respect to the commitment of the target population and to the creation of public awareness. Hence, donor organisations should identify local NGOs with a sufficient membership base and with a suitable network of branches. In cases where such NGOs can not be found, the promotion of local self-help groups could help in the establishment process. Such involvement might be of special importance in countries with adverse frame conditions. The change in the selection of partner organisations requires adjustments in the definition of activities, in order to make use of the specific advantages of NGOs' memberships. Organisational development and the training of a wide range of staff members and volunteers should receive much more attention than the technical input itself. This might even include a shift in the financial commitment towards capacity building of the partner organisations, enabling them to execute projects of development cooperation by themselves. Indirectly, this could lead to a better financial situation of the NGOs (increased membership, offering of services, obtaining of overheads) and hence to a reduction of their dependence, as well as to a decrease of costs for the donor organisations, which no longer need such a great number of expatriate staff. Although the relevance of NGOs has been widely acknowledged, most organisations still follow the same approaches. Working with volunteers, however, is considerably different from working with government employees. Project approaches implemented with NGOs have to take into consideration these differences in commitment, in employment relations, in hierarchies, in legal security and so on. This means that project approaches have to be far more flexible and find new forms of cooperation, replacing for example fixed counterparts by teams of local staff members and retreating from implementation to training and supervision. Even the administrative regulations have to be questioned. The reliability of the donor organisations has to be strengthened, allowing the affirmation of long-term contributions and taking into consideration the responsibilities of the local NGOs in case of a sudden retreat of the donor organisations. In short, this calls for a real partnership.

Conclusion

The cooperation with local NGOs is especially important in environment conservation due to the need for reaching a wide public. The combination of scientific knowledge with local commitment offers good prospects in this regard. The external input in this process could concentrate on the establishment of advanced management systems, on monitoring and evaluation activities, on the transfer of knowledge through the training of staff members and volunteers, and on the mediation with other donors.

I am convinced that the strengthening of the civil society and the promotion of a true North-South partnership are essential steps towards sustainable development. International development organisations should actively promote such processes and should establish suitable frame conditions within their own administration, especially for those countries which lack a responsible government.