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Documenting Darfur's war economy: interview with Sudanese SPARC researcher

As war devastates Sudan, one researcher shares how markets survive, how data is gathered, and why understanding the local situation is key to shaping humanitarian support.

By { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "SPARC", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/sparc" } } [SPARC Reframing aid and resilience Supporting livelihoods and markets Sudan](https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/sparc)

As the civil war in Sudan continues to uproot lives and infrastructure, collecting timely and accurate information on locally conditions has become a formidable challenge. Here, one Sudanese researcher reflects on their work to continue to document the situation inside the region, and identify what entry points exist for outside support. The researcher shares how data is gathered under conditions of extreme conflict, how traders keep markets alive, and why this reporting remains critical to informing any future humanitarian response.

Q: How hard is it to gather information about what's happening in Darfur at the minute?

A: It is very, very difficult. Darfur is under RSF [Rapid Support Forces], and they think they have the de facto government. But that area is very insecure: for travel, for communication, for the movement of individuals and groups. So, it is very difficult to collect information because the institutions are not there. The government apparatus is not there; internet is not there; communication is down. Travel between states or between towns can sometimes be very risky. It's very challenging. If you are not smart or creative enough, you will not be able to collect any data or any information.

However, people still live there and live life. In places of conflict, people don't totally vanish. People adapt and see how to live with that suppression.

Q: So, how are you collecting information? Are you working with people on the ground?

A: Because we know the situation in Darfur, we engineered a way to collect information around the fighting. There are extremely experienced Darfuri researchers who live in, or used to live in, Darfur. Those researchers are based in many towns in the states, such as Nyala, El Fasher, Ed Daein, Zalingei, and El Geneina. They are actually university professors or doctors who are researchers – directly or indirectly – with some institutions. So [they have] networks within those states.

Sometimes, where the situation allows, they go and talk to people and institutions in their

own places. They visit markets, they visit trade centres, depending on the security situation. Those researchers gather information and do the analysis, and they submit a monthly report to a group of research advisors and research managers – I am one of them. We have two research advisors based in Cairo who are directly receiving information from researchers on the ground, doing the analysis of the data presented, and writing the final monthly reports.

Q: How has the ongoing fighting affected trade and markets in Darfur?

A: The conflict has greatly affected trade and markets. Markets have been a target for all the fighting parties, but the worst is that in Darfur, markets have been the subject of aerial bombardment and shelling from the ground. The infrastructure in some markets is totally destroyed, and people are killed. For example, one market in North Darfur, called Kuma, was hit probably more than 30 times.

In addition, the [RSF's trade embargo](#) has affected the flow of trade from central Sudan, Egypt and Libya. So, markets are affected because trade is not flowing. Trade is often blocked. Movement is blocked, and trade supply is cut off. Roads are blocked, and trade cannot come from production areas to consumption areas. Local produce is also very much affected because it cannot be transported to export destinations. So, this has hugely damaged trade.

But most importantly, the conflict has meant that there is a lack of cash: there is no banking system working. Internet is not working, communication is not working, airports are not working, railways are not working. Everything is down.

Q: [Recent SPARC reports](#) mention that people are still able to trade. How does trade survive in a place like Darfur, and how are people getting by?

A: I think trade is the most resilient industry in the world. Traders are very smart, and they know that they make a lot of income and get a lot of money in times of conflict. They will always find a way to get to the markets.

One thing to realise is that not all markets are closed. Probably 80% of the markets are operational, with varying capacity. I was talking to someone [in El Fasher] this morning, which has been heavily besieged for over a year: yet some traders open their shops, sell to some people, then close down and go hide even now.

Movement of trade is coming from Chad and going directly into East Darfur. Before the RSF declared a trade embargo on long distance trade, trade was also coming in from the north – from Ad-Dabba [in Northern State, Sudan], from Bara [in North Kordofan State, Sudan], even from Egypt. But now that is not happening. Libya was also a source of trade coming to Sudan, but that is not happening at the moment due to the conflict between Sudan and Libya.

Chad has become the main source of trade into Darfur. Central African Republic and South Sudan, during the dry season, were also sources of income. Smuggled goods still come from Central Sudan through some routes, and they make their way into Darfur.

Q: You spoke about traders and how they're getting by. What about people buying these things at markets? What networks are they using to be able to buy

goods?

A: Selling and buying involves cash transactions. And cash is very rare because there are no banks. So alternatively, people use an online banking app called *bankak* to transfer cash. I think this is the most important application that Sudanese people have used during the war. Some other people in other towns, not in Darfur, might have been using the banks, or Western Union, or other services. But in Darfur, it is just the *bankak* system.

The disadvantage of this is that not everyone has a bank account. So, money cannot come directly to them; it has to go through someone else's bank account. That is where certain amounts are charged as percentages. And people charge different percentages. The lowest one is around 10%, but other places go for more. Also, buying and selling depends on the form of payment. If you want to buy a sack of sugar, it has two prices. The cash price is less than the *bankak* price. And the *bankak* price can be far more expensive than the cash price. Other places have reported that some people have resorted to bartering, but this is not that common at the moment, since the banking app is still serving our people.

But there are a lot of networks that people use to stay in the markets or access market facilities.

Q: Do you have recommendations for humanitarian agencies who are trying to operate in or find out more about Darfur?

A: What I would recommend to the humanitarian community is this: there is a lot of information being gathered, but we see very little response. And that raises a huge question: what is the use of gathering information if there is no response to that?

I myself believe it is important to continue gathering information, so there is no gap. That way, when someone is able to respond, they have the information necessary to base their response on. But if they want to link their operational response, I think they need to connect with advocacy, and with other operational institutions that have some leverage to help support response outreach to communities.

It is quite shameful that El Fasher has been under siege for more than 15 months. And, as I was told this morning, people in the town are eating *umbaz* – which is groundnut oil cake, technically animal feed. That is what people are eating at the moment, and it is very expensive. Even that may run out – then people will lose access to anything to eat.

Someone running a *tekia* – a centre where free support is given to poor people – told us that yesterday and the day before, the *tekia* centres were monitored, and they estimated that 20-30% of children in those centres were malnourished. This is likely to increase due to the lack of food.

Food is a human right. And I think people must have access to food. Otherwise, their rights are totally abused and denied. International humanitarian law must be respected.

Edited by Mahira Haque.



Credit Groundnuts were one of Sudan's major cash crops before the war. In Darfur, markets have been the subject of aerial bombardment and shelling from the ground. Credit: Albert González Farran / UNAMID.

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