Blog 30th September 2025

Dynamic Drylands: 'Facing floods and surviving civil wars: adaptability and resilience in Sudan and South Sudan'

The third episode of Dynamic Drylands podcast series 2 interviews experts about how people in the drylands are coping and adapting in the face of big changes—often without any external support.

Publisher SPARC
Promoting innovative solutions Reframing aid and resilience Supporting livelihoods and markets Understanding land and conflict Working in a changing climate Gender equality and social inclusion South Sudan Sudan

Below is an edited transcript of 'Facing floods and surviving civil wars: adaptability and resilience in Sudan and South Sudan', the latest episode of Dynamic Drylands podcast. We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so on Acast, Spotify and Amazon Music.

Bola Mosuro: In the last two episodes we heard about some of the issues facing people in the drylands: from policies and plans that treat pastoralists as a problem to be solved, to aid projects that aren't tailored to local contexts.

There's a myth that people living in the drylands are simply incapable of dealing with modern-day shocks and require outside support to exist. But in this episode, we're going to hear more about the incredible resourcefulness and adaptability of people living in the drylands—stories of how people in the drylands are surviving and adapting to huge changes.

I'm Bola Mosuro and this is Dynamic Drylands.

In previous episodes, we've heard how shared access to grazing and water resources are two of the most crucial elements for the pastoralist way of life. But there's another aspect to living in the drylands that's being driven by climate change and it is creating a different challenge to survival - flooding.

In Bor in South Sudan, yearly floods are becoming more frequent and intense. Pacificah Okemwa is a lecturer at Kenyatta University in Nairobi. Here, she talks about the impact climate change is having on people living in Bor:

Pacificah Okemwa: Climate change has a great impact on the peoples of South Sudan. This is basically plain land, and the River Nile flows through this region. So any time there is a change in terms of climate, maybe the rainfall is in any part of the East Africa region, including Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and all—a lot of that rain is washed through the Nile, and it causes serious floods. And these floods are experienced more and more as the climate is also changing. But how do these then impact on the people? Now, number one, we noted

that with all these extensive floods, people are displaced. And may I please mention that the Dinka, the majority of whom occupy Bor county, are pastoralists. And therefore, when there are floods, it just means that the animals do not have pasture, and they have to move, just like the people have to be moved. And the animals will be moved far, far away. Like in 2023 the movements were to the next state, which is East Equatoria, and that journey is not smooth at all.

Bola: But pastoralists are no strangers to dealing with climatic variability. The Dinka community have turned what could have been a disaster into a new livelihood opportunity—one that is particularly benefitting women…

Pacificah: Now we noted that women in Bor are adapting to climate change in very interesting ways. One of the things that happens is that when there is a flood and the floods are subsiding, for example, nobody needs to go into the river Nile to fish. They just need to dig small holes near where they stay, and the fish will be trapped.

What has happened is that while the women have often depended on their indigenous knowledge to dry such fish for consumption, now the fishing industry has become so large and it is dependent on women drying the fish in the sun, salting it, or even smoking it in traditional kilns.

So one of the things that really shocked us is to learn that while we thought the Dinka are purely pastoralists, we also learned that they are fish people, fisher folk, and they are also dependent on the trade of fish, and this trade of fish is growing by the day. In fact, as we collected data, we noted that daily there would be like three or four big trucks that are being packed with fish in the fish market, and the fish is transported as far as the Democratic Republic of Congo and parts of Uganda. So that was one of the things that we noted. And the women are not just sitting at home. In fact, they are majority of the retailers. The only thing that has happened is that while all this fish trade was in the hands of the women, now because of the attraction that this fish has in the export industry, men are now getting into controlling the fish industry.

Bola: Now, let’s travel 1000 km north to Sudan, where a brutal civil war has gripped the region since April 2023, when a power struggle between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces exploded into open conflict. What began as a rivalry between generals has spiralled into one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises: with millions displaced, entire cities reduced to rubble, devastating fatalities and famine looming as aid is blocked or looted.

Darfur already ravaged by years of war starting in 2003 which left hundreds of thousands dead and millions displaced, has been hit especially hard.

Margie Buchanan-Smith is a policy and humanitarian researcher who's been working in Sudan and especially Darfur since the 1980s. She describes the impact that the war has had on trade and markets:

Margie Buchanan-Smith: Many markets in Darfur were extremely vibrant, active before the war started. You would have pastoralists selling livestock, buying cereals, you would have farmers in exchanges with pastoralists.

Because there's been such a large displaced population in Darfur since the Darfur conflict broke out in 2003, you had this very large urban poor population even before the war

started. And a lot of those people were dependent on daily labouring to earn often a meagre, but nevertheless some income. And so they would be quite dependent on the market to buy their food needs. So they were a very vibrant place of exchange before the war.

The war has had a really massive impact on supply chains and on trading routes all across Sudan. So when trucks or convoys have moved across the country they've been at risk of looting, some traders have gone out of business. And also, the warring parties have sometimes tried to control trade. So for example, the town of Al Fasher which is the capital of North Darfur—that's been subject to a very very tight siege. It's the Rapid Support Force which has really had a very tight noose on Al Fasher. And has really prevented trade and commodities moving in and out of the town. And the consequence of all of this is increasing the cost of trade. So to give you an example, transporting millet has increased four or five times since the war began.

Bola: It's hard to imagine how trade can survive this kind of situation. And yet, many markets remain operational, and traders continue to open their shops. As Margie explains:

Margie: So, traders in Darfur are no strangers to conflict since between 2003 and 2023, Darfuri traders became very resourceful, very adaptive. The war, the nationwide war, has really in many ways pushed them to their limits, but we're still seeing a lot of adaptation and a lot of innovation.

So examples of that: they would be looking for safer trading routes, which are usually longer and maybe logistically more difficult, but it's trading routes where their convoys, their commodities are less likely to be looted.

Trade has also become very dependent on trust. In a war situation levels of suspicion are very high, trust can really break down particularly between different ethnic groups. So quantities will be smaller, distances will be shorter but they will tend to focus on trading with those with whom they have a high degree of trust. So for example, livestock traders may sell their livestock to local butchers but they may not get paid for a couple of weeks until those butchers have managed to sell the meat.

The frontline response in Darfur, just as in much of the rest of Sudan, is through community efforts, through *tekia*, which are these solidarity community kitchens, and for communities to run those, they're getting a lot of support from the Sudanese diaspora. And that's again where the international humanitarians can really provide a boost, but it's doing a lot of small-scale interventions through local civil society actors and that's the way to ensure that we don't draw attention of the warring parties to some of the humanitarian interventions that are absolutely essential.

Bola: What we've heard from Margie and Pacificah shouldn't surprise us. In the fast-changing drylands, people are more than capable of adapting and figuring out solutions to new challenges. The innovative methods they turn to or have adopted can sometimes be quite astounding.

They can thrive—or in some cases, continue to survive—in some of the most difficult crises, often without any external support. However, when decades of policy and development planning neglect people, they're going to be more vulnerable to new shocks.

I'm Bola Mosuro and thank you for listening to this episode of Dynamic Drylands. We're

grateful to Dr. Pacificah Okemwa and Margie Buchanan-Smith for their insight.

While people in the drylands are often adapting without outside support, this shouldn’t be the case. In the next episode, we’ll be hearing about how donors and NGOs can support people living in some of the most fragile places.

Dynamic Drylands is produced by the research-to-action programme ‘SPARC’: Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises. It was funded with UK aid from the UK government, and managed by Cowater International in partnership with the International Livestock Research Institute, Mercy Corps, and ODI Global. Thank you to everyone who contributed to this series. For more information about the issues discussed in this podcast, visit the links in the show notes.

Source URL: *https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/news-blog/blog/dynamic-drylands-s2-e3*