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The role of local elites in development projects: an experience from Sudan

by DIPANKAR DATTA

"Their key question was: why had partners selected a water project in the village, despite the fact that the area had a government-managed water source?"

Introduction

As project design specialists, we want all stakeholders – including local elites – to actively participate in project design. We want the project to bring substantial benefit to the extreme poor and the most vulnerable. But there is a risk: the project could be hijacked by the local elite. So we adopt different strategies, such as encouraging the participation of the poorest and the most vulnerable from the outset, or motivating local elites to do something for the betterment of the poorest, or by ensuring the participation of local governments.

Concern North Sudan designed a project using participatory approaches with a commitment to reach the extreme poor and the most vulnerable. But midway through the project implementation, many observers argued that the local elite had hijacked the project. We had to decide whether to continue or to stop. So we decided to give a critical look at this issue of hijacking. This article is an effort to document this learning in the context of Sudan.

Background

Sudan is the largest country in Africa. Approximately half the country is semi-arid or arid. Sudan is a highly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. The Sudanese economy depends largely on the pillars of traditional farming, livestock keeping and animal husbandry from employment, income generation and subsistence perspectives.

In large parts of the Darfur, Kordofan, Red Sea, Kassala and the south, nomadic pastoralism remains the dominant livelihood system. However, planners often wrongly regard their natural resource management systems as harmful to the environment. What services exist for them are centralised and encourage settlement, although in many areas mobile pastoralism remains an environmentally sustainable and economically viable livelihood system. But it is under threat in other areas. This is due to e.g. conflict, a lack of recognition of indigenous land tenure rights, and natural disasters such as drought. Interventions such as mechanised farming and vast, government sponsored irrigation schemes exclude nomads from large tracts of pasture. This generates additional pressure on the remaining land and water resources. In many cases, this has led to increased environmental degradation and conflict (Curley 2002 and Oxfam 1998).

After having an 800km bumpy drive through the forest, this was the best part of the road I had to go on to get to Abyei!

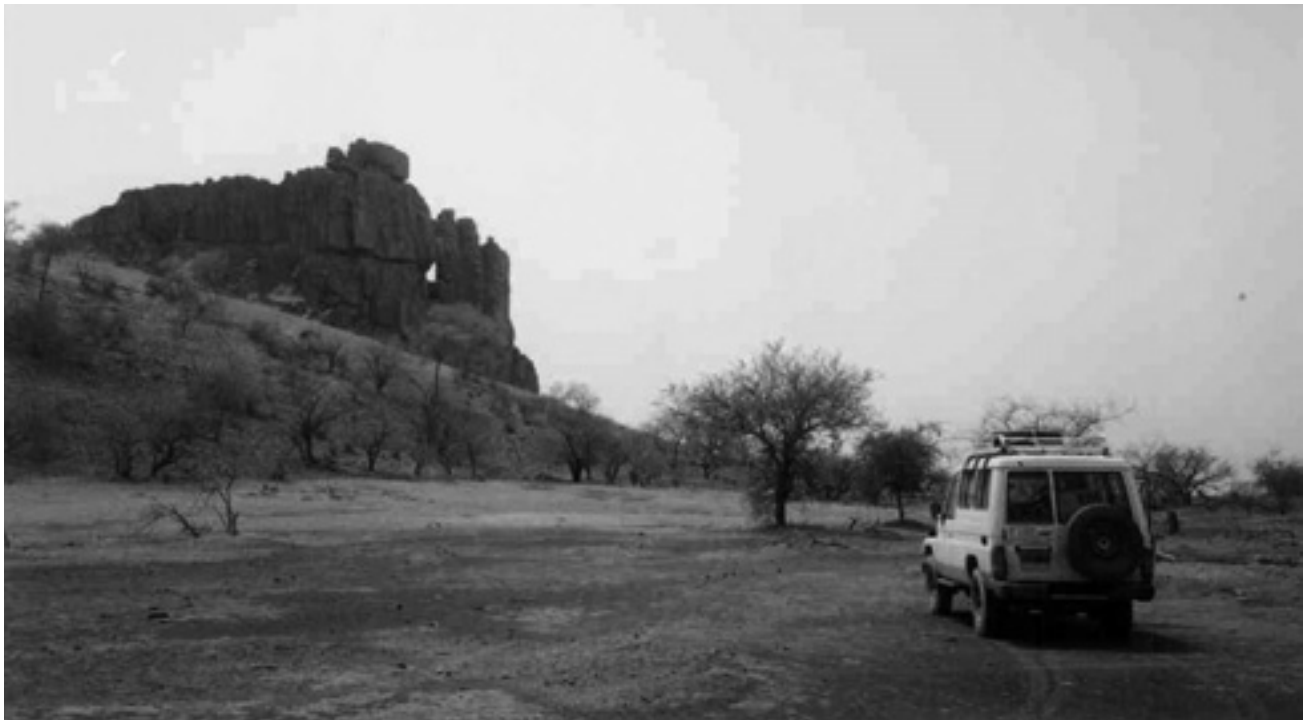

Photo: Dipankar Datta

Project development process

In 2001, a poverty study for the sixteen states was commissioned to explore poverty in North Sudan. In 2002, based on the findings, West Kordofan – the least developed state – was selected for a long-term development programme intervention. The Participatory Community Development Plan project (PCDP) would focus on selecting a priority problem, by analysing community needs and developing an action plan.

The programme team made a number of visits to West Kordofan, to determine the poorest locality. They selected the Abyei locality in the southwestern part of the state. Abyei has a total population of nearly 160,000, of whom 35% are internally displaced people (IDP) from other states.

Abyei has four administrative units: Al Meiram, Al Muglad, Dibab and Abyei. The area has three migratory routes – western, eastern and central – that cut across Meiram, Muglad and Dibab administrative units. These three units are mainly inhabited by the Missereya Humur tribe. They are mainly agro-pastoralists rearing cattle and adopting a seasonal pattern of migration. The Abyei administrative unit is mainly inhabited by the Dinka Ngok. This tribe practices subsistence farming and cattle rearing within their own tribal land.

After the state authorities granted permission to work in Abyei, in mid-2003 a baseline survey was commissioned. A local office was opened and field-based project staff were recruited. Based on the study findings, we developed a project proposal, aiming to implement four micro projects in four villages in the first year, with four local partner NGOs. In January 2004, partnerships with the four NGOs were established.

Next, we identified our target areas (see Table 1). Important criteria included:

- access to the villages during the rainy season (most villages are totally cut off during that time for up to five months);
- the location of the village on the migratory routes;
- selecting villages where internally displaced people and host communities lived together;
- fairly settled communities (not extreme nomads); and
- previous experience of the partner working in the village.

We decided that partners would implement one service delivery micro project in their respective target village. By April 2004, four micro projects had been identified: a food security project, a health project, and two water projects (see Table 1).

The food security project focused on the distribution of farm inputs among the villagers, and was implemented in late 2004. The two water projects focused on the construc-

I forgot the tiredness as well as the distance on seeing the beauty of Abyei

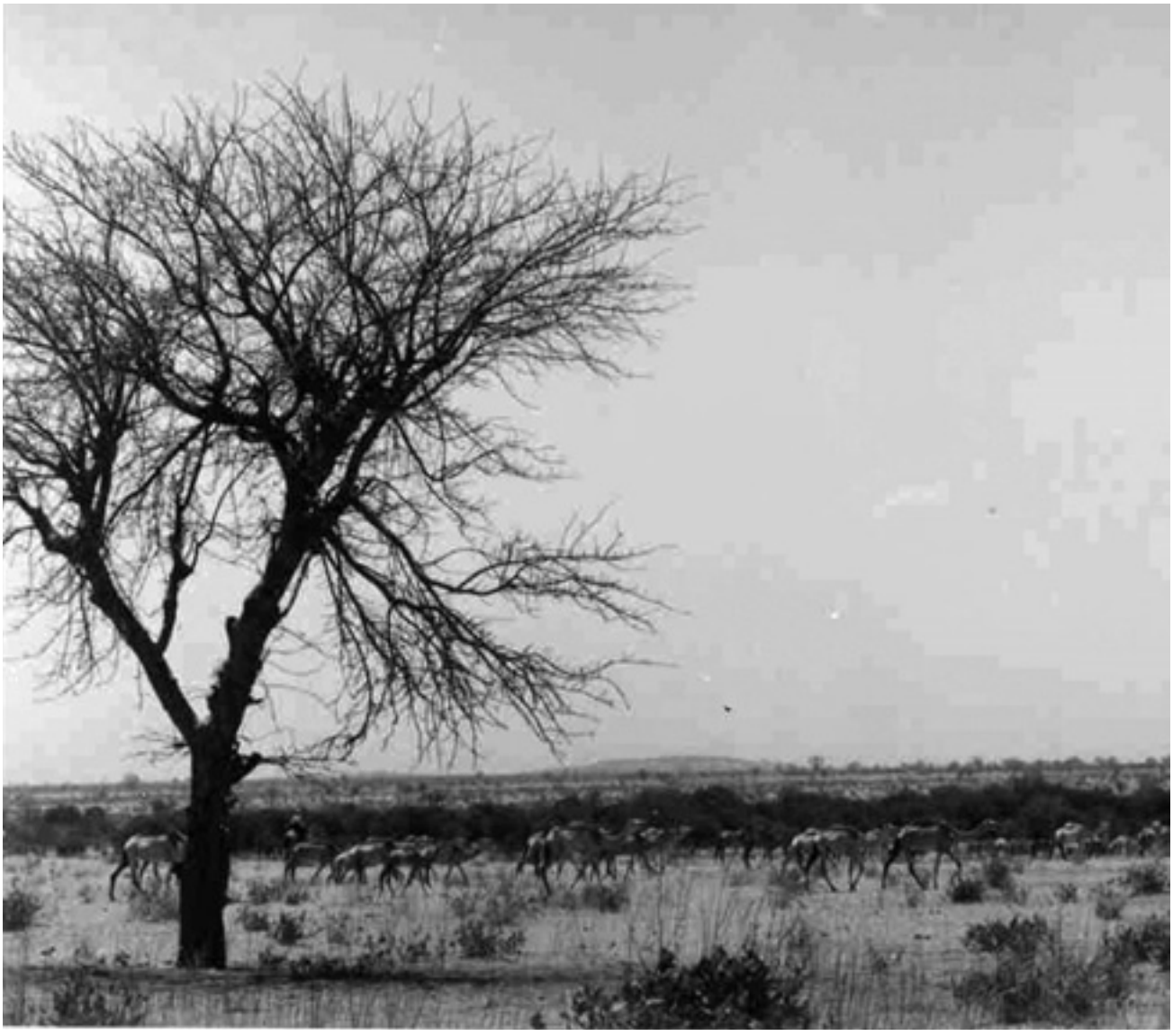

Photo: Dipankar Datta

Table 1: Target areas and identified projects

Administrative Units of Abyei locality	Village	Messereya Humur Tribe			Dinka Ngok Tribe
		Nomadic Migratory Routes			
		Central	Eastern	Western	
Muglad	El Sutaib	Food Security			
Dibab	Kilo Khamsin		Water		
Meiram	El Mugdama			Water	
Abyei	Makker				Health

Collecting water is the key to raising animals

Photo: Dipankar Datta

tion of 1500ft-deep boreholes and installing water pumps. At the time of project evaluation, the partners had already signed contracts with the drilling agency. The health project aimed to build one health centre and a mobile health clinic in the target village. At the time of evaluation, the partner was still working on designing it.

The need for critical analysis

However, recent visitors had begun to criticise the effectiveness of the micro projects in reaching the extreme poor. These included senior managers from the Concern North Sudan country office and the headquarters in Dublin. They asked whether the extreme poor were involved in identifying and designing the micro projects.

The food security project had already been implemented and the health project was at the design stage, so their main concerns were for the water projects – which were midway through the implementation stage. Their key question was: why had partners selected a water project in the village, despite the fact that the area had a government-managed water source? They were concerned that the locations of both new boreholes were too near the existing ones. A second borehole might lead to the existing borehole being shut down. It might also mean that the communities living furthest from the centre were still unable to easily access water.

So in mid-2005, we conducted an evaluation, to examine whether the project was effectively reaching the extreme poor; and to consolidate our learning in order to develop an agreed framework for future directions.

Analysis of micro project development process

Effectiveness of the PCDP

Though we believe the PCDP is a useful tool for ensuring community participation, the process suffered from a series of limitations:

- The PCDP process aimed to identify community problems and prioritise them by conducting a causal analysis, and to develop an action plan. But the project team did not spend enough time analysing the top priority problem, in terms of who was the most affected by it within the community.
- Every selected village had a core team of partners and community volunteers to run PCDP. The community volunteers were mainly educated, knowledgeable, and powerful people of their village. The team had training for using the tools and techniques of PCDP – but no training in facilitating the participatory process at community level.
- The PCDP sessions were organised in the market places at the centre of the villages. The local elites, who lived around the village centres, easily dominated these sessions and influenced the outcome of the process.

Villagers who analysed the effectiveness of programme in reaching extreme poor

Photo: Dipankar Datta

- The project staff did not have a clear understanding of who constituted the poorest people in the community, or of their livelihoods. They thought that only the internally displaced people were the most vulnerable. Despite internally displaced people attending the sessions, the PCDP methodology did not specifically capture their suggestions. In addition, the project team failed to include other extreme poor families in the PCDP.
- Hiring field-based project staff and opening an office in the Abyei locality raised community expectations. Project staff were under constant pressure to begin work, even when preparations were not complete, and the local administration kept asking them to justify what they were doing. As the project development process took so long, there was also pressure from the community and the local administration to deliver 'tangible' benefits at the community level. Because of this, the PCDP process was facilitated in a supply-driven way. And the community was not adequately mobilised before conducting the actual PCDP – so the voices of the poorest had been lost.

We wanted to understand **why** the project staff had failed to overcome these limitations in maintaining a good quality process. During discussions, they revealed that they thought too much time had been spent developing the programme. As a consequence, they felt that there had not been adequate time for understanding the local situation, or to mobilise the community effectively. They understood the different tools and techniques, but they had no substantial experiences in facilitating PCDP at the community level. They also were not fluent in local tribal languages. So they felt that they could not properly guide the partner staff and volunteers in conducting PCDP or maintain good quality facilitation. This meant that they were unable to realise the attitudes of the local elite towards the selection of micro projects.

Understanding how targeting works

The project staff were unaware that other extreme poor families belonged to the same tribe or sub-tribes in the same villages. They were unclear about the difference between 'targeting poor communities' and 'targeting the poor or poorest within the community'. For example, during the implementation of the food security micro project, the distribution of farm inputs to the beneficiaries in the village had no definite targeting criteria. As a result, those living in the village centres were involved in the distribution process – and got the maximum benefit. The extreme poor, living in the

most remote part of the villages, were not even aware of the farm inputs distribution.

Broad community problems were also not necessarily specific to the poorest in the community. For example, the project staff asserted that people going to the Bhar Al Arab river in search of water and pasture was a major problem. In fact, this was a coping mechanism for people during the dry season that had been practiced for a long time. But the local elites, who own more animals, perceived this practice as a problem. Prioritising water issues might be important for the rich – but not necessarily important for the poorest community members.

Later, after discussions with the poorest families, we discovered that they had never even heard about the PCDP. In fact, they identified food insecurity as their immediate problem, such as insufficient human and financial capital for clearing land to farm or buy the necessary agricultural inputs, resulting in low production. Water was a problem – but mainly only during two months of the dry season. As they don't own big animals, and need little water for consumption, their demand for water is much less compared to the other well-off families living in the village.

Analysing the perceptions of the local elite

Local development

It was important for us to understand how the local elites and the local government officials envisioned the local development process. So we organised a cordial meeting with the local Aamir (Sultan), the deputy Sultan, the locality manager, the national water corporation water engineer in charge, community leaders and various other community members. We found that their perception was that the community needed government support in health, education, communication and transportation, etc. Because of the nomadic way of life and the vastness of the area where people live in very scattered way, they believed it was very difficult for the government or any development agency to reach these people with a comprehensive development intervention.

In North Sudan, town growth happens around water sources and points. To develop a town, local government needs multiple water sources in order to attract people. Communities prefer to live in an area where they have access to two or more water sources that can provide security for water accessibility. They would rather walk further to collect water than live closer to a single water source.

The local leaders, including the government, thought that more boreholes would attract more people to settle around the water points, making it easier to target them with other services such as health and education. They added that the community leadership would ensure that the new boreholes would not lead to the closure of the existing ones.

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Defining the extreme poor

Local elites agreed that targeting internally displaced people is much harder compared to the other extreme poor families living in the same area. Their situation is worse as not only have they lost all their assets during the war, but also they are unwelcome inhabitants in the villages. They have no rights to land for cultivation. They work as casual labourers and rear animals for local villagers. They are paid in kind (3kg sorghum/millet every two days) – not in cash. They are afraid of the local elite – and completely voiceless.

The local elites labelled the other extreme poor as *Telia*, meaning they have nothing and depend on others. These families possess no cattle, sheep, or goats, and rarely own donkeys. They own land but lack the resources to cultivate it adequately. Household heads always work as casual labourers and collect firewood, honey and 'gum arabic' (wild cash food) to manage everyday meals. They live in dilapidated houses, which become worse during the rainy season. They are the hidden poor – the local elite prefers not to expose them to outsiders. However, the local elite (and other community members) do help them during a crisis. For example, a *Nafir* is a volunteering day, when the community gives food and provides free labour to the poorest families, even giving young men from the poorest families marriage dowries. This help is given in the hope that the next generation will help the family to move out from poverty.

Learning and the way forward

Our key learning can be put into the following three broad categories:

- **Quality facilitation**: facilitation is a vital and skilled component of the participatory process. It plays a significant part

in determining the outcome. Providing one training session is only a tiny part of developing facilitation skills. It takes time, so the classroom training should be complemented with field-testing, on the job training, and coaching. As far as possible, the participatory sessions should be conducted in the most comfortable language for participants. Where it is difficult to accommodate all participants with one language, sessions can be held in different languages at different times.

- **Understand the local context**: the facilitating team should have clear understanding about the local context and manifestations of poverty. The larger community does not necessarily share the town development vision promoting the permanent settlement of nomads. The poorest people have other priorities, which differ from those of the local elites. A year-round, secure livelihood is a bigger concern to the poorest than dry season water problems. And it is important to acknowledge that it is not possible to reach the extremely poor families without having a clear understanding of the vision of the local elites, of the livelihoods and social capital of the extreme poor, or of local power structures.
- **Voices of the extreme poor**: the community has its own mechanism to help the vulnerable families moving out from extreme poverty. But community leaders prefer to hide the poorest. Why should they reveal this hidden poverty to an outsider? And the extreme poor often remain silent in front of powerful local elites, who are linked to local government. To ensure the voices of the poorest and most vulnerable are heard, it is important to work with the extreme poor separately.

Final thoughts

As the health micro project is still in the development process, we recommend that the project design be revisited. However, despite these concerns, the water projects do need to be implemented on time. The justifications for this are:

- The water project implementation will not compete with the government-run boreholes – instead it will complement the government's vision of town growth, which is linked to local economic and infrastructure development. Local economic development should significantly contribute to enhancing the well-being of the extreme poor.
- The successful implementation of the water projects should lead to greater harmony as it reaches all sections of the community. It will be much easier to mobilise the leadership in these villages to undertake very specific pro-extreme poor interventions, including targeting internally displaced people. The rapport with the community will also help in mobilising community leaders to strengthen their internal local support system and coping mechanisms to move out the vulnerable families from extreme poverty.
- Last but not least, the water projects are a long-standing commitment to the community. Through these micro projects, a good rapport has already been created with power structures in the existing communities. Not implementing these projects would eventually lead to hostilities and mistrust among all relevant parties. It might prevent access to working with these communities again by Concern or by the partners.

Our experience shows that facilitating project design using participatory tools and techniques does not always necessarily ensure the participation of all relevant stakeholders in the process. Different stakeholders represent different social/ethnic/religious groups and levels of well-being – and hold different levels of power. They participate in the process with different interests, attitudes and perceptions. This multidimensionality makes the real world of participation very complex – and we often tend to ignore this reality or pretend that we have the tools to deal with it. Trade-offs have to be made and we cannot always be perfect.

CONTACT DETAILS
Dipankar Datta
Assistant Country Director
Concern Worldwide Kenya
5th Floor, Kalson Towers
The Crescent, Off Parklands Road
PO Box 13850-00800,
Nairobi,
Kenya.
Phone: +254 (0) 20-3755051 to 5
Fax: + 254 (0) 20-3755056
Email: dipankar2kbd@yahoo.com

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