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LAND ISSUES AND POVERTY REDUCTION

Requirements for Lasting Peace in Sudan and Afghanistan

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During the last decade, an increasing share of foreign aid has been provided to countries coming out of civil war or experiencing severe conflict. Most of these countries—like the Republic of Congo, Sudan, Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Liberia—suffer from a combination of conflict, a state in crisis, underdevelopment, and poverty. Under most circumstances, poverty is greatly exacerbated by conflict, but it is also one of a number of factors that may contribute to violent conflict. Addressing what Frances Stewart has called “horizontal inequalities” is, therefore, likely to play a role in preventing the shift from grievance to violence, as well as in building and sustaining peace in postwar situations. In several countries that have suffered from protracted conflict, however, an approach focused on poverty has been slow to emerge. To a large extent, peace-building missions have become state-building missions, first, because “fragile states” are seen as a risk both for their society and for international security and, second, because it is broadly assumed that one vital condition for sustainable peace is that the state apparatus has the capacity to exercise core functions of statehood in an efficient, nonviolent, and legitimate way. In the process, however, the extent to which the poverty and marginalization of large rural populations have spurred recent wars has been underestimated. As a consequence, donors and policymakers risk rebuilding the causes of war.

This brief uses examples from Sudan and Afghanistan to highlight the role that land issues have played both in causing poverty and in driving and sustaining protracted conflict. In both countries, a number of interconnected conflicts have global reach, as well as occurring at regional, national, and local levels. For example, conflicts over water and grazing rights in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan have become entwined with political rivalries on a larger scale, even including neighboring countries. In a similar fashion, efforts by foreign troops to track down remnants of Al-Qaida and Taliban forces in Afghanistan have become entangled with localized conflicts. A great challenge, therefore, is to identify which particular types of interventions affect the different levels and dimensions of current conflicts.

This is a tall order, but it seems safe to conclude that the international community has not yet

responded adequately to the challenge. In Afghanistan, postwar reconstruction efforts have been focused on establishing an effective central state that operates under the rule of law and in accordance with principles of transparency and accountability. While the U.S.-led coalition has invested heavily in military efforts, aid strategies have created a state that depends on foreign funds and military forces for its survival. In the process, the role that rural land issues have played in driving and sustaining internal conflict has been insufficiently considered. In Sudan, the international community has been drawn into continuous crisis management because of Darfur, as well as the slow and very difficult implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. As one consequence, there is less concern with the patterns of development that have been and are being pursued in Sudan, and the way in which they may promote or reduce poverty. In both countries, land use is a key grievance that fuels a number of local and regional conflicts.

Sudan

Civil war has been fought in Sudan for most of the period since independence in 1956, with only a brief spell of peace from 1972 to 1983. After the signing of the CPA, two other peace agreements were concluded in 2006: the Darfur Peace Agreement and the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement. The international community has provided substantial funds for the implementation of the CPA; however, due to the continued crisis in Darfur and continued unrest and lack of basic services in the south, the bulk of donor aid to Sudan has so far been directed to humanitarian assistance. Successive Khartoum governments have argued, as they do now for Darfur, that violence is caused by local-level, ethnic conflicts mainly arising from pressure on a diminishing resource base. However, the civil strife that has spread throughout many parts of Sudan since the 1980s should be seen as part of a pattern of violence in which the Sudanese state—as a vehicle for special interest groups—has played a major role.

Historically, state resources have been concentrated in the central Nile areas in the north, reflecting the longstanding political dominance of groups from this area. A process of uneven development and economic dislocation began during the colonial period and became massive in the 1970s. The shift from subsistence agriculture to export-oriented, mechanized agriculture had its greatest impact in the so-called Transition Zone between north and south—along southern Kordofan, southern Darfur, Blue Nile, and the Sudan–Ethiopian border region—resulting in the dispossession of smallholder farmers from their customary rights to land, the erosion of the land-use rights of pastoralists, and the creation of a large force of agricultural wage laborers, whose numbers were increased through displacement by drought and war in the 1980s and 1990s.

This process generated important benefits for a key political constituency, mainly in Khartoum. It also created serious structural problems in the agricultural sector. The rate of increase in production has been declining and many areas have high food insecurity. A major grievance has been land use. The area of land under mechanized farming increased from around 2 million feddans at the beginning of the 1970s to some 14 million feddans by 2003 (1 feddan equals 1.038 acres). A vital factor here was the passage of laws undermining the control that local authorities and local people were able to exert over land. This process was accelerated by the National Islamic Front regime after it came to power in 1989. Policies have also been divisive at local and regional levels, creating growing regional subcultures of ethnic violence.

From the 1970s onward, the agricultural growth model adopted in Sudan gave little or no consideration to those who were displaced or otherwise affected, whether in Darfur, among the Nuba in southern Kordofan, or among the Beja in eastern Sudan. It is no coincidence, therefore, that aside from Khartoum—which saw major violence following the death of John Garang and occasionally suffers from confrontations between groups—most of the violence has taken place in rural (pastoral and agropastoral) areas. Populations from these areas also constitute the main source of street children, poor female-headed households, displaced persons, and refugees. They come from three broad regions: the areas struck by drought and famine during the 1970s and 1980s, the areas that saw an expansion of mechanized farming during the same period, and the former “closed districts” of the colonial period, such as south Sudan.

Changes in rights to land and its use represent fundamental transformations in Sudanese society. Their effects will not be removed by the signing of peace accords. In addition to various obstacles to improved productivity and access to markets, land issues have far-reaching consequences for rural

poverty and development, as well as for local, regional, and national conflicts. Thus, in Darfur the inability of land ownership and land management systems to cope with the demand for agricultural land and pasture has been a key element of the often deadly conflicts, also between different Arab groups. Illegal land occupation has also been an integral part of the crisis. It is also a critical issue in eastern Sudan, where the loss of traditionally owned land to mechanized agricultural schemes has undermined the sustainability of the pastoralist livelihoods of the predominant group in the region, the Beja, and pushed many Beja to settle in urban slums, particularly in Port Sudan. In the south, land rights have become increasingly disputed as refugees and internationally displaced persons start returning, and oil exploration continues in new areas.

While Sudan is becoming wealthier because of oil exports, rural poverty is accentuated because spending on social services has been among the lowest in the world. The poor track record on development spending is paralleled by a very limited capacity at state and local levels to plan and manage projects. As a result, poverty and human deprivation in all probability worsened over the past decade.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan shares Sudan’s long history of war, displacement, and drought, with continued armed conflict since 1978. Several factors affect the continuation of conflict despite the ousting of the Taliban regime in 2001. Often overlooked is the importance of conflict arising from land issues and how these tie in with the postwar structure of political economy.

According to the latest report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2007), Afghanistan currently produces 90 percent of the world’s heroin. Part of the explanation for both the increasing conflict level and the sharp increase in poppy production since 2002 relates to land issues. Most Afghans depend at least in part on agriculture for their livelihood, but a significant proportion are either landless or are farming plots that are too small to generate adequate income. A high degree of uncertainty exists over landownership, particularly in sharecropping and the closely related practice of land mortgaging; there is no regime to manage land rights and disputes beyond local councils dominated by local power holders; and the policy and legal framework to regulate the use and transfer of substantial state landholdings is also highly inadequate.

Previous governments have tried to introduce land reform, including a king (in the 1920s), a president (in the early 1970s), and a communist government (in the late 1970s). The most radical attempt was by the government of the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan

following the coup d'état in 1978. However, such reforms led to armed revolt with strong backing from the conservative and traditionalist religious networks and landowners. Following the Soviet invasion in 1979, armed resistance was primarily mounted in rural areas, with mujahideen forces operating within the population and from their bases in Pakistan and Iran. A combination of targeted destruction and lack of maintenance following the outflow of 5 million Afghans to neighboring countries destroyed much of the underground irrigation systems—the *kareezes*. Drug production started to pick up as it required less water and was not discouraged by the international backers, both Western and Islamic, who supported the resistance with funding and arms. The commanders emerging in the resistance parties were frequently religious leaders or landowners able to command people through religious or financial bonds. When these parties assumed power in Kabul in 1992, they were neither willing nor able to address land issues. Rather, they used their military power to increase their own holdings.

The Taliban movement that emerged in southern Afghanistan in 1994 restored the rights of land and property confiscated by commanders, but the Taliban did not establish a functional government and administration, nor were they willing to address land issues. Hoping for international recognition and using religious arguments, they banned the production and processing of drugs, knowing that this would reduce the income of many farmers and seasonal workers.

Following the military defeat of the Taliban in late 2001, rapid change was on the horizon. With an elected president and parliament, national plans and international funding to promote development, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to provide military security, Afghans hoped that they had seen the end of both poverty and violence. Expectations were high, as the Afghans were to be rewarded for assisting in the "war on terror." However, as part of the settlement, the former commanders returned and regained influence, lands, and properties. The Taliban, primarily drawn from the poorest rural areas in the south, were excluded from peace negotiations and the new government and opted to continue their military struggle.

Leaving security aside, land issues remain largely unaddressed in Afghanistan, and very limited efforts have been made to improve and increase agricultural production and ensure food security. According to a 2007 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 6.5 million out of an estimated population of 27 million face food insecurity. The priority has rather been to strengthen the central administration in Kabul and initiate projects with high visibility. "The outcome in the agricultural sector is not easily and quickly visible and measurable to the donors," was the

explanation provided by a senior adviser to the Minister of Agriculture.

With 4.8 million Afghans returning from Iran and Pakistan since 2002, pressure on land and unemployment has sharply increased. Problems have been exacerbated by corruption, ethnic tension, and arbitrary use of power by local strongmen. Large landholdings have been transferred to a few well-connected persons. Moreover, the present pattern of landownership, powerful commanders/landowners, and high availability of unemployed young men provide ideal conditions for drug production and warfare. When a poor sharecropper knows he has to pay as much as 50 percent of his yield to the landowner, he will select the produce that provides the highest outcome—if given a choice. When the government and the international forces threaten to eradicate the harvest, many see no option but to join the insurgency to protect their livelihood.

Policy Implications

An approach that focuses on poverty and gives due consideration to land issues and livelihood support has been slow to emerge in the postwar reconstruction of both Sudan and Afghanistan. In both countries, the lack of economic development in the rural areas negatively affects the perception that the population has of the international community's intervention.

In Afghanistan, it is difficult to envisage any possibilities for building sustained peace until landownership, agricultural production, and rural employment are properly addressed. Years of misdirected policy have entrenched deeply inequitable landownership relations among tribes, between agricultural and pastoral systems, and among feudally arranged classes of society. These challenges have not yet been adequately recognized among donors in Kabul despite the existence of rural programs funded by the World Bank, U.S. Agency for International Development, and others. Growing insecurity, massive corruption, and the expanding drug economy have diverted the attention of both donors and the Afghan government and reinforced the mantras of the importance of state building and "good governance" as priority areas for development.

In Sudan, alienation of land as part of processes of marginalization and increasing poverty has been a key determinant of conflict, but there is an absence of an overall framework to deal with the problems with the necessary urgency. True, funds have been allocated for a number of programs targeting rural populations in the areas of health and education, mainly in southern Sudan. Agricultural development has received little attention so far, and a striking feature of current aid to Sudan is the lack of priorities related to an understanding and critique of the patterns of development that have been and are

being pursued. Given that the influx of revenues from oil exports may consolidate a “rentier” state that renders it less accountable to its population, the prospects for reducing poverty and inequities—and, for that matter, promoting democratic forms of development—may not be encouraging.

Despite similarities, Sudan and Afghanistan are of course different, and so it is important to look at context and particular settings before identifying strategies. The conclusions offered here, therefore, must be of a more general kind, emphasizing the following issues.

First, on a general level, a blend of approaches is essential in order to promote sustainable peace building. On the one hand, it is important to build state capacities, and a strong, accountable state is best when it comes to alleviating persistent conflict and the chronic poverty it generates, protecting entitlements, and providing health care and education. On the other hand, peace will not be achieved unless the grievances of the marginalized and the benefits accruing from violence are addressed. Recent research clearly indicates that low levels of development adversely affect the chances of successful peace building, whereas patterns of development that meet the needs of ordinary people may weaken the position of warlords, extremist politicians, and leaders who offer to meet these needs through more violent means.

Second, land rights management is a cornerstone of social management and poverty reduction in agrarian states like Sudan and Afghanistan. While both countries share the need for an overall framework for land management, it must also be recognized that the problems differ, and that the adoption of localized and community-based approaches is essential. As Liz Wiley suggests in

Land Rights in Crisis: Restoring Tenure Security in Afghanistan, addressing problems only through new law or new policy cannot have much success in the often lawless conditions that operate beyond the reach of the current administration.

Finally, most international investment in peace building has happened at the state level. Despite political and other constraints, there is both scope and need for local-level peace building and reconciliation work and for rebuilding state–society relations through bottom-up processes. Aid strategies need to be designed to support such processes. In Sudan and Afghanistan, this would include addressing land issues that may underpin the recovery process and also provide opportunities to bring about changes in governance through development of systems that are fairer to the poorest and most marginalized communities. It also implies that policymakers must pay more attention to low-intensity and local conflicts. These struggles are often over access to agricultural and pastoral resources and can establish pockets of discontent, reduce food production, flare up into greater conflicts, or be linked to other, larger scale conflicts.

For Further Reading: D. H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003); Special Issue on the World Food Program in Sudan, *Disasters* (Vol. 31, Supplement 1, 2007); L. A. Wiley, *Land Rights in Crisis: Restoring Tenure Security in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Issues Paper, 2003); A. Suhrke, *When More Is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan* (Madrid: Fundacion par alas Relaciones Internacionales y el Dialogo Exterior, FRIDE Working Paper, 2006); A. Opel, *Bound for the City: A Study of Urban to Rural Labour Migration in Afghanistan* (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2005); and A. Suhrke and A. Strand, “The Logic of Conflictual Peacebuilding,” in *After the Conflict: Reconstruction and Development in the Aftermath of War*, ed. Sultan Barakat, (London/NY: I.B. Tauris, 2005).

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