RESEARCHING ATTITUDES TOWARDS PEACE AND CONFLICT IN DARFUR
AN OVERVIEW OF THE METHOD AND FINDINGS FROM PILOT PROJECT JULY–OCTOBER 2007

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper outlines the research and findings from the piloting of a project to gauge public opinion in Darfur concerning the root causes of the Darfur conflict, its effects, and its potential solutions. The research piloted three methods: oral history interviews with persons residing in IDP camps, semi-structured interviews with humanitarian professionals and local politicians and administrators, and ethnographic research on discussions taking place on the Internet. The pilot sought to gain an indication of the effectiveness and appropriateness of the methods employed and to identify themes and trajectories emerging from the data to develop hypotheses that can act as guides in the following phases of research.

The oral history interviews were conducted with 15 persons from two IDP camps, using local researchers from the communities being studied. Patterns emerging from this limited sample, which require review and confirmation from the ongoing study, include:

- IDPs consistently trace the roots of the conflict to the famine of 1984, which was followed by a period of lawlessness and the proliferation of arms;
- A lack of faith in negotiated agreements and ambivalence toward the movement leaders that are supposed to represent their interests;
- A profound distrust among IDPs of the government in contrast to trust of the international community, manifest in a firm belief of the ability of an external intervention to deal with their problems.

Further, the oral histories provided an extremely rich narrative, which adds substance to concepts often used in an abstract way in debates relating to the conflict. These promise a useful foundation for future phases of research and offer concrete points of reference for representatives and negotiators attempting to resolve the conflict. The piloting of the methods also revealed a number of lessons concerning the preparation of local researchers and the environment in which the research is being carried out.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out with 14 Sudanese and international professionals who had contact with the Darfuri communities in varying capacities. The aim of the interviews was to elicit a range of views that might be preliminarily compared and contrasted with each other, with the views of IDPs, and with views expressed in on-line debates. The interviews produced useful lessons for later phases of the research from the point of view of interview structure and revealed a tendency of the interviewees to give answers that are more explanatory rather than descriptive.

The ethnographic research of Internet-based debates identified five of the most popular sites for online debates and analysed discussions taking place in two calendar months during which important internationally mediated events relating to the conflict took place. An analysis of debates found that the events
themselves and talks about foreign involvement in the conflict were rare. Debates that were initiated often saw participation well below the website’s average per discussion. Analysis showed that many debates dealt with very specific incidents in the conflict or brought up episodes that bring to the fore the personality of the actors involved. Debates did, however, seem to indicate a general support for the deployment of a foreign force.

The triangulation of findings from the three methods indicated the following consistent patterns:

- A clear belief in the capacity of Western organization to assist Darfuris, as it was the case in the famine of 1984 and other events when the international community has intervened;

- A lack of faith in a resolution being reached through a negotiated settlement;

- Very little reference to the work of the African Union.
Introduction

This paper presents the research and preliminary findings of the piloting of Researching attitudes towards peace and conflict in Darfur – a research project into prevailing trends of public opinions among Darfuris. The research seeks to develop an understanding of and an insight into the perceptions of the Darfuri people regarding the conflict in Darfur, its causes, its effects, the needs of its victims, and attempts to achieve peace. The project will provide independent empirical information that will be made available to the negotiators and the parties to the peace talks to enable them to take into consideration the views, needs and aspirations of those who have suffered from the conflict. It will also represent a contribution in maintaining communication with the Darfuri people as part of the search for a just settlement and the implementation of any agreements. The project seeks to breach new ground by carrying out research in the environment of an ongoing conflict and by taking as its subject the very attitudes and opinions central to the conflict itself. The project seeks to develop a mechanism that can be used by other organisations to provide empirical evidence about opinions, attitudes and needs in Darfur – a mechanism that may be transferable to other conflict environments.

The present report gives an outline of the research design for the full project and explains the method and rationale behind conducting a pilot as a prelude to the full research. It goes on to explain the three research methods employed for the pilot, following each explanation with an outline of each method’s preliminary findings and the lessons the research team has drawn from utilising these methods. The final section summarises these findings, indicating implications for the overall research design.

I. THE RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The framework for Researching attitudes towards peace and conflict in Darfur was designed at two workshops, conducted in Philadelphia in April and in Oxford in July 2007. In Philadelphia, the participants, who included experts in the field of communications and experts on Sudan (participant list for both workshops in Annex I), looked at a wide range of methods for researching public opinion and investigated the particular difficulties of conducting such research in Sudan in general and in Darfur in particular. The methods selected at Philadelphia and refined by a smaller team of experts were presented at the Oxford workshop. The resulting operative research plan consists of the following components:

(i) **Oral history interviews** with elders, sheikhs, other community leaders, and women, who have born the brunt of the conflict. The interview techniques employed in this phase of the research are designed to allow the interviewees to frame their attitudes and experiences in their own words. These will be analysed for key events, concepts, beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations as emerging from the narrative.

(ii) **Semi-structured interviews** with NGO workers, local administrators and politicians, intellectuals, such as university professors, and others whose educational background suggests a clearer understanding of the interview process, allowing a more direct technique. These interviews are structured to complement the information gathered in phase one by providing clarifications, alternative views and context.

(iii) A **survey**, to gather larger data samples on views found among Darfuris. The survey questions shall be developed based on the concepts and context found in phases one and two.
(iv) An ethnographic analysis of Internet debates taking place on the issues of Darfur. This line of enquiry aims to bring in voices thus far overlooked in the analysis of the conflict, and it also constitutes a back-up line of enquiry in the event that further escalation of the war in Darfur makes it impossible to collect information on the ground.

A full outline of the research framework can be found in Annex II.

II. THE PILOT PROJECT

The use of multiple methods and the critical environment in which the research was to take place mandated the design of a preliminary phase to pilot some of the techniques and strengthen the capacity of these techniques to work together. This pilot project had three main aims:

- To test the methodology on the ground in order to tune it to the situation of the Darfur crisis. In this sense, piloting the research methods means understanding their real capacity to elicit what was initially expected and making the technique more flexible to adapt to new, unplanned situations;

- To identify themes and trajectories to be further investigated throughout the main research, providing the research team with the opportunity to use the empirical data to develop a number of hypotheses, which can later represent useful guides in the following phases of the research; and

- To offer the actors involved in the negotiations a preliminary set of findings that can help them understand the strengths and limitations of the research, thus providing the opportunity to assess which research components and themes are the most promising in informing the peace process.

From the techniques highlighted in the main research plan, three were selected for the pilot phase:

(i) oral histories;

(ii) a series of semi-structured interviews with local NGO and IO workers, as well as local politicians and administrators; and

(iii) ethnographic research of online spaces.

In addition, the first phase of the pilot research was accompanied by a literature review, which looked at a selection of similar efforts to assess opinions in conflict areas in general and in Darfur in particular (Annex III).

While assessing the effectiveness of the methods used, the concern of the researchers in the pilot phase was to conduct unobtrusive research that would respect an endogenous framing of attitudes, opinions and narratives, thus reducing the interference brought by outsiders’ perspectives. The selection of oral histories and the ethnographic research for this phase, therefore, was intended to allow themes to emerge while minimizing the influence of preconceptions and prejudices.

The use of semi-structured interviews in the pilot phase diverges from that of the overall research design in that it is employed as a means of gauging the variety of views across social contexts and professional backgrounds. We discuss each line enquiry in turn.
III. ORAL HISTORIES

The oral histories were conducted over a three-week period at the beginning of October 2007 at two IDP camps.

The interviews were conducted by researchers hired from among the IDPs and given training on the purpose of the research, the nature of the research, and basic interviewing skills. The researchers included both males and females from among the two main ethnic groups in the Darfur IDP communities, Fur and Zaghawa, and belonged to the communities of the two camps selected for the pilot project.

1. METHOD

Oral histories are interviews using open questions that seek to elicit a narrative in the interviewee’s own words, concerning his or her experience of an event or situation. The focus in an oral history is on the interviewees themselves. Oral histories seek not only to gain facts, but also to uncover the beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations behind the understandings of these facts, thus providing the context in which they were experienced.

1.1 Sampling

As a qualitative technique the selection of interviewees for oral histories follows a purposeful sampling method, meaning that the research seeks to gain an insight into multiple experiences and understandings. In the environment of the camps, purposeful sampling meant ensuring the inclusion of the views of persons from a variety of geographical areas and social strata.

The sampling was conducted with the assistance of the local researchers and looked to ensure a representation of a variety of regions from which the IDPs have come. The names and positions of the oral history interviewees will remain confidential due to the uncertain political and security situation in the region. Interviewees included males and females between the ages of 30 and 69. Their positions ranged from omda, sheikh, youth leader, to ordinary residents of IDP camps.

1.2 Structure of the interview

The oral history interviews were developed around a topic guide that would suggest to the researchers areas around which the interviewees could develop their narrative. The guide provided the interviewers with the following focal points around which to base the interview:

- introductory phase to develop rapport with interviewee;
- Darfur’s far past, based on experience of the famine;
- Darfur’s recent past; events between the famine and the present;
- the present, based on experience as a refugee; and
- the future, touching on issues of how the conflict might be resolved.

2. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Among the responses, the research found a wide range of voices and sentiments. In some interviews respondents were able to articulate clearly their understanding of a situation and make connections between their experiences as victims of the conflict and the portrayal of the conflict in the media and in political debates. Other interviews were characterised by emotional outpourings of grievances, demonstrating a determination to bear testimony to the injustices the respondent has suffered. Within this narrow sample, certain patterns emerged.
2.1 Attitudes and opinions

The recent history of Darfur, as the research has seen it reconstructed by the individuals interviewed so far, is characterized by a series of dramatic events that have had a powerful influence on the interviewees’ perceptions. The many crises, droughts, famines, floods, “armed robberies”, and displacements have presented multiple occasions to develop hope and distrust towards different actors involved in the crisis.

In most cases the government is perceived as hostile, and in some of the accounts of the earlier attacks in 2004 the people express a feeling of betrayal and incredulity that it was their own government that attacked them.

“I came and I asked the people about the flight, and they told me it was a Sudanese flight. I had an argument with them, but they told me that I don’t know anything and that it was a government flight and they shoot in this way. It was a surprise for me and very annoying. I told the people that there are no good people in the world.”

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“I was sitting under a tree, when suddenly a plane appeared from the east side and went to the west. The plane was flying at a low height and I saw them waving their hands to the janjaweed. I swear that was why we lost confidence in the government.”

Rebukes of the government’s behaviour are not tied to any one regime. Interviewees testify to government neglect of the region and/or complicity in the violence against them by a series of regimes dating back to the time of the famine, with key figures mentioned by name.

By contrast, outside influence, such as that of foreign aid organisations and the United Nations, is consistently viewed benevolently. This, too, appears to be rooted in Darfur’s history, dating back to the time of the famine:

“We never receive assistance except the aid which was called Reagan as it was funded by President Reagan. In fact we appreciate what President Reagan did for us, because it alleviated the historical disaster which happened to us due to which some people died”

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“We still remember that and we remember General Reagan because he supported us. I also remember that there were some Imams in the mosque who prayed for him and asked God for him to enter heaven. And also there are some people who named their children Reagan because they do not know of anyone else who supported them through that time. We appreciated this assistance and we kept it as history”

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“I was young at the time but I heard that it was [...] president called Reagan, and they were the ones who sent the aid. Everyone in Darfur used to say Reagan. When you mention the corn beans we don’t call it corn they call it Reagan, so the credit goes to the American president Reagan. He is the one who rescued us in Darfur at that time”.

Like their encounters with international organisations, many trace the roots of the conflict back to the famine of 1984. In some cases interviewees traced an apparent line of causation from the famine, to the displacement of families and the influx of migrants from Chad, to a rise in banditry and the proliferation of weapons and the consequent aggravation of conflicts that took place habitually between certain tribes:
“And this is what was most dangerous after the famine. And the banditry continued until it became conflict in a similar way. It has become a phenomenon in which the stronger beat the people and take their money. The militia groups come from Chad, steal, and return to Chad again. And the local residents start together to defend themselves because there is no one to protect them. From that consequence it has continued and all the tribes are each against a particular tribe.”

A foremost preoccupation among IDPs is with the security situation. At the same time, the interviewees demonstrate very little faith in the African Union (AU), the very body charged with providing security. Interviewees made very little reference to the force, and references that were made were without exception negative:

“The AU is the cause of our problems. They do not convey the message in the real way. You can be sitting there in your place and if they come and kill you the AU will do nothing for you. It will come after three days and ask… Who did this?... Who did this? Who do they think did it? They write their report... The culprit is unknown. If you tell them that the killer is a janjaweed, you won't be able to prove it. These organizations are not neutral. I can't say all of them. Their job is to observe. They should come and see. I especially mention Nur Ad-din Al-Mazni, Salim Ahmed Salim and Alfa Omer Konaré... They are the ones who stand against us, whether in Abuja or elsewhere. The document signed in Abuja was prepared by the AU.”

In contrast to the lack of confidence in the African Union peacekeepers to offer the needed protection, there is evidence of a high level of faith and expectation in a United Nations intervention:

“We believe the joint military forces could alleviate the pain we have suffered and solve the Darfur problem, and the solution could be far if they don’t come. If the United Nations demands are answered fast the problems could get fixed fast, we are in a misery that rises day after day.”

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“My request to the international community is that to fulfil our demands. The most important thing is security. Security is the responsibility of every body. It is the responsibility of the government. If the government is unable to provide or ensure security then we ask the United Nations to provide and ensure it.”

From the myriad of leaders who have appeared since the signing of the DPA, only Abdul Wahid and Khalil Ibrahim are mentioned by name. While the narratives indicate a general sense of support for the rebel leadership, there are also indications that there is a general dissatisfaction with the negotiation process:

“The ones who represent us are our movement leaders – the ones who call for our rescue and our rights. We wish that the international community could open a door for the displaced to enter these negotiations”

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“We, as displaced people, see that the armed movements are speaking with our rights. Darfur is a very big country. Yes, very big. The things which Abdul Wahid speaks about are not his. He is speaking in our voice”

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“We go for what? We stay here. Only here. Khawajat are feeding us, water is available, and we work. We are happy here. If the government will give us the compensations, everyone will control his family and go back […] The solution was in the government’s hands. We know there were trials between the government and the movements. At that time the solution could be within Sudan only. Khawajat were not there at that time. [...] Everybody, even Omar Al-Bashir, if he will give us our rights we are with him”

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“The people who were sitting now to negotiate were not affected by war, never felt that pain.”

In some cases there seems to be a lack of faith in negotiations in general:

“All agreements signed with the government have not been implemented. In Naivasha, in Abuja and in N’djamena and everywhere, many agreements were signed but nothing was implemented”

“We do not need negotiations. We ask the international community to postpone negotiations and make haste in providing us with security and aid. Yes, we need protection first.”

Emerging patterns are not without contradictions, and underline the need to seek confirmation in further research, as well as possible adjustments to the method (see section 3(iv))

2.2 Experiencing the conflict

While the attitudes and opinions expressed by the interviewees offer an indication of what patterns might emerge from the research in its entirety, further findings are contained in the details of the descriptions offered by the narratives, from which one can piece together perspectives on some of the key concepts relating to the conflict. Examples include:

The experience of marginalisation:

“In Khartoum people own big buildings and they eat caviar. Caviar is fish eggs. And here we cannot even find normal, natural food. […] is the Nile only for Khartoum? Is this dignified life only for Khartoum? […] They take these goods from Jebel Marra and get the juice from them in factories in Khartoum. Should not these factories be where the resources are? People take it from here by car and they sell it on the road. They implement taxes to increase the prices of the goods and in the end they take the juice from all these oranges and turn it into Oranga and sell it back to us.”

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“The history of people should be showed in the right way […] If we look to history, the history of Ali Dinar: the brought the whole history of Ali Dinar in five lines for the classes of grade 8 […] This is a disgrace for a whole people’s history and these are all things which offend people.”
The significance of compensation:

“It is a fact that we have lost our money and the government sent the janjaweed, actually the government itself stole our money. They came with their airplanes and stole. They came to the Tawila area with the airplanes and stole our sheep. And we had a lot of money which was taken, and we need this money back. This is an obligation. We have women who have been raped, whose honour has been taken, and this in Islam to take a woman’s honour is a big thing. This needs to be restored for the women so that they can receive their compensation to ensure our psychological health. We need them to build for us at international standards, as we have seen at Merowe... how they built at international standards in a very nice way and the buildings look stable and they compensated for the palm trees with seven million.”

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“[If the government agrees to offer guarantees and pay what is due to us, then every thing is finished. I will tell others to come and join the government, since the government pays the compensation and offer guarantees. [I shall say] “The government shall give you power the same way it gave the people of the east”.

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“We demand peace and security. There is no security in Sudan as before. Any person should ask for his rights. He should not be disgraced. He should ask for his lost and stolen properties to be given back. We need rehabilitation to our villages which were burnt. We lost many people, and we were disgraced. We can not abandon our rights. Nobody can abandon.”

. Being given a voice in negotiations:

“We as displaced have to sit down at the table, and they should listen to our voice and hear us talk. This is why we think it is a right for them to be chosen and they should represent our case and we will make a choice who will be the displaced to represent our case. We will find somebody who is honest who will support the case of their family and the families of Darfur without separating them as tribes […] I actually have a basic condition on the part of who represents the displaced, because the representation of the displaced should be 80% which is the percentage of displaced in Darfur.

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“If our voices were able to reach our politicians, we would have told Minawi for example never to sign that weak agreement with the government.”

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“People here in the camps do not know Khalil or Abdul Wahid. Those here want their rights. If any one from the camp comes out and starts to speak about their rights, they will follow him.”

Narratives include not only personal experiences and eye-witness accounts, but also the recounting of particular events that the interviewees consider significant to the development of the conflict. Examples of such events include attempts by officials and community leaders to address the conflict, previous uprisings and other indications of local grievances. All of these details provide reference points that are particularly useful for further study through semi-structured interviews, as anticipated in phase two of the research design.
3. **REFINING THE RESEARCH**

The difficulties encountered in eliciting authentic responses from the victims of an ongoing conflict not only give an indication of the limitations of the preliminary findings, but also provide useful feedback for the research team on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the techniques employed. The obstacles the research team met with can be broken down into the following categories:

(i) politicisation of camp population;
(ii) experience of local researchers;
(iii) difficulty in eliciting responses from women; and
(iv) necessity of complementing oral history technique with additional tools.

**(i) politicisation of camp population**

The oral histories evidenced a number of individuals showing a distinct awareness of the language and terminology used in the international community and the terms in which demands are grievances are articulated. There is a great deal of evidence that the rebel movements are extremely active politically within the camp and able to exercise considerable influence on the refugees, leading to a suspicion that not all responses received are entirely natural and free from a political agenda that is dictated from outside of the community itself.

The selection and training of the researchers took place at the end of September, with the interviews beginning in the first week of October – a period of time marked by considerable political debate surrounding the Darfur issue, including the planned talks with Darfur rebel groups in Libya, the visit of UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon to Darfur, and the visit of the international group of peace envoys known as the Elders. Members of the research team coordinating the local researchers felt that this, too, further influenced the way certain issues were being articulated.

**(ii) experience of local researchers**

The research further underlined the training needs of local researchers to generate interviews of a consistently high quality. While there are many examples where the researchers questioning have led to a rich narrative, full of description and personally formed opinion, there are also occasions where the interview is characterised by a series of short exchanges akin to questionnaire interviewing. On some occasions it appears to be related to the way the researcher has posed a closed question, in which a short answer appears to be required, while on other occasions it appears to be the interviewer’s manner of speaking that leads the interviewee to respond concisely. On rare occasions a researcher has cut an interviewee short by interrupting a particular narrative or changing the subject before the interviewee appears to have finished talking. An early indication of the varying quality in interviews was the duration of the interviews, which vary from just half an hour to almost three hours, though in some cases, too, the duration is not a clear indicator as some interviews are characterised by stilted and repetitive responses, in which comparatively little information is conveyed.

**(iii) difficulty in eliciting responses from women**

The research team identified particular problems in eliciting flowing and descriptive narratives from some of the women identified for the oral histories, especially older women. Researchers felt that the structure of a one-on-one interview, as employed for the oral histories, was not optimal for eliciting narratives from women, even if the interviewer is herself a woman. Given the importance of the views of this particular group of respondents, action needs to be taken to allow for a research method more conducive to conversation with older women, and the research team
is considering the options regarding the design of a series of group discussions, in which the women might gain confidence from each other’s presence and feel less hesitancy to put forward their views and share their experiences.

(iv) necessity of complementing oral history technique with additional tools

While the oral histories have demonstrated a great capacity in generating powerful narratives on Darfur’s past and the experiences of the respondents, they encounter limitations when the focus shifted to more recent events. This is well illustrated when treating the issue of the negotiations and what these are able to deliver to the victims of the conflict. Here, the negotiations emerge as an issue in themselves, i.e. as an event to be narrated rather than an issue to engage in. This highlights the need to complement the oral histories with techniques that could elicit more explanatory responses, developing a hybridised technique between the oral histories and the semi-structured interviews.

IV. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

1. METHOD

In the overall research design, semi-structured interviews are supposed to serve both as a complement to oral histories and as an instrument per se to access ideas and representations held by other groups in the Darfur such as local NGOs workers and local politicians. While the timeline for the pilot project did not allow the semi-structured interviews to be paired with the oral histories, they provided different representations of the conflict and the peace process as expressed by individuals who are actively working in Darfur and whose strategies are more visible. The result of this effort was the collection and typification of different representations and interests at stake by a variety of actors already involved in the conflict and advocating for possible solutions.

While varying according to the area of a particular interviewee’s expertise, a semi-structured interview would typically touch upon the following questions:

- the interviewee’s understanding of the roots of the conflict, evidence to support this point of view, and analysis of conflicting views on the conflict’s causes;
- interviewee’s view on potential solutions to the conflict;
- interviewee’s professional experience of conflict resolution attempts in Darfur;
- knowledge and experience of the use of traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution in Darfur; and
- key milestones in the escalation of the conflict or attempts to make peace.

The respondents for the semi-structured interviews can be divided into the following categories:

- Darfuri administrators and politicians working in Darfur;
- Darfuri community leaders and politicians based in Khartoum;
- International professionals who had worked in Darfur;
- Local NGO and IO workers with operations in Darfur.

2. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The series of semi-structured interviews indicated areas in which opinions with IDPs converge and diverge. Both data collection methods showed a divergence towards the ability of the international community to deal with the Darfur problem. While the IDPs strongly advocate for an intervention, in most cases those interviewed in this way expressed a greater criticism of the way in which the international community is going about its work to resolve the problem. An area
where the views of IDPs and administrators/NGO workers tended to converge was in a general scepticism towards the peace process, and particularly the manner in which the talks in Libya were organised.

Participants in oral history interviews described events or situations. Responses in the semi-structured interviews, meanwhile, tended to offer causal explanations to similar events. For example, where IDPs complain of a lack of development in Darfur, local professionals explain Darfur in terms of the pattern of development throughout Sudan, identifying causal mechanisms. As another example, where IDPs give no mention at all of the AU and brand the DPA “the dead peace agreement”, an aid worker described how the AU’s mandate had not allowed the forces to offer even the most basic protection and that the AU is the most visible of the DPA provisions, meaning that the force’s failure is viewed as the DPA’s failure.

A comparison of Darfuri and non-Darfuri voices from the interviews reveals an interesting contrast concerning the roots of the conflict. Non-Sudanese often talk of the conflict as being inevitable when one considers the marginalisation that the states of Darfur have experienced for so long. Darfuris themselves, however, while acknowledging, and indeed emphasising, the marginalisation, often by giving graphic illustrations of the way they have suffered, say that the conflict could very easily have been avoided, if the government had responded in the right way to their grievances.

3. REFINING THE RESEARCH

Interviewees in this phase of research often showed a keen interest in the research itself and on some occasions volunteered advice on how the research could be conducted or improved upon by gaining perspectives not often expressed. Of note, was the advice concerning the extent to which the conflict has been politicised and the impact that this politicisation is likely to have on the responses gained. Further advice included the need to concentrate on women and the illiterate and to make attempts to conduct interviews in the native languages (not Arabic) of the IDPs.

The detail and degree of explanatory information gained from the semi-structured interviews highlights the importance of the appropriate selection of interviewees for phase two of the research programme. The number of specific events emerging from the oral histories offers the opportunity to add the context of the multiple perspectives on such events, comparing and contrasting how these were viewed by various sections of the population.

V. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

1. METHOD

Early stages of this research path focused on identifying sites containing discussion forums and selecting a sample that would include the most significant discussion places and yet remain balanced and representative of the totality of discussions on these sites, in which participants engage in discussions as diverse as the latest political events, football scores, and debates over arts and literature. By observing and comparing ten different sites, the following five were selected:

- sudaneseonline.com;
- sudaneseoffline.com;
- shamarat.com;
- sudan-forall.org; and
- sudanjem.com.
The research selected two discrete time periods surrounding major events in which the international community played a role relating to the Darfur conflict. The nature of debates on online bulletin boards, which consists of countable threads (discussions on a given topic) and comments (single contributions to a thread), allows an analysis that is both statistical and qualitative, meaning that researchers would be able to analyse, to a certain degree, the amount of attention these events are gaining from forum participants, as well as the content of these debates, revealing any emerging trends in opinion or any views that are heavily contested.

The following time periods were selected:

i. 1 - 30 November 2006

The month of **November 2006** was significant to the Darfur conflict for the meeting in Addis Ababa on 16th November, which was attended by representatives of the Sudanese government, the AU, the UN and a number of officials from other African countries. The talks were convened to find a way forward for the deployment of troops in Darfur pursuant to UN Security Council resolution 1706.

ii. 1 - 31 August 2007

**August 2007** saw the gathering of parties to the conflict in Arusha between 3rd and 5th of the month, with the support of the UN and the AU to prepare the ground for peace talks. Additionally, on 31 July the UN Security Council passed the resolution 1769 which set a new mandate for the deployment of a UN/AU hybrid peacekeeping force in Darfur.

2. **PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

**November 2006, the Addis Ababa meeting and UNSC resolution 1706**

If the outcomes of the Addis Ababa meeting were greeted as highly successful both by the UN and other parties involved the meeting generated almost no discussion online. No threads were opened on the meeting on the sites **Sudan-forall.org** or **Sudanjem.com**. On **Sudaneseoffline.com** among the 25 threads on Darfur, only one was on the Addis meeting and on **Sudaneseonline.com** just eight of the 71 threads on Darfur were connected to this meeting. Of note also is the cool response of participants to those threads that were initiated. The most populated and active forums, such as **Sudaneseonline.com** and **Sudaneseoffline.com**, on which discussions on Darfur might reach 40 or more comments, and which see an average of 14 and seven comments per thread respectively in the month of November, saw very little debate on the Addis Ababa meeting. On **Sudaneseonline.com** four of the eight threads generated no comments at all, one thread produced 11 comments, while the other three produced two, two and four. On **Sudaneseoffline.com** the only thread opened produced no comments at all.

A number of other postings in November dealt with resolution 1706 without mentioning the meeting in Addis Ababa. **Sudaneseonline.com**, for example, ran a poll to see what proportion of visitors to the site support the presence of an international force in Sudan (28% were against, 72% in favour).

**August 2007, the Arusha meeting and UNSC resolution 1769**

The Arusha meeting held in August also generated relatively little on-line debate. Direct references to Arusha could be found only on the JEM forum, where three out of nine threads addressed the outcomes of the meeting, and **Sudaneseonline.com**, where 11 of the 121 threads on Darfur dealt with the rebels’ gathering. August, however, proved to be a month in which there
was very little on-line discussion on Darfur: Sudanforall.org had only two threads on Darfur out of 59 total threads, and Shamarat only four out of a total of 50.

By contrast there was quite a good deal of discussion surrounding UN Security Council resolution 1769. Seven out of 34 threads on Darfur on Sudaneseoffline.com made it central to their discussion, as did 28 of the 121 Darfur threads analysed in the first half of August on Sudaneseonline.com. These threads stimulated an active discussion of 48 comments on Sudaneseoffline.com and 137 on Sudaneseonline.com. This is still lower than the monthly average of 22 and 11 comments per thread respectively. However, in the month of August a single topic, the inappropriate behaviour of some workers from Western NGOs, attracted an unusually high amount of attention and is responsible for the higher average number of threads for that month. On Sudaneseoffline.com for example two main threads dealing with this issue produced 195 and 101 comments each.

The few threads on Arusha basically logged on a daily basis the developments taking place at the meetings, without adding further comment to the issues at stake. Discussion on both Sudaneseonline.com and Sudanjem.com focused their debate on Arusha on the decision of rebel leader Abdul Wahid An-Nur not to participate in the talks and the impact this decision was likely to have. Threads on the UN Security Council resolution, on the other hand, offered wider-ranging discussions, with most participants welcoming the passing of the resolution with a certain enthusiasm, and others focusing more on the details of the technicalities of the text. A minority expressed scepticism on the real efficacy the resolution would have.

2.1 Patterns of debate

Only a limited number of on-line debates about Darfur deal with the peace negotiations and the intervention of international organizations in the crisis. Even in the case of the popular Security Council resolution 1769, at most a quarter of the threads registered on Darfur directly touched upon the issue in the two weeks after the resolution was passed, and most forums showed considerably less interest. With such silence on these issues, what then are the issues that do generate on-line debate on the issue of the Darfur conflict?

Analysis of the forums has shown that the content of threads may vary wildly. They may deal with specific incidents of fighting between rebels, Arab tribes and government soldiers (e.g. the attack of a government plane, the clash in Khartoum between police and rebel factions, a revolt by Arab tribes against the government, etc.), address issues only tangentially connected to the crisis and the peace process (e.g. the establishment of a Darfur/Israeli Sudanese Friendship Society which was highly debated on Sudaneseoffline.com in November) or raise awareness on a vast range of ethical issues which are only loosely related to one another (e.g. racism among Arab tribes or rebel movements, the necessity of putting on trial the perpetrators of the violence or the refusal of the government to accept the figures for those killed or displaced in Darfur). Some threads might generate heated debates and attract a large number of participants, but these do not usually produce a coherent discussion over time. Nevertheless, in a limited number of cases it has been possible to highlight a few patterns emerging from the threads analyzed.

Personalisation. Instead of dealing directly with specific issues and events, many forum members often prefer to talk about the actors involved in these issues. Abdul Wahid An-Nur is thus mentioned in relation to his continuous refusals to participate in the peace talks and portrayed as “stubborn” (Sudanjem.com, 8 August 2007), “stupid” (Sudaneseonline.com, 8 August 2007) and committing “political suicide” (Sudaneseoffline.com, 12 August 2007). Mini Minnawi’s wedding and honeymoon received a good deal of attention and inspired a certain number of jokes.

Sovereignty and interference. If the intervention of the hybrid force is usually met with support, it also produces complementary discussions on what that means for the Sudanese state and how it can impact issues that pertain primarily to the Sudanese. In Sudanforall.org this discussion has
been going on intermittently for a few months since mid 2006. Content in these threads include debate over whether Egyptian troops will ever come to Sudan as part of the hybrid force (Sudaneseonline.com, 8 August 2007), and the influence of China in passing UN Security Council resolution 1769, described as the result of China “hammering the nail on a bent government” (Sudaneseonline.com, 4 August 2007)

**The inappropriate and exploitative behaviour of international organisations workers.** While not a recurrent theme, this is the subject of the two most commented-upon threads on Sudaneseoffline.com (195 and 101 comments), which were initiated on 9 and 26 August. A similar discussion was found on Sudaneseonline.com. At issues was the behaviour of certain IO workers, which was described as “obscene” and “exploitative”. The discussion reveals a profound dissatisfaction with the dubious conduct of some foreigners, seen as exploiting the conflict for their own benefit and as a cause of the corruption of the local customs.

2.2  **Analysis and interpretation**

While by necessity incomplete at this time, interesting results have emerged, and these allow us to put forward some tentative interpretations on a provisional basis. Any emerging patterns from the pilot, however, will have to be tested through further research in the following months so as to confirm or disconfirm what has been observed so far.

An analysis of the discussions in November 2006 and August 2007, allows us to advance the following points.

Firstly, the lack of conspicuous references to meetings such as those in Addis Ababa and Arusha may signal a certain lack of engagement with the negotiation process. Instead, the security situation is perceived to be a bigger problem and the deployment of a hybrid force is welcomed as a more decisive measure in changing the course of the crisis. Some members in fact claim the UN Security Council resolution 1769 to be “a victory for the people of Darfur” (Sudaneseonline.com, 2 August 2007), a “solution to Darfur” (Sudaneseoffline.com, 14 August 2007) and a “way for Darfur to gain independence” (Sudaneseonline.com, 5 August 2007).

Secondly, and in apparent contrast to this abovementioned confidence in a rapid, external solution, there is evidence of a certain criticism also regarding the role the international community has played so far and can play in the future. This criticism may be articulated along different dimensions. On the one hand, it is worth noticing the absence of references to the African Union as one of the players in the resolution of the conflict. Although the AU had been operating in the region for a long time previous to the period studied in the pilot very few post acknowledge its presence or significance. On the other hand, in relation to the deployment of a bigger UN contingent, some forum members wonder how the sovereignty of the Sudanese state will be affected by this measure, highlighting some potential problems for a number of Sudanese that a prolonged presence of foreign troops on Sudanese soil might have. Finally, two threads that attracted considerable participation heavily criticised the behaviour of some foreign workers, who were accused of exploiting the crisis for reasons other than the peaceful future of Darfur. Westerners were depicted as corruptors of Darfuri customs and a danger to the population rather than a support.

These somehow contradictory findings exemplify how at this stage of the study the comprehension of the conflict and peace process emerging form-on-line debates has to be considered only provisional. Only from a constant check of the spaces identified so far will it become possible to gain more confidence with trends and changes in opinion.

Through the pilot the team identified a number of key issues to be closely looked at in the future and potential attitudes that need to be further analyzed. There are probably the premises to explore, for example, how the faith in the UN intervention might be corrupted in the long term by
resistances already active on the ground or by the frustration that changes are occurring slower than the Darfuri population might expect.

3. **REFINING THE RESEARCH**

In the first instance, the ethnographic research was concerned with focusing on discussions on the conflict in Darfur taking place among Darfuris. An early finding, however, was that there did not appear to be such a thing as a Darfuri on-line space. The lack of specific Darfuri on-line community was contrasted by the diversity of the voices speaking of, about, and on behalf of Darfuris. The orientation thus had to shift from its initial focus on the Darfuri voices online to the monitoring of the conflict and the peace process as expressed by Sudanese in general, whether they were of Darfuri origin or not.

Having gained more familiarity with the online spaces analyzed through the pilot research, in the next phases of the research it will be easier to profile who is who and track where the opinions are coming from. In most cases the participants themselves clearly express where they are from and which opinions they represent, but because of the anonymity granted by the medium they are using, in some cases the communication can be altered for purposes other than the simple expression of a personal view. This problem can and will be partially solved through the administration of questionnaires to some of the participants so as to acquire a clearer profile of where the opinions are coming from and directly interrogate the people who are posting online.

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This first phase of the ethnographic online research analyzed a set of interesting themes and will continue to represent a parallel stream of the project. However, the focus on the negotiations as an issue per se will be in part replaced by more specific attention to the themes emerging online which may be relevant for the negotiation process. The very nature of this methodology in fact allow to track opinions as they evolve over time and will produce constant updates on what is perceived by the still few, but increasingly relevant, members of Sudanese online spaces, inside Sudan and in the diaspora.

VI. CONCLUSION

The three research methods provide an effective way to assess how narratives, discussions, and opinions are produced in different contexts.

The oral histories add a fine-textured and illustrative layer of detail to concepts that have been major areas of contention at the negotiations. The semi-structured interviews constitute an important check to explore if and how ideas and opinions emerging on the ground actually converge with what is advocated by NGO and IO workers, local politicians and community leaders. The ethnographic on-line research allows the research to capture how different opinions are formulated beyond the borders of Sudan.

A convergence on a selected number of issues has emerged from the initial triangulation from the pilot research.

- A trust in the capacity of the international community – often identified with the UN and Western NGOs – to assist Darfuris, which, in the case of the data collected through the oral histories, can be tracked to the famine of 1984 and in other events where the international community has intervened;
A lack of faith in a negotiated settlement;

Very little reference to the work of the African Union.

While the pattern of attitudes uncovered by the research so far often follow what is generally known of the views of the IDP population, reflected as they are in the demands of certain rebel groups, the richness of the narrative adds a colour to concepts that are often used somewhat abstractly in politicised situations. Examples include discussions of what it means to be marginalised, what it means to be compensated for one’s suffering, and what it means to be represented. Aggregating multiple such perspectives holds the promise of creating a firm foundation for the construction of a survey based on the understandings of the target population, as well as a series of understandings that can expand the negotiators’ universe of possibility in the search for a just settlement.

The pilot project has highlighted a number of difficulties in the implementation of the research plan, thus providing useful guidance on steps to be taken in order to fine-tune the research design to the circumstances prevalent on the ground in Darfur and the Sudanese political context. In the light of these findings, the research team will address the issues of:

- Designing and implementing an ongoing performance improvement programme for the locally recruited researchers to improve interview skills;

- Giving due consideration to politicisation of the camp’s environment when working with the researchers who are part of the communities;

- Giving due consideration to the sampling of persons for the semi-structured interviews, identifying issues that are of the greatest relevance to interviewees in phase one and seeking a balanced and informed perspective on these issues; and

- Designing a format to conduct focus group discussions in place of oral history interviews with women interviewees.

The pilot further highlights the possibility of triangulating data from the oral histories, the semi-structured interviews and the ethnographic research of online spaces to reveal interesting areas of convergence and divergence, suggesting possibilities for other lines of enquiry to complement the research. The prominence that the Darfur issue has received in the international media and the increasingly frequent complaints emerging from certain and varied quarters that the portrayal of the conflict is at odds with the experience on the ground suggests that an analysis of the international media’s coverage of Darfur may provide interesting comparisons. Further analysis of the Sudanese media’s coverage of the conflict may, again, add further evidence of public opinion on the crisis and its resolution. Finally, to fully give voice to Darfuris, the research team is working on a 1200 person sample of those affected by the crisis. This survey tool will build upon the themes that have emerged from this pilot project and methodologies.
LIST OF ANNEXES (available on request)

I  – List of participants at Philadelphia workshop, April 2007 and Oxford workshop, July 2007

II – Research framework methodology

III – Literature review

IV – Internet research: detailed methodology and findings

V  – Sudanese Council of Reference and International Advisory Board