Researching Attitudes Towards Peace and Conflict in Darfur

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Details of the main components and methodologies of the research

In support of African Union endeavours to secure a lasting peace in Darfur, the Stanhope Centre for Communication Policy Research, in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication will undertake a ten-month consultancy to analyse attitudes and public opinion towards the conflict and the peace process in Darfur. The purpose of the research is to enable the AU-UN mediation team and negotiating parties to develop a deeper understanding of the needs and perceptions of those on the ground, to act and negotiate accordingly, and to develop an effective communications strategy during the mediation and implementation of any peace agreement. The Stanhope Centre’s research will also establish a mechanism that can be used by other organizations to provide much needed empirical information about opinions, attitudes and needs in Darfur as well as in other conflict environments.

The need of independent research on attitudes and opinions towards the conflict in Darfur and the peace process emerges from the difficulties faced in previous attempts to bring peace to the region that have not been inclusive and have involved only a restricted number of voices and interests.

For a peace agreement to be legitimate and effective, it must be “owned” by local communities. In order to achieve this goal, local people must participate and be fully involved throughout the process of negotiations. This can happen in a number of ways, from selecting representatives of different communities to participate in talks, to conducting independent research which everybody that everyone can feel a part of. These strategies are not mutually exclusive and can support each other in building inclusiveness. In addition, using independent research will be a signal of commitment to involve in the negotiations the unarmed groups, moving away from a strategy whereby the armed groups are the main stakeholders invited to the table.

To date a number of organizations have attempted to conduct research on different aspects of the conflict but they have been relatively limited in scope. Our research will be comprehensive, and it will address the attitudes towards the conflict and the peace process as emerging directly from the Darfurian society. Our central research questions are the following:

How do people in Darfur understand the conflict and understand or perceive what is actually going on?

Three sub-questions will address different periods in time:

- How do Darfurians understand the historical roots of the conflict?
- How do different Darfurian groups and constituencies understand the current peace initiatives? How do they think the violence be stopped?
- How do Darfurians think the society can be reconciled?

Conducting research in areas of violent conflict is not a simple task and it is impossible to rely on the same instruments that would be used in peaceful situations. For this reason multiple methodologies have been proposed and context sensitive ways to select and sample informants and analyze the data will be employed. These will be elaborated below, and emphasizing the importance
of building on local knowledge as a way to collect attitudes and views, reaching different groups in the population and using culturally appropriate tools and methods.

**The research framework: Moving from Philadelphia to Oxford (to El Fasher)**

The development of the research framework has been planned as a three-step process, two of which have already been carried out.

A first workshop was held at the Annenberg School of Communication in Philadelphia, US in April 4,5. The aim was analyzing the widest possible range of methodologies which could be employed in a problematic situation such as that of the Darfur conflict. As a result of the meeting a number of methodologies were selected to be further developed by a smaller team of experts.

A second workshop was organized in Oxford, UK in July 2,3. Here the methodologies selected in Philadelphia were combined to build an operative research plan, which is detailed into this document. The participants of this workshop included the core research team as well as academics and researchers from Sudan. It was an opportunity to explore possible collaborations and to ensure that research efforts were and will not be duplicated.

We are now entering the third phase of the development of the research framework which will include mapping the research environment and further adapting the methodology to the specific situation as experienced on the ground.

Our framework is based on the assumption that in conflict situations multiple sources and methodologies must be used and there is no single approach that can produce alone reliable and valid data.

Thus we have decided to develop different streams of the research. Independently, the components will be capable of bringing an unique view on the issues under scrutiny. They will also work together, complement and inform each other, developing a nuanced understanding of the conflict and the peace process. Several main components have emerged.

**Interview methods:**

- Oral histories
- Semi-structured interviews
- => Survey

As it will be explained below into more details, these three methods will work together in collecting representations and attitudes among the Darfurian society. It is also important to note that we will start with the oral histories and semi-structured interviews such that these qualitative methods can inform the survey research.

**Unobtrusive methods:**

- Content analysis / Diaspora on-line research

Because of the uncertainty of the negotiation process the research plan must be flexible to adapt to the negotiation phase and, in the case of a quick resolution, to the implementation of the peace accords. While keeping the methodology in place the research questions may need to be modified. In the hypothetical case of a quick resolution for example, the focus might shift from the understanding of the issues to be discussed at the negotiation table to the unveiling of local and culturally specific ways to implement the peace accords among the Darfurian population.
Interview methods

Oral history

Oral history sits between the methods used by historians and the interviewing techniques employed by sociologists. As historiography does, oral history is interested in facts, but similarly to qualitative interviewing, it also aims at creating a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in a particular social context. It has been chosen as a starting point in the research framework for a variety of reasons.

First, especially in the second half of the 20th century, oral history has emerged as an emancipatory technique to give voice to the marginalized. It has been widely employed to narrate and investigate for example the stories of soldiers during the two world wars, those of women hit by violent conflicts and the experiences of the working class in the 50s and 60s. This tradition can prove extremely helpful in taking into account the voices of the marginalized populations in Darfur, those who have so far been left out from the peace process but should be given a wider role in it.

Secondly, even if oral history techniques have been used for a wide range of purposes, they have been most extensively employed in the exploration of crisis and transitions. Among the most popular examples of this tendency are the collection of memories from wars, of narration of displacements and resettlement experienced by migrants and of political crisis.

Third, oral histories techniques respect the local framing of problems and ideas. Especially in the social sciences oral history techniques have emerged as a critique of the question-answer schema. In surveys, but also in semi-structured interviews, the interviewer may easily impose structures on the interviewee by selecting the theme and the topic, by ordering the questions and by wording questions in his or her “language”. On the contrary in conducting oral history interviews exmanent questions are translated into immanent ones, the worldviews and interests of the researcher are re-framed according to the respondents’ worldviews: when questions arise they should be asked using the informant’s own words and language, avoiding a climate of cross-examination.

Finally, in oral societies, or in societies where a large percentage of the population is illiterate, orality still plays an important role in the production and dissemination of information, and represents a competence that is widely spread among the population and highly valued.

For these reasons oral history techniques represent powerful tools for the investigation of traditional knowledge, eliciting local and specific elements to frame events and explain worldviews. They will thus been employed to interview figures who play an important role in the Darfurian society and hold local wisdom but may be difficult to access in their complexity with other methods. They are, for example, sheiks, women and elders.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews represent the second pillar of the research framework. They will be employed 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.

Because of their jobs and educational background, these individuals probably won't have to be addressed through indirect methods such as oral histories, they would most likely have a clearer idea of the process of interviewing, of the meaning of an independent research, and more direct interview techniques can thus be used.

When paired with oral histories, semi-structured interviews will provide crucial context to the main stories. They will offer a reality check for the oral histories, situating them in time and space, adding further details, uncovering contradictions. Some themes will be taken from the oral histories and addressed during semi-structured interviews. In this case may be less important to be
unobtrusive, more direct questions can be asked and a tighter topic guide can be developed. The focus will be more specific, having a clearer idea of dimensions to investigate as emerging from the first set of oral histories.

As a component per se semi-structured interviews will work to collect 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 will be 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.

**Survey research**

The result of the oral histories and semi-structured interviews will be the collection of multiple representations of the conflict and peace process. Knowing them will contribute to the understanding of potential ways for the solution of the conflict, uncovering what are the perceptions on the ground, but at the same time will offer a comprehensive range of attitudes to be further investigated with a wider population through methods such as survey researches.

Moving stepwise, relying on the oral histories and semi-structured interviews will allow to transform “exmanent” into more “immanent” questions, avoiding the risk of imposing views from the outside on the population, of asking the wrong questions and of polling opinions with techniques and languages that may be highly effective in Western societies where they are most widely used and researched, but fail to capture local knowledge and adapt to conflict areas.

The survey questionnaire will thus employ the language and themes as emerging from the previous component of the research framework. It will be developed taking into account specific techniques, such as those developed by the Afrobarometer team, it will be translated in Arabic and in three local languages and piloted first on a smaller sample.

**Sampling**

The sampling of people to be interviewed and surveyed will follow different techniques for the oral histories and semi-structured interviews on one side and the survey on the other.

In the first case, the sampling of informants will be a **purposeful sampling**. The informants will be selected and not randomly sampled. Qualitative methods in fact are not aimed at reaching a high number of individuals as to generalize results to a population. Through the development of an adequate research corpus, they are aimed at maximizing the number of different representations available of the same phenomenon.

The social space can be unfolded in two dimensions: social strata, functions and categories, (they are known and intuitive, e.g. sex, age, education, etc) and representations of a particular phenomenon (they are unknown and potentially infinite, e.g. opinions, attitudes, feelings). These representations are the focus of the qualitative research. They can be typified, not listed.

In the construction of a corpus the starting point is represented by what is known, and people will be selected for example according to their sex and education. The next step, for collecting different representations, will be considering additional strata and functions, such as ethnicity, religion, etc. in order to identify the variety in people’s representations of a particular issue. At a certain point the law of diminishing returns will apply: adding further strata will make only a small difference with regard to additional representations. It will be reached what is called saturation, which works as a stopping criterion. In this process local knowledge will play a important role in the selection of the key informants to be interviewed. It will thus be important to develop a selection strategy in close collaboration with local partners.

In the case of the survey research instead, the sampling strategy will closely follow the one developed by the **Afrobarometer** team. This strategy represents a clever solution to the problem
experienced in most African countries of the lack of sampling frames (e.g. phonebooks, electoral lists, etc.) which allow to randomly select people to be included in a sample. It is a clustered, stratified, multi-stage, area-probability sample. It is not based on the random sampling of individuals but on the random sampling of geographic locations. In a series of stages, geographically defined sampling units of decreasing size are selected. To ensure that the sample is representative, the probability of selection at various stages is adjusted as well:

- The sample is stratified by key social characteristics in the population such as sub-national area (e.g. region or province) and residential locality (urban or rural). The area stratification reduces the likelihood that distinctive ethnic or language groups are left out of the sample.
- Wherever possible random sampling is conducted with probability proportionate to population size (PPS). The purpose is to guarantee that more populated geographical units have a proportionally greater probability of being chosen into the sample.

The sampling design has four stages:

- A first stage to stratify and randomly select primary sampling units (e.g. the census enumeration areas)
- A second-stage to randomly select sampling starting points from which the interviewers will start walking
- A third stage to randomly choose households
- A final stage involving the random selection of individual respondents

This techniques, used so far in various countries in Africa by the Afrobarometer, can be used as such in most cities in Darfur and will be adapted to the particular case of refugee camps in Darfur and Chad.

**Unobtrusive methods**

The techniques described so far will constitute the core of the research. They are aimed at directly interrogating the people of Darfur about what they think of the conflict and the peace process, as well as making their voices heard in the negotiation process.

An additional component will run parallel to this major one, and will be represented by a set of different, unobtrusive techniques, that allow the researcher to make use of and analyze materials and documents that are being produced independently from the research enterprise but can nonetheless shed an interesting light on the conflict and peace in Darfur.

These techniques are:

- Content analysis of some of the major newspapers in the Sudan, as a way to track opinions as expressed by the media;
- Online ethnographic research of the materials produced by the Darfurian Diaspora on mailing lists, newsgroups, blogs and websites, which represents important spaces where opinions on the conflict and its solutions are produced and shared.

**Newspapers content analysis**

Content analysis will be used in a twofold sense. On the one hand, as a dependent variable, it will be a means to unveil the framing of certain problems by a community that writes, in these case the Sudanese journalists. It will be employed to do “public opinion research by other means”. On the other hand, as an independent variable, it will be used to better understand certain reactions of society. Newspapers inform and frame the conflict, and the publication of certain information and opinion can have a role in the comprehension of it by the population as well as in the concrete
reaction to certain events as portrayed by the media. Placing them along a time-scale can thus be a useful exercise to understand the role of the media in the Darfur conflict.

**Ethnographic on-line research of the Diasporic networks**

Ethnographic on-line research has been widely used to investigate the new forms of interaction and communication emerging from the diffusion of the Internet. Based on a constant observation of online communication, as collected in virtual spaces such as mailing lists and on-line forum, it has been employed to analyze the most varied phenomena, from the communication between migrants and their families in the homeland to the inciting of hatred by terrorist groups.

In the specific case of the Darfur conflict, ethnographic on-line research will be used to track the political reactions to the main events connected to the conflict as expressed by Darfurians in the Diaspora. This will allow to bring in the debate a new voice, that has been left at the margin so far, and doing it through a constant tracking of attitudes and opinions archived on virtual spaces.

These components, in addition to their capacity of adding complexity and originality to the research, may also respond to the necessity of a **back up plan**, motivated by security reasons. A conflict situation like the one experienced in Darfur at the moment requires an adequate provision of multiple sources of data collection. In the case the interviewing-survey components encounter serious obstacles in their implementation, the Diaspora/content analysis dimensions may be extended in their scope and more resources can be diverted to them.

**Output**

The results of the research process will represent a valuable resource for sustaining the peace process and making it more inclusive.

On the one hand they can inform and shape the political process and the actions undertaken by organs such as the AU/UN mediation teams. They will enable the negotiators to understand the needs and context and gain more effectiveness. On the other hand, research which is independent from funding agencies and political players involved in the conflict can serve the fundamental role of building ownership of the peace process by the local communities. For these reasons the results will be transparent and shared publicly.

In particular, as far as the single deliverables are concerned, different products will be produced throughout the process:

- Process reports: they will be produced on a monthly basis, making available the provisional results to the parties involved in the negotiation process;
- A comprehensive report on all the component of the research as a way to build a deep understanding of the conflict, its causes, and possible solutions as perceived by the people of Darfur;
- An academic publication that will reflect on the methodologies employed and the findings of the research as a means to contribute to doing research in conflict and crisis situations.

To contribute to the work of the negotiators as well as measure the understanding and awareness of the conflict and the peace process a tracking system will have to be implemented, as to comprehend how people’s attitudes change over time and what this represents for the negotiations. In the case of the unobtrusive techniques this possibility is already embedded in the methods themselves, looking at how newspapers report on these issues and the Diaspora reacts to the main events in the conflict and negotiations. In the case of interviewing methods additional resources will have to be found to be able to repeat this component of the research over time.
Research plan

Pilot research

In August 2007 a pilot of the research will be carried out. The goal of this activity is twofold. On the one hand it will offer to the negotiating parties gathering again in September an initial indication of how the attitudes and opinions of Darfurians can contribute to the negotiation process. On the other it will provide inputs to better tune the research methodology on the situation on the ground.

The pilot will consist of a 2-week round of qualitative interviews, using both oral histories and semi-structured interview techniques. The research will take place in two locations, a town in Darfur (El Fasher or Nyala) and an IDP camp. The plan is to conduct a total of 10 oral histories and 20 semi structured interviews. The targets of both will be identified through consultations with local partners.

As a result of this first round of interviewees a paper will be produced by the beginning of September and may be shared with stakeholders involved in the negotiations.

Main research

Oral history
4 groups/areas: 15 individual each = 60 interviews
2 researchers: one man one women: 2 interviews a day each (2-3 hours per interview) = 4
15 days = 3 weeks

Semi-structured interviews
4 categories/functions: local NGOs, local politicians, journalists, university professors = 80
2 researchers: 4 interviews a day each (1-1.5 hours per interview) = 8
10 days = 2 weeks

Survey
1200 interviews
8 researchers: 6 interviews per day each (each interview 30 min) = 48
25 days = 5 weeks

On-line ethnographic research
One person part-time throughout the 10 months of the project

Content analysis
One experienced translator part time throughout the 10 months of the project