

Conflict transformation: pastoralists and settled farmers

Omer Egeimi, Mohammed Abdel Mahmood and Abdeen Sid Ahmed



Photo: SOS Sahel

Since time immemorial traditional leaders of the Gawamaa farmers in North Kordofan, Sudan, have dealt with controversial issues between settled farmers and pastoralist groups in a traditional way, based on religious rules and forgiveness. But as competition for natural resources increases rapidly, the frequency and severity of these conflicts are rising. In 1999, SOS Sahel started an initiative to reconcile sedentary farmers with the Sebeihat pastoralists, combining traditional conflict resolution mechanisms with some participatory tools.

Our story is set in the typical Sahelian zone around the El Ain forest, some 26 km east of El Obeid town, in North Kordofan. The village Gagrur is a small settlement of 45 households of the Gawamaa tribal group, who depend on dry-land farming for the cultivation of subsistence and cash crops. Many households also own a small number of goats and sheep.

Two different groups of pastoralists rely on Gagrur's land as a source of fodder and water for their livestock, while at the same time providing manure for their crops. The most important group are the Sebeihat of around 40 households, who raise cattle, sheep, goats and camels, and depend entirely on the Gagrur land and resources during the hot dry summer period between April and June. The other group of pastoralists are the Baggara tribes, who have their home base in South Kordofan, and move northwards during the rainy season, following long and well-established transhumance corridors. They pass through the Gagrur territory every August.

Conflicts

Though customary law states that agricultural land after harvest is subject to public grazing, during the crop-growing period, from mid-July to mid-January, no animals are allowed to enter the fields. The Gawamaa village *Sheikh* sets the start of this period with a ritual called 'stick raising'. This period coincides with the passing of the herds of

the Baggara pastoralists, and the time of greatest pressure on the pastoral resources in the region. Conflicts between pastoralists and resident farmers over crop damage are increasing due to the increased number of animals in the area, as well as the expansion of the productive fields into areas which were previously used for grazing and livestock corridors. Conflicts between these groups are normally settled by the Gawamaa village sheikhs, who are responsible for estimating the damage and determining the appropriate fine.

In the 1990s, and facilitated by SOS Sahel, the villagers of Gagrur dug out a reservoir, or *hafir*, and registered a 5000 ha community forest. The potential for increased conflict was rife between the residents of Gagrur, who were concerned with protecting their *hafir* and community forest, and the pastoralists who saw water sources, pastures and livestock corridors closed off to them.

Conflicting laws are another reason for increased tension. Though formally all unregistered land is state owned, in practice registration of land tenure is the exception rather than the rule. People consider land in their possession as 'their own', and land held in communal ownership is subject to customary law. In 1986 the Native Administration was reinstated: the customary institution of traditional leaders, including Sheikhs, Oumdass and Emirs, who are responsible for maintaining customary law, including the

allocation and management of land. There are numerous cases, however of federal government overriding the Native Administration.

Traditional conflict management

Conflict over natural resources is not new. In northern Kordofan, a sophisticated system known as *Goodiya*, is used for resolving conflicts of all types, from domestic disputes to land allocation, which draws heavily on the Koran and the teaching of the Prophet Mohammed. Traditional conventions also conform to religious rules, such as 'you should take care of your neighbour as you would yourself'. Mediators tend to be religious leaders, community leaders, or people of social standing within the communities, and mediation takes place in the house of an independent person. Most mediation begins by saying '*we are gathered here for the goodness of everyone and we do not want any more bloodshed*'.

During the meeting, the facts are laid down. The leader will first ask the two parties to forgive each other before going on to discuss the conflict. Mediators also relate the conflict to historical events, such as examples from the Old Testament and events in the life of the Prophet Mohammed, to provide examples of how things may be resolved. The mediator may talk to the parties individually, working on easing the situation between the parties. A mediator respects the two parties by letting them put their own stories for-

ward first before he states his proposed solution. The resolution ends with a recital from the Koran.

No longer enough

This traditional conflict resolution system faces a rapidly changing institutional and economic environment, however. The existence of both traditional and court systems opens the way for 'institutional shopping' when there is a dispute. Moreover, respect for local leaders as mediators in the traditional system has weakened. The decisions reached may be rejected if one of the parties does not agree, especially when there is no documentation of the process.

But one of the greatest threats to the traditional conflict resolution systems is the growing severity and frequency of conflicts, caused by decisions of competing authorities over natural resources. Finally, the traditional system is based on forgiveness, with a policy of avoiding digging too deep into the roots of a problem. As one traditional leader put it, *'peeling back the layers of an onion brings tears'* and can make a conflict worse. However, as competition for resources becomes more acute, the need to find solutions that will deal, at least in part, with the root-causes of the problem are becoming increasingly important; forgiveness alone is no longer enough.

Facilitating a dialogue

In 1999 a process was started to respond to the increasing number of resource-related controversies between the Gawamaa settled farmers and the Sebeihat pastoralist groups. The aim was to facilitate a dialogue between the interested parties and traditional leaders, and to assist them in finding their own solutions. First the SOS Sahel project team organised training workshops with the Gawamaa traditional leaders, a representative of the Pastoralist Union and government officers, to study ways to combine new skills on conflict management with traditional ones. The groups then identified a pilot area, in which the new approach would be tested.

During the actual preparation phase a meeting was held at Gagrur village, with the village Sheikh as the main contact person. During this initial meeting, people were asked to draw a map of the natural resources available in the village, and to identify the different users. This then led to discussion about current competition and conflict over resources. A second meeting was held with Sebeihat at their camp. The team followed the similar approach to the

one used in Gagrur.

During a second round of meetings with both groups, the information collected in the first round was confirmed, and built on by the local communities by using a range of participatory techniques. Examples used were conflict mapping, a time-line of events, and the 'conflict tree' which turned out to be one of the most effective tools for analysing the causes and effects of the conflict. The roots of the tree represent the root causes, the trunk represents the core problem, while the branches represent the effects of the problem, or symptoms. Comparing the trees drawn by different parties in a conflict clearly showed how the perceptions differed. These tools were well understood by the communities, and made it possible to identify the core conflict and its effects. It also became evident that collaboration was important for both of them.

The negotiation stage

Both parties mentioned the importance of involving a third party, and together elected a four-person team and a chairman to mediate during the negotiation process. The project centre was chosen as a neutral location for the negotiations. Representatives from the two communities were selected during the preparatory meetings, with no project representatives present, on the basis of personal qualities, levels of trust in the community, and position in local public life. All were men. The ground rules were agreed upon: good listening and equal participation without bias from any side. The final agreement was to be practical and acceptable to both parties.

The meetings began with the chairman confirming the importance of peace between the groups, and the need to share resources between the different stakeholders. This was followed by a presentation of the outcome of the community meetings within the two groups, to allow both sides to understand both perspectives. Then the negotiation started, in which solutions were proposed and discussed for their feasibility. Throughout this process, the mediation team used religious and cultural customs that call for sharing of resources among relatives and neighbours. Finally an agreement acceptable to both parties was reached, and signed by representatives of the two parties.

The 'new Goodiya'

Interviews one year later showed that nearly 80% of the population of Gagrur, and nearly 90% of the pastoralists knew about the agreement, and its various

articles. Both parties stressed that the agreement had been implemented, though some provisions had been made. The majority of those who had been involved indicated that the participatory tools had in fact strengthened the indigenous system. The process was perceived as transparent and helpful in analysing the root causes of the problems. According to representatives of the Pastoralists' Union: *'we call the new process the new Goodiya'*.

Ore olarabal name kule - 'war is not milk' - Maasai proverb

Pastoral cosmology arises from everyday necessities. What is it that gives life? Milk gives life but one needs to milk the livestock to obtain this food. The livestock in turn obtain their food and the potential for milk from the environment. Pastoralists assist this food harvest by intelligent herding, while God provides for his people with the gifts of life, rain and other natural resources. The reciprocal chain of life thus begins and ends with God, and the human relationship to God. Right relationships permeate the whole of pastoralist life, among family, clan, people, between peoples, with the environment, and with God. Disputes and violent resolutions are often part of the social fabric in these pastoral drylands. Yet, all of these normal conflicts can be resolved through agreements stemming ultimately from the common cosmology of the people. Traditional societies, rich in oral literature like these pastoralists, offer a wide diversity of peace-making resources based on the concept of covenantal relationships. Yet, these resources are woefully undervalued and under-utilised by government administrators, non-governmental agencies, and conflict resolution practitioners.

In: Pastoralist cosmology as foundation for sustainable peace and development - H.H.Jenner

This type of bilateral agreements involve high costs in terms of time and resources, however. Moreover, any pastoral community such as the Sebeihat needs to negotiate access to resources with various farmers' communities, while the agreements need to allow for variability from season to season and year to year. Discussions with local communities therefore indicate that the promotion of 'a culture of peace' by popular awareness raising may be more effective than small bilateral agreements. Moreover, without the support of the government administration and technical departments, there is a risk of these institutions undermining the agreements between the groups.

SOS Sahel UK,
P.O. Box 1387
Khartoum, Sudan
mohammedmam@netscape.net

