

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL
OF A VULNERABILITY FOCUS
IN BASIC ASSISTANCE POLICIES

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THE TRANSFORMATIVE
POTENTIAL OF A
VULNERABILITY FOCUS IN
BASIC ASSISTANCE POLICIES

A Study on UNHCR and IOM in Sudan

Veronika FLEGAR



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To Anne-Katrin Feigl (1989-2019)

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The five years during which I worked on this research, and especially the two years I spent in Sudan, were quite a journey. They allowed me to not only theorise about, but also to experience, feel and see vulnerability and resilience from up close. Precarity, disenfranchisement and very raw human suffering remain wide-spread in Sudan: whether it is the devastated refugees and other migrants that came to visit UNHCR and IOM during my research at these organisations, the displaced and/or disabled persons whom I encountered begging on the streets of Khartoum or the Sudanese protestors and political activists who had been suffering under a repressive regime for decades. Their faces told stories of devastation, but I simultaneously felt like a veil of collective denial had settled upon Sudan: people were careful in voicing any potentially critical opinions and passively underwent sandstorms, floods, incredible heat and draught, political repression and a deteriorating economic crisis that caused currency, bread and fuel shortages. People waited for hours, often even overnight, to receive fuel – apparently without ever complaining openly. Initially, it was hard for me to understand this, what to me seemed like, apathy and I was somewhat disappointed that only very few people would dare to speak up and even fewer would be willing to take action.

How wrong this initial impression was.

In 2019, Sudan witnessed the largest revolution in its history, which toppled long-term president-dictator Omar Al-Bashir on 11 April 2019. I remain deeply humbled by all the Sudanese who found the bravery and strength to stand up, unite and peacefully fight for justice, freedom and democracy. The passion, conviction and determination of the progressive voices in Sudan remains truly inspiring and has shown me what resilience really means. Mobilising and uniting peaceful protestors throughout a hugely divided and dispersed country, maintaining momentum for this movement throughout more than six months despite all government attempts to shut it down, holding a non-stop sit-in protest on a major road in front of the army headquarters for several weeks before and all throughout Ramadan during at least 45°C, recovering and drawing strength from continuous and horrible atrocities committed by military and paramilitary forces and organising large-scale demonstrations and strikes during a complete internet block-out are only some of the incredible examples of this resilience.

Although the present study is not about these protests or about Sudan as such, I think it is safe to say that the Sudanese are some of the most resilient people on earth. Whether it is in the many small-scale community initiatives among citizens and non-

citizens throughout Sudan, the cross-border solidarity of people with similar progressive hopes in countries like Algeria and Syria, or the Sudanese diaspora's strong involvement in, and rooting for, a democratic transition in Sudan: all of these examples reveal how vulnerability, migration, resilience and development are closely intertwined.

I have been lucky and remain incredibly grateful to have shared parts of this journey on vulnerability and resilience with a lot of amazing people (not all of whom I can name here). First and foremost, I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisors Prof. Gijsbert Vonk, Prof. Brigit Toebes and Dr. Viola Bex-Reimert for your great support and trust. The freedom you granted me to venture along unusual paths and to uncommon places ensured that I could keep my motivation till the end. Your thoughtful and well-dosed comments and advice provided me with encouragement at cross-roads and in difficult times. Although we sometimes spoke different academic 'languages', your diverse backgrounds and passions really helped me to identify and define my own interests. I will particularly cherish the memories of our informal meetings, be it at your homes, for lunch or for drinks: especially after I had moved away from Groningen these moments ensured that I still felt welcome and at home 'up in the north'.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the members of my assessment committee, Prof. Heinrich Winter, Prof. Marc Hertogh and Prof. Titti Mattsson, for their thoughtful review and approval of this thesis.

My sincere appreciation also goes to Prof. Monika Baár for encouraging me to pursue a PhD in the first place. Your belief in my work, your inspiring intellectual and practical guidance in pursuing an academic career and your willingness to support me in any way possible contributed a great deal to the completion of this project. Many thanks also for having had the honour of being a part of your team at Leiden University! You remain a constant source of inspiration to push the boundaries of disciplines, topics and my own knowledge. Plus, I am forever grateful for your unconscious help in meeting my future husband Bas.

A special thank you also to my colleagues at the Department of Constitutional Law, Administrative Law and Public Administration and at the Department of Transboundary Legal Studies at the University of Groningen as well as at the Institute for History at Leiden University for the inspiring conversations and happy moments. Your interest in my experiences in Sudan and Bangladesh as well as in my research (despite me only being around every so often) always gave me a feeling of belonging that helped me to continue with this project. This is all the more true for the laughs, talks and dinners with my dear friends and colleagues of the original 'Food and wine club!!' Lottie, Ira, Lucia, Marlies, Erna, Heyd, Katrina and Eva.

I am endlessly grateful for the great support, friendship and positivity of my paranymphs Heyd Más and Louisa Firnenburg. The deep conversations with both of you throughout the past five years were a great source of intellectual inspiration and personal strength that really helped me to shape this project – and your enthusiasm about my defence really dragged me through these last months!

I would also like to thank the institutions who hosted me or granted me access to their work as well as the researchers whom I met and who shared their thoughts during conferences and individual meetings. A special thanks to the employees of UNHCR and IOM in Khartoum for granting me access, letting me participate and sharing their insights and ideas on basic assistance to non-citizens. A big thank you also to all my friends and colleagues in Sudan, at Ahfad University, UNDP and beyond, without whom my stay in Sudan would not have been the same. Many thanks also to the inspiring people who were working at, or visiting, Lund University and Malmö University during my research period in Sweden and especially Prof. Titti Mattson for the warm welcome, encouragement and intellectual exchanges that kickstarted the analysis of my case studies and helped me to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Many thanks also to my new colleagues at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Bangladesh and to my friends in Dhaka for supporting me throughout the final stage of this project. You showed me that there is a life and whole new world out there beyond my PhD.

I owe an extraordinary amount of gratitude to all my friends and family (and especially Svenja) for your patience, interest, encouragement and welcome distractions throughout the past five years. I could not have done it without you! A special thanks for giving me a temporary home or supporting me in innumerable other ways to Ingrid and Egbert, Louisa, Eva, Lottie, Dorien, Lucia, Katrina, Melissa and Daan.

A very special thanks goes to my parents for raising me as a responsible and free person, for granting me every opportunity to broaden my horizon and for fostering in me a curious and restless mind that would venture out to discover the world. I also owe so much gratitude to my husband Bas: your incredible patience, your pep talks, your critical questions and reviews as well as your unconditional love really kept me going. The thought of the incredible life we built together and continue to build every day encourages me to be resilient – to get up in the morning, smile at the world and fall asleep grateful for every moment I am allowed to experience.

Lastly, I would like to thank Anne and dedicate this book to her. More than a year later, I still don't have words for the sorrow your sudden death has caused to your family and to everyone who knew you. I remain forever grateful for your contribution to this research as well as for the friendship, laughter and sunshine that you brought into my life and into the world of so many people. Without you, my stay in Sudan would not have been the same and I will always remember your enthusiasm, dedication and pragmatism. You had an incredible gift to stay positive, focused and humble despite all adversities (and adversities there were many in Sudan). I hope that the conclusions of this research would be in your interest and can contribute to one of the causes that you cared about most – the protection of vulnerable migrants.

Veronika Flegar, July 2020
Dhaka, Bangladesh

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS*

AVRR	Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration
COR	Commission(er) for Refugees ¹
DSA	Daily Subsistence Allowance
EU	European Union
GIZ	German Organisation for International Development Cooperation
HQ	Headquarters
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PSS	Psychosocial Support
PoC	Person(s) of concern (to UNHCR)
RCS	Refugee Counselling Services
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal ²
SDG	Sudanese Pound
(S)GBV	(Sexual and) Gender-based Violence
SNC	Special Needs Codes
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
UN	United Nations
UAM	Unaccompanied Minor(s)
UMC	Unaccompanied Migrant Child
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNAMID	United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur
UNISFA	United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA)
VoT	Victim of Trafficking
WFP	World Food Programme

* Most abbreviations are used by respondents and are not deliberate choices of this thesis. The overview excludes obvious abbreviations like HIV/AIDS, ID, TV, VIP, ATM, GDP and TB.

¹ Both terms, 'commission' and 'commissioner', were used by stakeholders in Sudan.

² Mentioned only once by a respondent.

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