

## Resilience in Darfur

By Anne-Mette Futtrup

The refugee camps in Darfur are alive with conversations and activities, where men and women are busy with daily chores, literacy classes, meetings and income-generating activities. Gathered in a community center, the women talk about their fears of being attacked and their desire to go back home. Although Sudan's president al-Bashir ordered 16 humanitarian organisations out of the country in March 2009, the humanitarian organisations and the people in the camps are still going strong. They are hopeful.



Everywhere in the Darfur, the conversations revolve around the same theme. When can we go home? When will it be safe to go home? Who will protect us?

For the majority of the internally displaced people in these crowded, dusty camps that are home to more than 2.5 million people, the greatest dream is about going home, going back to home villages, to own fields, to a life they know. And against all odds and gruesome experiences which will scar some women for life, there is still the desire to make a future for themselves. This message came through loud and clear in everyday conversations and episodes in Darfur camps, observed by Lisa Henry, Humanitarian Response Director for DanChurchAid.

"The people I met in Darfur have a fantastic strength. They understand very well the risks that lurk just outside the camps: attack, rape or death. But it is the rainy season now, and therefore, there are a few risk takers who have made the difficult decision to move outside of the camps. Sometimes we would drive by one woman walking down the road with her hoe over her shoulder, moving out of town. She looked ever so lonely. Yet determined. The game she is playing can have dramatic consequences. So only very few take the risk. From the World Food Program helicopter which brought us from Zalongei region to Nyala in Darfur, it was possible to see lonely dots of new plastic sheeting covering huts out in the middle of nowhere. The opportunity to plant, harvest and get some food to eat or sell to supplement the WFP food rations is hard to resist. But the price can be so high," Lisa Henry says.

## Impact

Lisa Henry was with the first team from the ACT (Action by Churches Together) donors who have visited the camps since President al-Bashir kicked the 16 humanitarian organisations out of Sudan in March 2009, leaving well over 1 million people in need of food, health services and water.

The gaps which were left have been identified and to the extent possible covered by other NGOs, by government staffers or by local communities themselves. NGOs have really shown their strength, solidarity and professionalism in the rapid pace with which they have responded to the immediate needs created by the absence of the 16 organisations. Permanent school structures and adult literacy classes are ongoing, and it is my clear impression that the impact is positive.

"We had reports of increased numbers of girls graduating from primary school and increased numbers of women reaching basic literacy levels and able to engage in community meetings. Hygiene education has also had positive results which can be seen both in the homes where latrines are now built, used and kept clean and where water containers are covered. A basic thing like regular hand washing has changed the patterns of illness. Health clinics in Hassa Hissa camp reported no outbreaks of disease over the past 8 months, and women at the health clinic explained that this was directly related to the fact that people were no longer going to the bathroom all over the place but in the latrines," Lisa Henry says.

## Accountability in action



Knowledge about democracy and basic rights are slowly seeping into the different levels of society in Darfur due to some humanitarian organisations and their ways of working. There are water committees and women's groups, and there is a lively culture of meetings. Traditionally though it is the sheiks that make all decisions in the camps. It is really difficult for members of the different committees to stand up to the power of the sheiks.

"But through the many meetings we attended, I could see the brave few raising their voices, debating and discussing who should receive plastic sheeting and why, for example. The traditions which some humanitarian organisations have brought with them; about participation, about targeting the most needy, about meeting basic needs while respecting basic rights and involving beneficiaries in decision making have been challenging new traditions to understand and use. The hope is that people can understand and exercise their rights in the camps but even more importantly that they can take this knowledge with them when they go home. But we have to be honest and understand that decision-making structures have existed for decades in the Sudanese society, so we cannot change things overnight," Lisa Henry says.

## **Second class citizens**

"Even though we have seen some incredibly positive responses from humanitarian organisations, local populations and like-minded people in the Sudanese ministries, it still feels like the world stood still and let the people of Darfur down again when the 16 organisations got kicked out in March 2009. We were left to scramble and pick up the pieces, and at the same time we have less staff to monitor and document the situation on the ground in Darfur. It is difficult to cross check data to get a true picture of nutritional status across the camps, for example. But we keep on going, just as the people in the camps do. A more resilient population is hard to find," ends Lisa Henry.