City Growth Under Conflict Conditions: The View from Nyala, Darfur

Anne Bartlett*
*University of San Francisco

Jennifer Alix-Garcia
University of Wisconsin, Madison

David S. Saah
Spatial Informatics Group LLC & University of San Francisco

The developing world today is challenging conventional accounts of city growth and change. In Africa, for example, conflict and mass displacement are reconfiguring the urban landscape in ways that are hard to ignore. This paper analyzes how conflict and the arrival of a large humanitarian aid infrastructure influence the dynamics of city growth and bring about a distinct spatial structure, niche gentrification, and informal economy in Nyala, Darfur. Using data from a three-year field study, we show how the size and socio-spatial organization of the city changed, the directions in which the city grew, and the factors that drove these changes. We look at interaction patterns between residents of Nyala itself and those now residing in internally displaced person (IDP) camps on the edge of the city. We show that considerations of both insecurity and risk are vitally important to understanding the processes of conflict urbanization. Conflict generates a distinctive social structure as internal displaced people, international aid workers, and long-time urban residents all move within the city.

INTRODUCTION

Accounts of the processes by which urbanization occurs in Africa often portray its cities as nightmarish containers for the worst excesses of violence, poverty, underdevelopment, failed governance, and poor planning. As Ferguson suggests, it is as though Africa has become a particular category or lens through which we see the world—a category that excludes other possibilities, yet has its own force and dominant reality in which people must live (Ferguson 2006). This perspective paints life in Africa’s rapidly growing urban centers in an overly pejorative and simplified light, evaluating it against a western standard that is often misplaced or even irrelevant. Yet, at the same time, there are still many serious issues that urban African residents face. Africa’s urban population has grown enormously

*Correspondence should be addressed to Anne Bartlett, Department of Sociology, University of San Francisco, 2130 Fulton Street, San Francisco, CA 94117; albartlett@usfca.edu

City & Community 11:2 June 2012
doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6040.2012.01396.x
© 2012 American Sociological Association, 1430 K Street NW, Washington, DC 20005
over the last half-century, rising from 15 percent of the continent in 1960 to 35 percent in 2006, and is now set to move towards a staggering projection of 60 percent by 2020 (Farvacque-Vitkovic et al. 2008; Beall et al. 2010).

Such rapid changes are driving the need to investigate the dynamics reshaping Africa’s cities for their own sake. The complex dynamics affecting urban Africans also challenge conventional accounts of city growth and change that emanate from a western perspective in urban sociology. There is a growing literature that responds to the hierarchical and possibly orientalist assumptions that are embedded in such schools of thought (Robinson 2002, 2006; Simone 2004; Pieterse 2008; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Beall et al. 2010, 2011; Myers 2011). Today, rapid urbanization, conflict, population movement, and aid infrastructures converge to produce not only social dislocation but also very distinct types of spatial re-ordering in African cities. Radically different urban futures are being forged. In Sudan—and in the case we examine in this paper, Nyala, Darfur—these elements come together to create a city that is gentrified in places yet also has areas of extreme poverty, insecurity, and risk. The goal of this paper is therefore to unpack the processes leading to urbanization in Nyala in ways that both speak to the African cities literature and also address how cities change specifically under conflict conditions.

As we show, conflict, displacement, the arrival of a large humanitarian aid population, and the calculations made by the population in regard to insecurity and risk radically alter the morphology of the city and unsettle the dynamics that previously contributed to urban growth. In Nyala, conflict has dramatically altered the traditional ebb and flow of the city’s inhabitants, leading to a cascade of other changes to the landscape. Nyala has grown tremendously since the onset of the Darfur crisis, engulfing large portions of land on either side of its main river, Wadi Birlii. What once was a local market and trading town has now emerged as a large city, with a cosmopolitan population made up of inhabitants from all over the world. In addition to changes within the city itself, camps of internally displaced people (IDPs), the size of small towns, have grown up on the outskirts of the city, mimicking the growth of edge cities (Garreau 1991). However, the stucco-fronted single-family homes of Garreau’s edge cities, are a long way from the terrifying scenario confronting Darfur at the periphery of Nyala. For these new residents, home is stitched together from sticks, old burlap bags, and, if they are lucky, homemade bricks. Far from escaping violence, locals find themselves deeply enmeshed in it. Unable to afford the relative security of living inside the city, they are forced to live in make-shift homes on Nyala’s insecure periphery.

Although there are negative outcomes for many of Nyala’s poorer residents, there are also those who benefit from conflict-induced changes. While the significant increase in housing prices may drive poorer residents to the edge of the city, there are rich pickings for those who are able to rent to international Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs). Further, for entrepreneurs keen to capitalize on the affluent INGO population, there are profits to be made in providing goods and services from the West that bring a little bit of “home” to Nyala. Cafés and other services emerge, catering to those with larger disposal income and, of course, to the “aid-worker scene.” As a result, increasing poverty in some areas of the city is accompanied by forms of niche gentrification.

Typically, these kinds of changes become evident over decades or sometimes even longer. Yet in conflict zones like Darfur, they appear in short order—sometimes only months or years. To track them we have used a variety of research methods. First, to
understand growth in absolute terms, we have used LANDSAT satellite imagery from 1972 to 2008 in order to chart the specific directions in which the city grew. This information has been supplemented by bi-weekly Enhanced Vegetation Index (EVI) data derived from MODIS satellite images for 2000 – 2007. EVI data show the extent of vegetation cover and is thus inversely related to city growth. This measure acts to show the “greening” or “browning” of land around the city. Supplementing this data we have also spoken to more than 200 households within Nyala (both inside Internally Displaced Persons Camps and in homes within the city itself), where we asked residents to provide information about their housing situation, the dates of their arrival, the composition of their household members, and the reasons why they moved. Finally, we collected information on changes to the housing sector from urban planning agencies and rental agents living within the city. The combination of all of these methods allows for a rigorous understanding of the nature of city growth, changes to the spatial structure of the city, the forms of social dislocation that have occurred, and how this changed the way that people engaged with the city.

We therefore begin by reviewing the literature on urbanization, particularly as it pertains to Africa and the issue of conflict. We then discuss the background to the conflict in Darfur and Nyala’s role in providing a logistical nerve center and a place of refuge for the local population. From here, we outline the dynamics that are contributing to the exponential growth patterns over the last decade and the very distinct forms of spatial restructuring that emerged. Subsequently we address how this has changed patterns of life and engagement within the city. Finally, we analyze what these changes mean for Nyala as a major regional center and what this adds to our knowledge about the manner in which cities grow and change under conflict conditions.

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF CONFLICT URBANIZATION

Over recent decades, the literature on urbanization in Africa has grown significantly. Arising out of a frustration with the way that cities have been viewed through the hierarchical lens of developmental discourse, there has been a move instead to view all cities as “ordinary” and as important sites of urban analysis (Robinson 2002, 2006). Urbanization, which can be defined as the shift from a rural to an urban society, occurs as a result of a number of complex and intersecting dynamics which include, but are not limited to: economic restructuring, environmental degradation, political policies, religious or ethnic conflict, poverty, and food scarcity. These dynamics drive rural populations into the city where they seek survival and a better future for themselves and their families. In turn, urban centers are afflicted by overcrowding and significant increases to population density as new residents find their own forms of social organization within urban space. Such processes bring about a rapid expansion of the city’s footprint and with them, significant changes to the patterns of land use and ways of living within the city.

Such urbanization processes require alternative accounts to those offered historically. Conventional accounts of growth and change typically focus on cities in the United States or Europe, rather than cities often considered “off the global map” (Robinson 2002, 2006). For example, the 1920s Park-Burgess Chicago School’s ecological approach to city growth and decline has come under attack for not only its modernist assumptions, but also its allochronising tendencies towards new urban migrants (Robinson 2002, 2006;
Simone 2004; Myers 2011). Critics raise questions, for example, about the extent to which alienation, a blasé attitude, and individualism brought on by the anomic city, really characterize the urban experience of many migrants (Gluckman 1961; Mitchell 1968, 1969, 1987). Further, the Burgess “invasion and succession” model, which assumed that the city grew outwards from the downtown or CBD, also came under fire for posing a single logic of growth and a somewhat impoverished analysis of political economy (Scott 1988, 1993, 1998; Abbott 2002).

As a result of these critiques, the modernist discourse that once held sway in the early parts of the 20th century began to lose relevance. On the matter of urban expansion, many questioned whether it was correct to see the city as a coherent whole organized by a specific logic of growth. In particular, writers from what has been termed the “LA School,” influenced by postmodernist thinking, have suggested a much less coherent picture—one that saw the city as a place of heterogeneity, disjuncture, global restructuring, and competing lives and imaginaries (Dear 2000, 2001; Garreau 1991; Scott 1988, 1993, 2000; Davis 1990, 1992, Ong 1994; Soja 1989, 1996, 2000; Sorkin 1992). Consequently, far from singular explanations for the desire of residents to move outwards, such writers were much more concerned with diverse urban experiences and the play of larger structural forces in the political economy to account for urban growth and change.

Some of the themes of this school have made their way into writings about urban life and global political economy on Africa. For example, Garth Myers’ (2011:21) recent book, *African Cities*, utilizes Soja’s (2000) concept of *postmetropolis* to investigate the restructuring of Lusaka, Zambia, in the wake of the displacement, new populations, crime, and poor services, but also increasing cosmopolitanism and connections to the global economy. Pointing to Chris Abani’s (2009) argument that LA is “the quintessential African city,” because of its similarity to the social geography of Lagos, Myers (2011: 27) understands some of the vulnerabilities, challenges, and possibilities facing Africa’s urban population by de-centering urban analysis and starting from the perspective of African cities.

De-centering means analyzing Africa’s cities from the standpoint of post-colonial dynamics, diversity, informality, and cosmopolitanism, but also pervasive violence. Echoing some of the ideas of “re-making” that are found in the work of AbdouMaliq Simone (2004), the idea is to analyze the creative ways local populations engage with life in African cities in response to population movement and new forms of social organization, and how that differs from elsewhere across the globe. Whether through contestation, informal engagement between different actors in the city, or even forms of community support that are not immediately visible at first glance, the goal is to understand some of the changes to the subjectivities and interaction patterns of Africa’s residents and how they contribute to city growth and change.

Yet, given the diversity of African cities, this project is an enormous task. Just as the growth patterns and forms of interaction that applied to Chicago might be unhelpful in understanding the dynamics reshaping L.A., the logics of economic growth that created distinctive patterns of urban morphology and forms of sociability in, say, South Africa will have very little reference to the specificities that create and drive city expansion elsewhere in Africa, such as Sudan. Of course, there may be legacies of post-colonialism in common, but the effects of ethnic and religious stratification, political culture, and not least, conflicts create very different outcomes.
Consider, for example, the issue of population movement. Are we to assume that populations who move for reasons of perceived economic mobility (however precarious that dream may be) are the same as those who move because their lives are at risk due to war? Are the locations where they arrive and their forms of engagement with the city the same or perhaps more transient? What is the relationship between the rural and urban (or peri-urban), when populations cannot disperse in the way they might choose due to threats from armed militias, helicopter gunships, and government-sponsored violence? As we go on to show, conflict has its own dynamics that have not only intended consequences, but many unintended ones too.

Cities in conflict conditions present at once significant dynamism, innovation, opportunity, diversification and cosmopolitanism. At the same time, they can also be “wounded”—that is, places of violence, extreme inequality, desperation, dependence, injustice, and fear (Myers 2011:138). Such situations are not mutually exclusive, either. Desperation can produce new economies, new forms of innovation, and the ability to extract profit and possibility from the direst of circumstances. Violence can reconfigure markets—as in the case we describe below, housing markets. It forces the city to grow outwards, as residents deal with large increases in rental costs and the influx of new and cosmopolitan populations from all over the globe into the center. Nor are the effects of violence confined to spatial dispersion; it can also alter the practices of the population as they find their own ways to navigate around the restless circuits of a city that is forever on the move (Jamal 2003; Diouf 2003; Pierterse 2010).

The relatively new literature on conflict urbanization addresses these processes. For example, Beall, Goodfellow, and Rodgers (2011: 9) have shown that when conflict is present, cities become hubs of a burgeoning war economy, nerve-centers for the logistical infrastructure of aid operations, and supply-points for general provisions. Those displaced move to cities to obtain goods and pool resources in order to survive. As Vlassenbrot and Büscher (2009: 9) have shown in the case of Goma in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the city under conflict conditions acts as a cross-border transaction point for valuable resource extraction to regional markets in neighboring countries. The profits received from such trade result in the building of new houses and hotels, thereby fundamentally changing the morphology and character of urban space.

If trade is one part of the growth equation, then security is another. Under conditions of conflict, cities can provide a stable location from which to ride out the storm. For example, Beall, Goodfellow, and Rodgers (2011: 9) argue that “somewhat counter intuitively, rapid urbanization and urban stability often go hand in hand when a civil war is raging nearby.” Yet, as we go on to show, even though there is a presumption of greater security within a city when war is raging nearby, the dangers associated with conflict have a habit of insinuating themselves into city life in ways that can often distribute populations in unintended ways. For example, there is a marked difference between understandings of insecurity which operate at the population level and the issue of risk which is a calculus of its own, more often than not connected to a family’s relationship to prevailing political conditions. Under conflict conditions, even those families who exist in relatively secure areas of cities may displace their own family members to other locations to avoid the scrutiny of the security apparatus of an authoritarian state. This is especially the case if a particular member of the family is considered to have “risky” connections to armed movements or groups whose interests are antithetical to the interests of political groups in charge. Consequently, while insecurity may be one element of concern to populations...
living under conflict conditions, risk, or the ability to comport oneself in specific ways that do not draw the attention of security agents, is a calculus of its own. These subjective evaluations of risk enter into the refusal to house certain people, the art of disguise of certain populations, and decisions not to enter certain parts of the city. Risk speaks volumes to the very particular dynamics that shape cities under conflict conditions, thereby producing spatial configurations that may not be obvious.

Finally, because cities are sites where resources may be obtained and refuge negotiated, they also provide habitation for an endless variety of new residents. In addition to providing shelter for internally displaced persons, cities grow because they provide accommodation to humanitarian aid workers and, perhaps more surreptitiously, cover for paramilitary groups and militant groups involved in conflict. As Branch (2008: 7) has pointed out in the case of Gulu, northern Uganda, the economy, dominated by the humanitarian industry, is large enough to support a surplus population of 90,000 displaced people even without food aid distribution. The influx of aid workers and their considerable disposable income can therefore change a town beyond recognition, restructuring not only its housing sector and spatial structure, but also its economic and social activities—formal or otherwise.

Taken together, this literature suggests that while insecurity, violence, and poverty can drive urban change in many cities throughout the world, the nature of change in cities experiencing violent conflict or war is more urgent and profound. Conflict shapes everything from city growth and the economy to the ways that local inhabitants engage the city and move around. These dynamics work together to change the size, shape, and character of cities in ways that produce a distinct socio-spatial structure. To show how some of these dynamics work in greater detail, we analyze the city of Nyala and the particular problems and opportunities it has faced since the onset of the Darfur conflict. Far from being bowed by the violence and insecurity, Nyala’s residents have also found their own, very distinctive ways to interact with the city. These particular forms of engagement have contributed to the re-making of urban space.

NYALA: CONTINUITY, CONFLICT, AND CHANGE

Nyala is now the second largest city in Sudan, and the only significant city in South Darfur State with a population of 2,960,000 people (Nations Online Project 2011). It has been the logistical nerve center for aid operations during the Darfur crisis and has experienced exponential growth as the world entered the region to provide assistance. Its origins can be traced from the period of the Daju empire, when the name “Nyala” was given to a place of gathering (Arkell 1952; Thelwall 1980). Over time its importance began to grow as it became a key marketplace for cross border trade and an administrative center for the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government following the fall of the Darfur Sultanate in 1916. Noted as the site of one of the most serious uprisings against the British in 1921, it became a place where empire was administered from the merkaz, or center, which housed the first brick building, built in 1917.

While Nyala continued to grow and played an important role as a trading and administrative center throughout much of the 20th century, its importance as a regional hub was sealed in 1994, when Darfur was carved up into three states following the revival of the Native Administration System. Under these new arrangements, Nyala became the
capital of Southern Darfur State, while el-Fasher, 205 kilometers to the North, became the capital of Northern Darfur State, and el-Geneina, which is 306 kilometers to the west of Nyala, became the capital of Western Darfur State. This transition had the effect of attracting new city residents associated with governmental functions and of course, those who were keen to capitalize on burgeoning economic opportunities. In the 1960s, the establishment of a railroad from Khartoum helped to increase the population and to attract traders from the center of the country. Although road and rail infrastructure to the city has been seriously damaged following years of neglect, Nyala airport has been, and continues to be, a busy and important hub for those coming into the region from Sudan’s capital, Khartoum.

Instability in the Darfur region has a long history. Besides imperial intervention in the region during the 19th and 20th centuries by the Turks, Egyptians, and British which set group against group, recent years have also witnessed ethnic or “tribal” conflict based around claims to land and livelihoods. The influx of arms into Darfur from a cross border war between Libya and Chad in the 1980s exacerbated hostilities. The emergence of Altajamu’u Al’ Arabi or the Arab Alliance in 1987 escalated tensions between so called “African” and “Arab” tribes in both urban and rural areas, leading to increased raids from the late 1980s onwards (Daly 2007; Flint and de Waal 2005; Bartlett 2008, 2009). Subsequent government efforts to arm the “Arab” side, plus the creation of wandering militias known as Murahileen, made raids on villages more frequent, leaving most residents feeling unsafe. As if this situation was not problematic enough, widespread famine in 1984 together with ongoing desertification acted to increase fear and desperation even further.

It was, however, an armed incursion into the region which aimed to unite the marginalized peoples of Western and Southern Sudan that ignited the current conflict. The 1991 incursion into Darfur from the South by Daoud Bolad was a failure, but resulted in local militiamen, or proxies hired by the Sudanese government to quash dissent, engaging an escalating program of harassment and intimidation against villagers (Harir 1993; Deng 1995; Bartlett, 2008). The constant threat of village burnings and summary executions increased the sense of insecurity significantly. In many cases, it forced villagers to leave rural areas and head towards the city in search of safety.

What started as random burning and reprisal attacks later became a systematic program to wipe out “African” tribes in the belief that this would prevent any further uprisings. From the late 1990s this campaign became far more systematized as government personnel and military hardware escalated the displacement. Village burnings and campaigns against local villagers grew commonplace, leaving locals with the feeling that it was only a matter of time before they would be attacked. Finally in the latter part of the 1990s, Al Haj Atta Al Mannan (Governor of Southern Darfur) gave locals an ultimatum to get off rural land and centralize around towns and cities. This threat emanated from a program that the Sudanese government had launched at the time to resettle their own supporters in rural areas and to re-title land in their favor. As a result, local villagers headed towards the city where they felt there might be some security and of course, safety in numbers (Bartlett 2008).

Following the Sudan Liberation Army’s (SLA) armed attack on Al-Fasher air base in April 2003, the crisis escalated substantially. Throughout late 2004 and 2005, the conflict ranged south from its original epicenter west of el-Fasher towards Nyala. Data from the World Food Program (WFP) shows that between April 2004—when WFP began its
operations—until April 2005, the number of IDPs in the city exploded, growing from less than 100,000 to over 700,000. Consistent reports of violence and continued deliveries of food aid to the region from 2005 suggest that the number of IDPs held relatively constant during the period between 2005 and 2009.

As the conflict came to the world’s attention, so aid agencies arrived to protect the internally displaced. Organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), US Agency for Development (USAID), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), World Food Program (WFP), Mercycorps, Oxfam, Caritas, Red Cross, Tearfund, Merlin, World Vision, together with Islamic charities such as Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid, all established offices in the center of Nyala. This resulted in a substantial inflow of foreign INGO workers who were paid considerably more than the prevailing local wage. According to the United Nations, the number of foreign employees registered in Darfur rose from 586 to 2800 between 2003 and 2008, quadrupling this population. This number was further augmented by large numbers of local aid professionals.

The largest of the camps in Nyala today is called Kalma, and resides southeast of the city on a disused railway line. According to OCHA figures in 2007, the inhabitants of Kalma camp total 91,800. Close by, Beleil camp houses another 21,000 people. Together, this agglomeration of people forms the largest internally displaced population (IDP) camp in the vicinity of Nyala and constitutes the single biggest stress on resources. To the north of the city, Otash camp houses 57,000 people and Derieg camp, 23,000. To the South across Wadi Birlii (Birlii River) are the camps of Mosey and El-Sereif that house close to 17,000 people. Finally, inside Nyala itself there are camps that house approximately 20,000 people.

These dynamics demonstrate how, during times of war, urban centers become powerful nodes in the landscape of conflict and humanitarian aid. First, under conditions of conflict, cities tend to exert a centripetal effect, drawing in locals from surrounding rural hinterlands where security is poor. Second, in times of war, cities also act as locations for information exchange about the status of loved ones, as well as key transport hubs. Third, cities serve as logistical stepping off points for those involved in aid delivery. For aid workers, a city such as Nyala becomes the place of initial immersion in the local culture, a place to be de-briefed after return from conflict sites, and a place to network with other aid professionals. All of these processes produce tremendous urban growth.

POPULATION DISPLACEMENT & SPATIAL RESTRUCTURING

Early research on Nyala shows that growth rates were relatively constant since Sudan’s independence in 1956. As Table 1 shows, the annual growth rate from 1956 to 1993 ranged from approximately six percent to about 10 per cent per annum (Ali 1999; Eltayeb 2002). The arrival of rail to the city through the laying of track from Khartoum may explain the higher growth rates from 1965 to 1973.

However, from the later part of the 1990s, the growth rate rose dramatically. Figure 1 shows the growth of the town over the period 1972–2008, calculated using Landsat imagery:

The first two bands shown are for the years 1972 and 1986, respectively, revealing the moderate growth levels in Table 1. The year-on-year change in total urban area (including
villages) between 1972 and 1986 was about 116 ha/year. The 1999 band shows tremendous growth in the city footprint; from 1986 to 1999, the average yearly increase in the urban footprint was 432 ha/year. This corresponds to the period of time during which Nyala was designated a regional administrative center, the Sudanese government instituted urban centralization programs, and the conflict generally heightened regional insecurity. Clearly visible are large increases around the urban core in 2000 and 2001, and substantial increases in the IDP camp areas since 2004. Much of the growth in 2001 was to the south and west of the city, along the established road network. The city seems to stretch towards both Otash and the southeastern IDP camps after 2003. Taken together, and especially after 1999, inflows of displaced persons accommodated within the city or in camps around the city and large inflows of aid workers dramatically changed the shape and character of Nyala.

Table 2 shows the considerable differences in the cost of rental properties between 2002 (before the conflict started) and 2007 when aid workers had been in the city for some time.

Behind the spatial changes are external shocks to the local economy. First, the influx of international aid personnel with disposable income resulted in a scarcity of suitable housing and dramatically increased rents in the center of the city, driving locals out towards the periphery. Suitable housing in this case meant relative security from the violence. In order to procure such scarce housing, aid agencies typically signed one year contracts in
advance so as to guarantee housing for their workers. This in turn inflated the rental market, since rental incomes proved to be an attractive option for Sudanese nationals who already owned housing stock. Consequently, many of those who owned housing rented it to aid agencies at elevated rents, moving outward from the center to build again in parts of the city where prices were cheaper. Some of these owners were able to use rental income to build desirable properties for themselves elsewhere in the city outside the downtown area. One man we interviewed informed us that the house next to him had been rented by an NGO for 72,000 Sudanese pounds, which is roughly equivalent to $33,000 dollars. The rental terms included payment for one year in advance. At these prices, the monthly rent of $2750 approaches a level one might expect to pay in London, Chicago, or even San Francisco.
Table 3. Number of Houses Rented from One Local Realtor’s Records

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Name</th>
<th>Number of Rental INGO properties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>El-Cinema</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El-Jamhuria</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El-Matar</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El-Emtidat</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El-Nahadah</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>El-Mazad</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sham El-Nasim</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: University of San Francisco, Economic Geography of Conflict in Darfur Research Project.

Price increases of such a magnitude primarily affected properties in the center of the city which were deemed to be both secure and to have plentiful services. Table 3, which is drawn from the books of one generous informant working in real estate in Nyala, shows the number of properties rented to foreign INGOs in the central zones of Nyala.

As Table 3 shows, El-Matar experienced a ten-fold increase in price. This area contains relatively new housing, much of which has been built to foreign specifications after the aid worker arrival in 2003. El-Matar and El-Cinema are also desirable to aid workers since they are close to the main central market and are in locations which have a good variety of local services. Housing in this area has therefore been rented to local aid organizations for residential use, but also for office space and guest accommodation. Another resident informed us that parking had become a similar growth industry, with the local soccer club renting out its space for INGO vehicles.

Besides the higher level of income of INGO workers, the second exogenous shock to the local housing market came from expatriates who, having left the city to work in countries such as Saudi Arabia, were now buying plots within the city as a form of investment. With the price of housing plots rising, these investments could reap rich rewards, not
only from rental income, but also from the price of the land itself, which had skyrocketed overnight.

While landlords and investors benefitted from the conflict, this dynamic hurt local renters without connections to INGOs. In contrast to those who were able to rent their properties for inflated rents, those without property were left at the mercy of a very expensive rental market. Many families were forced to move to insecure parts of the city that might have been desirable before the conflict started, but now represented significant danger to those living there. The displacement did not occur slowly either: it often occurred by jumping from the center to the periphery in one go to places that were less secure and consequently less expensive.\(^7\)

The ways that these decisions were reached are interesting in and of themselves, reflecting concerns not only over insecurity, but also over risk. Typically when one considers the reasons why people might decide to move, it is more often than not a matter of desirable location and possibilities for one’s family. In Nyala, however, a different calculus is at play. First, there is the matter of insecurity. This is a fairly general problem that exists across most of the city. Robberies, assault, and generalized violence were on the increase in the majority of places. Escaping this insecurity is difficult unless one lives in areas where security is tight—in “first class neighborhoods” or in places where residents are living in government housing or where military presence is pronounced, such as the center of the city. Even then, families who enjoy the patronage of the Sudanese government have to represent themselves in certain ways in order for that assistance to continue. Any indication of involvement with “rebel groups” or nefarious activities will lose them this housing and displace them to another part of the city. With an authoritarian state and its security apparatus looking over their shoulder, they therefore have to consider not only the problems of generalized insecurity, but calculate the risk of interacting with certain influential people in central secure areas.

One household that we encountered had a family member who had just come from the Jebel Marra Mountains, a rebel stronghold, sporting dreadlocks in his hair, a style considered to be the main indicator of rebel activity.\(^8\) Forced to hide this individual in their house for fear that government agents might see him, the family was planning to smuggle him out to a place on the outskirts of the city. Other young people who came from the fighting in the Jebel Marra, wearing their hair in dreadlocks, told us that they were forced to live in areas away from the city center. If they went to the center where the security and intelligence apparatus was located and were caught, they would be tied up in the local market near the taxi rank and subjected to a ritual head-shaving before being carried off to jail.\(^9\) These concerns about navigating the city were so pronounced for people coming to the city from the mountains that they took a circuitous route in order to avoid security checkpoints. Once there, to avoid surveillance, they donned the garb and headwear of a religious person. While in the city and living in relatives’ houses, they had to be careful not to draw attention to themselves in case a neighbor might inform on them. In a place where money is tight and informing on someone to the security personnel can pay off, the presence of any person out of the ordinary creates risk. This often forces families to move elsewhere within Nyala to avoid this problem and to get away from locals who start to know their “business”.

The importance of risk as a factor that shapes the socio-spatial layout of Nyala can also be illustrated by the case of Fallujah—an area to the north of the center of the city named after the Iraqi town in al Anbar province. According to local sources, this area, which
has been settled by Janjaweed militias, has had no increase in its property prices despite being in a relatively desirable location. The reason for this situation is not a matter of insecurity per se. For the people connected to the Janjaweed, the area is both stable and secure. Yet because the Janjaweed are perpetrators of violence in Darfur, with a reputation for unpredictability and collaboration with the government, neither aid agencies nor local people have been prepared to live there. As a consequence, while house prices rose dramatically across the general area, Fallujah remained unaffected.

Those residents displaced to the edge of the city bring new meaning to the phrase, “living life on the edge.” Settling in this area from elsewhere, the people are far more likely to fall prey to local Janjaweed militias or gangs looking to extract income from the less powerful. They are also the prey of members of the security services who are looking for those who might be linked to the armed movements. Amenities and services are scarce or non-existent, forcing people to travel long distances in order to obtain the most basic of supplies. In many sectors of this periphery or peri-urban transition zone, newcomers are in fact not from the rural areas; those populations were decimated during the conflict years ago. Rather, they are residents from elsewhere in the city who have either been displaced or who are trying to resettle from the IDP camps.

Data from the Planning and Survey Department of Nyala show that, in sectors to the west of the city, significant numbers of homes were being built. However, these new homes are not just for existing urban residents. In one particular area, in the west of the city, just over 20 percent of the 11,152 houses built in the last few years are for resettling IDPs from the camps into the city itself. The rationale for building such houses is to prevent many of the displaced from returning to premium rural land, which the Government of Sudan has already promised to its supporters. Therefore, at the same time that people are being displaced from the center to the edge of the city, external residents of IDP camps are required to make the transition and move into the city.

Finally, if the housing market in Nyala has had a significant effect on the nature of land use, then so too have the internally displaced persons. This is seen in the decline of vegetative cover around the city. An EVI measure within a radius of 25 km around the city of Nyala, using pixel data obtained from the University of San Francisco Landscape Ecology and Ecosystem Research Laboratory, shows a marked decrease as one gets closer to either the camps or to the city. A lower EVI reading suggests less vegetation, documenting the significant deforestation occurring around the outskirts of the city.

Across the entire period studied, we find that there is a tendency towards less vegetation overall in the entire 25 km radius, which is consistent with a general propensity for development of forested land. However, after the arrival of the main group of IDPs, the tendency in the overall sample is towards more greenness. The EVI is 17 percent higher in the post-inflow period in the entire sample than in the pre-inflow period. This is consistent with abandonment of agricultural land and concentration of population in towns. When we consider the effects on vegetation of being closer to the city or an IDP camp, we find that there are significant differences between the pre- and post-May 2004 periods. In particular, for land close to the city center, one is more likely to see deforestation. This implies that land between the camps and the city is likely to be developed. For land outside the city center, distance from camps increases vegetative cover, suggesting afforestation or land abandonment. This implies that land on the non-city side of the camps is actually experiencing less use now than it did previously, a finding that supports the anecdotes of low security in the camp peripheries.
PATTERNS OF CITY LIFE

If the size and shape of Nyala is changing dramatically as newcomers access the city, then so too is the everyday life of its residents. The expansion of the city’s footprint together with the influx of very different types of residents has produced not only interesting forms of niche gentrification, but also a variety of different ways of existing under conflict. On one hand, there is evidence of western consumption patterns emanating from the presence of higher disposable incomes in the city; on the other, there are new survival strategies of recycling unwanted goods and engaging in informal employment.
In the center of Nyala, new kinds of markets and services have developed for the incoming population. Tourist restaurants serving Turkish, Lebanese, Egyptian, and Italian food, which were not present before, now exist in the downtown area. For example, a local man working for the largest Sudanese NGO told me that he was astonished to be invited to a pizza restaurant in the downtown area by an International NGO (INGO). Besides the fact that he did not know what pizza was, he found the whole scene to be buzzing with khawagas (white westerners), making Nyala appear to him to be cosmopolitan indeed! These changes are especially odd to a Darfuri, who typically prides himself on food cooked in his own home. External food bought in the market, except for traditional fare such as drinks like chai (tea), halawa (sweets), and some occasional Shaaiya (grilled meat) or Aseeda (millet porridge), is a significant departure from what has been available before.

New supermarkets and grocery shops have also been established. For example, in locations where the city has been deforested, the land has been used to grow particular kinds of vegetables for use almost exclusively by the aid worker population. Some of the more fancy vegetables are finding their way in specialist groceries which charge prices well in excess of what local residents can afford to pay. Dairies for milk production for the whole population are also on that land. Elsewhere in the city new kinds of western-style services have also appeared on the scene, as shown in the picture above.

The kinds of establishments that have emerged are not oriented towards city residents as a whole or to those who are living in camps. Bars and restaurants like the “Beatles” café and the “New Camp David Restaurant” have emerged that have a very particular type of clientele. Since Arabic is the lingua franca of the region, English signage on such niche enterprises aims at the foreign aid-worker population, and, perhaps minimally, at the local INGO worker population with additional disposable income to spend.

Everyday drinks like chai (tea) have also become part of this new culture. In places like Suk El Mawashi, foreign workers go to drink tea with colleagues. As one local man
remarked, “tea was not the only thing on sale.” Even from cursory observation, it was clear that young women from the IDP camps vie with each other to collect the glasses, since contact with international workers is deemed valuable. Behind the tea counter, prices for all manner of “personal services” are now part of the menu. In an area where prostitution was not prevalent before and where the propriety of women is considered extremely important, this dynamic is also now affecting the informal markets in a way that has not occurred before.

Within the city, many guest houses and hotels have also appeared. In particular, after the influx of humanitarian aid agencies, hotels such as Abu Mazin hotel, El-Matar hotel, and Suni-Safari hotel have emerged. Finally, in the informal sector, many young people and impoverished members of the refugee camps act as Shaiyyala or “barrow boys” to carry goods by wheelbarrow for their more affluent neighbors or for groups within the camps. In the market, an informal trade goes on in aid items that were previously supplied for use in the IDP camps. Not useful for the purpose they were intended for, they are now part of a barter economy. A new kind of “war economy” has emerged in many of the camps based upon trade in stolen four-wheel drive vehicles, satellite phones, and other assets stolen from the humanitarian agencies. These have become illicit commodities for barter or sale by those who have acquired them in the IDP camps (Buchanan-Smith et al. 2011). Given the war’s destruction of the economic infrastructure of Darfur and the displacement of many food producers, the lack of cash has resulted in a resurgence of informal trade in kind as a way to survive.16

16

CONCLUSION: A NEW MORPHOLOGY OF CONFLICT?

It is clear that there have been significant changes to Nyala’s footprint and composition since the onset of the Darfur crisis. The shape of the city has changed dramatically as a result of the inflow of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons (IDPs) and the largest humanitarian aid operation in the world with its attendant source of income. While some of the aid agencies have now left Nyala following a government ruling, there are still marked effects on the spatial distribution of the population and the welfare of Nyala’s residents. At the height of the aid-worker boom, the scarcity of secure accommodation vastly increased the price of rental property. This created displacement to the edges of the city. It negatively affected local renters both in terms of their access to services and the risk with which they live their lives. At the same time, the influx of large amounts of foreign disposable income has created new niche markets for goods and luxury services.

What can we learn more generally from these developments in Nyala? From the standpoint of city growth, it is clear that while Nyala may share dynamics in common with other cities in Africa, the specific context of Darfur and its relationship to conflict are extremely important in creating the changes that have occurred. The city’s links to the outside world through the aid economy have changed much about the size, shape, and composition of the city, including house prices, gentrification, consumption styles, and lifestyle choices. However, there are other interesting developments in the ways that people settle in the city and navigate its streets that are related to the insecurity and risk associated with the conflict. It becomes clear that, while those with money can find ways to mitigate the worst excesses of conflict, this option is not always available for others who have to turn to informal methods in order to survive.
For the existing local urban population (who can also be extremely impoverished), the effect of many thousands of newcomers puts pressure on local services, restructures some forms of consumption, and places devastating pressure on local housing markets. For long-time citizens, displacement is often not associated with war per se, but rather with the side effects of war, such as the influx of newcomers and aid providers. What was a relatively stable housing market in the city has become unstable, driving long-term renters from the center towards the city’s edge. In addition to this problem, the infrastructure of cities like Nyala is simply not developed enough to handle the extent and rapidity of population growth brought about by conflict. The net result of this situation is that long-term residents of the city are either deprived of services that were once available to them, or experience diminished provision of such services, since city residents are forced to compete with outsiders.

Finally, as far as the aid worker sector is concerned, there are multiple effects as it interacts with the local population. Of course, many of these effects can be positive, assisting locals to obtain goods and services and addressing other needs. Yet some of these effects can also be negative. In particular, there is the issue of creating additional risk for city residents who are already juggling a heavy-handed security apparatus and who now find themselves displaced to the periphery of the city. Further, the gentrification of Nyala’s city center may create new markets for food and entertainment, but more often than not, these services do little to assist local residents with the daily struggles in their lives.

Moving forward, these dynamics are likely to have lasting effects on the city of Nyala. In particular, while the Sudanese government’s attempts to limit external aid suppliers decreased the size of the aid population, there are still significantly large inflows of external capital which continue to exert effects on consumption patterns, housing markets, etc. In the housing sector, the swift growth of the city may have a number of outcomes. If locals do not return to their original locations after the conflict, Nyala will continue to consolidate its position as Sudan’s second city, but may achieve this at the expense of the rural communities and the agricultural sector. If locals do return home, Nyala may witness an implosion of its housing market, especially when aid agencies finally withdraw altogether and demand decreases.

For Nyala, conflict-related trends have given birth to a new city: one that in many respects is more cosmopolitan, wealthy, and international, yet for many living within its bounds, is more insecure, risky, unstable, and economically volatile. Population growth has increased Nyala’s importance relative to its hinterland and the rest of Sudan, yet this prominence has been bought at significant cost.

For urban theorists, Nyala offers lessons about the effects of conflict on city growth, socio-spatial form, and the local economy. We hope that the analysis presented here will open up new lines of inquiry, since such cities now constitute not only a new frontier in our understanding of urban change, but are also likely to be the location of most urbanization in the foreseeable future.
Royal, Caitlin Mathews, and Jenta Russell. In the later stages of the project, we would also like to thank our researcher, Adeeb Yousif AbdelAlla, for the many hours of work he put into this project, together with our team in Nyala, who, for security reasons, shall remain anonymous. Finally, we are grateful for the careful reading of the manuscript by two anonymous referees, whose comments substantially improved the paper. Any remaining errors are our own.

Notes

1 See Figure 1 below, which presents a graphic of the growth patterns in Nyala from 1972 to date.

2 In 1921, one of the condominium officials described Nyala “as widely scattered over a large stretch of land,” with zabtia offices, a square, the home of the District Commissioner, a suk (market), and tukls or huts which housed many of Nyala’s residents. Sudan Notes and Records (SNR), Vol. 23, page 104, Khartoum 1940.

3 Trade to Nyala has typically occurred from inside Sudan itself, from the Central African Republic and Chad, which has supplied Nyala with perfumes, coffee, ivory, and spices among other things. It has also come from the al-Kufra route through Libya and from trade in electronic goods from the Gulf countries.

4 It is important to note that the politicized terminology of “Africans” and “Arabs” is a relatively new phenomenon in Darfur. Prior to interference of Chad and Libya and the emergence of a plan to create an Arab belt across the Sahel, people may have used identifying labels to denote certain kinds of lifestyles. However, in recent years such titles have been used in a political way to describe who has rights and who does not. They have also been used as a justification for murder and destruction of livelihoods.

5 Information obtained from local interviews conducted in Darfur in 2003 and 2004 by our research team.

6 Hectares per year.

7 Information obtained in the research team’s interviews with local realtors in May 2010.

8 Information obtained from interviews with Nyala residents returning from “rebel” strongholds 5/1/2011, 5/9/2011, and 5/10/2011. Dreadlocks have become synonymous with opposition to the government in Darfur and are more often than not the reason for arbitrary arrests, detention, and torture by the intelligence agency. Males in the mountains continue to style their hair in this way since it suggests a closeness to “African” culture and a distance from the “Arabizing” tendencies of the Sudanese Government. Hair style, above anything else, has become a gesture of political defiance.

9 Interview with Nyala resident 5/10/11.

10 Data obtained from interviews conducted in Nyala in March and April 2010.

11 Janjawid militias are the notorious militia groups in Darfur who work in concert with the Sudanese government to destroy villages.

12 Information obtained from interviews with residents in al-Geer and surrounding peri-urban areas in April and May 2010 and January 2012.

13 These changes were highlighted by an announcement made by the Government of Sudan at the end of December 2009. The announcement stated that people in the displaced person camps should either make the transition to housing within the city or return to their rural land. The suggestion to return to rural areas was made with the explicit knowledge that the land of many of the displaced had already been reassigned to Government of Sudan sympathizers. In Darfur, the allocation of land is made on the basis of use, rather than ownership per se. Consequently, if one does not return to land within a five year period, land can be reassigned.

14 In order to compute this index, we apply regression analysis, using the natural log of EVI as the dependent variable, and measuring the impacts of distance to the city center, to the nearest refugee camps, and to the railroad before and after the main inflow of IDPs in May of 2004. The estimation strategy controls for both time and seasonal trends, along with the baseline value of the vegetation index through a fixed effects
estimation. The formal specification and results can be found in Alix-Garcia, Bartlett, and Saah (2010) with only the intuition reported here.

15 Tribal languages such as Fur Massalit and Zaghawa are also in frequent use.

16 The emergence of a barter system was reported to our researchers in the process of collecting data. For example, blankets given out by aid organizations are often exchanged for sugar or other staples. Since 2009, there has been a decrease in aid provision due to the Sudanese government’s tightening of regulations. However, many of the goods acquired by banditry can still be found for sale within the camps and other locations in the city.

17 One dollar is roughly equivalent to 2.2 Sudanese pounds.

REFERENCES


Crecimiento Urbano bajo Condiciones de Conflicto: Una Mirada desde Nyala Darfur (Anne Bartlett, Jennifer Alix-García, y David S. Saah)

Resumen
El mundo en desarrollo de hoy pone en cuestión las miradas convencionales sobre el crecimiento y el cambio urbano. En África, por ejemplo, los conflictos y las reubicaciones masivas están reconfigurando el paisaje urbano de formas que son difíciles de ignorar. Este artículo analiza cómo el conflicto y la llegada de una gran infraestructura de ayuda humanitaria influyen en la dinámica del crecimiento de la ciudad y hasta generan una estructura espacial, bolsones de gentrificación y una economía informal de Nyala, Darfur. Usando información de un estudio de campo de tres años, mostramos cambios en el tamaño y en la organización socio-espacial de la ciudad, cambios en la forma cómo la ciudad creció, así como los factores que dirigieron estos cambios. Observamos patrones de interacción entre los habitantes de Nyala y entre estos y los actuales habitantes en Campamentos de Desplazados Internos (CDI) en las afueras de la ciudad. Mostramos que las preocupaciones de inseguridad y riesgo son de vital importancia para comprender el conflicto en el proceso de urbanización. Dicho conflicto genera una estructura social particular en tanto desplazados internos, trabajadores de cooperación internacional y antiguos habitantes de la ciudad se desplazan al interior de la ciudad.