



# Political Economy Analysis in Sudan: Handy Tools for Everyone?

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## Acronyms

CA	Contextual Analysis
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CSO	Civil society organisation
DFID	Department for International Development
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
FFC	Forces for Freedom and Change
ICC	International Criminal Court
KLP	Kullana Liltanmia (All of Us for Development)
LPDP	Local Partnerships for Dialogue Programme
NCP	National Congress Party
NGO	Non-government organisation
PEA	Political Economy Analysis
RDC	Regime Dismantling Committee
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SSGP	Sudan Stability and Growth Programme
TMC	Transitional Military Forces
UK	United Kingdom

## Executive summary

Based on a case study of the **Kullana Liltanmia (All of Us for Development) (KLP) Contextual Analysis (CA) course in Sudan**, this paper tells the story of how training and capacity building in Political Economy Analysis (PEA) made a difference in the lives and experiences of those involved, including in particular young people.

The paper highlights three critical lessons:

- At the *country level*, the twists and turns of Sudan's recent history reinforce the importance of people deepening their understanding of what is really going on, in order to make better informed (if not the best or least-worst) choices. The skills and mindset of both broad and localised PEA capacity can make a difference to people living in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where navigating complexity and uncertainty is a daily reality.
- At the level of *strategic programming*, the potential of PEA remains under-utilised. There is considerable scope for capacity in PEA to support not only ordinary people across a range of different occupations and educational levels, but also prominent actors who may eventually play key roles in political processes, and whose choices can affect the longer-term prospects for stability and peace. This becomes even more imperative in the context of the war in Sudan, which now involves a plethora of external actors.
- At the level of the *experiment in the KLP CA course*, this story reinforces the paramount importance of adapting and grounding PEA training in a common understanding among its intended participants, shaping it through their insights and experience. It also highlights how essential it is to nurture PEA skills and mindsets not only in stable contexts but also in challenging, more dangerous and uncertain ones. Supporting this vital capability during periods of hiatus, fast-moving transitions, and even active conflict is a public good; and it requires courage and creativity on the part of the donors, course designers, implementers and participants.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 provides an introduction setting out the broad context of Sudan within which the KLP CA training took place. Section 2 describes the 30-year period of al-Bashir's regime (1989-2019). Section 3 focuses on successive UK governance programmes in Sudan between 2015 and 2019. Section 4 describes the KLP CA course (2017-2018) and its development. Section 5 looks at the revolutionary hiatus and brief transition to civilian rule in Sudan (2017-2018). This is followed by an account in Section 6 of the 2019-2023 transitional phase and dashed hopes for a move to civilian rule with the outbreak of a civil war that has led to exceptional violence (including weaponised sexual violence), displacement and hunger.

Section 7 concludes with reflections on missed opportunities to capitalise on the KLP CA experiment, and with recommendations on the need for continued support on PEA for Sudanese people and organisations.

# 1. Introduction

Based on a case study of the **Kullana Liltanmia (All of Us for Development) (KLP) Contextual Analysis (CA) course in Sudan**, in this paper we argue that the skills and mindset of broad and localised Political Economy Analysis (PEA) capacity can make a tangible difference to people living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, where navigating dangerous complexity is a daily reality. The paper also contends that there is under-utilised potential for PEA capacity to support not only ordinary people across a range of different occupations and educational levels, but also prominent actors who may eventually play key roles in intricate political processes, and whose choices can affect the longer-term prospects for stability and peace in Sudan. We conclude by suggesting that the fact that PEA training cannot always rely on stable contexts makes it even more important to consider ways to conduct it during periods of hiatus, fast-moving transitions – and even active conflict – as a form of essential capability and as a public good.

We develop our arguments by telling a story about a group of Sudanese people who have practised PEA in Sudan, from the last year of the 30-year regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019) up to the Sudanese revolution (2018-2019) and the current civil war (April 2023-present). This group comprises the architects and participants of a PEA course – called Kullana Liltanmia (All of Us for Development) (KLP) Contextual Analysis (CA) – which was conducted in 2017-2018 under the auspices of a UK-funded programme implemented by the British Council. Since 2020, this story has also been the focus of a case study on participatory approaches in the bi-annual Political Economy Analysis in Action training provided by The Policy Practice and ODI.<sup>1</sup>

The key people in this story are Dr Abdelgalil Elmekki (known to close colleagues as AG), Esraa Ahmed and Yousif Sam – the original team who designed and delivered the course (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Also featured are some of the practitioner participants who were part of the activist movement that emerged through Sudan's revolution: Asha Hamad, Mahir Elfiel, Hussein Saad, Maha Tambal and Mohamed Abbas. As a result of the current war, all of these people have since been displaced, either to different parts of Sudan or to other countries in the region and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about the course, see: <https://thepolicypractice.com/our-online-and-face-face-training>. The Sudan case study was developed by Beverley Jones and updated by Daniel Oosthuizen through a series of interviews with the architects and participants of the CA course.

<sup>2</sup> The team was also supported by other members of the team and local consultants.

As with the process of PEA itself, piecing together what has happened and how that affects the present (and possible futures) is not straightforward. The multiple and multi-layered events in Sudan's recent history will take years to clarify – and some things will never be truly known.<sup>3</sup> But how we each make sense of the past also continues to unfold as we revisit previous experiences from our current standpoints.

Figure 1. A Snapshot of the Kullana Liltanmia (All of Us for Development) (KLP) Contextual Analysis Course

Unit	Focus	Details
1	Conceptual understanding (politics and development)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conceptualization of equity (and the role of government)</li> <li>Development: local, national or global?</li> <li>Basic questions</li> </ul>
2	The fundamentals of doing Contextual Analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What to analyse</li> <li>General overview of diverse set of contextual analysis frameworks (not PEAs, such as effectiveness)</li> <li>Governance issues and different ways of manoeuvre such as: co-production, co-governance</li> </ul>
3	Towards a common understanding of concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What to analyse when doing contextual analysis?</li> <li>General overview of diverse set of contextual analysis frameworks (not PEAs, such as etc.) and data collection tools (Qualitative and quantitative)</li> <li>Basic questions: what is power and who has power?</li> </ul>
4	Too Much Jargon And Too Many Acronyms: critical study of most widely used frameworks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop a common understanding of what is meant by CA, PEA, adaptive and politically-inclusive structure (i.e. institutions and governance)</li> <li>Why do we need it? What is wrong with the conventional academic and ideology-led approaches?</li> <li>Evolution of PEA from intellectual academic and ideology-led discipline to problem-driven</li> <li>The 'economic' and the 'political' in political economy analysis</li> <li>PEA is much more than the sum of the economic and the political: 'multi-disciplinary' vs. 'interdisciplinary' or paradigms?</li> <li>The difference between country-level, geographic, sectoral and thematic CA</li> </ul>
5	PEA group practices and exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Get familiar with concepts and jargon: drivers of change, power analysis, political economy assessment, political economy and governance analysis, World Bank PSIA, development effect programming, politically-led programming, problem-solving analysis, problem-driven analysis</li> <li>Too many "tools for political economy analysis". Why too many? How different (mechanical) or paradigms?</li> </ul>
6	PEA group practices and exercise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UNDP: Institutional and Context Analysis Guidance Note</li> <li>The EU frameworks</li> <li>DANIDA</li> <li>The Swiss Development</li> <li>SIDA (S)</li> </ul>
7	DFID frameworks, tools/guides on PEA	
8	Case studies of DFID models in practice: Myanmar, Zambia, Nigeria & Ethiopia	
9	PEA group practices and exercise	
10	PEA group practices and exercise	
11	PEA group practices and exercise	
12	PEA group practices and exercise	
13	PEA group practices and exercise	
14	Ladder of change at Contextual Analysis	
15	Radical inclusion: a contextual analysis	
16	Closing out	

This story plays out on three levels:

1. The Sudan *country* context, through some of the key events which have occurred over recent years. This includes the context before, during and after the revolution from late 2018 to mid-2019, and the current situation of devastating war and escalating humanitarian crises (see Table 1).<sup>4</sup>
2. An account of the UK's *programmatic* involvement, first through the Department for International Development (DFID) with its pre-revolution Local Partnerships for Dialogue

<sup>3</sup> For more information about Sudan's recent history, see this is a clear and concise read: Medani, KM (2024) [‘The Struggle for Sudan’](#). *Middle East Report* 310 (Spring).

<sup>4</sup> According to data from the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), an expert group of United Nations agencies, aid groups and governments that measures food crises, as of July 2024, some 755,000 people face starvation in Sudan, with a risk of famine in 14 parts of the country; and nearly 26 million people are experiencing acute food insecurity, which is the worst level ever recorded by the IPC in Sudan. See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2024/06/28/sudan-starvation-famine-kenya-protests-aid-funding-the-cheat-sheet>. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) also estimates that over 50% of Sudan's pre-war population is displaced, including refugees (<https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>).



Programme (LPDP), and then its post-revolution Sudan Stability and Growth Programme (SSGP) – and how this programme changed under the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), following the DFID-FCDO merger in 2021.

3. The *experiment* of delivering a contextualised and customised CA on-the-job training course, through the perspectives of the people who designed and led the course, and those who participated in it. At that time (in the year before and during the 2018-2019 revolution in Sudan), to provide training on PEA for ordinary citizens was, in the words of AG, *'almost as dangerous as attempting to buy Kalashnikovs in the local market'*. We hear from them why they were prepared to take the risk, and what this experience may offer to help navigate the current reality of Sudan.

In order to tell the story, we move between these three different levels, while following roughly the chronological order set out in Table 1, which combines the sequence of events in Sudan with the corresponding focus of UK governance programming in the country.

Table 1. The sequence of events in Sudan covering the period of UK-funded governance programmes

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Sudan trends	Increased centralisation of al-Bashir regime. RSF law passed parliament	Revolution starts (December) across Sudan – after price rises	al-Bashir removed; June Massacre; declaration of results in Transitional Government	Civilians lead reforms; COVID delays progress; dismantling old regime	Continued reforms and peace tracks; military coup (October) – Generals Burhan and Hemedti share power	Uneasy military rule, with two 'generals' and two armies; reforms and donor funding on hold	April sees war start between SAF and RSF, spreads across country; Khartoum destroyed	Protracted war with regional involvement ; elite civilian coalition; hunger spreads
UK Programme focus	Contextual Analysis Training with CSOs under LPDP	Problems and entry points explored by CSOs in target localities	End of LPDP Start of SSGP, with analysis unit	Emphasis on Macro-economic pillar and on-going analysis – with COVID-19 pivot	Shift to Macro-governance (non-government)	Rolling patchwork of investments, including with external actors	Evacuation and displaced teams and CSOs. Emphasis on deadline diplomacy	Support for civilian coalition convention; SSGP extension; new UK Gov

The cartoon illustrations used in the paper (see Figures 4, 6, 7, 8 9 and 10) were commissioned by the original LPDP programme and formed the basis of visual reporting on the work of the civil society participating organisations. They are the work of the political caricaturist Nader Genie, who continues

to produce caricatures of current events.<sup>5</sup> The English text translates Arabic words in each cartoon, or in the caption where appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

The importance of this story is shown in two reflections from the architects of the course, Esraa and AG respectively:

*'One lesson we learned from this war is that when citizens do not engage actively – to the extent possible – with politics, they end up losing their houses, families and communities because they left the engagement process to warlord generals and an immature political class. It reminds me of Plato's words: 'the price good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men.'* (Esraa)

*'For me, making the huge jump from the world of academia and abstraction to the world of practice has been the key thing. Instead of imprisoning ourselves in theoretical models, why not try to make these handy tools for everyone – to use and understand their own surroundings, circumstances and the dynamics of relations around them?'* (AG)

## 2. Sudan: the al-Bashir regime, 1989-2019

From 1989, and for the following 30 years, Omar al-Bashir ruled Sudan from the centre as a single figurehead. We call this whole period 'the al-Bashir regime', even though it conceals the fact that, at various stages, different internal factions (within the military, the ruling National Congress Party [NCP] and within specific Islamist groups) held sway over others.

In early 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Government of Sudan brought an end to decades of civil war between north and south Sudan. It also paved the way for a referendum on independence, resulting in the creation of the new country of South Sudan in July 2011. In what was left of Sudan, the focus shifted from the question of South Sudan to the grievances of other marginalised periphery populations and their difficult relationship with the ruling party and the centralised political system.

Back in March 2009, the International Criminal Court (ICC) had issued an arrest warrant for al-Bashir on five counts of crimes against humanity, two counts of war crimes, and three counts of genocide committed between 2003 and 2008 in the western region of Darfur. To keep these wars in Darfur politically 'off the books', al-Bashir funded and armed the so-called 'Janjaweed' militias of Darfur. The Janjaweed (combining different Arab nomadic groups) had existed since around the 1980s, but with al-Bashir's support, they became much more powerful against the non-Arab tribes such as the Fur, Zaghawa and Massalit.

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/nadergenie> for more on Nader Genie.

<sup>6</sup> A wider platform for Sudanese artists reporting on the war, including Nader Genie, can be found at: <https://khartoonmag.com/>

In 2013, al-Bashir formally incorporated the Janjaweed into the so-called 'Rapid Support Forces' (RSF), a parallel militia distinct from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Since then, the leader of the RSF has been Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is referred to almost universally as Hemedti, or 'little Mohamed'.

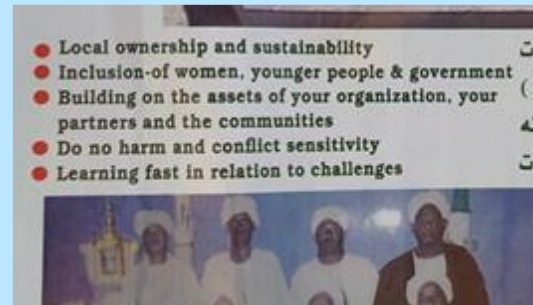
### 3. UK programming in Sudan, 2015–2019

In early 2015, DFID launched its five-year programme in Sudan to promote partnerships for local dialogue (LPDP). At that time, there was a growing sense among donors, including the UK, that, while space in Sudan was profoundly constrained and repressive, there was room (and even an imperative) to invest 'for a time that is yet to come' in the country's future as the beleaguered and ever more centralised al-Bashir regime ran out of options for staying afloat.

Anticipating upheaval, DFID wanted LPDP to support careful activism (towards democracy) in progressive elements of civil society as well as among young people, and to stimulate broader thinking and engagement on different kinds of political settlement once the al-Bashir regime came to an end. Inspired by an idea from Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation,<sup>7</sup> shared directly with DFID, the UK government also wanted to see a focus on local governments outside Khartoum, where it was felt that there was more likely to be some room for manoeuvre.

The British Council was responsible for the first LPDP component, known as Kullana Liltanmia or KLP (meaning All of Us for Development), which focused on strengthening civil society and local government engagement. The name was intended to help the programme avoid unnecessary attention and maintain a low profile while it set about trying something a bit different.

Figure 2. Principles shared by KLP CA participants



#### Kullana Liltanmia principles

- **Creating Ownership:** work to ensure local ownership and sustainability
- **Radical Inclusion:** women and younger people, but also local government – even people you really don't agree with
- **Building on Assets:** of your organisation, your partners and communities
- **Taking Time:** to really understand how things work so you can avoid doing harm
- and **Learning Fast:** as you encounter challenges.

<sup>7</sup> For more information on Alex de Waal, see: <https://facultyprofiles.tufts.edu/alex-dewaal>

DFID had a strong preference for supporting capacity for civil society advocacy aimed at government actors. However, the newly recruited KLP team in the British Council questioned the timing of this strategy on a variety of grounds.

Firstly, overt advocacy activities targeting the ruling party were very risky, evidenced by the detention of high-profile Sudanese civil society activists at that time. Secondly, it was unclear what issues were amenable to advocacy or where civil society could influence the behaviour of power holders. Thirdly, given their dependence on donor funding, which was often project-based and focused on discrete 'deliverables' over the short term, progressive civil society organisations (CSOs) were struggling to survive. They also relied on the consultancy fees that their well-respected but over-worked leaders could secure for contracted pieces of work with the few international organisations still engaged in Sudan. A large proportion of younger (and less educated) CSO 'staff' were, in fact, unpaid volunteers who sought some purpose and sense of community through their attachment to local organisations, even if they had little scope to do anything of substance. Finally, demoralisation and the daily struggle for survival, combined with competition with other CSOs for limited and short-term funding, made it challenging to attract and keep the attention of these CSOs. People in CSOs had neither the time nor the incentives to collaborate with each other, even if they had known each other socially in Sudan for decades.

Taking this into consideration, the KLP team designed an approach which included a range of incentives to help mitigate these kinds of constraints. Rather than running a 'winner-takes-all' competition, the selection process was based on evidence of the most committed CSO leaders and their membership, and their reach into different parts of Sudan beyond Khartoum – for example, through their networks of local CSO partners at the subnational (state) level.

Once selected, the first task was for the CSOs to develop a set of shared principles for working together (see Figure 2). These were derived from their analysis of which kinds of behaviours were likely to be most important for reducing resistance from local government actors, mitigating risk of interference by national security agents, and building their own credibility as they sought to facilitate improvements in how things work between local government and communities in different geographical areas. These principles were widely used in the CSOs' communication materials so that 'what we're about' was clear and upfront. The principles also helped to establish a greater sense of trust, by, for example, giving each CSO some reassurance that they were less likely to be damaged by association with one of their number incurring unacceptable risks in a dangerous operating environment.

Still, the KLP team in the British Council was asking CSOs to incur risks: work more collaboratively with each other, explore different approaches, and engage more directly with the very government whose ruling party was oppressing the sector. In return for taking on these risks, the KLP team offered participating CSOs a range of financial and technical support. Most useful of all was organisational

core funding to reduce the pressure on CSO leaders to spend so much time pursuing discrete project funding from different sources merely to 'keep the show on the road'.

The KLP team discussed with them the idea of investing in the CSOs' PEA skills as a means of helping them move towards more 'politically smart' ways of working, and away from conventional project-based service delivery. One of the key factors which made it possible to convert the idea of PEA training into a practical approach was the arrival of the new head of DFID, who had developed similar approaches in Myanmar and Nigeria. The personal encouragement to both the KLP team and the CSOs coming from DFID leadership in Sudan, reinforced by the rest of the DFID in-country team, made it much easier to move ahead.

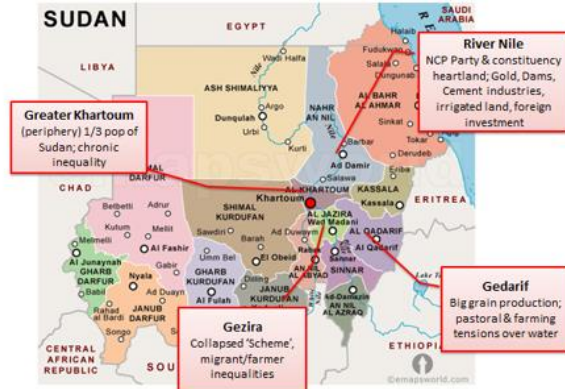
Given that the emphasis of the KLP programme was on testing approaches to local governance, this training was combined with flexible funding to support initiatives<sup>8</sup> that arose from the consultations and deliberations that CSOs undertook in the different localities<sup>8</sup> in which they worked with local government, community-based groups, business organisations and other actors.

The way CSOs selected the geographical locations for their work helps to illustrate the effectiveness of their approach.

Figure 3a. Where NGOs worked in Sudan in 2015



Figure 3b. Where KLP participants worked in 2015



At that time, most donor-funded CSO project activity was either in Khartoum, or to the west (Darfur) or south (Nuba Mountains) of the country – focused on areas of conflict and marginalised populations and political actors (Figure 3a). In view of the programme's objective to try to influence those with power, after some deliberation the group concluded that they needed to test their approaches in states where the ruling party and elites had most presence – either directly or through businesses. This pointed to the states north and east of Khartoum: River Nile, Gezira and Gedaref. In the end, Greater Khartoum was included as well because of its large population and the significant representation of marginalised populations displaced from other parts of Sudan (Figure 3b). Esraa,

<sup>8</sup> The term 'locality' relates to Sudan's administrative system and represents the tier of local government, coming under the (sub-national) state government.

who was part of the team which designed the KLP CA course, recalls that these locations were *'where it seemed most likely that a model of strengthening state-citizen relations could work, through a non-antagonising approach which still sought accountability but in subtle ways'*.

## 4. The Contextual Analysis course, 2017–2018

### 4.1 The course launch

In 2017, just after al-Bashir passed the Rapid Support Forces Act in parliament which established the legislative basis for integrating the RSF militia into the Armed Forces, a group of people started to meet quietly to study PEA. Naturally, they were discreet, using the upstairs room of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's (FES) back-street Khartoum office. They called the subject 'contextual analysis' to make it sound less political. Three of them were course developers and organisers (Dr Abdelgalil, Esraa and Yousif); the rest were participants. But they were all in one way or another engaged citizens, working with and for Sudanese CSOs which had been fighting for survival in a context of grinding hostility. They met like this weekly and then monthly for nearly a year, stretching into early 2018.

The course concept came originally from AG – a long-standing Sudanese political scientist and academic who had worked for a range of organisations, including DFID, and who brought deep historical insight, cross-country experience and an extensive network of Sudanese contacts in all parts of society. AG joined the British Council KLP team soon after DFID launched LPDP in early 2015.<sup>9</sup>

The training was for younger staff and volunteers in each CSO who were recommended by their leaders. Most came from local backgrounds at the state level, rather than elite families from the capital. Their daily lives reflected the considerable complexity of Sudan's socio-economic realities, where issues of ethnicity, family, religious and cultural dimensions are critical. While these dimensions were often included in the universal PEA frameworks at that time, they were not well-covered or well-utilised by teams commissioned to undertake PEA in Sudan by international organisations.

AG acknowledges that, when the course was launched, *'we were experimenting; we were not sure how things were going to come out. But what I knew was going to be more important than any PEA framework was the way we Sudanised everything – the efforts we made to make the content as relevant as possible to the contexts the participants came from. This is what helped the course to be both attractive and useful for people.'*

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<sup>9</sup> The core content of the course included different analytical frameworks for PEA, from those developed by the World Bank and DFID to other ideological perspectives such as feminist analysis, multi-disciplinary approaches, and comparative examples. All discussion was in Arabic, and much of the content was also presented in Arabic, with concepts in English debated in Arabic to create equivalent, contrasting or complementary meanings.

At the time, Mahir Elfiel headed the FES Young Leaders programme, which was also part of the UK-funded LPDP programme.<sup>10</sup> Mahir joined the course without high expectations. He recalled that, at the time, it seemed like a box-ticking exercise to comply with DFID's requirement that all LPDP implementing partners should find ways to 'cooperate and collaborate':<sup>11</sup> But in his own words,

*'the training turned [out] to be one of the best experiences I ever had, actually. We were all working under the dictatorship, under the authoritarian regime. So naturally you read the newspapers, to understand what's happening, and then you navigate your way. That was something all the organisations in the field were doing already in some way. But there was no structured way that systematically organised your ideas or thoughts on how to analyse the context. I don't think any organisation followed a systematic process or linked this to their programming. That was actually very new to me.'*

AG remembers the interactive nature of the course, and how important it was to teach the subject of PEA critically, in dialogue with the participants, while guiding them in weighing up the pros and cons of different analytical models for themselves.

*'We tried to make them think for themselves. I told them that our job is not to teach you, but we want to share some knowledge here and we want all of us to think critically. I told them not to take the DFID [PEA] model for granted just because the programme is funded by DFID.'*

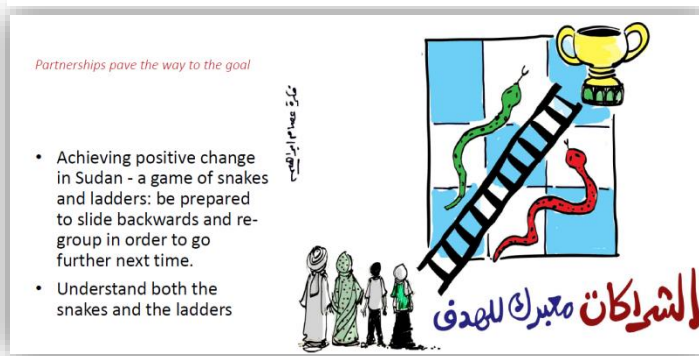
Esraa, who later became a governance adviser in DFID

Khartoum, added that it was important to help participants learn how *'to challenge the world view behind each framework'*, not least because the purpose of the course was to diagnose problems more accurately, and to identify approaches that had a chance of working in the Sudanese context.

For each of the PEA models explored through the course, the participants had to address two simple questions:

- how does this model help in analysing our *own* context? and

Figure 4. Positive change in Sudan like a game of snakes and ladders



<sup>10</sup> The third member of the LPDP implementing organisations was Conflict Dynamics International (CDI) whose focus was on educating political and armed groups on different forms of political settlement.

<sup>11</sup> DFID was keen to avoid a siloed programme in which the three implementing organisations 'did their own thing' and failed to contribute to, or learn from, each other.

- how useful is that analysis in guiding our search for approaches to the big problems affecting people?

AG observed that, given time to dig deep into the models, *'people came up with brilliant ideas that you can't find in the most scholarly journal. You wouldn't believe it! Even when they were discussing a complex model, like the [PEA framework] from the World Bank'*.<sup>12</sup>

The education gap between the older and younger generations had grown significantly in Sudan as a result of the deteriorating education system over the previous 30 years – and this was reflected in CSOs as elsewhere. Fluency in English had suffered especially, along with critical thinking skills. By using Arabic as much as possible in the course, and emphasising the importance of 'Sudanisation', participants were able to access and make sense of the concepts in ways that allowed them to increase their capacity much faster and to create new knowledge and insights.

As the course progressed, the participants began to impress the leadership of their organisations. AG observed:

*'Asha for example suddenly became the lead in PEA in her organisation, and she convinced her bosses that, 'wait, I can bring you something really different!'. In his organisation, Hussein impressed Ustaz Mahjoub – a veteran, leading Sudanese journalist, over 90 years old now. He has been writing for 70 years, yet Hussein impressed him. <sup>13</sup> We also saw immediate improvements in the way people started reporting on the localities where they were planning to work.'*

We will hear more from Asha a little later in the story.

AG was amused to observe which elements of which models the students liked best – as they borrowed from different inputs to create their own investigative framework for practical application.

*'Not too many borrowed from the DFID model!<sup>14</sup> The students found that it was too simple to accommodate our complex situation. They felt it focused too much on institutions, rather than the dynamics of things. In Sudan, for example, the major problem is poverty. It is linked to conflict, to*

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<sup>12</sup> The World Bank PEA framework that AG is referring to is the one included in Fritz, V., K. Kaiser and B. Levy (2009) [Problem-Driven Governance and Political Economy Analysis Good Practice Framework](#). Washington, DC: The World Bank.

<sup>13</sup> The legendary Ustaz Mahjoub died in February 2024. He was the founder of Sudan's first independent newspaper, *Al-Ayam*. See here for his tributes: <https://wan-ifra.org/2024/02/tributes-pour-in-for-dean-of-sudanese-press-and-golden-pen-laureate-mahjoub-mohammed-saleh/>

<sup>14</sup> The PEA model to which AG refers is: DFID (2009) ['Political Economy Analysis – How To Note'](#). London: DFID. The guidance places a strong, and perhaps overly binary, emphasis on formal institutions (e.g. rule of law, elections) alongside informal social, political and cultural norms. Since then, DFID's (and now FCDO's) thinking on PEA has also evolved, paying greater attention to power analysis and the exploration of how change really happens in given contexts. See for example FCDO and TWP CoP (2023) ['Understanding Political Economy Analysis and Thinking and Working Politically'](#). London and Birmingham: FCDO and TWP CoP. That guidance also includes reference to this Sudan Contextual Analysis case study as an example of participatory PEA.



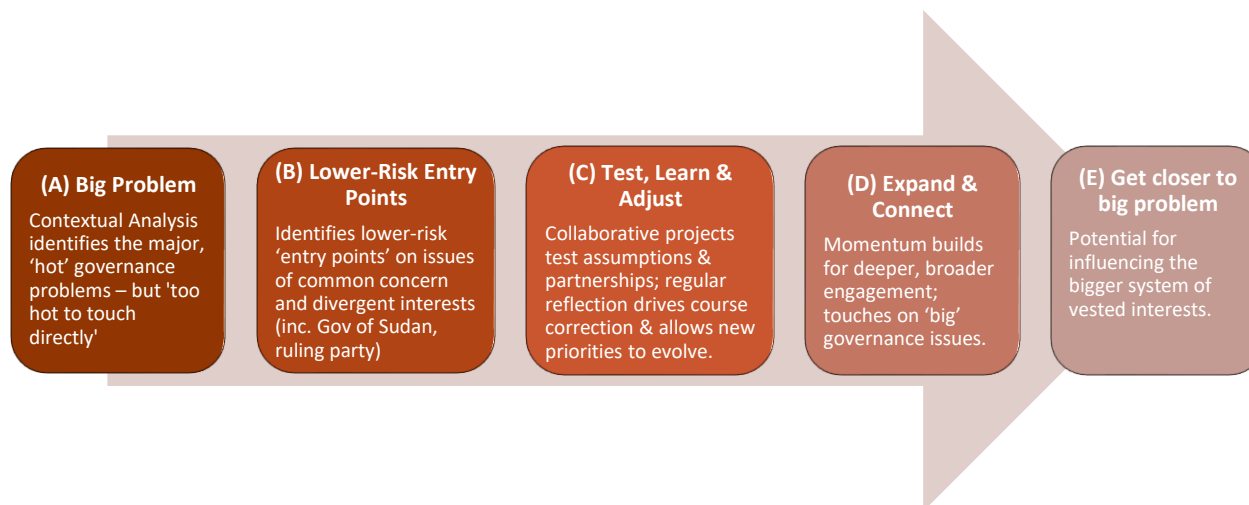
*authoritarianism, to everything. The participants felt that poverty cannot be fully understood and analysed by an institutions-based approach. Sudan is basically an agricultural economy. We don't yet have large-scale enterprises along capitalist lines. The family is still the production unit and the consumption unit. Even in the Gezira scheme south of Khartoum, established by the British in 1925, the large-scale cotton-production scheme is not based on plantations – no! It is based on family plots. So the family is still the source of labour and management and everything else. This means if you want to do something on poverty, you need to focus not on economic sectors, productive sectors and so on, but you start from the family.'*

## 4.2 The first phase of field application

As the start of the revolution approached in Sudan in 2018, KLP CA course participants and their organisations were busy applying their new analytical skills to the design and implementation of different strategies for influencing local governance in localities in four different states (including Greater Khartoum – see Figure 3b)

Based on the simple strategy described in Figure 5, the CSOs used their deepened understanding to find out the big problems that were affecting people in a given locality but were considered 'too hot to touch' directly. They then sought to identify the most promising entry points where a diverse group of people could be encouraged to engage and find solutions to more proximate issues related to the bigger problem based on their shared interests.

Figure 5. The KLP process for using contextual analysis to think and work politically in the pre-revolution Sudanese context



These big problems included:

- the crisis in rural and urban water supply in the eastern state of Gedaref, and related environmental factors and farmer/pastoralist tensions, as well as territorial tensions related to the area's close proximity to Ethiopia;

- the collapse of the major agricultural scheme in Gezira state and its impact on land tenancy and livelihoods;
- in River Nile state to the north, the impact of gold mining, cement production and foreign land deals (all tied to major business interests of the NCP ruling party) on the environment and public health;
- in Greater Khartoum, the collapse of public education and its effect on the poorest children – themselves often displaced from other parts of Sudan.

Through a range of lower-risk entry points, the CSOs were able to begin to air more sensitive big problems across both local government and community actors. Interventions included:

- supporting community journalists in their investigative reporting of local issues that everyone – be they rich or poor, government or non-government – cared about;
- creating bridges with younger people from the marginalised ‘Campo’ communities of settled migrant populations through ‘listening clubs’ between people from different socio-economic backgrounds;
- facilitating negotiations between private and public companies to address issues related to potable water, and in so doing, raising the long-term problem of water supply in urban areas; and
- convening and supporting service providers and users to conduct informed discussions about how resources coming from parents, the community and/or government could be boosted to improve the delivery of education

As mentioned earlier, the cartoons used in this paper (Figures 4 and 6-10) are just a small selection of those drawn by Nader Genie during the KLP learning events to reflect the different change processes that local CSOs were able to support and the stories of change that they developed from their grounded experience.

With the exception of two pilot activities – one which was suspended because of interference by national security agents, while the other was transferred to a different locality owing to a conflict between different groups – CSOs were able to implement their interventions with few constraints from the government. One contributing factor, reflected in many of the cartoons, is that the analysis of the problem was accompanied by a vision of how things

Figure 6. Health costs of mining



On the sack is written 'mining money'

could be better – not only for the local population but also for the relationship between government and citizens.

Key to the whole strategy process was Step C captured in Figure 5 to *Test, Learn and Adjust*. KLP facilitated structured and collective reflection spaces with partners every three months which proved instrumental in helping CSOs to address blind spots and think through more creative ways of responding to obstacles they faced in their respective contexts.

The CSO partners knew that the last step (Step E) in the sequence, *Getting closer to the Big Problem* (see Figure 5), was unlikely to be possible without some corresponding seismic shift in the political system. The point was to demonstrate that, despite the constraints, it was possible to make *some* progress towards influencing or ‘nudging’ the system – and this was part of the objective to prepare people ‘for a time that is yet to come’, a time when the old system fell apart and there was potential to shape a new and better one.

Figure 7. Inclusion



With hindsight, and without minimising the challenges of this pre-revolution period, Mahir (one of the course participants from FES) reflected that this was also a period of relative stability, where you knew what to expect from the regime. In other words that there was a system which could *be* described. And you knew pretty much where all the red lines were, as well as when you crossed any by mistake. The era that followed grew into something altogether different.

The participants' enthusiasm for their new skills was such that a group of them decided to start their own organisation to offer contextual analysis services more widely. That is how Focus Vision Consultancy was established in 2018. The organisation managed to remain active for a number of years (see Box 2) – but not with the kind of capacity support that they had gained through the CA course, and which the British Council had also hoped to continue under the follow-on programme SSGP. Later in this paper, we reflect on this as one of the early missed opportunities for expanding an experiment which had proved so popular and inspiring in its first phase.

#### Box 2. Focus Vision Consultancy



The last message posted on the Focus Vision Facebook page is from June 2023. On the occasion of holy day of Eid al-Adha, the message (in translation here) reflects the early effects of the war: *'...After peace and congratulations on the blessed Eid Al-Adha, we ask God to bless everyone in Sudan with security and well-being, to heal the grief of the bereaved, to bring together the families and the missing, and to have mercy on the dead and the martyrs. And pardon and well-being.'*

## 5. The revolution, 2018–2019

### 5.1 Towards a transitional government

By late 2018, events in Sudan were moving very quickly. On 19 December, the government tripled the price of bread, sparking furious protests outside Khartoum. These protests were replicated across all of Sudan's major cities. Over the next eight months, al-Bashir's government was not able to regain control, despite repeated crackdowns and a state of emergency declared on 22 February 2019.

Figure 8. Surveillance and transparency<sup>15</sup>



*For the sake of good governance*

<sup>15</sup> The image depicts al-Bashir and his wife.

Non-violent protests became more organised through the Sudanese Professional Association and its partners; while the network of neighbourhood groups which had coordinated civil disobedience in Khartoum in 2013 re-emerged across the country as Resistance Committees (or 'The Street' – a term associated with the Arab Spring and earlier periods of social unrest in the Middle East).

The protesters chanted many slogans, but the one which overshadowed all others was *tasquṭ bas*: 'just fall!'. The slogan trended as a hashtag for some time on social media, and there are several songs which use the phrase in the title.

On 11 April, al-Bashir indeed fell – ousted from within by the SAF. He was replaced by General Ahmed Awad ibn Auf. But the protestors did not want him either. He had been too close to al-Bashir's regime, and had announced he would not extradite al-Bashir to the ICC. Seemingly judging that he could not placate the protestors enough to govern, Auf stepped down the very next day, and General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan took over. Al-Burhan would turn out to be more durable.

Citizens were initially well disposed towards al-Burhan. Apparently he had made contact with the civilian coalition Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) earlier in 2019, and had said he was committed to free and fair elections and handing power over to the people. But civilian groups quickly concluded that al-Burhan was not serious about these promises. Relations broke down and tensions rose.

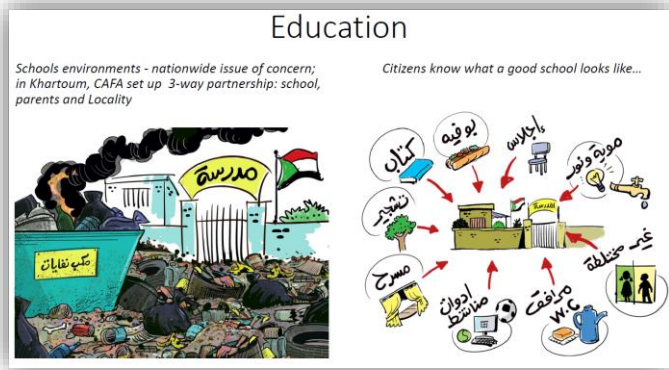
On 3 June 2019, the penultimate day of Ramadan, the Transitional Military Forces (TMC) of SAF and RSF brutally crushed a sit-in in Khartoum. Like many revolutionary spaces, the sit-in had created a place where people from very different walks of life could mix. There were murals dedicated to peace and freedom, poems were written, and a bookshop was set up;<sup>16</sup> but these were destroyed. At least 128 people were killed, over 70 women and men raped, over 650 more seriously injured. The Sudanese Government had killed protesters in the past, but never on this scale. The Khartoum massacre is one of the foundational traumas which structure the Resistance Committees' political engagement to this day.

At the time, the violence also injected a great deal of chaos into the situation. No one knew exactly who had been killed, or who had been responsible. In particular, though many believed Hemedti and the RSF itself were responsible, it was unclear to what extent the SAF and al-Burhan were also involved.

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<sup>16</sup> For more documentation of the Khartoum sit-in, see Nicholas-Bach, J. and F. Mongiat (eds.) (2021) [Soudan, année zero](#). Soleb-Bleu Autour.

Figure 9. Education



The massacre seemed to shock everyone, including the military. Very possibly both Hemedti and al-Burhan consider it was a strategic blunder. Hemedti's reputation in particular never recovered in Khartoum. The massacre brought considerable pressure from the international community (primarily in the form of the 'Quad', which comprised Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States and the UK) to continue transition negotiations. It also triggered a general strike in Sudan, which began on 9 June 2019. More significantly, it was the March of Millions on 30 June (still an important memorial for The Street) that forced the TMC to back down from their proposal to rule by themselves.

Following that, the TMC agreed to release its political prisoners, and the FFC agreed to suspend the strike. Negotiations continued, with some bumps along the way. On 17 August 2019, the Constitutional Declaration for a transitional government was formally signed by representatives from the FFC and TMC in the presence of regional and international heads of state and government. The FFC proposed Abdalla Hamdok as Prime Minister of a civilian cabinet, paving the way for a planned period of just over three years to return to full democracy. The TMC was dissolved and Sudan's Sovereignty Council was formed, combining military and civilian actors, but heavily dominated by the military.

## 5.2 Handy tools in a revolution?

The hiatus of the revolution and scale of the deaths and sexual violence which occurred then have been overtaken in magnitude and brutality by what has happened to Sudanese people at the hands of military groups since April 2023. Nevertheless, a number of the KLP CA course participants appreciated how the skills they learned helped them to navigate the uncertainty of that revolutionary period. As AG noted: *'All of them shared one thing: they had a vision for change. This is why they seized on the training and then used it – to identify forces and processes of change in the period leading up to and during the revolution.'*

One participant, Maha Tambal, described how she was much better able to *'understand the power dynamics behind every situation and piece of news'*. She also took greater care to think about where she should protest and what escape routes were available. Instead of protesting in the more convenient open streets of her area of residence in central Khartoum, she opted to protest in Omdurman, where she had better knowledge of the backstreets and knew where she could get shelter in the houses of relatives.

Mohamed Abbas, a participant from River Nile state, explained how the course had helped him to *'see beyond the news to realise opportunities in seemingly desperate situations'*. He also took these skills into his interactions with other activists, helping to develop *'different scenarios to enable people to see the positive side of the transition, not just all its problems'*. In fact, Mohamed was so enthused by his new skills that he went on to set up his own organisation to apply them further.

Mohamed thought that, as events unfolded, the Resistance Committees were able to develop a level of understanding of NCP behaviour in real time, and that this helped him and others to predict NCP moves in the short term. In this way, he and other revolutionaries were able to stay one step ahead of the NCP agents.

But Mohamed also identified one of the persistent problems which has beset the activist movement since 2019. *'The only goal then was to remove the National Congress Party – the ruling party; there was no strategic or thorough analysis at street level of what should happen next.'* He thought that political parties did not read the dynamic correctly at that time and did not lead the mass groups effectively, especially after the first phase of protest. This created mistrust, with 'The Street' viewing political parties as opportunists assuming powers for themselves which they had not properly earned.

Both Maha and Mohamed felt that one of the main obstacles to effective participation of Resistance Committees in the transition processes starting in late 2019 was the lack of a unified position – not only on what they were against, but what they wanted to see. They attributed this partly to weak analysis of what was happening at a critical time in Sudan's history. In their view, there remains a crucial need for greater capacity among younger people and their organisations to develop the kinds of critical thinking skills and mindset that they had been learning through the KLP CA course. Such training would need to be carefully tailored to different groups, and with the purpose of helping citizens to prioritise their issues and think through smarter strategies for influencing powerful actors in government, business, religious organisations and the military.

Esraa went further. As she put it, a key message from the course is that *'social movements for change shouldn't be confused with progress in achieving social change. PEA helps identify the target for change, as well as possible routes for influencing. And it emphasises the importance of patience and trial and error'*.

During the Juba peace talks which took place during the first year of the transitional government with various armed groups (2019–2020), Esraa designed and delivered informal PEA courses with a group

of friends for prominent RC members. Her objective was to help them deepen their understanding of the key actors in the Juba meetings, and think more carefully about what the RCs could push for from the Street: *'I found that those young activists were really engaged and their feedback was that the reading of context they developed through the informal sessions was depressing but also eye opening'*.

### 5.3 UK programme transition (LPDP to SSGP 2018–2019)

In the period leading up to the 2018–2019 revolution, DFID had been developing a business case for a new and expanded programme, drawing on learning from the implementation of LPDP. Using the significant leverage in the international community that it enjoyed at that time, DFID planned to support three major pillars of activity under a new multi-million, multi-year Sudan Stability and Growth Programme (SSGP).

The first pillar focused on macro-economic investments with and through the World Bank and Sudan's Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, to support social protection and economic reforms (for example, working out how to scale back fuel and other subsidies).

The second pillar was an expansion of the old LPDP programme, renamed 'macro-governance'. Led by the British Council, this component sought to scale up support for progressive civil society and go further in testing issue-based approaches to influence the way the system worked from the local to the state level. Under this pillar, plans were underway to extend and expand the KLP CA course to a wider set of CSOs within a rapidly changing context. DFID also required the British Council team to provide regular contextual analysis as an input to its own strategic decision-making and as a resource to the wider group of implementing partners and technical assistance which formed part of SSGP.

A third pillar concentrated on donor coordination, involving at that time a relatively small group of bilateral and multilateral donors, and the Quad.

The revolution came just as UK ministers were reviewing the business case. Approval went ahead in mid-2019, but the whole programme had to be reconceived in response to the newly formed Transitional Government of Sudan. This coincided with an almost complete changeover of UK staff in DFID Sudan. More than that, DFID went from being a large fish in a relatively small pond of western donors to a moderately sized fish in a much larger pond of international actors – all competing with each other for direct engagement with Sudan's transition process, and in particular for the reforms that they wished to see.

Work under the macro-economic pillar dominated this period of the SSGP. Donors and technical professionals in government sought to achieve dividends for the civilian-led transitional government in the form of better international partnerships for Sudan, offsetting subsidy reform with aid for social protection and the prospect of debt relief. There was limited focus on



strengthening the accountability of the transition itself, as if its status as a revolutionary government made this unnecessary. This was a critical omission on the part of development partners because it overlooked the narrow FFC coalition and its limited mechanisms for consulting with the broad constituency it claimed to represent. Esraa believes that fragmentation and weakening of civilian forces started from this point.

At the same time, as Asha's story illustrates later on, a small cohort of leaders from the CSOs involved under the former KLP programme were intimately involved in the transition process, including working closely with the Prime Minister's Office. The macro governance pillar under the British Council sought to support this with a modified version of the original KLP model of providing core finance alongside careful advisory support.

DFID, as well as others in the international community, felt that speeding up reform processes was key for stabilising the country. To this end, DFID placed growing emphasis on bringing in a wider set of actors, including governance-related international organisations with which the UK works beyond Sudan. This urgency was understandable. Yet, when combined with the dynamics that were taking place within and among Sudanese stakeholders, the overall effect was to crowd out space and speed up the pace at which Sudanese people and organisations were expected to work out their own ways of doing things.

DFID viewed the proposals for building capability for deeper political understanding (learning from the CA experiment under KLP) as too slow for the demands of the time. In addition, as the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region, attention was diverted as the international community pivoted its work towards COVID responses, with local organisations and government departments having to do the same. Once the effects of the pandemic receded in 2021, neither Sudanese nor international actors were able to recover the lost ground.

Figure 10. Addressing deforestation



For most of 2021 and 2022, the focus of the British Council team was on servicing the wide array of external organisations which DFID was trying to bring in to boost whatever processes seemed most useful at the time. As it had been doing since mid-2019, it was also producing, under the pen of AG, a regular update on the fast-moving situation. Every week, AG phoned around his extensive network of contacts, digging into the latest developments, and produced crisp analysis, underpinned by scores of Sudanese voices.<sup>17</sup> These insights helped the British Council to make better decisions about its activities. DFID (as well as FCDO from late 2020) also valued the analysis, as UK civil servants sought to keep up with events. Yet the opportunity to continue building capability for political understanding among a generation of Sudanese civil society activists was not realised – despite the many different strategies the British Council team used to win the argument with DFID and then FCDO.

## 6. The Transitional Phase, 2019–2023: Promise and disappointment

### 6.1 Off to a bad start

The Constitutional Declaration which formed the transition deal in 2019 had severe limitations, including the lack of a clear separation of the branches of power. The military maintained the right to reject proposals made by civilian leaders in the coalition. They were also granted immunity from any investigation of past crimes (including the Sit-in Massacre), and wielded veto power over civilian ministerial appointments, such as the Chief Justice and Attorney General. This imbalance between the authority of the military and civilian leadership persisted throughout the transitional period.

Esraa reflected on some of the other factors which compounded the fragility of the temporary political settlement. One of the major popular demands of the revolution was to dismantle the previous regime inside the civil service and private sector. A high-authority Regime Dismantling Committee (RDC) was created to that end. In a context of low trust on all sides, some groups felt that the RDC went about its task in a vengeful manner (especially in pursuit of Islamists, not all of whom had been supporters of the al-Bashir regime) and without proper investigation or accountability to the judiciary. Others believed that the judiciary was the first place that needed purging.

The second problem was the way the civilian wing of government, with financial support and enthusiasm from western donors, replaced senior civil servants with professionals from the Sudanese diaspora. Not only was their understanding of the bureaucracy far more limited (meaning that they did

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<sup>17</sup> Over a five-year period from 2019, Dr Abdelgalil produced over 100 concise and regular updates on the fast-changing context of Sudan – a treasure trove of informed first-hand analysis from the period.

not know how to navigate it to achieve reforms), but the diaspora professionals were also paid vastly more than other civil servants.

Esraa noted that:

*A genuine partnership facilitated between incoming and existing civil servants might have borne positive results for the ensuing reform processes. Instead, the antagonising position towards older bureaucrats, fostered by the international community, meant they were either ousted from their position or sidelined. Now, in a situation of war, none of these professional diaspora personnel continue to serve the country; those who have stayed on and continued to serve are from the same group of civil servants deemed 'dysfunctional' by many diplomatic missions and professional diaspora.'*

## 6.2 Transitional government: Sudan's first gender advisor

This is where the story returns to one of the KLP CA course participants, Asha Hamad. Asha is from the marginalised Beja people of Sudan's Red Sea Hills in the north-east, and she is also a long-standing member of the Sudanese think tank Partners in Development Services (PDS). Active in the civilian coalition during the revolution, she was appointed by Prime Minister Hamdok to be the national Gender Adviser.

*'I was the first gender adviser ever for the prime minister in the history of Sudan – the position did not exist before. When the civilian government came, the participation of women in the revolution was very high. We thought they had a right to be represented in government. When we wrote the Constitution, we included a minimum 40% quota of women in government. But in practice it didn't work like this – maybe four ministers out of 90 were women. And I was the only woman adviser, out of many men.'*

There were many in the opposition who did not accept that the Prime Minister should have a gender adviser. Some saw it as a gesture to appease western donors; others saw it as a threat to the Muslim beliefs because of the perceived risk that such a position would advocate for lesbian and gay rights. Asha found this challenging, but it did not dent her motivation. *'I was happy to take on this challenge because I know Sudanese women, their power and resilience to have their rights.'*

She looks back on the CA course as an important reminder of the need to think carefully before rushing into major tasks. One of her early assignments in the Prime Minister's office was to participate in developing a strategy for supporting peace in eastern Sudan. Before launching into the strategy, she realised that she needed to step back and understand better who all the different actors were: the 'blockers', the supporters, the different power relations, and how this affected the big picture. *'The Contextual Analysis course was a very useful course. I love it! I really love it.'*

She goes on to reflect on the second round of the Juba peace negotiations at that time:

*The integration and representation of women around the table was weak – not just in numbers, but also in terms of the issues to be discussed. When people ask the armed forces about bringing women in, they want to satisfy the donors, so they include one woman so they can proclaim that ‘she is here!’ But when it comes to the important issues, the men go into another small room. So in the second phase of the negotiations, we wanted women around the table, and also in that small room. We planned to have training provided by the gender ministry for the next round. We would train them within the framework of the five peace agreement ‘files’, and ‘engender’ these areas. They shouldn’t just be gender blind. We wanted to train them on how to be gender-sensitive when doing these discussions. But, in the end we didn’t get to do the training...not because the different groups were not interested, but because government representation was delayed.’*

She applied similar learning to her own task of leading the development of a National Gender Equality Plan.

*‘I wanted to develop the national gender equality plan in consultation with others, not to sit in my office and write what I know about gender. I started meeting with groups, women activists, CSOs, government institutions. I met with the Ministries of Justice, Social Welfare, Work and Labour, CSOs and women’s groups, and we began to form a three-month plan.’*

Asha was never able to complete the National Gender Equality Plan. In October 2021, the military coup forced her out of office, along with the Prime Minister and his civilian cabinet and much of the professional diaspora. And with them, much donor support was pushed out as well.

### 6.3 Putsch: October 2021

An attempted coup by some al-Bashir loyalists failed in September 2021. But October was the real deal. On 16 October, staged pro-military protests advanced to the gates of the presidential palace, apparently demanding a military takeover to ‘re-set the transition’. Al-Burhan was happy to oblige. Hamdok, the Prime Minister, was arrested.

There was a flurry of diplomatic activity as different parts of the regional and international community sought to get some kind of transitional process back on track. This included efforts by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to reinstate Hamdok (with his apparent agreement). But civilian groups did not accept this arrangement because the military remained the dominant actor.

Hamdok quickly became isolated from the civilian base, which had hardened its resolve that the military should have no part in government, declaring that there would be ‘No negotiation, no partnership and no legitimacy’ for the military. His support cut off, and caught in an impossible balancing act between increasingly polarised civilians and military, Hamdok resigned on 2 January 2022.

Esraa sees this period as another example of how prominent people in Sudan's transition did not really understand the politics as well as they needed to in order to navigate the space more effectively. *'It was not just the bad generals, but also prominent civilian leaders who contributed by association with the excessive interference of regional powers such as the Emirates.'*

## 6.4 Reflections on the transitional period

In early 2023, the authors of this paper visited Sudan to refresh some of the interviews used in the original case study for the ODI/TPP PEA-in-action training. It had been over four years since the revolution began in December 2018, and nearly 18 months since the military coup in late 2021. The city was visibly unkempt, dustier and dirtier than it had been a few years before. Driving from the airport to the iconic Acropole Hotel, we saw that the military had constructed a great concrete wall around the military headquarters, six metres high. This was the site of sit-ins in 2019 which were brutally broken up, with 128 young lives lost.

When we interviewed AG and Esraa again, it was clear that their thinking on PEA as an essential capability had deepened through their experience. They believed more strongly than ever that PEA should not just be a tool for academics, donors, and programme implementers. They saw it as a key part of capacity development for a much wider range of people – and they now included as a priority those who may have thought they understood 'politics' already.

Esraa argued that a major contribution to the ignominious end of the civilian transitional government in late 2021 stemmed from their earlier failure to understand the political economy of their own context. In her view, this failure resulted in a preventable military crackdown, and eventually to al-Burhan's coup:

*'I don't want to take away the beauty of the revolution. The moment of the revolution was very unifying for us Sudanese, including traditional leaders, Muslims and Christians. But I think the main Sudanese actors didn't get the political economy right. I'm disappointed in how they managed the transition and how they managed expectations – people in the main civilian coalition group, people who were sitting in Hamdok's office, people in very prominent positions. Of course, every citizen thinks their politicians aren't making the right call, but I think there was too much loss, in terms of lives and years.'*

*'The revolution came about because the army played a role in kicking al-Bashir out – so you can't say, 'Oh, we forced it'.<sup>18</sup> No revolution in the world was ever won without an insider. So you're working with an insider, indoors, but outside you're demonising them?'*

*'It's okay to say, 'we won because we forced the insiders', but you still have to acknowledge that the military is part of the equation. But if you then raise the bar of expectations – by saying that people*

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<sup>18</sup> Meaning 'we the activists brought about the revolution'.

can have 100% civilian government – then people get killed by this institution which has had control over the country since the early 1900s.

*'I think they were politically immature. What I'm trying to say is, why were we losing people we didn't need to lose? At some point there would have been a crossroads, but it wasn't there yet – you needed to sequence stuff.'*

Reflecting on the atmosphere in that period just before the outbreak of war, AG told us that he was worried about how visible the international community was in the negotiations, how diplomats were vying to be at the front of the line-ups. He also told us he thought it was dangerous that the US had so clearly signalled that its priority was stability and security.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of PEA competence, AG said:

*'Now, I think there is even more need for it, for a number of reasons. First of all, civil society is in a much better position than it was in 2019, even with setbacks of course. The things that happened since the coup in October 2021 took us a number of steps back. But the context is so complicated that frankly I myself at times get confused, and more than half the people I talk to get confused, and they tell you, Gee! We end up with an analysis today, and tomorrow everything changes.'*

Mahir added to this impression.

*'The context currently is changing rapidly – rapidly – unlike when we had the CA course. When we had the course, we had the luxury of relaxing, of analysing the context. We had the luxury of time.'*

AG then commented on a new phenomenon he had observed which suggests that the appetite for deeper political awareness was growing among some new actors at that time.

*'For the first time, people from political parties are asking for this kind of support, which is quite new! Historically, whether during democracies or dictatorships, our political parties looked at themselves as 'We know everything – you stay away'. So now they are asking for it. This is a new constituency for us. And there is also a third possible constituency. If the political process goes up to an end – and nobody's hoping for a perfect kind of thing – but if it ended up forming a transitional legislative assembly, we can target them [for training] as well.'*

## 7. Epilogue: The civil war and after

### 7.1 Is there a future for Sudan?

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<sup>19</sup> More recently, Alex de Waal has expressed a similar opinion about the US diplomatic emphasis on security and getting a deal, suggesting that it in fact hastened the onset of inter-military civil war, since neither SAF nor RSF any longer needed to win the consent of civil society. See: ['Sudan in Crisis: interview with the Bruno Kreisky Forum for International Dialogue'](#) (YouTube).

On 15 April 2023, just over a month after we had returned home from Sudan and had finished editing the podcast for the updated TPP-ODI course case study, open fighting broke out between the SAF and the RSF. Two military entities, of roughly equal might and each with powerful backers in the region, deciding by force who will rule Sudan.

More than a year and a half later, territory continues to move back and forth between the RSF and the SAF. Sudanese mediation involves seven different diplomatic actors in what has been described as ‘a low-level diplomatic traffic jam’.<sup>20</sup> The major risks now are that vestigial state structures, already functioning only at a very basic level, collapse completely, and that the two belligerent parties begin to fragment internally. If the RSF or the SAF, or both, fracture, then the prospects for a peace settlement become increasingly more remote.

Taking us back to the start of this story with the KLP experiment, the demise of centralised state power in Sudan means that citizen and local state capacity and collaboration are now more critical than ever for day-to-day survival. There is some opportunity here in the midst of crisis, as the fall of Khartoum appears to have forced state governments to step up in the service of their populations.

The current situation is quite different from what it was in 2022. It is darker, more chaotic, more depressing. Many international organisations that provide support to civil society have decamped to neighbouring countries. The Sudanese professionals from the diaspora who were brought in to assist with the civilian transition have left. Haggard and much-maligned civil servants doggedly continue to turn up to work everyday day. It is not the kind of situation that people hoped for during the heady days of the civilian transition. But it would be naïve not to have expected that an outcome like this was possible. It would also be naïve now to think that the current situation is as bad as things can get.

Human beings do not need political understanding in the way that they need water, or food, or air to breathe. Often, they seem to get along fine understanding very little of their political context and how things really work. But in such cases, they are trusting others to get this understanding right. Any stable political settlement involves a shared political understanding to a significant degree.

Ending this war in Sudan requires thinking through what comes next. Rushing to a ceasefire without trying to solve the problem of a lasting settlement is not the basis for a secure and lasting peace. A 2020 study by the University of Khartoum looked back over lessons from previous peace agreements in Sudan, and highlighted among other things:<sup>21</sup>

- the risks of ‘deadline diplomacy’ when external mediating states rush to secure a provisional settlement;

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<sup>20</sup> De Waal, A. (2023) [‘Sudan is tearing itself apart and Washington lost its capacity to help’](#). Analysis | Africa. *Responsible Statecraft*.

<sup>21</sup> Peace Research Institute (2020) ‘Lessons learned from Sudan Peace Agreements’. Khartoum: University of Khartoum. Unpublished report.

- the importance of casting a ‘wide net’ of inclusion to avoid multiplying the spoilers during implementation of any agreement; and
- the need for essential capability to implement the provisions of a given peace agreement in a timely manner.

The process of thinking *politically* through what comes next in Sudan is something that must be done by Sudanese people. The models that Esraa and AG worked through with the participants in the 2017/18 KLP CA course did not tell people what positions to take, but showed them how to begin to think carefully about their political context – most of all, how to ask better questions, continuously. Over its eight-month period, the course also encouraged them to take time to work things out, rather than to rush to solutions.

The world over, people tend to think in terms of what they feel is right, and what they feel is fair. These are just and noble goals. But achieving them (in most cases, for most people) requires more than simply expressing demands or announcing fiats. You have to be strategic – and patient. A critical insight from Sudan’s experience is that having a strategy does not guarantee success, but an absence of strategy may almost certainly preclude it.

## 7.2 Missed opportunities

This case study has highlighted a succession of missed opportunities to capitalise on the early inspiring experiment with PEA. Among other things:

- The British Council could have accompanied Focus Vision Consultancy from 2019 onwards so that young practitioners could continue to build on their earlier skills and repurpose some of the PEA tools towards the post-revolution situation.
- Naturally suspicious of both Sudanese political parties and international donors, the Resistance Committees feared co-option by one agenda or another. By building the credibility of a cohort of younger Sudanese PEA experts (in Focus Vision and beyond), a trusted mechanism would have become available at a critical time to help the Resistance Committees – as well as other issue-based groups that were activated after the revolution – to think through their strategies for engagement with transition actors and for navigating the coup more consistently.
- The original KLP CA course could have been converted into an online course, accessible remotely (by phone or WhatsApp), drawing on experiences from initiatives like the Thomson Foundation’s course on tackling hate speech and COVID misinformation, which succeeded in reaching across most parts of Sudan.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.thomsonfoundation.org/latest/whatsapp-misinformation-course-goes-viral/>. This intervention was part of a broader platform of work undertaken by the British Council under the Macro-Governance component of SSGP.



- The CA course could also have been customised to different target groups (government, political parties, communities) and sectors to help deepen engagement on specific issues – such as economic reform, the peace processes, Islamism, and gender equality.
- Instead of being confined to a tight FCDO readership, AG’s regular contextual analysis could have been used as a basis for wider discussion among trusted CSO leaders who were operating closely with the Prime Minister and his team during the transition period. This may have helped them to provide more compelling and robust guidance to civilian leaders to rethink some of the strategies they were using, and to be more aware of the emergence and risks of unintended consequences for the whole transition.
- Finally, continued investment in the CA training could have helped develop a new generation of sharp and critical thinkers to carry on the task of making sense of Sudan and its trajectory.

Following through on these opportunities might have provided some (albeit small) footholds for better navigation of complex situations during the fast-moving and ultimately chaotic period which followed.

Perhaps the most important point on which to conclude is that variations of all the above suggestions are still relevant and possible as Sudanese people and their organisations regroup. Such support would constitute (to borrow a phrase used first in relation to climate change mitigation) ‘no regrets’<sup>23</sup> investments for Sudanese people now, wherever they are, and for ‘a time that is yet to come’.

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<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Ostertag, K. (2003) *No-regret Potentials in Energy Conservation: An Analysis of Their Relevance, Size and Determinants*. Springer; and Dercon, S. (2020) ‘No-Regret Policies for the COVID-19 Crisis in Developing Countries’. *CGD Notes*. Center for Global Development.

## About the Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice

The Thinking and working Politically Community of Practice (TWP CoP) is a global network of practitioners, researchers and policymakers in development and global affairs committed to promoting more effective policy and practice. The TWP CoP works to foster more politically aware approaches to understand how change happens and why, translate findings and implications emerging from political economy analysis into operationally relevant guidance, encourage more flexible and adaptable ways of working, and provide evidence-based insights that can stimulate innovation, sharing and learning in international development and global affairs.

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