Public Opinion Research in a Conflict Zone: Grassroots Diplomacy in Darfur

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Foreword

By Simon Haselock

"Forget the government and the [rebel] movements; it's time our voices were heard." This was the impassioned entreaty of a tribal leader to me this summer in South Darfur. His comment goes to the heart of the problem facing peace makers in Darfur, which is that the majority of those most affected by the conflict feel no ownership of the peace process aimed at ending it.

Marrack Goulding, the former head of Peace Keeping and Political Affairs at the UN, has written that most governments and intergovernmental organizations have traditionally viewed peacemaking as a quintessentially governmental activity (Goulding, 2002). As a consequence, the prevalent strategy for ending civil wars has been to bring the combatants (normally the government and representatives of the armed insurgents) to a neutral venue to negotiate behind closed doors assisted by an international mediator or envoy. While this approach has worked in many places, it rarely provides an opportunity for those who have not taken up arms—the majority—to have a voice in shaping or endorsing the agreements that result and thereby ensure their sustainability (Barnes, 2002). Efforts to bring peace to Darfur so far have been no exception.

I first found myself in Sudan at the end of July 2006. I had been asked by the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office to assist the African Union (AU) devise and implement a strategy for explaining the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) to ordinary Darfurians. The DPA, which had been signed in Abuja the previous May, was the result of seven rounds of talks under the auspices of an AU mediation team supported by the UN, the UK, the United States and other international partners. While it was generally considered, with some notable exceptions,[1] to have been a good text covering the main causes of the conflict (as perceived internationally), it was only signed by two of the four principal parties. It had been driven by deadline diplomacy with little or no public consultation and as a consequence the parties had little embedded commitment to it. It also exacerbated existing fault lines between the parties, which resulted in new fighting between those who signed and those who didn't and in the splintering of the rebel movements into an alphabet soup of competing armed factions. As Laurie Nathan of the Centre for Conflict Resolution, who was at Abuja at the time, has put it, "deadline diplomacy inhibited effective mediation, resulted in a peace agreement that did not bring peace and sowed divisions that exacerbated the conflict" (Nathan, 2006).

By June of 2006 the DPA was already in trouble with the UN Secretary General's representative in Sudan arguing that there was a risk that it would collapse, not least because it had no resonance with the people of Darfur themselves (Pronk, 2006). This clearly meant that our task to help the AU to explain the agreement to Darfur's population was going to be a formidable undertaking, so much so that by the end of the

[1] See, for example, Flint (2006) and International Crisis Group (2006).

year we had to think again about whether it was a realistic proposition at all. What had become clear was that the process by which the agreement had been prepared and concluded was at least as important to its legitimacy as the content of the agreement itself. The DPA had been delivered by a deadline but in so doing the complexities of the conflict had been underestimated and the imperative of ownership neglected (Nathan, 2006). What was now needed was a communications strategy that addressed these shortcomings and supported the peace process as a whole. We needed to help empower civil society and give voice to those without the guns.

Despite the prevailing paradigm that peacemaking is merely the preserve of governments, there are many examples where civil society and grassroots public participation has been the key to building successful and sustainable peace processes. In the African context alone, there are a number of examples, most notably in post-apartheid South Africa where an explosion of political violence was avoided in part because of the process of open dialogue that had helped bring about democracy and a culture of peaceful negotiation and coexistence. Public participation through mass organization, public debate and direct participation at local and regional levels created a sense of legitimacy and public ownership of the process that fostered a culture of cooperation and compromise (De Clerk, 2002). The effort to end persistent violent conflict in northern Mali in the mid 1990s also provides another good example. As in Darfur, negotiated agreements between government representatives and the armed factions were unable to bring the conflict to a conclusion, and in fact exacerbated the conflict. It was only when thousands of people engaged directly in inter-community peacemaking that the path to national reconciliation opened. The involvement of those most affected by the conflict in open and inclusive dialogue was able to achieve what the official political negations could not (Lode, 2002). Outside Africa, the UK's experience in Northern Ireland demonstrates that it was only once the government realized that communities and community groups, far from being a distraction to peacemaking, were in fact central to its success, that they were finally able to see the light at the end of the tunnel (Briggs, Fieschi and Lownsbrough, 2006).

In 1991, Quintin Oliver, an NGO activist in Northern Ireland, was part of a group of intellectuals who hit upon the idea of inviting a commission of outsiders to go to the Province and hear from ordinary people about life there and make recommendations on new ways of tackling the seemingly intractable problems they faced. Initiative 92, as the project became known, developed into a new form of civil society engagement with the Northern Ireland Peace Process. The initiative meant getting out onto the streets and into the countryside to listen to what people had to say about what was going on, and then by disseminating these views to pressure recalcitrant politicians into engaging more constructively in the non-violent search for solutions. The project culminated in the production and distribution of a report to a wide audience, including all the political parties as well as the broader public. The initiative has continued to disseminate and animate the results of the research through an extensive follow-up program of what could be described as grassroots diplomacy. While Mr. Oliver doesn't claim that the IRA ceasefire of 1994 was a direct result of this work, many observers have highlighted the contribution it made to creating an atmosphere of greater participation, easing the

situation and softening the edges of the conflict (Oliver, 2002). This grassroots approach to mobilizing voices, understanding the issues and developing a popular constituency of interest is the context that formed the basis of the research project in Darfur that is the subject of this occasional paper.

In early 2007, an ever-increasing and disparate mixture of experts, exiles and rebel movements claimed to speak with authority on behalf of the people of Darfur. But it was clear that there was very little empirical evidence to support what they were saying, either positively or negatively. Very few seemed to be asking ordinary folk for their opinion; and as a consequence, it was apparent that these same individuals felt excluded from the process as they were unable to recognize their own voice in the discourse. Equally clear to the African Union and the Joint Mediation Support Team (JMST) was the lack of adequate and accurate data to support the mediation effort itself; most of the information that was available was either, old, anecdotal or extracted from intermittent whirlwind official visits. What was needed was genuine, academically rigorous and reliable research that could be used to inform and shape the overall political process from the bottom up; enable the negotiators to understand the context of the conflict and the needs of those affected by it; assist in building ownership and inclusiveness by representing individuals' views and experiences in a way that they could recognize; challenge the assumptions of all of the stakeholders to prevent them from high jacking the process; and, finally, measure the level of public understanding and awareness of the peace process as a whole. The question, however, was, how could this be done?

It was clear from the outset that regardless of where the funding came from, to be seen as credible, the research had to be genuinely independent. This meant that it would have to be as transparent as conditions on the ground would allow, and that its data and reports should not be proprietorial but published and disseminated as widely as possible, much like the Initiative 92 reports that nudged the peace process forward in Northern Ireland. Public presentation would be vital so that people could feel that they were beginning to participate in a process where their views were being accurately reflected. The research also needed to be ambitious in scale if it was to generate the momentum necessary to have any impact.

But traditional polling techniques were unlikely to be reliable in the war-torn environment of Darfur where tribal suspicion, the threat of intimidation and a fear of strangers asking questions is the norm.

Standard survey questionnaires and conventional random sampling are of questionable use in such circumstances, so a new and creative research framework that could be trusted and tailored to the specific social dynamics of the region needed to be developed. This paper examines the approach taken by the CGCS-Stanhope Centre team in developing this framework and how the resulting research was focused on supporting the sort of inclusive grassroots diplomacy that is required to break the intransigence of the parties to the conflict and kick start a sustainable peace process owned by all sections of the population in Darfur. The paper also looks at how this model of research might provide a useful toolkit in similar situations elsewhere.

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Public Opinion Research in a Conflict Zone: Grassroots Diplomacy in Darfur[*]

By Nicole Stremlau and Iginio Gagliardone

This paper outlines a research framework to assess attitudes towards peace and conflict and support a form of "grassroots diplomacy" in conflict and post-conflict societies. Based on research in Darfur conducted in 2007-2008, a combination of methods that can be effective tools for addressing this challenge is detailed. The intent is to provide a framework that others interested in research in conflict areas can implement in different scenarios.

Grassroots diplomacy, a way to include a wider variety of voices in negotiation processes and in the building of consensual ideas, is not simply an idealistic approach. Modern wars and related peace processes are increasingly affected by problems that cannot be easily resolved through the habitual channels of traditional diplomacy, and need creative solutions. In Darfur, three such problems present themselves.

The first is the proliferation of armed groups that claim to represent different constituencies and are invited to sit at the negotiation table but whose real base is rarely assessed. Before the May 2006 signing of the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), two Darfurian rebel groups were fighting the central government in Khartoum: the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army/Movement (SLA/M). These rebel groups have been active in the region since the 1980s, although open conflict with the Sudanese army erupted only in 2003. After the DPA, which was signed only by the SLA/M faction headed by Minni Minnawi, JEM and SLA/M each split into myriad factions, and still others have been created outside of their umbrella. Efforts have been made to engage and unify these groups,[1] but they have not succeeded. It has thus become increasingly difficult to assess how many groups are now operating in the region.

[*] The ideas that led to this paper were initially presented at a workshop organized in Oxford in July 2007 by the Stanhope centre (www.stanhopecentre.org) in collaboration with Albany Associates (www.albanyassociates.com) to develop a research plan to assess public opinions in a conflict situation. We would like to thank all those who were involved in this meeting and especially those who have continued to contribute to the development of the methodology, including Monroe Price, Simon Haselock, Adil El Baz, Abduljabar Abdalla Fadul, and Amna Rhama. We are also particularly grateful to the Stanhope team that has been implementing the research plan outlined here and in particular to Anthony Foreman, Susan Abbott, Ensaf Abdullah, Tarig Mustafa, Reham Hassan and all the local researchers from Darfur who have participated in different phases of research but out of concerns for their safety are anonymous. The data presented here has been collected by the Stanhope research team. We are grateful to Albany Associates, the African Union and the Dutch and Canadian governments for funding this research. We would like to thank Robin Mansell, Mehita Iqani and Libby Morgan for their precious comments on the earlier versions of the paper.

[1] The UN/AU organized a meeting in Arusha in August 2007 to explore the potential for the groups to unite. Other groups later met in Eritrea and decided to create a united front. Other parallel tracks have been opened by the AU and UN to facilitate a united voice in the talks that started in Libya in October 2007.

In this context, knowledge of the attitudes and opinions of the population on the ground – in refugee camps as well as in the main towns or in the villages – represents a fundamental check on those groups which claim to speak on behalf of large constituencies but often manipulate their depth of local support to further their own economic and political interests. Public opinion research can temper the risks of negotiating with the wrong people and on the wrong issues, both directly, by investigating which groups have real popular support, and indirectly, by comparing the agenda advanced by rebels and local politicians with the needs and desired expressed by those directly affected.

A second and related problem is connected to the need to engage not just armed groups but also a civil society sector that claims to represent significant portions of the population. The problem of real versus claimed representativeness is also apparent here, amplified by the international attention given to Darfur. With the injection of foreign aid, organizations claiming to speak for particular groups of victims mushroom. As David Keen from the London School of Economics argues, just whose voices such NGOs are representing, and how, is debatable.

> While NGOs often claim to be speaking for the victims of disasters, the voice of these victims may come through very weakly if at all from programmes and publicity that are geared towards the delivery of relief commodities and the appearance of success. Indeed one of the advantages enjoyed by NGOs that claim to speak on behalf of 'those who have no voice' is that these latter are in no position to challenge this claim (Keen, 1998, p. 320)

Although these groups speak in the language of international human rights, rarely are they politically neutral. In some cases, they merely operate as enterprises to support the agenda, both political and financial, of a leader or select group of people.

Finally, the heavy presence of UN officials, mediators and NGO workers presents the opportunity for competition over ownership of new information and of opinions about how the crisis can be solved. Alongside the pressure to find viable solutions in a reasonable time, this increases the tendency to rely on anecdotes to interpret the reality on the ground and on developing only a superficial understanding (often sold as deep-rooted knowledge) of the local population.

The use of rigorous public opinion research can be of great help in facing these (and other) challenges, helping to discern what people's real demands are and to assess which rebel groups and NGOs really represent the people. Yet conflict situations present their own challenges, and the traditional tools of public opinion research cannot simply be imported. Public opinion research generally focuses on obtaining a snapshot of what people think at a particular point in time. While this information is certainly useful in some situations, it is of limited utility in helping to resolve a protracted conflict, where there are often competing versions of history and ideas of the nation, and where numerous efforts to promote reconciliation have failed. Public opinion research that seeks a richer picture—capturing the historical base of opinions and values—may offer new ground to promote reconciliation. If broadly embraced (ideally by the government as well), this type of research can play an important role in encouraging dialogue.

In addition, numerous peacemaking deals have been brokered quickly on the timetables of international actors, leaving significant local groups marginalized and soon

leading to even deadlier conflict.[2] By drawing attention to the opinion of individuals most affected by the conflict, public opinion research of the type we propose could help avoid such scenarios.

Grassroots diplomacy is not simply a version of Track II (or backdoor) diplomacy, which primarily involves elite participation in the informal exploration of paths for peace, or Track III diplomacy, which works in small localities to broker peace among civilians and prepare the terrain for reconciliation, at least at a local level, rather than trying to find high-level agreement between conflicting parties.

At times, governments have engaged in efforts that are similar to the ones we propose here to obtain a better understanding of the culture or organization of particular societies for political or military reasons.[3] Our research does not intend to provide support for any particular faction, organization, or group. Rather, it seeks to support the role that organizations such as the United Nations or the African Union are facing in complex emergencies such as that in Darfur. Our research methods and findings seek to equip these multi-lateral organizations with information that is shared and valued among the population affected by a conflict and that is based on solid understanding, not short-term observation or anecdotal findings. This research has the potential to represent a fundamental resource in effectively working towards peace and in collectively reconstructing a society in the midst and aftermath of violent conflict.

Moving towards a research framework

To conduct research that could capture the voices of those affected by conflict in Africa and represent them at the negotiating table we had to develop an innovative set of combined methodologies. Before we elaborate this framework, it is important to briefly review the public opinion research techniques that have been applied to conflict areas.

There is a long tradition of public opinion research in conflict areas. During wars, governments and other actors use a variety of methods to assess and influence the enemy's public opinion. During World Wars I and II, both America and Germany, through their academics and diplomats, were consistently trying to gauge public opinion through sources such as the press, personal contacts and public demonstrations. More recently, the coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq have also encouraged and sponsored public opinion research to gauge Afghani or Iraqi opinion of political developments. In Iraq, for example, the Coalition Provisional Authority has commissioned surveys by Gallup and other organizations on political preferences and on the Iraqis' perception of

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[2] One example is Rwanda, where a peace agreement was signed in Arusha on August 4 1993 between the government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front. The agreement did little in addressing the root causes of the conflict, which erupted again and more dramatically less than a year later, causing the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. The Darfur Peace Agreement, signed in Abuja on May 5 2006, had a similar, even if less deadlier, effect, causing splits within the rebel groups and even more violence in the areas already afflicted by the conflict.

[3] For this reason we want to separate our research with similar ones attempted in the past, such as project Camelot, developed by the US Army in 1964 to obtain a cultural understanding of societies, especially in Latin America, as a way to support potentially friendly government and adverse revolutionary movements, or the more recent Human Terrain Team program, which employs anthropologists in Afghanistan to understand the culture of counter-insurgents and combat them.

their government and of the U.S. forces.[4] Similarly, public opinion research has been used in Afghanistan to identify support among the population for what the Altai Consulting Group calls "illegal state opposing armed groups."[5] Extensive survey research has also been conducted for the U.S. government and donor groups to identify what Afghanis perceive to be development priorities, and on other pressing issues for the international community such as the narcotics trade. While these research efforts are certainly interesting and methodologically sound, they are not typically used for the benefit of the population being surveyed. Rather, they are employed for the purpose of winning wars or the hearts and minds of local populations. The only commonality between the framework they employ and the one we propose is the necessity of overcoming the obstacles of conducting research in a conflict environment.

Similarly, public opinion research has often been used in peace negotiations. Important examples, both successful and unsuccessful, can be found in Northern Ireland and Israel and Palestine. In Northern Ireland, party negotiators surveyed public opinion as a strategy to increase the inclusivity of the peace process, encourage transparency during negotiations and test and develop issues of language and policies (Irwin, 2001). While this research helped to explore problems, define critical issues and explore solutions, researchers conducting the polling argued that they were most important in "facilitating a discourse in which the society as a whole could play a part in the decision making process" (Irwin, 2001, p. 64). They also served as a useful mechanism to "eliminate extreme opinions, map out common ground and areas of compromise and test comprehensive agreements as packages" (Irwin, 2001, p. 67). In this sense, the experience in Northern Ireland represents a fundamental guide for action for the research we propose. A less successful example is public opinion research conducted around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While such information could have played an influential role in the negotiations by better informing negotiators of their options and highlighting new solutions, the information was marginalized by the interests of those that did not support the use of alternative methods to broker peace.[6] Despite this, the experience provided scholars with important data suggesting why previous peace processes had failed and thus allowed them to develop alternative analyses and proposals (Shikaki, 2006).

These experiences indicate how research might inform a negotiation process and are useful guides for building effective techniques to collect data and assess public opinion in a conflict situation. But present-day Northern Ireland, Israel and Palestine, and World War II-era Europe, have significant social, political and infrastructural differences from Sub-Saharan Africa, and the techniques applied and lessons learned from these experiences are not necessarily directly transferable. Polling efforts such as the Afrobarometer,[7] which regularly polls citizens on issues of democracy, freedom of expression and livelihood, seek to take into account the particular circumstances in Africa. Given the intricacies of assessing public opinion in Africa, such as the lack of sampling frames or reliable censuses, this work has been an important precursor to ours. Still, the Afrobarometer has its own shortcomings. Its research focuses on stable,

[4] See for example http://www.comw.org/pda/0501br17append.html or http://www.iraqanalysis.org/info/55

[5] http://www.altaiconsulting.com/aid-development.htm

[6] The Israeli-Palestinian case represents an example of how research can do little to help a negotiation process in the absence of the political will to use it appropriately.

[7] http://www.afrobarometer.org/

relatively democratic countries; countries that have experienced significant conflict, including Sierra Leone, the DRC and Sudan are excluded. Its broad, continent-wide methodology disregards the divergent meanings that may be attributed to the same ideas or words in different corners of the continent. Democracy, for example, a concept on which they regularly poll, can have different connotations across countries: to people in Uganda who have been part of the Movement System, a single-party democratic model, democracy means something quite different than for Ghanaians who have had a longer history of multi-party democracy.

Even simple words can be laden with cultural significance, presenting pitfalls for the researcher, and affecting survey results in unexpected ways. Jok Madut Jok cites a case where researchers inappropriately ask a Dinka person the number of cattle he owns, without realizing that it is considered bad luck to tell someone this information and that the exact number is seldom known by the owners. Similarly, in Dinka culture, only oxen are traded for grain. If a researcher confuses an ox with a bull in a survey question, by asking a herdsman whether he sells bulls for grain in bad years, responses are likely to be inaccurate (Jok, 1996).

To overcome such problems and capture the local meanings that are attributed to more complex (and sensitive) words such as peace, rights or reconciliation, we decided to rely on a combination of oral histories, which let attitudes and values emerge in a very indirect way, and more focused semi-structured interviews. These methods differ from those usually employed to assess public opinion, but are powerful in letting people frame issues in their own terms and allowing shared experiences to assemble local versions of these words. At the same time, we used a set of unobtrusive methods to analyze alternative sources. The results obtained by these methods were compared and triangulated to improve the quality of data and the accuracy of findings, forcing researchers to reflect on inconsistencies and to ponder interpretations (Flick, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1994).[8]

Letting people write their own questionnaire: from oral histories to survey research

A fundamental first step in the overall research endeavor is getting the research questions right. Our project was initially interested in understanding Darfurian opinion of the peace process and the newly-signed Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), but we soon realized that that this was not viable; asking Darfurians directly about the DPA would be deeply polarizing and contentious. Because only one faction of one of the two major rebel groups had signed the agreement, there were profound divisions among the rebels. This had repercussions on the ground: some camps had to be reorganized according to affiliations to signatory or non-signatory parties to prevent violence among refugees. Thus, it was crucial to get at the issues in a less direct way. Rather than asking Darfurians what they thought about the substance, credibility or possible improvements of the DPA and relevant actors, we defined a set of more tempered research questions.

[8] It is important to take into account that, even if different typologies of sources and methods may usefully converge to examine the same event, each of them brings with it a unique view, not equivalent to the others (Blaikie, 1991). This is a weakness to be aware of, but it also presents an opportunity to produce different layers of analysis, which may complement each other (Robson, 1993).

The central question we chose to examine was, "How do people in Darfur understand and perceive the present violence?" Three sub-questions, which address different periods in time, were also identified: 1) How do Darfurians understand the historical roots of the conflict?; 2) How do different Darfurian groups and constituencies understand the current peace initiatives and think the violence can be stopped?; and 3) How do Darfurians think their society can be reconciled? These questions are intentionally broad, as to allow sufficient flexibility for the interviewees to define the issues of most pressing importance and in some respects narrow the research questions themselves.

We designed an initial, core research strategy which, as outlined in Figure 1, moves along a continuum of methods (located in the center of the figure). These methods reinforce each other in the pursuit of accurate representations of attitudes, values and opinions and at the same time provide unique results based on their own specific mode of interrogation.

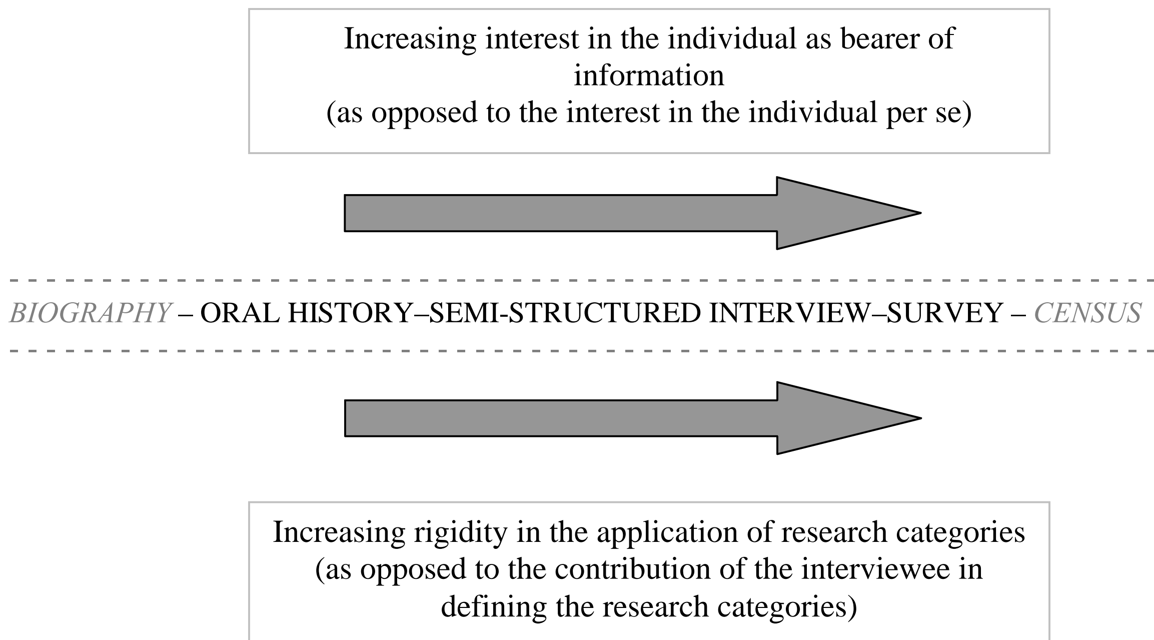

Figure 1: Continuum of research methods and their characteristics

The two techniques located at the extremes of the continuum in Figure 1 (biography and census[9]) are not included in our research framework; they represent signposts to more accurately place the other methods.

At the left end are methods that focus on individuals and their lifeworlds. A biography centers on the experience of one individual and provides a rich and nuanced perspective. Similarly, an oral history reconstructs an event or a period from different perspectives, not limiting itself to the official version of a fact, but illustrating the past as

[9] Strictly speaking a census is not a technique but a research enterprise that uses face to face interviews structured through a close-ended questionnaire as its main technique.

remembered by the people who have witnessed or have taken part in its making. In these cases the researcher facilitates the reconstruction of a life-story (biography) or a particular point in time (oral history), but his role is primarily to allow a story to develop and ensure that the key events are addressed.[10] It is up to the interviewees themselves to define what is relevant and what is not, and to varying degrees, set the "rules of the game" to define the categories through which the research will develop.

In contrast, at the right end of the continuum are methods that put the researcher in control. These techniques include surveys, which usually focus on a limited set of predefined dimensions and must be administered to a minimum number of individuals (usually 1,200 for a national survey) to claim representativeness, and censuses, which reach every inhabitant of a region or a country. The interviewees are given little or no chance to divert from the pre-selected categories. They can decide not to respond or not to choose among a predefined list of possibilities, but they cannot create their own categories. Here it is not so much the individual who matters, but the information that is "attached" to him.[11]

By moving from one end of the continuum to the other, from one method to the next, the importance of certain factors increases or decreases. While methods on the left end are interested in maximizing the number of representations held by a single individual, those on the right are interested in maximizing the number of individuals that hold a predefined set of representations or characteristics. The two measurements are inversely correlated; within a certain margin, when one increases the other decreases.

These methods manifest themselves in particular ways in Africa. On the left end of the spectrum, the narrative mode, characteristic of biographies and oral histories, builds on a competence that is common and highly valued in societies where orality plays an important role in the production and dissemination of information. Sitting with a person and asking her to recollect a particular event is common and can return rich accounts of the actors involved in the event, its causes and its consequences. Censuses and surveys, by contrast, are less familiar exercises and are typically perceived as less natural and more political. Because censuses have often been used to determine the redistribution of wealth within a nation, they are thus often seen to be a direct intrusion of a government in the life of its citizens. For example, in Sudan, the April 2008 census that was carried out in Sudan as a step towards the subsequent elections produced a number of incidents and deaths, especially in the most tense regions such as Darfur and Southern Sudan. In many refugee camps in Darfur the IDPs refused to respond to the questions they were asked. In southern Darfur some census counters were fired on and assaulted; people were killed by unidentified militia for refusing to participate (Reuters, 2008). A survey can produce similar suspicion, especially when its goals, language and procedures

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[10] These techniques however require a great degree of competence by the researcher about the interviewee and his social context. This is fundamental in pointing at the most relevant episodes of someone's life and in building a rapport.

[11] While the object of study sets the categories at the biographical end of the continuum, the researcher retains influence through his ability to organize the categories according to a specific paradigm or to select certain things over others. On the census end of the spectrum there is no flexibility offered to the participant and all the categories are already set; there is no opinion involved. But still there are limits in deciding, for example, to which ethnic group someone belongs, a decision that in many societies like Darfur where intermarriage is common depends on self-perception more than on evidence (Flint & De Waal, 2006)

are not clear to the surveyed population. It may thus be particularly important for a survey to ask questions using a language that is not perceived as highly politicized.

Building on the differences and relative strengths of these methods, our framework operates by moving from the techniques that allow the interviewees the greatest freedom to express themselves using their own language and worldviews (left of the spectrum), to the ones that allow researchers to ask more focused questions and to employ more traditional public opinion research techniques (right of the spectrum). By conducting a survey following rounds of oral histories and semi-structured interviews, as illustrated below in Fig. 2, a researcher can build on the language and issues that directly emerge from the interviewed population and can avoid, at least partially, the imposition of external language and interests on the population affected by the conflict. This process is aimed at translating "exmanent" questions (those based on the worldviews and interests of the researcher) into "immanent" ones (those reflecting the respondents' worldviews) (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

Figure 2: core set of methods for on the ground research

While this process may seem laborious for those who are looking for quick responses to problems that require urgent solutions, it has proved critical in a conflict environment such as Darfur for at least two reasons.

First, by using frames that are familiar to the interviewee, it is easier to negotiate access to individuals and groups and to distinguish oneself within a space occupied by a myriad of organizations with separate goals and policies, often at odds with each other. In our project in Darfur, this approach signalled that we did not have an agenda but were interested in the person and his or her narration. This helped in differentiating our research and building rapport with the population, which can facilitate subsequent phases of the research.[12]

Second, in a conflict situation, the velocity with which old traditions change or disappear and new ones replace them is much higher than in times of peace. By starting with methods that reconstruct the history of specific localities it is possible to look into this process of change and understand which institutions played what roles and when, and explore their potential use in conflict resolution.

Oral histories as the starting point

As the name suggests, oral history combines historiography (the collection of facts considered relevant for the purpose of the analysis), with the perceptions of those

[12] These goals were also achieved by using local researchers that could speak the vernacular language.

facts as experienced by the individuals who witnessed them or participated in their making. Like historiography, oral history is interested in facts; at the same time, it draws on the qualitative interview techniques employed by sociologists to create "a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in a particular social context" (Gaskell, 2000, p. 39). Oral histories thus represent a valuable resource for reconstructing the puzzle of a violent conflict, which often cannot be easily developed through the few secondary resources or written material available. Even more critical than the historical rigour that an oral history can guarantee, however, is its capacity to let subjectivity speak.

> The first thing that makes oral history different is that it tells us less about events than about their meaning. […] Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did […] Oral sources are credible, but with a different credibility. The importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism, and desire emerge (Portelli, 1991, pp. 50-51).

Our research framework takes oral history as a starting point for several reasons.

First, in the second half of the 20th century, oral history emerged as an emancipatory technique to give voice to the marginalized. It has been widely employed to narrate stories of simple soldiers (Arthur 2005) instead of generals, and those of the working class (Portelli, 1991) instead of key politicians. Oral histories have illustrated the sufferings of displacement, recollected the memories of migrants (Arthur, 2006; Coan, 1999), and reported the experiences of women during wars (Summerfield 1998). In the case of our research in Darfur, this tradition proved extremely helpful in approaching the large segments of the population who have been excluded from the peace process so as to investigate their perception of marginalization. In the words of two interviewees from internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in West and North Darfur:

> The history of people should be showed in the right way. If we look to history, the history of Ali Dinar[13]: they brought the all history of Ali Dinar in five lines in the classes of grade 8. This is a disgrace for the whole people's history and these are all things that offend people.

> There is development in Khartoum. I visited Khartoum and we had a warm reception. I saw there more than thirty-two mosques. Omer al-Bashir is responsible for us in the Day of Resurrection. Those who build mosques in Gezira region, why don't they come to Darfur and Kordofan and build mosques? This agitates the feeling of oppression in our people and causes disaster.

Second, oral histories can be adept in exploring crises and transitions. While the method has been used to look at varied subjects, from the routines of British cabinet ministries and civil servants (Seldon & Pappworth, 1983) to the history of punk (McNeil & McCain, 1997), it has also been widely used to investigate periods of war and change. Among the most popular examples of this tendency are the collection of memories from wars (Arthur, 1987, 2005; Portelli, 1997; Steinhoff, Pechel, & Showalter, 1994;

[13] Ali Dinar was the last sultan of Darfur. He resisted the colonial assaults in Darfur but was eventually killed by the British in 1916.

Summerfield, 1998), the struggles of trade unionists in the post World War II period (Portelli, 1991), and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Rubalcava, 2001).[14]

Portelli (1991) presents a useful approach to analyzing oral histories. Borrowing a literary category from the Russian formalists, he suggests to identify in every story a *fabula (*the chronological, causal sequence of a story, which is what most historians are interested in), and a *plot* (the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell their story, which is what we are interested in). It is in the interplay between a fabula and a plot, in the decision of what to narrate and what to omit and in which order, that we discover the meaning of a story and, thus, the worldview in which our informants live. It is a highly interpretative work, but some instruments can be of help. Portelli explains that narratives can be arranged around three different levels: institutional, collective and personal, and a narrator's choice of level is illustrative of his perspective. For example, a war can be narrated as the consequence of capitalism, as the catastrophe that caused the destruction of the hometown, or as a personal experience e.g. the tragedy of the loss of relatives and friends. In research he did on steel workers in the Italian city of Terni, Portelli noticed how the death of Luigi Trastulli during a peaceful demonstration against the North Atlantic Treaty in 1949 was shifted by many narrators to the violent protests against massive loss of jobs and for workers' rights in 1953. The explanation he gives is complex but can be summarized by the idea that for most narrators, interviewed in the 60s, the North Atlantic Treaty represented something abstract and far, while the loss of jobs had a much more significant impact on the lives of many of them.

Third, similar to the narrative interview (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000), the collection of oral histories involves little pre-structuring and attempts to be unobtrusive.[15] This is particularly relevant when the interviewer and the interviewee do not share the same cultural background; a tightly-structured questionnaire can impose a specific and partial perspective on the informant and misinterpret reality.

Oral histories have been instrumental for our research in understanding how the current crisis is perceived in Darfur. As the following excerpts from two interviews demonstrate, references to how the 1984 famine affected the region provide insight into how people perceive external interventions.

> I was young at the time but I heard that [there was a] president called Reagan, and they were the ones who sent the aid. Everyone in Darfur used to say Reagan. When you mention the corn beans we don't call it corn [we] call it Reagan, so the credit goes to the American president Reagan. He is the one who rescued us in Darfur at that time
>
> We never receive assistance except the aid which was called Reagan as it was funded by President Reagan. In fact we appreciate what President Reagan did for us, because it alleviated the historical disaster which happened to us due to which some people died

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[14] There are several ways to analyze and interpret oral histories, which provide an important launching point for the other research methods. Below we illustrate the one proposed by Alessandro Portelli (1991). On a paradigmatic axis different events happen at the same time. They are inseparable but logically distinct; different interpretations for the same events are equally available, but these have to be selected accordingly to make the storytelling possible.

[15] The narrative interview has emerged partially to contest the question-answer schema (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000)

Oral histories illustrated that generally, Americans and Europeans are perceived to be helpful, a view rooted in actions they have made in the past. These findings can be used to explain recent political maneuvers, such as the resistance of the Sudanese government to European troops as part of the hybrid AU/UN military force. According to the opinion gathered on the ground, the presence of a European force would be perceived by Darfurians as a reason to hope for their safety and return to their villages, while for the government of Sudan this could represent a risk of losing control of the region and give it an opportunity to manipulate the situation to its advantage. An interviewer from West Darfur in fact noted:

> I think that if the hybrid forces were mixed with European forces or if they were under European command, they might solve something, because the European forces cannot be fooled. Yes, nobody can deceive or trick the Europeans.

Since the Europeans are not allowed to take part in the hybrid force this will be difficult to prove. While perceptions of the United States and Europe were generally positive, other oral histories showed that the capital accumulated by the West in the past is being slowly eroded; the increased presence of foreign organizations in Darfur, not always acting in the best interests of those on the ground, has resulted in an increased resistance to influence.

> There are some good organizations that want to help, and others that have special purposes. Unfortunately these organizations brought bad habits and ideas that we do not share. For example: the disrespectful appearance or the fact that children who go to these organizations are given gifts and candies. The real man of Darfur has lost trust in these organizations because they are not concerned with the life of the people of Darfur and start to trade in the name of Darfur. So if someone can give you the food and the clothes, does that mean that he can take your son? This is not the good life we are looking for and no one will accept this. So people start to stay away from dealing with these organizations.

As these accounts partially show, oral histories, while time consuming, provide the richest insights and are a crucial method in ensuring that subsequent methods, including surveys, are appropriate and culturally sensitive.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews complement oral histories and serve as a tool to access ideas and representations held by individuals such as local politicians, journalists, NGO workers and academics. These individuals have important opinions about a conflict and its potential resolutions. Even if they already have access to channels to have their voice heard, it is important to map their ideas as a way to understand which forces in society advocate for which kind of solutions.

Semi-structured interviews offer a reality check for the oral histories, situating them in time and space, adding further details and uncovering contradictions. Some themes can be taken from the oral histories and addressed during semi-structured interviews. In this case it may be less important to be unobtrusive: more direct questions

can be asked and a tighter topic guide can be developed. The focus can be more specific, building on dimensions that emerge from the oral histories. Semi-structured interviews can also lead to a typification of different representations and interests at stake.[16]

For both oral histories and semi-structured interviews, the sampling methodology is purposeful. Qualitative methods do not intend to include a large number of individuals to generalize results to a population; rather, they are aimed at maximizing the number of different representations available of the same phenomenon. As a result, the informants are selected and not randomly sampled. Factors to consider include social strata, functions and categories (qualities that are known and finite, e.g. sex, age, ethnic group, etc) and representations of a particular phenomenon (qualities that are unknown and potentially infinite, e.g. opinions, attitudes, feelings).

The number of interviews necessary to obtain the information required varies according to the specific purpose of the research being conducted. One useful criterion to identify when to stop collecting new data is the law of diminishing returns. When, after adding further strata, a smaller and smaller difference is registered in representations to the whole, the corpus of data is referred to as saturated.

Survey

As identified along the continuum of methods in Fig. 1, the third research method is survey research. Most public opinion research is conducted through surveys which makes surveys the prevalent means to assess attitudes and beliefs (though as we have argued here, surveys are not the only, nor often the best, method). Survey research usually relies on a wide set of elaborated techniques to explore the social world, predict behaviours and analyze trends. Because of its randomness, scope and quantifiable aspects it provides a legitimacy and comprehensiveness that can be important for supporting claims of representation. However, while this research instrument has been widely employed for varied purposes it is crucial that it be based on preliminary research so as to allow researchers to ask the right questions. It is also crucial that surveys be conducted in a language that can be easily understood by both the interviewer and by the sampled population.

As explained above, moving from oral histories and semi-structured interviews to surveys seeks to address these concerns, allowing for the transformation of "exmanent" questions into more "immanent" ones, and building questionnaires based on local knowledge and adapted to the complexities of a conflict situation.

However, although we argue that a questionnaire *must* emerge directly from the previous phases of the research, the sampling strategy for the survey has to be different from that used for the oral histories and semi-structured interviews. The strategy we recommend closely follows the one developed by the Afrobarometer team, which skillfully addresses the problem of the lack of sampling frames (e.g. phonebooks, electoral lists, etc.) in most African countries, but allows for the random selection of people. The methodology we suggest is a clustered, stratified, multi-stage, area-probability sample. It is not based on the random sampling of individuals but of geographic locations. In a series of stages, geographically-defined sampling units of

[16] The interviews can be analyzed with a method similar to the five stage analytic process proposed by Grant McCracken (McCracken, 1988).

decreasing size are selected. To ensure that the sample is representative, the sample is stratified by key social characteristics in the population such as sub-national area (e.g. region or province) and residential locality (urban or rural). The area stratification reduces the likelihood that distinctive ethnic or language groups are left out of the sample.

The sampling design has four stages. In the first stage, primary sampling units (e.g. the census enumeration areas) are stratified and randomly selected; in the second stage, sampling starting points from which the interviewers will start walking are selected; in the third stage, households are randomly chosen; and in the final stage, there is a random selection of individual respondents. We believe that this technique, which is close to the methodology Afrobarometer has employed in regions of peace, represents an effective approach to public opinion polling in conflict areas or in refugee camps, as it is highly adaptable to informal settlements and areas that are highly in flux. Despite the volatile environment, maps, which are essential to the work of NGOs and international organizations, are often available, and are important in contributing to the random sampling.

While a survey can yield a rich, comprehensive picture of public opinion, it is unfortunately the most politically complex and expensive part of our methodology. It often takes much longer than anticipated and can easily be derailed by government or rebel interference in sensitive areas such as Darfur.

Far from the ground: unobtrusive methods to conduct public opinion research in conflict environments

The second stream of our research relies on methods that target a different population, less marginal than the one covered by the core research stream. Alongside the core research, this method has provided an important context to the main findings, and has allowed us to keep contact with the formation of opinions on the ground when the security situation did not allow us to carry out interviews.

The earliest examples of similar alternative methodologies for gauging public opinion date back to World War I when Harold Lasswell perfected content analysis as a way to map the symbolic environment that surrounds and influence people's lives and used it to study the enemy's propaganda (Lasswell, 1927). Lasswell later employed the same technique to infer from German newspapers the status of the Nazi apparatus during World War II (Howland, Becker, & Prelli, 2006). As Naisbitt (1982: p. 3) reported, "the strain on Germany's people, industry, and economy began to show up in its newspapers…. Over time, it was possible to piece together what was going on in Germany and to figure out whether conditions were improving or deteriorating by carefully tracking local stories about factory openings, closings, and production targets, about train arrivals, departures, and delays and so on."

A similar attempt to understand opinions, values and attitudes in inaccessible areas was made by Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead during World War II. Their project was grounded in anthropology and social psychology and had the ambitious scope of studying "cultures at a distance," of understanding societies in Europe and Asia that were unreachable because of the war. This research enterprise, while controversial, devised

key methods for understanding remote societies through local cultural products such as literature, films and public imagery.[17]

Today, in the era of global networks and media, access to foreign newspapers and public imagery has greatly facilitated the researcher's ability to assess the process attitude and opinion formation from a distance. Our research methodology benefits from this expansion of media spaces to study public opinions but also builds on the experiences described above. We focus on two particular techniques: content analysis of the local press and the ethnographic exploration of online forums.

These methods have the advantage of being unobtrusive, as they make use of materials that are being produced independently of the research enterprise (thus minimizing the risk of politicized responses).[18] In addition, their built-in tracking system makes it possible to follow changes of opinion and to assess the relevance and influence of certain events on the attitudes towards peace and conflict.[19]

Ethnographic research of online voices

Ethnographic online research has been widely used to investigate the new forms of interaction emerging from the diffusion of the Internet.[20] Observation of this virtual space has been employed to analyze the most varied phenomena, from the exchanges between migrants and their families in the homeland (Bernal, 2006; Miller & Slater, 2000; Parham, 2004) to the resistance to Western ideas and discourses (Bickel, 2003; Mitra, 2001), to the inciting of hatred by extremist groups (Bunt, 2003).

Since our research framework is interested in the analysis of attitudes towards peace and conflict, among the virtual spaces available—including websites, on-line newspapers, and blogs—we chose to focus primarily on online forums. As opposed to web-based newspapers, which usually are the expression of a relatively organized group

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[17] This research led to the creation of the Columbia University Research in Contemporary Cultures project, which was founded by Mead. Ruth Benedict's *The chrysanthemum and the sword : patterns of Japanese culture* (1946) is probably the most famous output of this effort.

[18] Certainly, expressing opinions on an online forum or writing a piece for a newspaper is often a political activity that aims to influence decisions. The point is that the techniques discussed here reduce the probability that the research is manipulated by people who have a stake in the conflict.

[19] Even if multiple surveys can be administered over time, this represents a major effort in a conflict area, where the continuous polling we are used to in Western countries is not possible. In the case of oral histories, frequent interviews will not yield much data on shifts in perceptions over short periods of time. But these alternative methods also have important limitations. For example, even if some scholars argue that the press reflects the society it is part of (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956), focusing only on individuals who speak to an audience on a daily basis contributes little to research that aims to represent those who have no voice. Similarly, while online forums are a good space to observe the emergence of a multiplicity of opinions, it is risky to base assumptions only on the messages of a group that is largely anonymous and where it is difficult to identify participants that might have particular interests in the conflict.

[20] The ethnographic exploration of online spaces dates back to the very origin of the Internet as we know it. It was initially used by social psychologists (Mantovani, 1995; Spears & Lea, ; Sproull & Kiesler, 1992; Turkle, 1997) and linguists (Cherny, 1995; Danet & Herring, 2003) to investigate issues such as the representation of the self online or the new form of orality that the medium was encouraging. It was based on participant observation of discussion forums centered on particular issues or open to more generic debates. These first studies set the basis of methods that are still used now to analyze both the private and public use of the Internet.

of professionals, and blogs, which are typically centered on the opinions of a single individual, online forums are a more open space where multiple voices can compete and every member is given the opportunity to post and make his/her ideas known to the other participants.

In general, each thread of discussion is opened by a member posting a stand-alone message. Other participants can then extend the thread by sending their comments or decide to open a new one on a similar or different topic. This method is particularly conducive for studying public opinion: a researcher can quantify the amount of interest in different issues by counting the number of threads on a particular topic and the number of overall comments received by the threads and the topic.

The variety of forums and their differing features[21] make it difficult to design research techniques of universal application; it is necessary to adapt to the different scopes of the research and the virtual environments where it is taking place. Nevertheless, we propose a general two-step plan that can be relevant for a range of studies interested in tracking public opinion online.

The first step is mainly explorative. Its goal is to gain access to online spaces. In our project on Darfur, the interest was identifying online forums hosting reactions to events connected to the conflict as expressed by Darfurians in particular and Sudanese in general, inside and outside Sudan. This exercise resulted in the selection of ten forums[22] addressing various political issues, among which the conflict in Darfur emerged more or less prominently.

Once the appropriate sites are identified, techniques such as participant observation and/or thick description[23] can be used to understand the dynamics at play in each forum, to form a general impression of categories that can be later used during the research and to approach ethical issues such as anonymity, confidentiality and data publication. In the case of our research, participant observation was key in developing an initial understanding of the composition of each forum, in terms of provenience of members, political affiliation and relationships among the most active participants, and in later guiding the selection of a smaller number of forums for the subsequent phase of the research. The outcome of this first step should be an accurate description of the forums and a preliminary comprehension of the ways in which the issues under scrutiny are addressed online.[24]

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[21] Some forums can be accessed only through invitations, while others are completely open. Some forums keep the main threads on the home page and allow contributions mainly in the form of replies to those main threads.

[22] The websites hosting the online forums were http://www.sudaneseonline.com, www.sudaneseoffline.net, http://www.shamarat.net, http://www.sudanjem.com, http://www.sudan-forall.org, http://www.alnilin.com, http://www.sudanile.com, http://www.sudanforum.net, www.sudanyat.org, www.kartowm.net

[23] In Darfur, we did not use thick description, a technique initially developed by Clifford Geertz (1973). However, the technique can prove extremely useful in an initial phase. The accurate description of habits, behaviours and routines that characterize each forum is a way to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying features of each online space. For a more comprehensive illustration of ethnographic online research techniques we suggest consulting Miller and Slater (2000).

[24] To test the techniques, at the beginning of the research project, two points in time that we judged relevant in the peace process were analyzed. The first period was the month of November 2006, which was chosen because of the November 15-16 meeting in Addis Ababa, attended by representatives of Government of Sudan, the AU, the UN and a number of officials from other African countries and aimed at finding a way forward for the deployment of troops which could improve the security situation in Darfur. The meeting

The second step focuses more closely on the tracking of specific opinions, using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.[25] The methodology employed for research in Darfur – which can be extended to the analysis of other cases – consisted of counting the number of threads focused on Darfur among the total threads for each forum. This method illustrates the importance of a particular event to the selected online population. In addition, to further measure the popularity of the particular issue addressed in a thread, a researcher can count the number of comments posted following this thread.

Different approaches can be used to analyze the content of the threads. One way is to simply report the issues as framed by the online members in a narrative way – saying, for example, that "on August 9 the discussion on Sudaneseoffline was monopolized by a thread about the inappropriate behaviour of international organizations' workers in South Darfur…" Another way is to develop coding frames to categorize each thread by attaching labels such as "criticism towards the government," "racism," and so on, and measuring their recurrence over time. In both cases, especially if coupled with a calendar of events related to the conflict, the content analysis identifies both how opinions evolve in a number of selected online spaces and the degree to which events influence the perception of the conflict itself.

Online forums highlighted new issues that could then be tested through the other methods. For example online ethnography was very important in exploring some of the criticism addressed at expat workers and testing through oral histories whether the resentment expressed online was also common, among the population in IDP camps. Later on, when the rebel group the JEM attacked Khartoum, online research proved useful in providing insight into how the event was perceived in real-time

The following posts illustrate how these two themes were articulated online. The first quotes refer to the reactions to the incident that involved the French organization l'Arche de Zoé, whose members tried to fly Chadian and Darfurian children to France claiming their status of orphans.

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was the first one to see the participation of the Government of Sudan after the signing of the DPA. The second timeframe was the month of August 2007, chosen for similar reasons. From August 3-5,the rebel movement gathered in Arusha with the support of the UN and AU to find a common voice in preparation for the peace negotiations.The selection of these two periods in the negotiations of the process saw the participation of the two main actors involved in the conflict, the Government of Sudan and the rebel movements. At the same time, the periods also captured the initiatives put forward by the United Nations to find a solution to the conflict by improving the security situation.

The findings were somewhat surprising and partially disconfirmed our initial expectations. If the Addis meeting received good coverage in the international press (see Montestquiou 2006 and Cooper 2006)), the meeting generated almost no discussion on-line.

Eight months later, following the August Arusha meeting, the articulation of the opinions expressed online on the Darfur crisis and the peace process was similarly sparse.

Our initial presumption, that we would find a lot of information on the peace process and its key events in the online forums (based on the high visibility the negotiations received in the international press), was disconfirmed. To find information relevant to the research questions we were asking we had to shift the focus to other issues, such as opinions about the rebel groups and their leaders, the perception of NGO workers in Darfur, and so on.

[25] Continuing to use participant observation and thick description also in phase 2 can however prove useful in deepening the knowledge of the online forums in terms of provenience of members, their political leaning, their relationships, etc.

> Darfur is becoming like Iraq. Everything is overlapping and people do not know anymore who the friend is and who the enemy is. And above all, it became a topic for earning money through marketing the empty bellies of the innocents. (Sudan.net April 9 2008)

> Those children are victims for the long European hand which is dishonest in the way it deals with countries of the south. The return of the children does not reflect the awakening of the European consciousness. They were returned because Europe is fed up with immigrants and refugees and it does not intend to receive any more of them. (Sudaneseoffline, March 27 2008)

The following quotes, taken from debates over the May 2008 attack on Khartoum, highlight how the Darfurian rebel movements are the object of strong criticism among the online community. The last quote, by a member who identified himself as a member of JEM (the movement that organized the attack), illustrates how online forums are becoming a space for members of the rebel movements to articulate their thoughts and to respond to criticism.

> As we saw in the news there are children among the prisoners who were pushed by Khalil Ibrahim to fight in Khartoum while they were supposed to be at school working for a promising future. What the leaders of JEM have done confirms that their struggle is for a luxury life for them and their children, not for a better life for the Darfuri children. Why didn't the JEM leaders send their children to fight instead of the children of poor simple people? They are staying in the expensive hotels of Cairo and London. (Sudaneseoffline May 11 2008)

> What did the JEM expect to benefit from this attack? They are attacking with 200 cars, let's say that each car contains ten soldiers, which means 2000 soldiers participating in the attack. Did they expect to take over a city which has thousands of police and military soldiers with this number? Do they watch action movies too much or what? This means it was a suicidal attempt. Their leaders sent them to die. (Sudan.net, May 10 2008)

> I personally do not agree on war or killing, but you know what our people in Darfur have been suffering from during the last 5 years…. And then you should notice that the movement has been very careful to keeping citizens unharmed… we only target the regime and nothing else, the citizen will remain a citizen and nothing will change that (Sudaneseoffline, May 18 2008)

Content analysis of the local press

The local press can also be an important forum for representing attitudes towards peace and conflict. The media is an accessible tool for researchers in contexts of both peace and conflict, which can prove extremely useful when it is impossible, for security or other reasons, to be on the ground. Media outlets can be accessed in the capital city, a library abroad or through an online database. The major drawback of this technique is that it does not capture the opinions as they emerge on the ground, but rather as they are articulated by local elites.

Content analysis has been employed to study varied phenomena, from advertising (Frith & Shaw, 2005; Livingstone & Green, 1986; Thomas & Treiber, 2000) to elections coverage (Coleman & Wasike, 2004; Schweitzer, 2005). As briefly illustrated above, the technique was initially used on a wide scale to analyze news coverage and propaganda during the two world wars (Lasswell, 1927; Neuendorf, 2002). While we are interested in understanding a society through its media and representing media actors themselves as stakeholders in the resolution of a conflict, not in deciphering an enemy's mind or assessing its morale, our interest in conflict environments makes these early experiences extremely relevant.[26]

Most content analysis techniques link qualitative and quantitative techniques together, and return a numerical representation of texts in the form of frequencies and percentages.[27] Beyond these similarities, the focus of content analysis studies and the goals they seek differ widely. Some direct their attention to the source of the message while others focus on the message itself, or on its receiver. Some attempt to track changes over time, reveal differences among different media outlets, or construct indices or maps of knowledge (Krippendorf, 1980), while others look at the text as a medium of expression or as a medium of appeal (Bauer, 2000).

Among this variety of applications our main interest is making use of content analysis as "public opinion research by other means" (Bauer, 2000, 134). As a result, we primarily focus on the messages and their sources to follow how the framing of a conflict and the actors involved in it evolve over time.

Our interest is on the printed press, a central element of media systems for reasons often specific to poor countries. The press can serve as a forum for the negotiation of power between different factions as well as between these factions and the government (a factor that is often overlooked). Print journalists in Africa have also had substantially more freedoms than their electronic counterparts, and have been very active during and after political transitions. As Charles Onyango-Obbo, a founding editor of the *Monitor* newspapers in Uganda, argued, in his country it is the print media that really matters:

> In print you have the policy debate. In Africa you cannot have policy debates in any sensible way in the broadcast media. For call in shows in Uganda and a lot of Africa their function is for people to vent. People go home after they have vented. They don't actually call in so their point of view can form the basis of government action but they call in spur of the moment. It is not recorded. But the people that write in the media are very meticulous, they do their research, it is the intellectual forum.[28]

The press, as Onyango-Obbo implies, remains the realm of the intellectuals and elites. Even in authoritarian countries, such as Sudan, the press represents a space (one of

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[26] As Bauer argues, "content analysis allows [the construction of] indicators of worldviews, values, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and stereotypes" (Bauer, 2000, 134).

[27] Human coding is based on the construction of a coding frame that allows classification of the unit of analysis according to a specific research question. A different approach consists in counting the occurrence of specific words and calculating their relevance as compared to their average use or to the use in other selected documents. This can be done by out looking at "keywords out of contexts" (simple world counts where specific words are looked at through the construction of an appropriate dictionary) or at "keywords in context" (the focus here is on the co-occurrence of certain words with others and their positions within a text). A comprehensive description of content analysis techniques can be found in Neuendorf (2002).

[28] Interview: Charles Onyango-Obbo.

the few) for the negotiation of power. In Sudan's authoritarian society, the press has paradoxically represented a venue where multiple voices appear with a relative degree of freedom. At various times the press is opened, at other times it is restricted. Thus, a comprehensive study of the press system can provide important data and understanding into the broader debates occurring within society on a particular issue.

In the case of content analysis of the press, we propose a two-step research approach similar to that employed for the study of public opinion in online spaces.

The goal of the first step is mapping the main media outlets in terms of ownership, political leanings and readership. Unfortunately, little secondary literature is available. Reports on national media systems regularly published by organizations such as Reporters Without Borders or Freedom House can be of some help, but their focus on ranking countries according to their degree of press freedom typically fails to provide a richer picture illustrating the primary actors in a particular media scene or the nuances of particular positions. To really understand what interests are represented by specific media outlets the best way is direct interviewing of editors and journalists, delving into their past and the reasons why they embraced the profession and exploring the role they think they are playing in their country. As pointed out by authors such as Francis Nyamjoh (2005), the press in developing countries often has different objectives than performing the idealized Western role of watchdog or neutral advocate. Journalists frequently use the press as a platform to advocate for a different idea of society or to play (or try to play) a role of opposition in a single party system. Having a nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for research that seeks to map public opinion and for providing a context to the data collected through the analysis of individual texts. At the end of this process, the result should be the creation of an exhaustive picture of the press in the country, so as to later select a representative sample of newspapers to be analyzed.

The second step is the actual implementation of the content analysis strategy. Depending on the resources available, a larger or smaller sample of items (usually articles) can be selected for analysis. In Darfur, we chose to sample five papers out of the many published in Sudan and for each of them to select the opinion pieces on Darfur. The codes used to analyze the items included "the blaming of the Khartoum government for the cause of the war," "the positive/negative impact of China," and "advocating support for the International criminal court," among others. Other techniques could be used instead of or in parallel to this. For example, with the support of text analysis and text mining software such as Alceste, Hamlet or Taltac, it is possible to register the occurrence, co-occurrence and frequency of certain words that are key in the framing of a conflict and peace process.[29]

Whatever specific technique is employed for the treatment of texts, content analysis can track attitudes and opinions of a certain segment of the population. While its

[29]It is possible for example to capture the adjectives that are used to characterize specific actors involved in the conflict (in the case of our research, for example, "the African Union," the "government of Sudan," or "the Justice and Equality Movement") or to identify language elements shared by different newspapers (common language) as well as words and sequences that, on the contrary, occur only in one or more papers but not in others (exclusive language). Unfortunately so far there is no software that can treat languages other than those based on the Latin alphabet and the analysis of newspapers in Arabic requires an additional effort of translation. Since single words or strings of words are the main object of analysis the translation has to be carried out with particular care, be as literal as possible, and ideally carried out by the same translator over time or at least produce a dictionary clear enough to be used by different translators.

constituency may be debatable and may vary, a daily examination of the local press allows the researcher to register the impact of certain events, and the increasing or decreasing favour for particular courses of action.

Both the ethnographic online research and the content analysis are ideally used to complement the interview-based research. From our experience, the exploration of online spaces related to Darfur allowed us to register the emergence of a strong criticism towards the “improper behaviour” of some AU soldiers and aid workers, a dimension that was later incorporated in other components of the research.

In unpredictable conflict situations these methods also provide important means of maintaining the continuity of the research when particular environments are inaccessible; this has often been the case for our research, both because of logistical and bureaucratic problems. These methods proved important in allowing us to continue to collect data on opinions towards the conflict and possible solutions for peace, and also kept the team focused on what was happening on the ground.

Politicization and ethical considerations

Underlying the research framework, particularly the interview and survey-based research, are very serious ethical considerations that must not be ignored. In conducting research during sensitive times there is a risk of endangering the safety of both researchers as well as informants. For this reason, we recommend that the research should be conducted anonymously, but there remains the very real potential of people being persecuted for taking part.

Research in crisis situations can also be easily politicized and manipulated. NGOs are often the most active researchers, yet they typically have an interest in particular outcomes. They may also prioritize public relations activities, at times even providing misinformation in conflict zones.[30] Difficulties conducting research may be further compounded by a lack of accurate baseline data, some of which should be provided by governments. However, governments share a similar interest in manipulating information, and particularly census data that could serve as a valuable starting point for new research. In Sudan, for example, the 2008 census has been highly controversial: according to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between the North and South, the results will impact the distribution of resources between the Government of Sudan and the Government of Southern Sudan. As a result, leaders in the South have been strongly

[30] As Nik Gowing illustrated in a piece on the conflict in the Great Lakes (Gowing, 1998) there were widespread reports of NGOs, such as Medecins sans frontiers, providing information that was self-motivated and inaccurate. Organizations reportedly made false claims, for example, that 50,000 people died of cholera in Eastern DRC, or reported that soon more than 1,000 refugees would be dying every day. When journalists arrived on the scene, however, there would be no such catastrophe. While MSF claims that its assessment was based on statistical data and certainly solid information can be difficult to come by in such circumstances, these organizations were also clearly in a public relations competition for funds. The reality is that organizations with the most dire predictions or highest numbers of casualties are those that make the evening news.

encouraging Southerners living in the North to return to the South temporarily to be counted in the census,[31] so as to ensure that the South gets a greater share of the wealth.

Additionally, in some places, such as Darfur, which have been inundated with relief organizations, informants can become exhausted by the continuous cycles of researchers and suffer “assessment fatigue.” This is a major issue affecting the ability to conduct research and the validity of results. Informants may simply answer whatever is quickest or what they assume researchers what to hear, or they may even intentionally mislead the researchers as a polite way of expressing their frustration. Particularly in conflict areas, there can be a major disconnect between the information sought by the researchers and the desperately needed peace. When people have suffered such traumatic events as losing their home and family members, questions about peace can seem naïve, patronizing and irrelevant. A major challenge for all researchers is how to conduct research with dignity.

Improving understandings of violence and peace in Africa

The methods we have detailed in this paper are extremely powerful when deployed together, but this does not mean they *must* all be used to carry out research in conflict environments. For example, a collection of oral histories can contribute interesting insights into the understanding of a certain aspect of a crisis. Or, a content analysis of local papers can highlight how different sectors of society look at the same problem but advocate for different solutions. However, a researcher who has decided to use one method while excluding others should havea sense of perspective and context. Oral histories, for example, can be not only an isolated endeavour but a contribution to the development of categories that can be employed by another researcher coding newspaper articles or preparing a questionnaire for a national survey.

The research methods we propose contribute to broader understandings of violent conflict in Africa. There is an urgency in giving voice to the people affected by the conflict, primarily because African wars are so often misunderstood and inaccurately portrayed by the news media, academics and the international community involved in the peace settlement. Current African wars are often considered ‘new wars,’ signaling a break with those that were fought before the Cold War ended. Some scholars perceive a level of anarchy, brutality and senselessness about the new civil wars that the previous wars did not share (Kaldor, 2006; Kaplan, 1994). While the wars of the present may involve a significant proportion of the population, arguments that they are largely about private loot, lack public support and sponsor gratuitous violence or are even “about nothing at all” can reflect a lack of field research and understanding of the historical and political dimensions of the conflict. Such views may suggest a superiority bias where ‘our wars’ have been ‘real struggles over serious issues.’ In fact, as some authors remind us (Dexter, 2007; Elshtain, 2001; Newman, 2004), most of the current wars in Africa have roots in the Cold War world and earlier. Participation in such conflicts is often complex and sophisticated. As Kalyvas notes, “ideological motivations are simply not always visible to observers looking for ‘Western’ patterns of allegiance and discourse.

[31] The census in Ethiopia has been similarly politicized and contentious as the Ethiopian government has been accused of stalling the nationwide survey out of concern that some ethnic groups would prove larger than official estimates and that the officially Christian country would in reality be more than half Muslim.

They make the flawed assumption that organizations using religious idioms and local cultural practices to mobilize people – rather than easily recognizable universalistic appeals – lack any ideology" (Kalyvas, 2001, pp. 104-105). Such claims tend to focus on the effects of violence rather than on understanding the motivations of the participants, their loyalties and ideologies, and the history of the conflict and its economic and power dimensions, and thus risk misunderstanding the nature of a conflict.

In an effort to move past misleading analysis, collecting the opinions of those involved and affected by the violence can bring a nuanced perspective to understanding both the nature of the conflict and its possible resolutions and contribute to the form of grassroots diplomacy that we tried to illustrate here. However, for these opinions to make a difference it is fundamental that they are endorsed by big players such as the United Nations or the African Union. The responsibility of researchers and academics is to produce sound research that moves beyond a basic translation of techniques used elsewhere and try to get as close to the ground as possible, but without a committed and powerful partner that will use the findings at the negotiation table they can remain just exercises.

To conclude, grassroots diplomacy of the kind we propose is part of a wider need to engage with local contexts, populations and actors, not just refining the tools diplomatic corps use to mediate and convince, but offering the kind of knowledge from the grassroots that is often overlooked when peace is brokered but it is fundamental to implement it on the ground after diplomats, soldiers and development workers have left.

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