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IMPACT OF THE WAR ON MARKET INSTITUTIONS AND FUNCTIONS IN DARFUR

CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN CHANGE

Introduction

Markets in Darfur have long been vibrant, complex hubs that are vital for food systems, culture, and the economy. Like many traditional marketplaces in Africa, they have played a role far beyond their economic function as an arena for social interaction and trust-based exchanges, facilitating community ties and identity, connecting different livelihood and ethnic groups, and linking rural producers to urban and peri-urban consumers.[1] This brief looks at markets in Darfur as physical spaces and institutional arrangements with roles beyond their economic function, including conflict resolution and peacebuilding, social and political interaction, and exchange of information. It explores how these functions have been impacted by almost three years of civil war, since April 2023, and how traditional and modern market institutions have been affected. When markets are not operating in an optimum manner, communities around them suffer and communal stability also becomes compromised.

The analysis is based on first-hand accounts and predominantly qualitative data collected by researchers in each of Darfur's states between November 2024 and January 2026, with a period of more targeted data collection in December 2025 and January 2026. This is part of the 'Understanding Markets' project. See Box 1 for a description of the project.

1. The importance of these non-economic functions in markets in Africa has long been recognised. See, for example, Bohannan and Dalton, 1963.

Representative market institutions are critical to the effective functioning of markets in Darfur. © Albert González Farran/UNAMID

BOX 1 SUMMARY OF THE 'UNDERSTANDING MARKETS' STUDY

This briefing note is produced by the project 'Understanding markets and trade in a context of extreme conflict and humanitarian crisis, with limited access, in Darfur, Sudan'.

It sets out to address three research questions:

1. How can market monitoring and data collection be adapted, with flexibility and sensitivity, to fill the information gap in Darfur at least partially – in a context of extreme conflict, insecurity and constrained access – through local actors?

2. How has trade in agricultural and livestock commodities adapted, positively and negatively, to the current context of extreme conflict in Darfur, how is trade affecting the conflict, and what are the implications for social cohesion and for conflict-sensitive programming by humanitarian actors?

3. How can a deeper understanding of markets and trade in food commodities contribute to improved understanding of the severity of food insecurity in Darfur?

The brief provides recommendations on how humanitarian actors can support certain market institutions to boost the wider and critical functions they play.

Markets as multifunctional social institutions in the pre-2023 war period

The structure and features of markets in Darfur vary according to the population and the geospatial characteristics of the area they serve in terms of converging trade routes and production of certain goods in their hinterland. The main market in each state capital represents the top of the hierarchy where trade flows converge. Much of the governance of and influence over trading activities emanates from here. Next in the hierarchy are smaller town markets in the capitals of localities. Below these are vibrant rural markets called *omdawarwar* where people gather once or twice a week and the shops are mostly makeshift shelters for the temporary display of goods on market days. At the bottom of the hierarchy are smaller village markets where people congregate, usually once a week, to perform necessary transactions. Both men and women are active traders in Darfur, although much large-scale trading is dominated by men. Female petty traders usually occupy the middle of the marketplace, in the shape of a circle of makeshift stalls.

Markets in Darfur traditionally had multifunctional roles. Each marketplace mirrored not only the socio-economic and political conditions of the surrounding area but also the patterns of long-distance association with other communities further afield that could stretch across the whole country and across borders into neighbouring countries. In addition to the usual facilitation of trading commodities, markets in Darfur were forums where community leaders presided over meetings to resolve diverse types of conflicts, such as those between farmers and traders over seasonal agricultural credit for farmers, or arbitration between traders. In many areas, customary courts also met on market days so they were accessible to all concerned. Local committee members entrusted with the task of collecting contributions for public infrastructure such as schools, mosques, water sources, health centres or even for road repair often used the marketplace as a practical platform. Other forms of fundraising in marketplaces included blood-money payment[2] as well as contributions in times of crisis. Local government officers, public health officers, the police and tax collectors also found it easier to access the public on a market day. More generally, people meeting in the marketplace exchanged information on a wide range of issues, both personal (such as invitations for marriage ceremonies and work parties for building a house) and public (such as livestock pasture and pest control) as this was the most common method for direct communication between people. The market was also a place of entertainment where friends met to drink tea or eat roasted meat. Markets gave rural youth the chance of freedom or relaxation as market days broke daily routines, offered new experiences and provided opportunities to meet friends and share news. Through these interactions the marketplace provided a leadership and capacity development forum for the youth.

Markets played an important peacebuilding role because they facilitated transactions between people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The relationship between farmers and herders is a case in point. Markets played a critical role in bringing these two groups together, emphasising their complementarity despite ongoing conflict and competition between them. During the Darfur conflict which broke out in 2003, the multi-donor Darfur Community Peace and Stability Fund (DCPSF), established in 2007 to support local peace and security, found that support to local markets in multi-ethnic areas had a peace-promoting impact.[3] (See Box 2 for an example that demonstrates the enduring impact of such support.) Markets also played an

2. Money paid as compensation for loss of life or serious injury, customarily collected from close relatives and wider kin groups.

3. For more details see https://www.undp.org/sudan/projects/darfur-community-peace-and-stability-fund-project.

important role in sustaining peace between borderland ethnic communities as well as enhancing cross-border relations between neighbouring countries. Border markets such as Tina in North Darfur (on the Sudan-Chad border) and Forabaranga (on the border of Sudan with Chad and Central African Republic) were powerful examples.

Market governance institutions

In Darfur there have been several institutions critical to market governance that are part of the inherited colonial legacy. After independence, the national government tried to modernise local government apparatus, including markets, introducing market clerks, tax collectors and chambers of commerce for urban markets. These and other institutions are described below, beginning with the older traditional institutions.

a) **Native administrators** customarily control the territory where the market is found, hence they are usually responsible for choosing and/or confirming the suitability of the space for market functions, in addition to keeping order and resolving conflicts that may occur in the marketplace. Officially recognised as government representatives at the local level (although not full state officials), they act as a link between government and local communities regarding all public matters within their area of jurisdiction. (Historically they also collected taxes on animals and cereals.)[4] The native administration hierarchy starts with a paramount chief (called either *sultan*, *melik*, *shartai* or *nazir*, depending on the tribe) at the top, covering a large area of territory, followed by a sectional chief (*omda*) and then a village headman (*sheikh*) at the bottom. Paramount and sectional chiefs employ guards (*khafeer*, Arabic singular) who wear distinctive clothes and carry rifles. They generally help keep order in courts and marketplaces and aid in tax collection by accompanying the designated collector.

a) **The chief merchant** (*sir-altujar*) was the wealthiest, most socially respected and trusted merchant in the market. He normally traded in manufactured goods brought from larger urban centres. Some chief merchants later expanded into livestock or oilseeds and cereals. *Sir-altujars* were replaced by chambers of commerce in big town markets in the late 1970s during the rule of Jaafar Nimeiri. Thereafter, the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce has played the same role as the chief merchant. This includes solving emerging problems in the marketplace, arbitrating and mediating between traders, and representing them in dealings with the native administration and government authorities.[5]

a) **The guarantor** (*damin*) is a man selected on a tribal basis who acts as guarantor to anyone from his tribe offering an animal for sale in the livestock market. Every tribe has its own *damin*. He is expected to be knowledgeable about livestock conditions plus the animal branding used by different tribal groups to signify livestock ownership. Traditionally, the *damin* knows a wide network of breeders from different areas who bring livestock to sell in the market. The *damin's* role is to review and certify sellers before livestock sales are concluded to prevent transactions of looted animals. If a stolen animal is sold, it is the responsibility of the guarantor to bring the seller to court. The *damin* knows the seller and ensures that the seller can be traced if there is any contestation of animal ownership. The *damin* also ensures that those who sell on credit will be paid by the buyer on the due date. *Damins* are also known to be generous and host many guests at their homes in the town, and that boosts their popularity amongst herding communities who treat them as a patron when they are in town. A *damin* must be certified by the paramount and sectional chiefs of the territories that he represents.

a) **The market clerk** is responsible for collecting levies from traders and others selling taxable goods. Large markets have more than one clerk: one dealing solely with livestock sales, another dealing with crop sales and a third one responsible for trader licenses.[6] They are all agents of the local government and money collected by them goes to the government treasury. The market clerk, sometimes assisted by seasonally appointed tax collectors, is not an accountant nor a salaried staff member but receives commission on the money he manages to collect on market day. Local government authorities later introduced

4. *Ushoor* was a type of tax collected after the grain harvest by the village headman, responsible for land tenure, who then shared it with the native administrator of his territory in a hierarchical manner. It was discontinued after the enactment of the Unregistered Land Act of 1970. Nowadays the Zakat Chamber (Islamic alms-tax chamber) is responsible for collecting a tax on cereal production through their own staff without the involvement of native administrators.

5. Chief merchants often showed generosity and responded positively to demands from their communities to make voluntary contributions towards public services such as schools, mosques, water points and the like, in addition to hosting guests at their homes. According to Darfur culture, prominent figures such as merchants and government officials hosted guests in their houses who came to the town from their natal villages seeking medical treatment or to attend to other matters in town. Students attending urban schools were often hosted by relatives or prominent friends living in the town. Since this was linked to resources, the more prominent a person was, the more people he hosted.

6. Market clerks and seasonally appointed collectors are sometimes collectively referred to as 'the collectors' (Arabic: *Muhassileen*).

salaried accountants, who are regular staff, when they expanded the range of taxable products in the market. The expansion was justified as raising revenue for public services, such as education, health and water, but in reality, it reflected the rentier nature of the state: the services provided by government did not match the level of taxation imposed.

a) **The Chamber of Commerce**, a modern institution, gradually replaced the *sir-altujar*, who usually became the chairman of the new institution, thus providing a smooth transition from traditional to modern leadership. In addition to addressing merchants' problems and representing them in dealings with government departments, the Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce also coordinated with the local authorities in supplying basic commodities such as sugar, wheat flour and petrol, which have long been subsidised by government. For this reason, the role became politicised by the Nimeiri and Bashir regimes respectively.

a) **Civil society organisations with a role in market organisation** include **market committees**, which have performed some of the functions of chambers of commerce in rural markets. They represent all stakeholders in these markets. There are also different types of producer associations as well as civil society and community-based organisations (CBOs) engaged in market activities. Many of them were established and empowered with the support of development projects implemented by both national and international organisations, who recognised the importance of their role in promoting market functions. For example, the Wadi El Ku project west and south of El Fasher helped many market committees to register officially as associations, thus improving their sustainability.[7]

It is important to note that almost all these institutions have been managed entirely by men even though the number of women participating in the market, both as traders and as consumers, is almost equal to the number of men. However, no formal positions in the market have been assigned to women despite the fact they are responsible for most small-scale agricultural production. Small traders collect their produce in smaller markets and sell to bigger traders in larger markets. Some women do operate as intermediaries, trading especially in cereals, fruits and vegetables. Although women do have some agency in the marketplace, as both producers and consumers, the dominant role of men in decision making reflects a huge power imbalance that is responsible for holding back women's participation and development, economically, socially and politically.

The impact of the conflict on the market as a multi-functional institution

Insecurity caused by robbery, repeated outbreaks of violent clashes in the market between armed groups (for example, in Kutum), bombing by aircraft and drone attacks on markets (as in El Geneina, Mellit, Kuma, Turra and Kutum, amongst others) have caused many markets to shrink in terms of numbers attending and hours of operation. Some traders have lost business; others have lost their shops as well. Since the flow of goods has been seriously disrupted, both sellers and buyers have sustained great losses and the level of economic activity has declined, affecting job opportunities and the provision of inputs and tools for agricultural production (SPARC, 2025a).

The war has negatively impacted not only the economic role of markets, which were a primary source of livelihood for many, but also their vital social, cultural and political roles as well. The role of markets in strengthening social connections between neighbouring communities has weakened as market size and activity has decreased and the conflict has polarised most communities along ethnic lines. This has meant some formerly active traders of particular ethnic groups (in, for example, El Geneina and El Fasher) have either stayed away from markets or left Darfur altogether because they are unable to operate under control of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This has diminished the conflict resolution and peacemaking roles of markets in Darfur.

The reduced role of the native administration in Darfur, which has been accelerated by the war, leaves an important gap that must be filled by other organisations such as market committees. Nowadays, the local courts that formerly sat on market days to resolve disputes are rarely or never convened, making it harder for community members to seek justice.

The role of markets as venues for political discussions between community members has been badly affected. For example, meetings with higher native administration authorities (mainly paramount and sectional chiefs) used to be held on market days but, during the current conflict, such meetings have become risky and are therefore largely avoided. As a result, community members are unable to deliberate openly on matters concerning their common interests without the supervision and approval of the RSF, effectively compromising civil society agency.

Whereas markets used to be hubs for people from different areas to exchange important information through face-to-face interaction, the war has changed methods of communication. There is more reliance on technologies such as telephones and Starlink sets,

7. For more details see https://www.unep.org/resources/report/lessons-learned-implementation-wadi-el-ku-catchment-management-project-phase-2

which are not dependable because their use carries considerable security risks. In many markets the hours have been reduced due to fear of attack by gunmen, aerial bombardment or drone attacks (see for example, OCHA, 2025). Marketplaces have thus become less welcoming and more dangerous places to visit. Targeted attacks on markets, usually incurring large numbers of casualties, have led to increased radicalisation and militarisation of the youth, who feel enraged by the unjustified violence against innocent people. This also triggers a feeling of duty to protect their own community, in turn encouraging them to acquire arms or join an armed movement.

The impact of the conflict on market governance institutions

When the RSF took over, they did not replace the existing formal market governance structures and associated staff but continued to operate with the former employees, except those who objected, in addition to newly recruited staff loyal to them. The RSF's 'civil authority', or *Tasis* is now the de facto government centred in Nyala, South Darfur. Practically, market management and revenue collection continues to be conducted by the same local authority personnel as before, with the difference that they now must pledge loyalty to the RSF.

Native administration leaders in Darfur had already become more polarised since the advent of the Darfur conflict in 2003. That trend has increased dramatically since 2023, to the extent that all those who support the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) are now outside Darfur while those remaining behind have either kept silent or have been forced to declare support for the RSF and therefore rubberstamp whatever comes from local military commanders and the newly appointed civil authorities.[8] This has direct and indirect ramifications for the peace and stability of local communities, specifically for market governance, especially in rural areas. The disruption of the leadership structure is particularly significant for internally displaced communities, who need representation with humanitarian actors. There is also an increased intergenerational gap where young, militarised youth no longer feel obliged to obey native administrators and even challenge their authority. On the other hand, it is notable that the RSF leadership has created new native administration units for pastoralist groups who recently arrived from across the border, especially in Central and West Darfur states.[9] The new arrivals lacked the shared history of cooperation and peaceful coexistence built on past interactions that resulted in intercommunal customary agreements between pastoralists and farmers. Instead, they first engaged in subjugation by force with their new neighbours when handling local conflicts. They looted markets, only to start negotiations to reopen disrupted markets later when they discovered that they need functioning markets. Recognising the importance of restoring normal trading activities, in the last year the RSF has adopted a more pragmatic approach and engaged local leaders to help restore market functionality.[10] Moreover, according to a recent report, a committee was formed by the RSF in late 2024 to address intercommunal disputes: '… the West Darfur Committee to Combat Negative Phenomena includes Native Administration representatives deployed to mediate during periods of unrest, particularly over intercommunal or economic disputes, avoiding the need to rely on security forces' (XCEPT, 2025). This is similar in some ways to the well-documented peace markets in South Kordofan during the war between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and SAF in the 1990s. These were informal, community-negotiated trading points that emerged during the conflict in areas where governance was weak, allowing warring communities to exchange essential goods and information. They functioned as temporary neutral zones and relied on local security agreements rather than formal state enforcement (see Komey, 2011 for more details). Such markets were held out of practical need and brokered with the help of traditional leaders.

The chambers of commerce have also witnessed considerable change. Since the war started in 2023, the performance of many chambers has been disrupted due to the absence of most of their members and the interference of the RSF's newly appointed civil administration, which has tried to control them by adding new emerging traders as co-opted members. In two state capitals – El Fasher, which is still suffering from the aftermath of violence that preceded and accompanied its occupation by the RSF last October, and El Geneina, which suffered a genocidal massacre in 2023 – the old committee members have disappeared, many having left Darfur altogether. However, in Central, South and East Darfur states, the chambers of commerce have been subjected to partial replacement of their membership. For example, in Nyala, the old Chairman

8. The dismissal of traditional leaders has become a primary tool of political and military control, both for state governors in SAF-controlled areas and for the RSF civil authorities during the ongoing civil war. State governors in SAF-controlled areas have systematically purged leaders accused of RSF ties, while the RSF has replaced traditional non-Arab authorities with its own loyalists to consolidate territorial control. (See Sudan Tribune, November 17, 2024, and Darfur Network for Human Rights, May 30, 2025.)

9. It is reported that members of a small Arab clan called Awlad Baraka and Mubarak, who arrived recently from the Central African Republic, have been offered a new 'principality' in Central Darfur State in a clear violation of the established traditions regarding formation of new native administration units. (For further details see https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/10/20.)

10. According to field reports, many traders went back to their shops in El Geneina Town after the RSF authorities announced their commitment to securing properties and market transactions.

of the Chamber of Commerce, who was elected before April 2023, is now recognised by the RSF authority and allowed to continue in his position.

As with the chambers of commerce, the RSF has tried to influence **local market committees** or dissolve them where its efforts at co-option have failed. In Dar Alsalaam (North Darfur), the vibrant market committees that existed before the war broke out in April 2023 are reported to have lost their influence, either because their members left the area or because they are afraid of the substantial security risks of operating independently in RSF-controlled territory. Nevertheless, there are reports of some market committees in North Darfur pivoting in their role to meet immediate needs during the war; for example, by providing *Takiya*, although this too carries substantial security risks.[11]

Box 2 shows the resilience and role of market committees that were established in the Kass area before the war began. The situation is different in West Darfur, where it has been reported that partial replacement of market committee members has been ordered by the new civil administration there. The new members include RSF military and civilian officials as well as new traders allied to the RSF.

The *damin's* role had reduced in most markets as livestock theft and looting had become commonplace even before the current war, which has merely escalated the existing trend. However, there are key geographical differences related to conflict dynamics. Reports indicate the total absence of *damins* from the markets in central and southern parts of West Darfur. This is related to the arrival and settlement of pastoralist groups from Chad, starting in the mid-1990s under the Bashir regime.[12] The indigenous Masalit tribe has been gradually routed from the area, culminating in the El Geneina massacre early in the war in 2023. Since then, the main livestock market in El Geneina has been dominated by Arab pastoralists as the majority of the local Masalit people now live as refugees in camps in Eastern Chad. The role of *damin*, embedded in the Masalit traditional structure, has thus disappeared. In contrast, in East Darfur, which is ethnically more homogenous and aligned to the RSF, and where many livestock owners have some connection to the RSF, *damins* are still operating and well-respected in livestock markets.

Market clerks and seasonal tax collectors never ceased to operate during the Darfur conflict that started in 2003. However, since the start of the war in 2023, they have been obliged to operate under the auspices of the new authorities, with increased disruption to regular financial procedures and accountability measures, and evidence of increasingly corrupt practices. License fees and taxes are collected from traders but RSF affiliates are exempt, and the process is conducted in a less formal manner, with receipts issued on irregular forms, reflecting a complete lack of financial accountability and transparency. Local

BOX 2 CARE INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT TO MARKET COMMITTEES IN KASS, FUNDED BY THE DCPSF

CARE's livelihood and development programme established peacebuilding committees and market committees in villages in South Kass from 2007 with support from the DCPSF and Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These committees played a vital role in promoting peace, maintaining market security and resolving local disputes, including those related to trade. This has continued even after formal project activities ceased. There were many challenges when war broke out in April 2023; nevertheless, the committees have remained active and resilient. They continue to organise and secure markets and resolve disputes, and have networked across South Kass to ensure continuity of their work, sustaining peaceful coexistence and economic activity within their communities. During the early months of the current war, committee members travelled to the Kass locality headquarters to safeguard CARE's warehouses and property, eventually handing them over to staff. A central market has since been established to connect those living high up on Jebel Marra with surrounding areas, coordinated with reconciliation committees and representatives from the Abdel Wahid armed group. All of this has enabled markets in Kass locality and nearby Jebel Marra to remain open and functioning throughout the last three years. Importantly, women and youth have begun to participate in community decision-making through their active role on the committees, breaking a longstanding norm where only men were involved.

Source: Personal communication with CARE International staff

11. *Takiya* (Arabic, singular) refers to community kitchens that provide meals for internally displaced persons and other poor households, providing a lifeline for many.

12. In 1995, the governor of West Darfur State, appointed by President El Bashir, passed a local law according to which new native administration units were formed. This was considered a violation of the customary rights of the indigenous Masalit tribe that had enjoyed historical rights to land administration. It was met with protest and the outbreak of bloody confrontation between the Masalit and Arab pastoralist groups in 1997.

authorities still allocate new shop plots and display spaces in markets but clearly favour RSF-aligned traders (SPARC, 2025b). In East Darfur State, the market clerks who were working before the war continued even after the RSF took over.

Darfur markets have witnessed some changes in **women's roles** in recent years, particularly after 2023 when many more women entered the market as traders, especially petty traders. However, the overall pattern continues of men dominating trade in livestock and manufactured consumer goods, while women are more active in selling vegetables, fruits and food crops, including cereals, in addition to selling local foods, tea and snacks. Critically, despite their more significant role in the market, women do not appear to be any better represented in market institutions. In some highly insecure locations in North Darfur, women have left the marketplace because of the personal security risks associated with trading and being present in the market.

Conclusion

Although most monitoring and analysis of markets in Darfur in the last three years has focused on the impact of the war on their economic functions, it has also impacted their critical non-economic roles, such as conflict resolution, information exchange and social integration in multi-ethnic communities. As these roles are important for local peace and stability, understanding how they have been impacted is key to any efforts to improve stability and resilience at community level and to rebuild relationships. It is also necessary to understand how gender and intergenerational roles have been affected by the war – important areas for further research and analysis.

The extent to which market governance institutions have been affected by the war depends on geographical location and therefore local conflict dynamics. While East Darfur State has been the least affected, North and West Darfur states have been substantially impacted. Significantly, native administration functionaries have been pushed to side with one party or the other, compromising their credibility and socio-political influence. This inadvertently impacts their traditional roles within their communities. Although other long-time market institutions such as the *damin* and market clerk have experienced pressure and change in the past, the current conflict has escalated that trend and further compromised their roles.

The new de facto RSF local authorities have intervened to control governance institutions, including chambers of commerce and market committees in major markets, through co-option, security harassment, discriminatory practices and alteration of standardised operational rules.

Recommendations

- In order to reinforce the peacebuilding, social and political potential of markets, which have been grossly impacted by the conflict, market-oriented interventions by humanitarian actors need to identify and support critical market governance institutions that can restore some of the markets' non-economic functions. A high degree of conflict sensitivity is necessary, which in turn requires well-informed political economy analysis for specific markets and geographic areas to ensure that market institutions that are truly representative of local traders and the community are supported. This could include middle- and lower-level native administration and market committees that have remained intact and operate with some level of integrity since the war began.

- The feasibility of supporting different institutions at local level should be explored in different locations, informed by an understanding of which institutions were most representative of local communities before the war broke out. For example, in North Darfur, community-based groups such as market committees and CBO networks could be explored and supported. In South Darfur, village savings and loan groups, pastoralist organisations and national non-governmental organisations supporting agriculture producers and local markets might be appropriate choices in addition to market committees and CBOs.

- There is an opportunity to learn from past efforts to support the role of markets in promoting peaceful co-existence in Darfur; for example, the work of the DCPSF during the earlier Darfur conflict, and the peace markets in Southern Kordofan.

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