



Marginalization, civil war, and a lack of education aid: A case study of Sudan's Nuba Mountains

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INTRO

Although the global community has acknowledged the need for education in conflict, the Nuba Mountains region of Sudan exemplifies a critical gap in service provision for marginalized communities affected by civil war. The region has a long history of war, and has been in an almost-constant state of conflict with the government of Sudan since 1989. Education has been a notable catalyst of war, as the government of Sudan's Islamic, ethnocentric school curriculum intensified the Nuba people's oppression. The people of Nuba have expressed a great need for education, but the region has received little to no education aid. This case study presents an overview of the conflict in the Nuba Mountains, the gap in international aid coverage, and the education needs. By failing to reach marginalized communities like those in the Nuba Mountains, aid organizations fail to achieve SDG 4's mandate for inclusive education, and instead exacerbate inequality. This case study therefore implicates that international organizations reconsider policies and enhance efforts to deliver education aid to marginalized regions affected by civil war.



TO MOVE MOUNTAINS

Written by Anna Warren

Photos by Ryan Boyette and John Stephens

info@tomovemountains.org

CONFLICT IN THE NUBA MOUNTAINS

The Nuba Mountains is a region of Sudan with nearly 1 million people. It is located just north of the current border with South Sudan (see map on page 4), and has experienced decades of civil war. In brief, Sudan (including what is now South Sudan) has had two distinct regions throughout its history: the North, which is predominately Arab and Muslim, and the South, which has a predominately black, Nilotic* population that also practices Christianity and indigenous religions (Breidlid, 2010; Johnson, 2016; Lesch, 1998; Totten & Grzyb, 2014). Notwithstanding significant internal diversity, the people of the Nuba Mountains align with the South in terms of religion, race, linguistics, and economic standing (Breidlid, 2013; Jok, 2007). For decades, people in the South experienced neglect, political exclusion, and imposed Arabization from the North, which they responded to by forming the Southern People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) (Johnson, 2016; Jok, 2001, 2007; Totten & Grzyb, 2014). The Nuba people joined the opposition movement in 1984 and fought alongside the South in the civil war that ultimately led to South Sudan's formal independence in 2011 (Totten & Grzyb, 2014). However, the Nuba Mountains, along with other disputed areas such as Blue Nile, were ultimately not included in the succession. Since 2011, war has continued in the Nuba Mountains as a result of the people's continued oppression.



Soldiers in the Nuba Mountains

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE CONFLICT

Education has played a central role throughout the conflict in the Nuba Mountains, where approximately 57% of the population is under 15 (Enough Project, 2013). As the government of Sudan attempted to impose an Islamic state, it created an ethnocentric and religiously exclusive national school curriculum. This curriculum largely failed to include the history, language, and culture of regions such as the Nuba Mountains, and instead served to indoctrinate youth with a hegemonic national identity (Breidlid, 2010, 2013). The Arabic-language, Islamic curriculum invigorated the Nuba people's feelings of marginalization and therefore fueled their opposition.

Yet, education not only served as a symbol of sociocultural dominance, but also as a weapon of war. Schools in the Nuba Mountains experienced direct attack through aerial bombardments and indirect attack through a lack of investment (Nuba Reports, 2014,

**African people groups native to the Nile*

2016). Because the government of Sudan would have no interest in educating its opponents, it has not provided the region with resources or access to international assistance. This denial of educational opportunities has led to further marginalization by preventing the Nuba people from gaining the skills to improve their livelihoods and participate in the decisions of their country.

LACK OF EDUCATION AID

Although international actors have emphasized the need for education in areas of conflict, the Nuba Mountains exemplify a critical gap in education aid coverage.

When the most recent conflict broke out in 2011, humanitarian organizations evacuated the region. From that time, no government official or major aid organization visited the region for nearly nine years (Morgan, 2020). Millions of education aid dollars that have been invested into Sudan have failed to reach the marginalized populations in the Nuba Mountains.

Although a lack of security in the region has contributed to the absence of aid, international funding policies have also played a significant role. The majority of funding to education in Sudan has been carried out through partnership with the national government, which is problematic for places such as the Nuba Mountains. For example, the Global Partnership for Education, which provided \$76.5 million to the World Bank’s Sudan Basic Education Project from 2015 to 2019 (World Bank, 2019), has a policy of working predominately through government entities (Global Partnership for Education, 2020). Education Cannot Wait, the global fund for education in emergencies, channels funds through the “relevant coordinating body for education,” such as the Education Cluster or Local Education Group (LEG) (Education Cannot Wait, n.d., 2018). While Local Education Groups are government-led and would therefore not service areas of civil conflict, even programs run through the Education Cluster have not reached places like the Nuba Mountains. The Sudanese government's Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), with whom all non-governmental organizations are required to register, has a demonstrated tendency of strategically denying and obstructing international aid access (Nuba Reports 2017; Human Rights Watch 2006). Data from Sudan’s Global Education Cluster show that programming in South Kordofan (the province in which the Nuba Mountains are located) has not taken place in Heiban, Buram, and Habila counties which

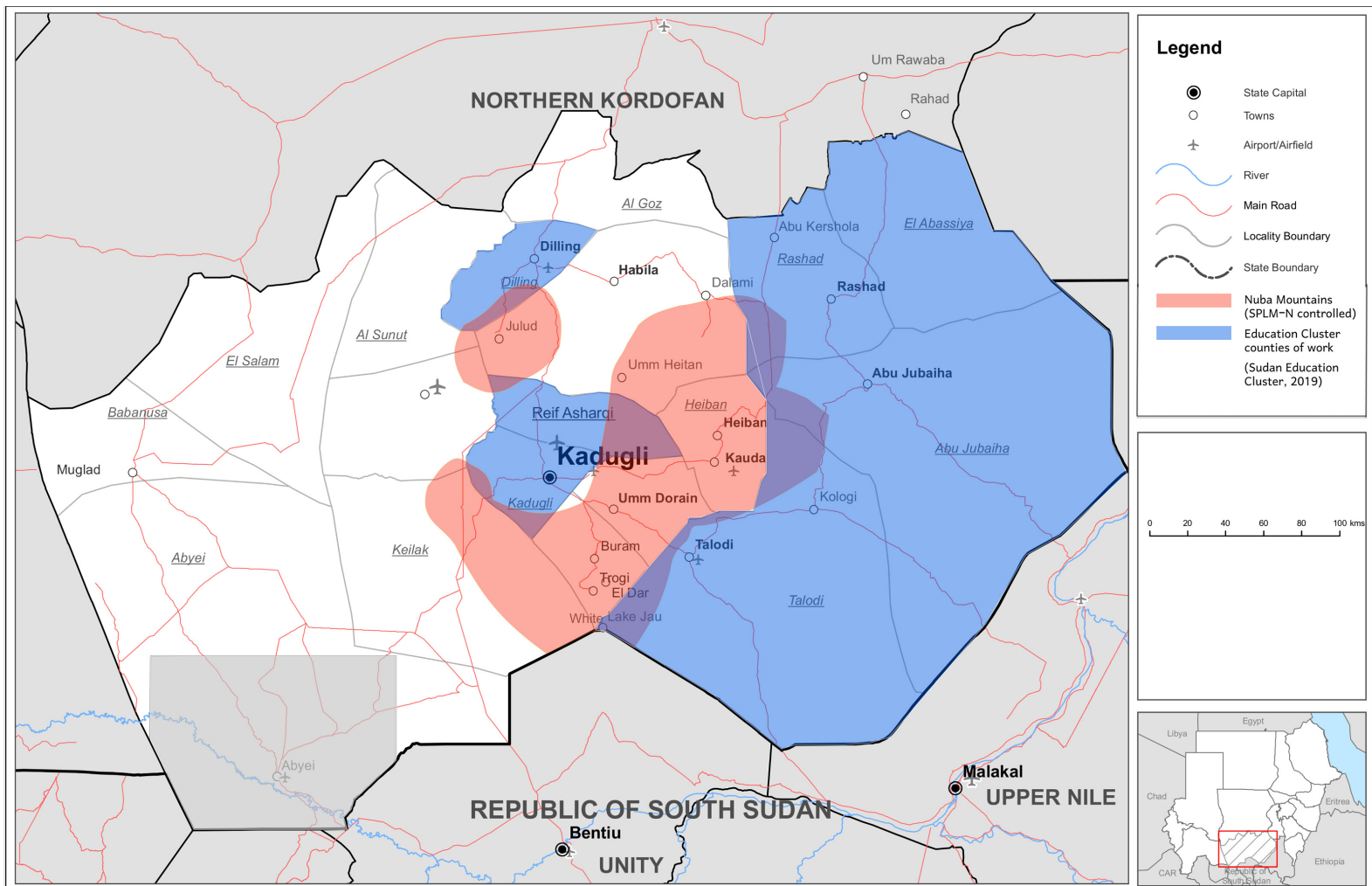


A girl in class in the village of Kujur Shabia

are specific to the Nuba Mountains (Sudan Education Cluster, 2019). (See map below.) Even if access were granted, the Nuba people have a longstanding distrust of any organizations perceived to be affiliated with the Sudanese government, and have resolved not to accept any educational materials from the North (Aldelaziz al-Hilu, personal communication).

Aid organizations have acknowledged the failure to reach the Nuba Mountains. UNICEF, which leads the Sudan Education Cluster and the Global Partnership for Education’s work in Sudan, wrote in its most recent annual reports that the Nuba Mountains region has been denied access to basic services such as education since 2011 and remains inaccessible (UNICEF Sudan, 2018, 2019). OCHA’s 2020 Humanitarian Needs Overview specifically names the Nuba Mountains as an inaccessible area believed to have extreme education needs (OCHA, 2020).

Map of Education Cluster Work in South Kordofan province, relative to Nuba Mountains



Map based on OCHA/ReliefWeb

**Note: The Education Cluster documents its data according to county boundaries. However, the Nuba Mountains area controlled by the SPLM-N (the Northern branch of the SPLM) does not adhere to such boundaries. Areas of overlap do not indicate that Cluster work is being carried out in the Nuba Mountains. Rather, Cluster work is being carried out elsewhere within the county.*

THE STATE OF EDUCATION IN THE NUBA MOUNTAINS

The data that aid organizations use to inform their programming comes from Sudan's Education Management Information System (EMIS) (itself funded by the European Union and UNICEF). Such national data fails to include certain population groups due to "difficult terrain, poor security, or other reasons" (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2017), which undoubtedly pertains to the Nuba Mountains.

Due to the lack of education data for the region, To Move Mountains, a small non-governmental organization with a high level of rapport across the Nuba Mountains, conducted a mixed methods study in 2019. The study, which included a literacy and numeracy assessment of 273 8- and 9-year-old children throughout the region, revealed significant educational needs. Findings showed that none of the children sampled met grade-level proficiency for reading. Less than 32% of those children could identify three given numbers between 1 and 20. Even fewer could perform basic addition and subtraction.



A classroom in the Nuba Mountains

Interviews and focus group discussions with 122 parents, teachers, students, and community leaders in the region found that schools face severe material shortages, notably a lack of textbooks and instructional aids. Parents face significant challenges providing teacher salaries and maintaining school infrastructure, while schools struggle to find qualified teachers within the largely uneducated workforce. Fundamentally, people expressed a need for a curriculum that includes the history and culture of the Nuba Mountains, which they feel incapable of achieving without external support. As explained by one community leader:

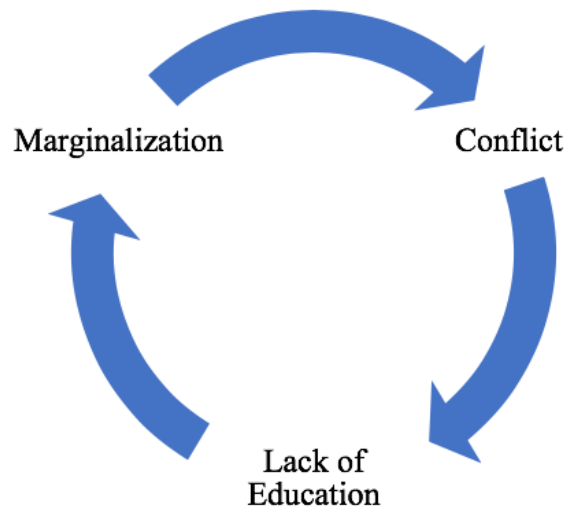
When we had war with the Khartoum people [the Sudanese government], they denied the right to our own curriculum and did not want anyone around here to get educated. We have no people who are educated, who can create and introduce a Nuba curriculum. But we are pushing on until we can get a better education for our children.

With such low levels of educational achievement and a significant lack of resources, the Nuba Mountains have an urgent need for educational investment and support.

CONCLUSION

Although the international community has acknowledged the need for education in areas affected by conflict, the Nuba Mountains region of Sudan has suffered from a lack of aid for many years. Civil war with the national government has both resulted from and perpetuated the region's oppression, in which education plays a significant role.

The Nuba Mountains exemplifies a global problem in which inequities experienced by marginalized groups of people often lead to prolonged conflict (Burde et al., 2016; Gurr, 1993; Stewart, 2002). The disruption and lack of investment caused by war results in very poor quality education with low learning outcomes (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2011). Without education, people fail to achieve opportunities to advance and to participate in their governance. As depicted below, this lack in education often fosters further marginalization, which, over time, leads to more long-term conflict – a relentless cycle.



Despite the SDGs' emphasis on reducing inequality and Sudan's history of discrimination and oppression, international funders have continued to support the government's education projects. Due to policies in which aid organizations work almost exclusively through government partnerships, millions of aid dollars that have been invested into education fail to reach areas like the Nuba Mountains that perhaps need them most. Especially considering that education is a primary cause for the Nuba people's feelings of oppression, these international aid efforts therefore compound inequality and conflict rather than alleviate it. In order to achieve SDG 4's mandate to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all," multi-national organizations should reconsider policies and enhance efforts to reach marginalized areas affected by civil war.

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