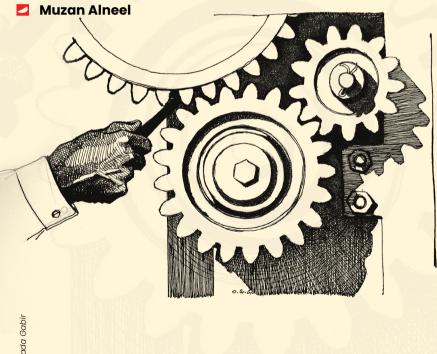


Discussing industry during war And findings from the experience



Artwork by: Obada Gabir

The war in Sudan has critically tested the utility and relevance of numerous institutions and fields of labour and science. Among these were organisations traditionally responsible for protecting the public from the impacts of such crises, as well as those forced to adapt their operations to function effectively under disaster conditions. Similarly, various fields of research and scientific endeavours were compelled to redefine their priorities, while others struggled to maintain focus amidst the chaos.

Institutions such as the civil service, the police, the ministry of finance, banks, big businesses, and national television stations were among the many exposed to questions about their validity and capability to serve the public. Many began to wonder whether these institutions were truly necessary and if their structures genuinely aligned with their stated mandates. In some cases, such as the police and bank which vanished on the eve of April 15, the war left people questioning whether these institutions had ever existed at all.

The test of war has forced practitioners across many fields in Sudan to redesign their processes and operations to adapt to new circumstances, with varying speeds of adjustment. In the first hours after the breakout of war in Khartoum, health service providers in many neighbourhoods issued public calls for medical professionals and members of the public with relevant knowledge, tools, or medication to come forward and join newly formed "Emergency Rooms." These initiatives introduced new models for raising resources and staffing health service institutions in response to the emerging challenges, such as restricted mobility and the destruction of hospitals and clinics by armed actors on the ground and in the air.

Within days, electricity technicians began repairing damage to power connections caused by shelling and other violent acts. These technicians organised themselves into teams based on their residential areas and collaborated with Emergency Rooms, Resistance Committees, and other grassroots organizations. Together, they identified damages, communicated maintenance activities to the public through local networks and social media, and worked to restore essential services.

Not long after, many of these technicians shifted their focus to decentralised, small-scale power generation solutions. This led to a surge in solar power installations, training programmes, diesel engine maintenance, and other related services, marking a significant shift in the frameworks guiding the provision of the important resource.

Along the same lines, the country witnessed educators innovating alternative learning practices for children in war-torn areas and IDP camps who no longer had access to schools. The country saw app developers create simple applications for purchasing electricity when the physical offices of electricity companies became unreachable and larger apps failed to meet the need. And many agriculturists shifted their focus to subsistence farming in homes to address the food gap and the inaccessibility of markets caused by the war. These examples are just a few among countless innovative and adaptive survival measures adopted by the working public in Sudan during this conflict.

In nearly every field of knowledge and labour in Sudan, the lessons of this time, the innovative practices and the flaws of old systems exposed by the war are worthy of documentation. They carry within them crucial building blocks for the future.

The following paragraphs attempt to review and document some of these findings, particularly their impact on my field of industrial policy research.

Industrial policy research involves the study and analysis of strategies, interventions, and frameworks that shape the busi-

ness environment. These can influence and support the development of certain industries and sectors while potentially leading to the decline of others. While many might question whether there is room to discuss industry in a time of war and death, let alone to discuss discussing industry, this is a question I hope the following paragraphs will help answer.

Challenged by centralization, lost in literature

The war that broke out in Khartoum on April 15 two years ago was not Sudan's first conflict, but it remains the most devastating in terms of its far-reaching impact, even on those outside the immediate combat zones. This is largely due to Sudan's highly centralised development model, where major institutions-hospitals, banks, and universities-are all concentrated in Khartoum. Most of the country's main roads pass through the capital, and essential service networks, including electricity and telecommunications, are also centered there. Given this setup, any disruption in Khartoum inevitably brings the entire country to a standstill.

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> This centralization was likely driven more by a desire for control than by a commitment to balanced development. Successive Sudanese governments designed a system that prioritized political dominance, ensuring that power remained secure in the center, even as conflicts raged in the peripheries. However, as we have now seen, this same

structure means that when war reaches the capital, essential services and protections collapse nationwide.

For those who benefit from centralized rule, the well-being of the general public has never been a priority, evident in their failure to invest in development

even during times of relative peace. Yet the livelihoods of the people, their right to security, dignity, and freedom from hunger and fear, should be the foremost concern for anyone who values justice and stands with the oppressed rather than the oppressor.

The centralization of development in Sudan is most evident in the industrial sector, and so was the impact of war on it. Khartoum and Al Jazeera, together, housed more than 50 per cent of Sudan's large industrial enterprises. As a result, when the RSF took control of both states within eight months, the entire Sudanese population, across the country's other sixteen states, suffered severe economic losses.

Mid-sized industrial enterprises that attempted to relocate or start anew outside the centre faced immense challenges due to weak infrastructure. Poor-quality roads, unreliable electrical networks, and inadequate facilities made relocation costly and impractical. Once again, centralization proved to be a barrier. Establishing a medium-sized industrial facility outside the centre often required major

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> investments, such as industrial power connections, absent in most of the country, or even the construction of roads to transport equipment and goods. For most mid-sized businesses, these costs were prohibitive. Meanwhile, large corporations did what big businesses typically do: They played it safe, prioritized cost-cutting, and avoided risk.

> In line with well-documented patterns seen in other conflict-affected economies, most large businesses in Sudan either fled the country or relocated to the most developed areas, avoiding the additional costs of operating in underdeveloped regions they had no interest in improving. This led to the collapse of Sudan's industrial sector as it once existed, raising critical questions about what a future industrial landscape might look like. How could a new sector emerge and function, whether under current conditions or in a more stable future? More importantly, how can it be made less fragile and more resilient to economic shocks. so it can better contribute to the economy and serve the people?

Wars have long been a constant reali-

ty in our world, particularly on our continent, and the study of war is an extensively researched field. A significant portion of this research falls under "war economy" studies, which one might expect to provide insights into the economic aspects of industry during wartime. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Most war economy research focuses primarily on the financial activities of armed groups, paying little attention to productive economic sectors outside of extractive industries and exports.

This narrow focus on violent and elite-driven economic activities has created a blind spot regarding productive industrial solutions that serve the general public. This gap in research stems from two key factors. The first is elit-

ist academic frameworks that are not only incapable of prioritising people's interests but also often fail to even acknowledge them. The second is the politi-

cal and economic agendas of the governments and institutions that fund research, steering studies toward their own interests, whether that be the extraction of resources from war-torn regions or reinforcing narratives that depict Africans as incapable of self-governance.

These two factors feed into one another. An elitist academic research supplies information that benefits exploiters or advances their narratives, while those same exploiters fund research that further aligns with their interests. The result is a war economy discourse that overlooks the industries that sustain ordinary people, leaving critical questions about wartime economic survival unanswered.

Reality, however, paints a different picture when it comes to industry in wartorn Sudan. Taking a people-centred approach, one that prioritises livelihoods, reveals both the necessity and resilience of industry. Micro- and small-scale industries have undergone remarkable developments in response to the war. The highly centralized industrial system meant that most large factories shut down within the first hours of the conflict, leaving a massive gap in the market. In response, micro- and small-scale enterprises stepped up.

Micro- and small-scale industries have undergone remarkable developments in response to the war.

> Within months, hundreds, if not thousands, of dairy businesses emerged to fill the void left by a single, family-owned company that had previously dominated Sudan's dairy market, serving a population of over 40 million. Similarly, smallscale soap and detergent production took off, replacing the output of a few large factories that had been owned by private investors and security apparatuses, all of which were based in Khartoum. These micro- and small-scale manufacturing activities demonstrate a real potential to

supply the market with essential goods, create employment opportunities, generate income, and support decentralized industrialization

These developments deserve documentation and research to address technical challenges, supply chain disruptions, and financing needs. Such research would not only help improve people's chances of securing a decent livelihood

in the midst of war but also policies and long-term industri-

al planning. However, it is unrealistic to expect elitist research institutions, policymakers, or financiers to take an interest in advancing the economics and politics of the exploited. The forces that benefit from the status quo have no incentive to do so. That task, instead, falls to socially committed researchers dedicated to people-centred industrial policy, a truth that applies just as much to many other fields of research.

The questions are not temporary, and neither are the answers

The humanitarian crises caused by the war are not new to Sudan. Whether it is the hundreds of thousands of children out of school, those without access to vital healthcare, the violently displaced, the unemployed, the hungry, or those facing violence from multiple armed actors, the country has seen these tragedies before. What the current war has done

is drastically increase the percentage of the population exposed to higher levels of exploitation and aggression. Yet none of these forms of suffering are new, nor are they merely temporary consequences of the war. Instead, they are rooted in systemic and structural issues, with centralization, discussed earlier, as one of the key factors behind Sudan's long-standing hardships.

contribute to the development War presents an opportunity to of people-centred economic learn from these failures.

> This raises important questions: Why did we not focus on decentralized education systems earlier, when children across the country could have benefited from them for decades? Why weren't electricity maintenance teams organized at the neighbourhood level, working alongside grassroots organizations to provide faster and more efficient service? These are issues that warrant further research, particularly on the systemic and epistemological barriers to developing more effective solutions and services.

> More importantly, the war presents an opportunity to learn from these failures. Rather than simply seeking to return to a flawed system, we must use these lessons to create new structures that serve people in the hardest of times and evolve to improve conditions in the future. Sudan's challenges are systemic and long-term, and any real solutions must be as well.

In the field of industry, particularly manufacturing, the systemic issues of centralized infrastructure and development are glaring. So are their consequences: More than half of the workforce is unemployed, and access to goods and services remains severely limited in the peripheries. This was the reality for many before the war, and for even more people after it.

A path toward addressing this industrial crisis can be found in the micro- and small-scale manufacturing initiatives that have emerged during the war. Of course, small-scale manufacturing alone is not the solution, larger-scale industries and other economic activities are also essential. Nevertheless, the manufacturing sector deserves serious attention, both because of the resilience and potential demonstrated by these small enterprises in war-torn Sudan and because of its crucial role in the country's broader democratic and economic development. Compared to other economic activities, such as trade or agriculture, manufacturing has been shown to generate the highest revenues, create the most employment opportunities, and support the growth of related businesses. These characteristics make it the sector best suited to improving livelihoods during the war while also laying the foundation for nationwide development and generating the revenue needed for essential public services.

Serious, context-driven industrialization efforts must therefore be part of the long-term solutions to Sudan's systemic challenges. While industrialization addresses these deep-rooted issues, it also plays a crucial role in meeting urgent needs by improving livelihoods and creating economic opportunities. The lessons drawn from public-led initiatives, as well as the obstacles imposed by anti-people systems, are invaluable resources. Any future -or current- industrialization strategies or research must be guided by these realities if they are to truly serve the interests of the people, the exploited.

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