

The Beja are a confederation of tribes united by a common language, TuBedawiye, and a common segmentary structure, each of which is linked to a common ownership and use of land. The three main tribes are the Amar'ar/Atmaan, the Bishariyy and the Hadendowa, who mostly live in North-Eastern Sudan between the Egyptian and the Eritrean borders, and all speak similar versions of TuBedawiye. Other minor related groups include the Arteiga, the Ashraf, the Kemeilab, the Halanga and the Shayaab. This article describes the migration of Beja pastoralist labour to Port Sudan from Halaib Province (NE Sudan). It reviews the different livestock holdings that the Beja have in town and shows that, although most urban-based pastoralists live in great poverty, some manage to successfully exploit urban opportunities whilst continuing to engage in rural-based livelihood strategies.

Photo by A. Waters-Bayer



Urban Camel

The Beja urban economy

Understanding and responding to an evolving reality

Economic diversification has always been an important strategy for Beja pastoralists, as a means to complement family income at certain times of the year or during periods of crisis. Some of the subsidiary activities of the Beja are agriculture, fishing, mining, firewood collection and charcoal making as well as sale of rural products like milk, ghee, mats, baskets and leather

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goods. Labour migration to town, especially to Port Sudan as cash labourers on the docks, was also a constant feature of the Beja economy throughout the 20th century.

However, the scope of the involvement in these non-pastoral activities has dramatically changed over the years. The result

is a more permanent shift to alternative sources of livelihoods as opposed to seasonal or crisis-related moves to increase family income.

LIVESTOCK KEEPING IN TOWN

One of the most notable changes to livelihood strategies has seen the Beja, particularly the Amar'ar/Atmaan, starting to move to Port Sudan in large numbers since 1931. From being a tiny minority for most of the first half of the century, it is estimated that today the number of Beja in the city has reached 400,000–500,000, i.e. approximately 50–60% of the overall town population according to recent unofficial estimates (Port Sudan has approx. 800,000 inhabitants).

The patterns of migration of the Beja are of several types. Perhaps the most dominant one has been the short migration of young men, taking turns to make sure that there is always somebody to herd the livestock in the hills. The regularity of these patterns has altered and the number of young men who moved to Port Sudan

increased significantly during times of crises.

For many of the migrants livestock are still an important livelihood resource. Holdings vary quite significantly between the different households, but the majority of them own a few small ruminants, mostly between one and three goats. Animals are kept both to obtain milk for family consumption and to be sold in times of need when there is no work available. In some *deims* (suburbs), camels and cattle are also kept. The animals normally graze in the more rural outskirts of the city, where the social and cultural atmosphere of the rural areas has been “recreated” by the Beja migrants.

Small ruminants, especially goats, are also kept in central areas of Port Sudan, where they usually are reared in the courtyard of the homestead, browsing on the garbage in back streets. Although livestock are less apparent in central town, a relatively large number of livestock owners live in this area. In most cases they hire young herders to take the animals to graze in the rural areas around town.

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The survey of Forman (1992) showed that in all *deims* significant differences in livestock holdings exist. A majority (63.7%) claims not to own any livestock in town, although 1/3 of this group state that they possess animals in Halaib Province.

Among the 36.3% who say they have livestock in Port Sudan, the vast majority (87%) say they have between one or four goats from which they obtain milk for the family. Very few are in a position to sell surplus milk. However, many of them, especially those who have recently arrived in town, hope to be able to rebuild the family herd through their urban earnings and return to Halaib Province in a short time. This possibility appears very unlikely though, since families in Port Sudan frequently come under pressure to sell livestock assets. Most Beja in Port Sudan actually live in conditions of great poverty as the economic activities in which they are mostly engaged are precarious, fragmented and do not offer the Beja a reliable alternative to their traditional pastoral livelihoods.

It is worth mentioning though that among the migrants from Halaib Province sampled in Port Sudan there is a small group (4.6% of the total) who declared they owned large herds of sheep and goats and camels in and around town. Part of this group is composed of urban dwellers who have been able to invest in livestock when the price was low (i.e. in time of drought), seizing large numbers of livestock from other herders, in some cases Beja from the same subgroup. They are in most cases government employees or former pastoralists who have been involved in animal trading in town for a long time. The other major livestock holders are still transhumant pastoralists who own large camel herds and use wage labour in Port Sudan to complement their earnings, e.g. the 'Aliab Beja of El Wihda.

For most Beja who have moved to town, livestock have retained their importance both in cultural (bridewealth payment), dietary (milk and meat) and economic terms (assets not eroded by inflation). It is interesting to note that the majority of them still describe themselves as pastoralists, even if they do not now own animals. From the above analysis of the survey findings, it is possible to identify three main types of "town pastoralists".

First, those whose main goal is to regain the lost viability of their pastoral household unit in Halaib Province. Secondly, those for whom livestock-keeping is only a subsidiary activity supporting a mainly urban-oriented unit (Hjort af Ornäs and Dahl, 1991:148). The third is the case of transhumant herders, such as the above mentioned 'Aliab Beja. This group offers an example of how pastoralists can take advantage of urban opportunities to diversify their income sources in order to strengthen the security of their livelihood system centred on livestock keeping

DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS AND THE URBAN BEJA

So far very little has been done to address the specific condition of pastoralists in urban contexts. In the case of the Beja in Port Sudan, many development agencies have concentrated their work on supporting and experimenting with the viability of a range of conventional income generating activities outside the pastoral sector. This has often stemmed from the widespread belief amongst local practitioners as well as international agencies that pastoralists' livelihoods are no longer viable and that alternative solutions need to be found.

An example can be found in the experience of the ACORD Small Scale Enterprise Programme in Port Sudan, which started in 1984. In overall terms the programme was relatively successful in reaching the urban poor and in remaining ostensibly financially sustainable in a very difficult economic context. However, it never devised specific measures or enterprise development packages that could be relevant for people with a pastoralist background. The only targeted support was the provision of loans to buy small stock (namely goats). The loans followed the same criteria applied to other kinds of businesses: a loan ceiling with repayment periods up to a maximum of six months, a mark up rate, and 25% immediate payment for loans of a certain

size. Impact flow charts drawn in two Port Sudan *deims* with Beja clients who had applied for a goat purchasing loan showed how difficult it was for them to repay the debt in such a short time frame. This was due to the high cost of fodder and drugs needed for the animals as well as to the fact that the milk obtained was often used for family consumption rather than for sale. As a result, clients were often forced to sell the goats to repay the loan. In other cases the clients returned to the rural areas with the livestock purchased through the loan without repaying the debt. As a consequence, ACORD staff started to perceive Beja clients as unreliable. In the case of the goat loans,

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longer time-frames would have allowed the Beja to sell the offspring and recover the original cost. A different approach more focused on community dynamics could have also helped people to reactivate redistributive mechanisms that are endogenous to Beja society.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of ACORD is not unique. Interventions of other agencies working in the region show equally ill-informed analysis and planning (Pantuliano, 2000). Certain agencies such as ACORD and Oxfam made serious attempts though to address local complexities through research and responsive programming in the late 1990s. Research has revealed a range of under-explored programming alternatives for urban pastoralists in the region, which could also prove applicable elsewhere in the Sahelian context.

Agencies involved in promoting development with Beja pastoralists in town, could focus on improving access to non-farm opportunities so as to strengthen livelihoods through a diversified resource

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base. A variety of inputs could be extended to those who are in town. Credit, training and marketing support are of relevance to both those who intend to remain in Port Sudan, amongst whom women are prominent, and those who are looking for a way of returning to Halaib Province.

Opportunities exist for promoting rural-urban linkages. Support strategies could prioritise town-based activities, which draw on rural resources and/or people's skills as pastoralists. These include dairy produce making and leather processing which are traditionally practised by women. Since there is a finite number of opportunities of this nature, clearly some urban Beja will have to be supported to pursue alternative livelihood options not linked to the pastoral sector. Agencies could plan for the provision of initial marketing support for both pastoral related and non-pastoral activities, such as fisheries. It is important that the philosophy underpinning such kinds of intervention is informed by "credit policies for livelihoods" (Scoones, 1998:14), which would allow the Beja access to a wide number of livelihood strategies according to the options available and people's own priorities and aspirations.

Other possibilities include supporting the productive investment of remittances, especially for the benefit of rural women

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who are the wives of town-based migrants. Such work would be facilitated by initiatives aimed at assisting women who are currently restricted in their access to markets. Enhancing economic opportunities should be accompanied by efforts to increase access to basic services in rural areas.

A crucial element to any attempt to try to promote investment or return to rural areas is the issue of land tenure in Halaib Province. Efforts need to be made to mobilise government support for developing land tenure regulations that recognise pastoralists' rights. Urban-based Beja who are closer to the centres of power can be effective in advocating for partnerships with government and other actors that can secure the Beja's basic rights and in so doing will work towards achieving sus-

tainable development. This interaction is predicated on a degree of openness on the part of government as well as the efficient functioning of Beja institutions. There is clearly scope for strengthening established organisations and institutions as well as for creating new ones that are knowledgeable of both urban and rural dynamics.

There is potential and need for a broadening of the development agenda if the Beja are to be assisted in achieving sustainable livelihoods across their new

found contexts. Failure to distinguish the large community of the Beja from the other urban poor and to design appropriate support strategies is likely to result in inappropriate measures. The external constraints to carry out such an agenda cannot be underestimated but there is much that can be gained from agencies coming together to undertake a more profound assessment of the wider contemporary Beja reality and working in concert to respond to the challenges that this presents.

THEMES FOR NEXT ISSUES

You are invited to contribute to the Urban Agriculture Magazine with an article, description of best (or bad) practices, photo's and information on interesting publications, websites, and forthcoming events.

An article contribution should give a clear description of the urban aspects and policy implications of your experiences and include recommendations for local policy makers and planners.

Articles should be written in such a way that those working with farmers could readily understand them. We would like to receive articles of up to 3000 words long (This is about 5-6 pages A4). Articles should preferably be accompanied by illustrations (digital if possible) and references. The availability of a good abstract is appreciated. Articles will be examined for selection by the editorial team consisting of the RUIAF-editor and the external scientific advisor/co-editor.

THE PLANNING FOR THE NEXT ISSUES IS:

- No. 3. *Health Aspects of Urban Agriculture* : Contributions in before January 1, 2001.
- No. 4. *Integration of UPA in Urban Planning* : Contributions in before April 1, 2001.
- No. 5. *Methodologies for UA research, Policy Development, Planning and Implementation* ; Contributions in before August 1, 2001.

Other issues that you mentioned in the questionnaires are:

- ❖ Transition to ecological urban farming
- ❖ Economic and marketing aspects of Urban Agriculture
- ❖ Re-use of waste and wastewater in urban agriculture; rural-urban nutrient cycles
- ❖ Training in urban agriculture

