Research Article

CHALLENGES CONFRONTING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS DURING THE ONGOING ARMED CONFLICT IN SUDAN: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract

Since gaining independence, Sudan has experienced considerable political instability, resulting in frequent armed conflicts. Previous conflicts erupted in distant regions from Khartoum, the capital. Khartoum is mostly secure from these conflicts and may be affected only by the conflict's side effects, notably internal population displacement. The current conflict erupted in the capital and extended to other territories, making the consequences of the conflict harsh at all levels. The question posed by this article is to what extent university studies can be disrupted by the outbreak of armed conflicts and the effects of the conflict on academic institutions, academic and non-academic staff, and university students. The article has three main parts. The first part identifies issues around the history of armed conflicts in Sudan. The second part discusses the beginning of higher education and its challenges. The third part of this article emphasizes the impacts of the ongoing armed conflict on higher education. The article is based on a review of secondary sources, including published academic research and grey literature. Secondary sources were obtained primarily from published literature from 2000 to 2023, except two resources before the mentioned date. The data for the article was especially collected between mid-April and the end of August of 2023.

Keywords: High education, Sudan, Armed conflict, Academic staff, University students, Scientific research.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education and beyond are crucial for a nation's future success and cannot be granted during social, economic, and political instability (Teferra & Altbachl, 2004, Babyesiza, 2014). Higher education refers to the several types of education provided in postsecondary learning institutions (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2023). Education quality enhances skills and knowledge, leading to economic growth (Jong, 2009) and improved social welfare (Morley, 2003, Madibbo, 2012). Individuals, institutions, and governments must prioritize education resources to prepare citizens to compete globally (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2007). In the same way, high education can contribute to peace building, restoring countries to a positive development path and conflict recovery (Buckland, 2005a, Hanushek, 2008). Many complex factors lead to armed conflicts within States. The underlying causes of conflicts in Sudan can often be attributed to poverty (Collins, 2007), significant marginalization of peripheral areas (Ylonen, 2009), droughts (Gleick & Heberger, 2014), and poor central administration (El-Nafabi, 2010).Promoting sustainable and peaceful growth requires addressing these core factors (Tilak, 2010). Conflicts can, however, very quickly develop into humanitarian and higher education emergencies (Buckland, 2005b). This is especially important considering that access to higher education is one of the critical mechanisms contributing to poverty alleviation and intergenerational mobility. Due to several events, high education in Sudan has been significantly disrupted. Universities may encounter resource constraints, students transferring outside the country, and university staff migration. This article presents a historical narrative of armed conflicts in Sudan and the devastating impact of ongoing armed conflicts on higher education. It also overviews the beginning and expansion of high education institutes in Sudan.

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METHODOLOGY

The article is based on desk research on higher education in Sudan and the history of armed conflict. This paper highlights short history of armed conflicts in Sudan. It aims to demonstrate also the disruption of higher education during the current armed conflict and its impact on students, and university staff. The sources include news agencies, newspapers, academic journals, research reports, and documents from international and multinational organizations and non-governmental organizations. Desk-based research involved reviewing academic literature on the impact of armed conflict on higher education, university students, and academic staff. Secondary sources were obtained primarily from published literature. The data for the article was primarily collected from mid-April 2023, the beginning of the armed conflict. This article also outlines actions the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research took regarding education during an ongoing armed conflict, sourced from news reports. The descriptive/ documentary method was used and rigorously followed.

The history of armed conflicts in Sudan

Armed conflicts are among the significant causes of development and growth failure in today's developing world. Sudan is a fragile country that has experienced significant political instability characterized by ongoing armed conflicts between the central government and various peripheral regions (Brosché, 2011, Themnér & Wallensteen, 2012). Since gaining independence in 1956, five civil wars have torn the country. Sudan experienced a long-standing armed conflict in the south. This 22-year armed conflict resulted in mass displacement of people from southern Sudan to the north, making Sudan have the most significant numbers of internally displaced people. Another armed conflict suddenly erupted in the Darfur region in 2003 (Mohamed *et al.,* 2008). After the military coup on June 30, 1989, insurgencies erupted in the

East in 1994 and the West in 2003. This has profoundly impacted the country's social (Abdall, 2016), economic (Mohamed, 2020), and political development (Hanushek, 2008b). In 2014, the African Union facilitated a peace agreement between the government of Sudan and the Sudanese Revolutionary Army. They agreed on a comprehensive political settlement to solve Sudan's problems (Pettersson & Wallensteen, 2015). The recent military coup on October 25th, 2021, has contributed to a cycle of instability, leading to protests erupting in various cities throughout the country. Unfortunately, hundreds of people died during these protests, including high school and college students and graduates (U.S. News & World Report, 2023). As mentioned by the United nation the nature of the ongoing armed conflict lay within the second and larger category of armed conflicts within States, involving a group of people who are armed and ready to fight for the goal of seizing governmental power-rapid support force- and control over vital natural resources such as gold (https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/ rwss/docs/2001/15%20Armed%20Conflict.pdfa). The ongoing armed conflict erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Force on April 15, 2023, during the third week of the Holy month of Ramadan. The conflict occurred in Khartoum and then spread to the Darfur region. (https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast). Public universities were typically closed during Ramadan and are expected to resume after the Aid Alftr holidays. At the same time, private higher education institutions in the capital were suspended since the eruption of the fighting (Sudan: Why has fighting broken out there? - BBC News). Fighting spreads and endangers international support for Sudan's economic development, putting the already struggling economy at risk. Sudan is ranked 158th out of 167 in the global prosperity index for 2023. (Legatumprosperity index, 2023). In 2022, Sudan had a population of 46.78 million, with a growth rate of 2.6%. The country's GDP was $51.66 billion, with an annual growth rate of 1.0%, while the inflation rate was 138.8%. Personal remittances from GDP were 2.9%. (http://www.worldbank.org/)

Beginning of formal high education in Sudan

Public education: The British Colonial Administration established the modern education system in Sudan with the opening of Gordon Memorial College in 1902, which later became the University of Khartoum. (Badri, 2019).In 1955, the Cairo University Khartoum branch was established (Beshir, 1969). The University of Gezira was founded in 1975 as the first Sudanese university outside Khartoum (Hamad, 1985); itis an accredited community-oriented/community-based, problem-based school and the first in the Eastern Mediterranean region (https://www.sudanakhbar.com).

Private education: In 1966, Al-Ahfad was the first private institution of higher education. It attained full university status in 1995. Al-Ahfad University for Women has a well-established relationship with Iowa University for collaboration in different academic fields (Cowan *et al.,* 2004).The three oldest public universities, established long before the 1990 revolution, are still the top choice for the best students.

Management of higher education in Sudan

The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MoHESR) was founded in 1992. It is responsible for formulating policies, strategies, and plans for Sudan's higher education, research, and innovation. It also regulates and monitors the quality of higher education institutions and programs in the country, ensuring that they meet the needs of the labor market (Elhadary, 2010a). Additionally, MoHESR promotes internationalization and collaboration with institutions abroad. (https://education-profiles.org/northern-africa-and-western-asia/sudan/~non-state-actors-in-education). There are four types of higher education institutions: public universities, public technical colleges, private universities, and private colleges. The cessation of academic activities at all universities was declared on August 14, 2023, by the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The minister emphasized that the Council decided on the Ministers' instructions to push back the opening of universities to a later date, which will be established for mid-October.

Khartoum is a hub for higher education

The Republic of Sudan's national capital is Khartoum, which is in the center of the Sudan State. Three towns form the core of the Sudanese capital: Umm-Durman, Khartoum, and Khartoum North; they lie in a triangle and are separated by the Blue, White, and Main Niles,andcomprise about 25% of Sudan's total urban population https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/sudan-population. Most of the resources and opportunities for higher education are concentrated in Khartoum. Eighty-one percent of private universities are in Khartoum. Unbalanced regional development has been the main cause of internal migration in Sudan. Since the 1960s, there has been a significant influx of immigrants to Khartoum, some escaping wars in nearby nations such as Ethiopia, Chad, and Uganda all of which were suffering from famine and internal armed conflict (Ahmed, 2013). Further, the 1980s witnessed a wave of immigration from the periphery being triggered by famine in west Sudan and the outbreak of civil war in the southern part of Sudan. Many migrants seek employment, improved healthcare, and educational opportunities (Ferris, 2012). Previous conflicts erupted in distant regions from Khartoum, the capital; Khartoum is mostly secure from these conflicts and may be affected only by the conflict's side effects, notably internal population displacement. According to the Human Development Index, Sudan has the world's largest internally displaced population. (UNDP, 2004). Sudan was the 141st most developed country out of the 177. As of August 28, 2023, around 1 million civilians had crossed into the neighboring countries, Chad (41%) and Egypt (28%), with the reminder displaced to other neighbors. The number of people internally displaced within the nation is about 7 million (https://dtm.iom.int/node/24896). According to reports, Khartoum state is home to most internally displaced people (74%).

What alterations take place in Sudan's higher education facilities beginning in mid-April?

The high education in Sudan has been subject to significant disruptions during the last 5 years because of several events. These include demonstrations that took place both before and after the removal of former leader Omar al-Bashir in 2019, record-setting floods in 2020, and like the rest of the world, Sudan experienced the severe social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic 2020-2021(Mohamed etal., 2021, http://doi.org/10.1089/hs.2020.0223). Sudan's universities struggle with inadequate funding due to the government's focus on military spending. In 2018, 70% of the budget went

towards the military, leaving just 3% for all levels of education. This has created a funding crisis and jeopardized the quality of education in Sudan. (Dabangasudan, 2018).The Sudanese government has spent US$30.5 billion on the war in Darfur, equivalent to 171% of the country's 2003 Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Over the past two decades, the government has allocated less than 1% to education. It is worth noting that the war alone consumes 13% of the GDP. (Ali,2013).

The ongoing conflict is causing considerable damage to vital infrastructure and institutions due to continuous air strikes, shelling, looting, and robbery. Hospitals, educational institutions, scientific facilities, and libraries are among the targeted locations that are being destroyed.) (https://www.bbc. co.uk/news/world-africa-65718968); (https://www.emro.who. int/media/news/index.html). The burning down and destruction have already claimed several universities, including Mashreq University (https://www.skynewsarabia.com/video/1623304) and Omdurman Ahlia University (https://1-a1072.azureedge. net/politics/2023/5/20). At the same time, the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research has also suffered the same fate (https://twitter.com/AJArabic/status/ 164788007488 7065604/photo/1. One university student was killed at the University of Khartoum after being struck by a stray bullet during the ongoing violent fighting. Regrettably, his body was buried on campus because safe transportation off-site could not be arranged. (BBC NEWS, April 2023).

The armed conflict spread to the western states of Darfur and Kordofan, general education in Sudan is greatly suffering. The fighting has resulted in restricted movement and disrupted access to education. Consequently, the final exams for students finishing their secondary education in 2023 have been indefinitely postponed throughout the country. (https://alsudantoday.com/sudan-news/breaking-news/242467) *The rapid force support uses campuses and other training hospitals as military barracks.* On the other hand,the Safe Schools Declaration, An inter-governmental political commitment to protect students, teachers, schools, and universities from the worst effects of armed conflict state, was endorsed in Oslo, Norway, in May 2015 https://www.unicef. org/education-under-attack. Sudan is one of 118 States that have endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration. https://ssd.protectingeducation.org/.Sudan was among fourteen countries that used education institutions by the military between 2005 and October 2012. (Human Rights Watch (protectingeducation.org, 2012).

The scale of destruction in Sudan's higher education sector was outlined in a statement on Facebook on 27 August by the country's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, "Since 15 April 2023, 104 public and private higher education institutions, research centers, and the National Fund for Student Welfare in Sudan has been damaged and vandalized". (https://www.universityworldnews.com/post-mobile.php?story=20230830182024830). Many schools in Sudan are currently being used as shelters for internally displaced people from Khartoum state. This has disrupted primary and secondary education throughout the country. Many universities strive to keep a satisfactory level of education. After brief closures, several private universities have again offered distance learning. Sudan presents a considerable problem sustaining dependable connectivity for

several reasons, including a lack of availability, inefficiency, and disruptions or inconsistent delivery of information and communication technology services (Nour, 2013, 2015).

Statusof the academic staff employed at universities

Since the beginning of the conflict, the staff have not received their salaries. Before 15 April, the Sudanese University Professors Committee had been in a series of strikes that started in May 2021. Job dissatisfaction due to low payment, inadequate training, and a flawed work environment are the primary reasons for the strike (https://suna-news.net/ar.2020, Rmadan& Kassahun, 2021, Ajeeb, 2021). Typical Sudanese universities have high enrollment but low staff-student ratios and too few instructors. Frequent disruptions due to political unrest and faculty strikes caused the accumulation and overlapping of batches. Sudan lacks its well-qualified human capital, and the brain drain is ongoing. Academic staff had immigrated to Arab Gulf universities seeking better pay years before the conflict began (Mushemea, 2016).The migration of Sudanese university staff is expected to increase due to economic, academic, and scientific challenges even after the ceasefire (Babyesiza, 2012). Additionally, many Sudanese scholars seeking faculty positions instead pursue opportunities abroad to apply for scholarships for better postgraduate opportunities (El-Imam & Yusuf, 2013).

The future of university students

Since students are the focus of the educational process, higher education's top priority is ensuring students remain engaged and complete the 2022-2023 academic year. Some externally displaced Sudanese students seek enrollment in foreign colleges and universities. Reuters August 2023 | Breaking International News & Views. Many Sudanese students from public and private admissions are transferred to universities in Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, India, and elsewhere to secure their future (https://www.independentarabia.com/node/, 2023). The exact number of transfer students is still being determined. Many students start anew despite having educational certificates that could allow them to continue from their previous level. Assigned students may face different social, language, and economic challenges (Sidhu, 2011). However, there are advantages for each student regarding their professional growth and job prospects (Bracht *et al.,* 2006). International students from Southeast Asia and African countries came to Sudan to study Arabic language and Islamic studies. Unfortunately, due to the conflict, these students were forced to flee Sudan before they could complete their education. They had to endure the tragedy alongside their peers in the country.

Non-teaching Staff

The consequences of this conflict may devastate high education infrastructure and personnel. In Sudan's public universities, the government is the employer, and the non-teaching staff working in administration and services have been affected by the armed conflict. They have not received any salaries since the conflict started. In private universities, non-teaching staff were considered risky, especially for those whose primary tasks were not considered critical to the continuity of teaching. Technical and computer support personnel were considered critical to the institution, whereas cleaning services, maintenance, and guards' personnel were

deemed non-critical. Due to the extended closure of universities, certain private institutions that resumed remote learning reduced employee salaries, while others began paying hourly.

DISCUSSION

Before the ongoing armed conflict, Sudan's higher education system faced significant obstacles (Fosu, 2001, Abbas, 2015). During the ongoing conflict, several universities became military barricades and became unsuitable due to the destruction and robbery they suffered. The effect of armed conflict on primary education is well documented in many studies (Elbert *et al.,* 2009, Betancourt, & Khan, 2008, Minoiu, & Shemyakina, 2014). Few studies about the effect of armed conflicts in higher education were found in the literature compared to that of primary education. One study (Tahirsyzaj, 2010). Investigating developments at the University of Prishtina in Kosovo concluded that the quality of education continues to suffer five years following the civil war. Compared to other conflict-ridden countries, Sudan has a long way to go in terms of education, even before the conflict. After the 1990 revolution, higher education institutions underwent unplanned expansion, resulting in the degradation of graduate quality and research output (Elhadary, 2010c). Productive research is possible when the University recruits, trains, and retains quality academic staff (Mushemeza, 2016). Similarly, Syrian universities-the Syrian civil war began in 2011-are also facing a similar problem with increased student intake.

The migration of senior and junior academic staff who left the country seeking other opportunities abroad have been reported in countries suffering from armed conflict in Ukraine (Savenkova & Svyrydenko, 2018) and Yemen (AlMunifi & Aleryani, 2021). Sudanese professionals return to their home country after the conflict remains uncertain, posing a challenge to rehabilitation and development. Policymakers and stakeholders should provide the necessary assurances and incentives to ensure these professionals return to Sudan and contribute to the country's progress (Abdallah, 2018). University Student's futures are in doubt because of the universities' protracted course suspensions owing to the continued unrest, amid concerns that the military clashes will make the academic situation even more challenging. The existing literature focuses on the adverse effects of violence in school learning (Human Rights Watch (protecting education. org, 2012). However, few studies look at the effect of violence on higher education students and explore its heterogeneous effects by different types of degree programs. Evidence from psychology shows that exposure to armed conflict among college students causes anxiety and depression (Ngenge 2022, Kurapov *et al.,* 2023). During times of intense conflict, prioritizing students' mental health is crucial. University medical units should ideally include social workers, psychiatric consultation, and student affairs support. A lower student-to-faculty ratio can foster closer relationships between students and professors and facilitate more interactive discussions, which, to some extent, can support students' mental health. Acknowledging prior studies when transferring credit can prevent repetition and facilitate a smooth transition in students' academic and professional growth. Recognizing a student's previous studies is crucial when moving to a new institution. On the other hand, student credit transfer can facilitate the globalization of higher education (Fox & Hundley, 2011,

Abdalla *et al.,* 2022). The transferred students should have additional assistance, re-consider their previous education concerning application outcomes and registration procedures, and provide waivers for tuition fees. Implementing these measures could positively impact the experiences of Sudanese students and other students from conflicted areas. Some university students may step away from their education temporarily or permanently due to emergencies or financial concerns. More studies should be done to understand better the challenges students face, particularly those who have fled Sudan and become refugees. Flexible intra-university collaboration should be established to give students more chances to continue their studies at other institutions when there is unrest in their state.

According to a United Nations report (https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/rwss/docs/2001/15%20Armed%20Conflict.pdf b). Sudan, besides Cambodia and Mozambique, child soldiers were "socialized" into violence by subjecting them to periods of terror and physical abuse. High-education students and even children are recruited in the ongoing armed conflict(Al-mustanfareen, Groups of young people undergoing short-term military training and then participating in battles). There are also cases of poor parents offering their children to serve in wars as a means of family survival. The brutal indoctrination of child soldiers leaves them with emotional and psychological scars. Since the mid-1990s, grey literature has become more accessible due to the rise of online resources and the Internet. Grey literature offers written materials in various formats that are challenging to access through traditional or for-profit publishing and distribution channels, indexing, or databases but are essential for understanding a particular issue's current state and past evolution. (Myohanen, *et al.,* 2005, Frater, *et al.,* 2007; (Mahood *et al.,* 2014, Kousha, *et al.,* 2022). In this article, grey literature is one of the data sources for the ongoing conflict. However, the measurement of armed conflict is mainly based on news reporting and suffers from national and cultural biases. It is becoming more widely acknowledged that rebuilding after a conflict involves more than just repairing the physical infrastructure. It also requires efforts to rebuild human relationships. This has significanteducational implications, including addressing the legacies of conflict and promoting human rights and citizenship. https://www.cedol.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/57-60-2007.pdf. Education is vital for Sudan's reconstruction, imparts knowledge, boosts human capital, and fosters responsible citizens. Education can be crucial in promoting post-conflict transformation in countries vulnerable to conflict, as demonstrated in previous studies conducted in Colombia and Kenya (Pacheco & Johnson, 2014). As Smith & Vaux, 2003 state, "not just a loss to the individual, but a loss of social capital and the capacity of a society to recover from the conflict. Higher education can be part of the solution for armed conflict. Increasing educational levels overall have pacifying effects. Conventional post-conflict recovery assumes priority sequencing is crucial for success (Langer *et al.,* 2016). A new national strategy to improve Sudan's higher education system and attract domestic and external funding in the short and medium term is necessary to sustain the educational process.

Conclusion

The capital city of Sudan, Khartoum, is currently experiencing an ongoing armed conflict; this has resulted in the central government being paralyzed and the country becoming even

more fragile. Damage to many higher education institutions significantly impacts the future of higher education in the country. Moreover, rebuilding the destruction will take considerable time. The departure of teaching staff can also devastate the educational system, leaving students with limited options, such as dropping out of studies or delaying graduation. This may force students to wait for their studies to resume domestically or seek better opportunities abroad. Meanwhile, teaching staff cannot afford to wait long for their salaries or the resumption of their institutes. Despite these challenges, higher education can play a crucial role in fostering peace and restoring countries to a path of positive development, reversing the damage caused by armed conflicts. Further investigations are needed to clarify and assess the destruction of higher education infrastructure and human resources.

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