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PJW-28
Taking Chances

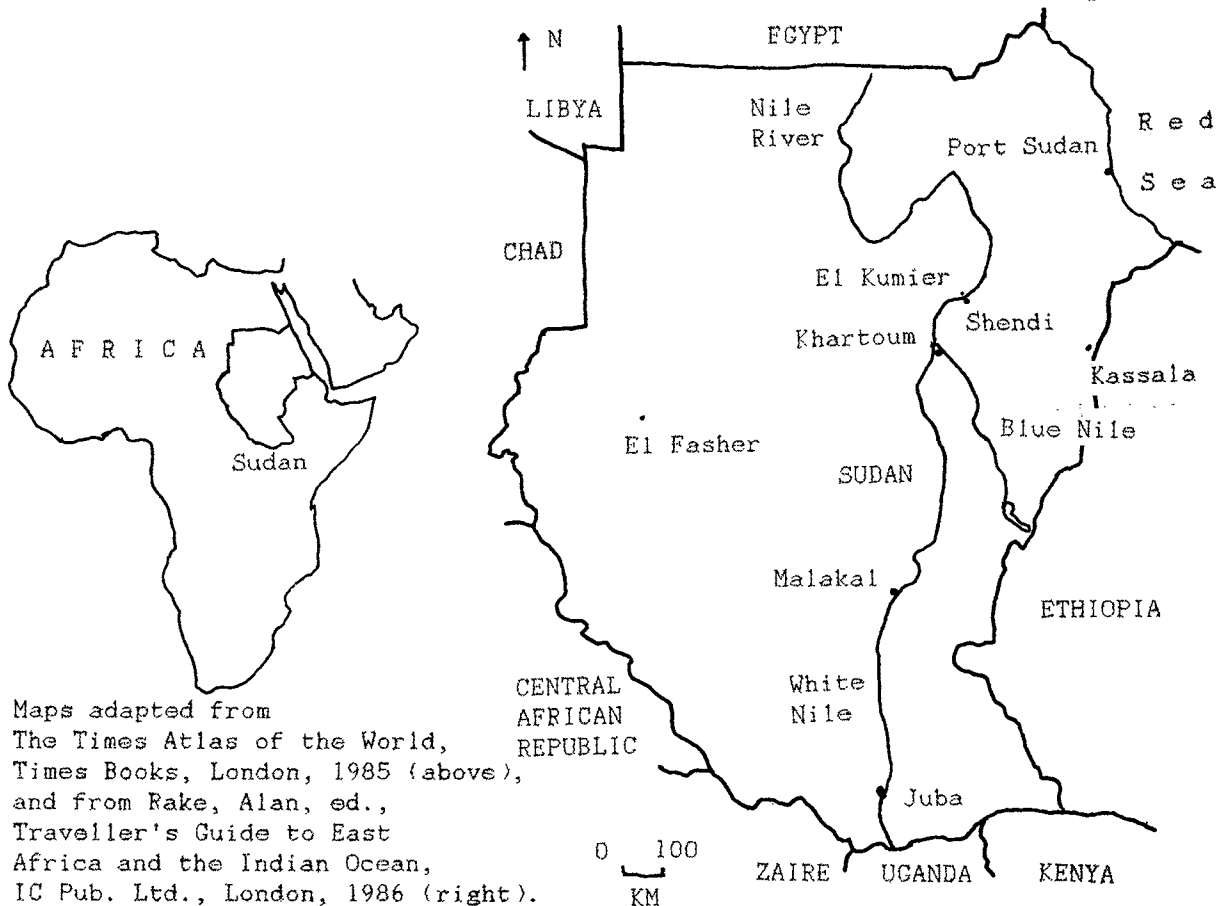
Nairobi, Kenya
4 December 1987

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

Recently I visited the SOS Sahel Forestry Project, located in northern Sudan. This project has taken bold and imaginative steps to encourage local people to try something new, to take chances on a new development strategy.

Sudan is an immense and diverse country, equal to one-quarter the size of the United States. The second largest country in Africa, it is just slightly smaller than Algeria, and larger than Zaire. Stretching all the way from central Africa across the desert to Egypt, Sudan links sub-Saharan Africa with the Middle East, African cultures with Arab culture (see map).



Maps adapted from
The Times Atlas of the World,
Times Books, London, 1985 (above),
and from Rake, Alan, ed.,
Traveller's Guide to East
Africa and the Indian Ocean,
IC Pub. Ltd., London, 1986 (right).

Sudan's population is comprised of over 160 ethnic groups, speaking 100 different languages. The northern part of the country is predominantly Muslim, whereas the southern part of the country is predominantly Christian. Rebels in the southern part of the country are fighting for more regional autonomy, and removal of the Sharia (Muslim) laws.

The SOS Sahel Forestry Project is a community forestry project funded by the British-based non-governmental organization, SOS Sahel. This project is based in the town of Shendi, located in Nile Province, about 150 kilometers (93 miles) north of Khartoum. The project staff have been working with residents of nearby villages, located on both sides of the Nile River.

This region receives sparse rainfall, like other Sahelian regions. In many areas, the only remaining natural vegetation is scattered acacia trees: all grass and other vegetation has been totally stripped by overgrazing of goats, sheep, and camels. Some villages are seriously threatened by moving sand dunes. The local economy is based on irrigated agriculture, using water from the Nile River or from borehole wells, and on livestock. While some people have been longtime farmers, others are recently settled nomads.

The forestry project is designed to meet the needs of local people for shade trees, shelterbelts, and fuelwood. When the project began two years ago, the project staff wanted to involve as many local people in tree-growing as possible. They needed, therefore, to try to assess what the local constraints to planting, protecting, and managing trees might be, and then try to develop strategies to overcome these constraints.

Two major social constraints were apparent from the start. First, the people in this region did not have a well-developed tradition of growing trees. Although people were aware that the abundance of trees had been decreasing, they had not yet taken steps -- as a community -- to deal with this problem. Second, local Muslim traditions restricted the activities of women and girls: how, then, could they also be encouraged to participate?

For both issues, the project staff has developed bold strategies, which seem to be working well. To introduce the project objectives and to mobilize the community, the project staff have developed a series of puppet shows that are used as extension tools. These puppet shows have been wildly successful: the local people appreciate them not only as entertainment, but also for their value in stimulating community action. Village audiences for these shows tend to range from five hundred to almost four thousand people for a single performance. Performances are held in the early evening, after late afternoon prayers and before dinnertime. Additional shows are held for school children, to encourage them to plant trees around their schools.

When a puppet show is scheduled, everyone in the village -- women, men, and children -- is invited, so that everyone can hear the same information. Announcements were made in the schools to children that their mothers were invited. The puppet show may be, for some women, their first participation in such a public event, concerning issues of general community interest.

Project staff usually talk with the village sheik, his wife, and other village authorities, to get the word out. The project staff learned, after the first show, to explain ahead of time where people should sit, what to expect, and how to behave. At the first show, people had been so excited by

the puppets that they had rushed the stage -- which made it difficult for the show to go on.

The puppet shows have been specifically developed for local audiences. The Sudanese puppeteers were trained by Bill Hamblett and Ann Shrosbree, who had a background in community theatre in Great Britain. They worked with the Sudanese to develop scripts in the local dialect of Arabic, that reflected characteristics of local culture and everyday life. With time and experience, the puppeteers have developed the ability to alter the script to reflect circumstances in a particular village, and also engage in repartee with their audiences.

While I was visiting the project, Bill and Ann happened to be back, doing follow-up training with the puppeteers. They explained why the puppet shows had been so effective. In the local society, the puppets were free to say certain things that no live actors could get away with. The puppets, for example, could say, "Who does that Abdullah think he is, letting his goats eat trees in the village woodlot? Does he think that the village is providing fodder just for him?" If, however, a live actor said such a thing, the real Abdullah would be offended.

Puppets also are easier to deal with than human actors. Four or five puppeteers can handle up to 50 different characters, which makes the logistics of putting on the shows far easier and less expensive.

The puppet shows have worked so well, that now Ann and Bill are training people from other projects. The approach is being used not only for forestry development issues, but also for other topics, such as family planning. Although most Sudanese puppeteers are men, in some areas, they are women -- such as all-female teams of extension students from the Afhad University College for Women.

The puppet shows help to mobilize the community, to reinforce their interest in trees. The first show in a village deals with general issues, and only at the very end is mentioned that the project is coming to the village, to work with those who are interested in growing trees. Project personnel also suggest that after the shows, interested villagers can form village forestry committees -- one for men and one for women.

Throughout the country, women still face numerous social constraints, such as restrictions on their abilities to travel, educational opportunities, or access to land. Most women still wear traditional attire, a "tobe", which is a light wrap of fabric that covers their heads and bodies. The social situation for women varies enormously from one region to another, with women in the western and southern regions being generally less restricted than those in the northern and eastern regions (Baxter 1981, FAO 1987).

In this region of Sudan, women generally work within their household compounds. The compounds are divided into women's quarters and men's quarters. Generally women and girls do not mix freely with men from outside their own households. When they do leave the compounds, they generally travel in groups.

The project has developed a women's extension unit, that works with the women's committees and with individual women. The extension staff informs

women on options available, and then the women villagers decide how they wish to participate. The project also developed a questionnaire for women, as well as one for men, to learn of their needs and interests. Many women expressed surprise, and pleasure, that their opinions were being solicited.

The women's extension team is a very spirited, enthusiastic, and outgoing group, headed by Shadia El Amin. Shadia, like the other five members of her staff, is a young unmarried woman in her twenties. Married women are busy with their household duties, and do not have the time to work for the project. Two extension staff members have married and moved away from the area, so they have been replaced.

When Ann first began trying to develop the women's program, it was difficult to find a woman who was willing to work with expatriates, and whose family would permit such employment. Shadia's uncle, a local forest conservator, works on a nearby project funded by the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA), and had encouraged her to apply for the job.



Shadia, wearing her "tobe", is talking with the project driver and Anne in the newly-planted woodlot in Seyal Soria

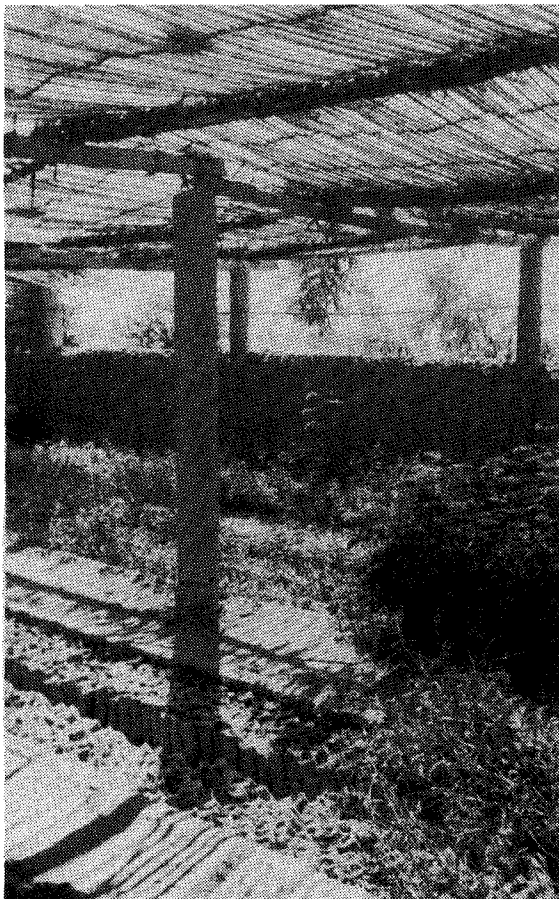
Shadia has a university degree, and her extensionists all have at least high school educations. They were not, however, specifically trained in forestry prior to joining the project. [To date, while some Sudanese women have studied forestry at the university level, no women have yet been trained as forestry technicians. The national school for forestry technicians at Soba does not have accommodations for women, and so has not accepted any as students. USAID, however, has agreed to finance construction of a women's dormitory, so this situation should change within two years.]

One extensionist, Khowla Bushran, had previously worked as a secretary for the Forests Administration. She had sought employment with the project so that she could work in the region where her family lives. Khowla greatly prefers working with the project, as she enjoys being out of an office, and having a more varied work schedule.

The extensionists work two or three days a week in three new villages, where they are starting activities. They also keep in touch with the women in the villages where activities have already been launched. One day a week the extension team spends in the office, where they can discuss issues, or receive additional training.

To begin, tree nurseries were needed for the villages. The project paid for the installation of a borehole well, construction of the nursery beds, and purchase of a water pump, fuel, barbed wire fencing, plastic pots, seeds, and other supplies. The project personnel stressed that since the nursery was for the entire community, the entire community -- including the women -- ought to contribute.

The women contributed to community nurseries by working on tasks that they could perform within the women's compounds. First, they made mats to be used as roofing, or shade, for the seedling beds. This mats were made from leaves of doum palm trees, tied together with rope made from the leaves of sisal plants. The work was difficult, as the sisal rope is very rough, and can easily cut someone's hands. (The project was unable to obtain gloves.) The women and girls worked together as a group and socialized in one women's compound.



Village nursery, with shade mats made by women.



Trees planted by the project have grown rapidly with irrigation.

After the mats were made, then the women worked on a second task -- punching drainage holes in the plastic tubing, used as tree seedling pots. For both jobs, teenage girls or young, unmarried women had the most time to contribute, but the older married women also would drop by and participate.

The women also became involved in individual, as well as community, activities. The extension staff trained women to grow tree seedlings. Women were provided seeds, pots, and soil from the banks of the Nile, and started their own household nurseries, to raise 30 to 50 seedlings each.

Women have used their tree seedlings to plant in their own compounds, or given some away to friends and relatives. The project has also offered women the option of trading their seedlings for others species grown in the community nursery. The project buys women's surplus seedlings, paying them 75 piastres (US\$ 0.17) per seedling. Thus, the home nurseries have become small-scale, income-generating projects for women.

After the community nurseries were built and started production, the project staff discovered that the wells had extra water, and decided to use the water for irrigated woodlots. During the first few years, the trees can be grown in conjunction with vegetables, such as tomatoes or millet: a row of trees is planted on one side of the irrigation ditch, and the vegetables on the other. The wells also provide clean water for the villagers.



The nursery well in Seyal Soria.

In some villages, women decided to have their own woodlots. Shadia explained that in Seyal Kabir, the women wanted to set up the women's woodlot as a small park with flowers, vegetables, and benches as well as trees, where the women could go and relax. While this vision of "women's parks" has not yet been achieved, in several villages women have planted their own section of the community woodlot, using tree seedlings that they themselves have grown. (The establishment of one community woodlot, with men's and women's sections, economizes on well water for irrigation, and on the barbed wire fence to protect the woodlot from goats.)

Shadia, Khowla, Caroline Webb, and I went to visit several women in the village of El Kumier. Caroline, a British visual anthropologist, was preparing a slide show to document women's participation in the project.

The women were quite willing to talk to us. In some households teenage girls had undertaken the tree nurseries and household plantings. We talked with one teenager, who currently has to walk twice a week to the shores of the Nile -- a five-hour roundtrip -- to get firewood. She hopes that the trees that she has planted in her family's compound, and those to be planted in the village woodlot, will provide enough fuelwood in a few years, so that the long walk to get fuel will no longer be necessary.

In other households, the married woman of the family had done the work herself. The compounds had varying numbers of trees planted -- between seven and over thirty trees. The trees were generally planted around the perimeter of the compound, or else in a small clustered area. Women were trying out a wide variety of trees, interested in them for fuel and shade. Many women were also growing flowers around the base of the trees, or a variety of Hibiscus used to make a locally-popular, bright red drink.

In El Kumier, women were now involved in their second cycle of tree production. Most will only plant a few more trees in their compounds, due to constraints of space and of the work required to fetch water for the trees. Some women would like to plant trees on the outside of their compounds, but fear that the goats would eat them. They will continue to grow trees as a source of income, and would also like to grow fruit trees.

One woman, El Saraf, had planted 14 trees from her first production, and was now growing another 22 trees to sell. What would she use the money for, I asked? She would like more chickens to raise, and some plastic sandals. Her tree seedlings will net 16.5 Sudanese pounds (US \$3.75). As a chicken costs 10-12 pounds (US \$2.27-2.73), and it takes three to four months to grow the seedlings, she could earn money for 3-4 chickens within a year's time.

This project clearly demonstrates the importance of involving women in community forestry endeavors from the very beginning. Interest in involving women in development seems to be growing in Sudan. Already at least two conferences on women and resource issues have been held (Baxter 1981, FAO 1987), to exchange experiences. Afhad University College for Women, which has a program in rural extension and development, has recently begun focusing some applied research and training on forestry issues.

Forestry projects elsewhere in Sudan are also working with women. In each area, the same general process has to be adopted -- of working with, or creating, local groups that can decide upon the most appropriate strategies for involving women. In the eastern area, around Gedarf and Kassala, for example, the FAO fuelwood project has a university-trained woman forester, who is working with local women's groups and schools to develop an extension program. In the western region of Kordofan, however, the CARE forestry project has found that they can reach women effectively through male forestry extension agents, so long as they are trained to work with women.

This experience also underscores the importance of community development. The SOS Sahel Project got off to such a good start, I believe, because it not only had foresters, to provide technical guidance on tree-

growing, but also community development people, who could focus on the development of the puppet shows and other extension programs, and the organization of women, men, and school children.

Some of my forestry colleagues still believe, unfortunately, that they must first focus on preserving and growing trees -- "saving the world's tropical forests" -- and then, in the future, they can worry about equity issues, such as whether women participate and benefit from forestry projects. The SOS Sahel Project, however, demonstrates that by focusing on involving the whole community -- including the women -- from the very beginning, chances for achieving forestry success are greatly enhanced.

The involvement of women in forestry activities in this region has resulted in greater production of tree seedlings, substantial household plantings of trees for shade and fuel production, larger plantings of community fuel woodlots, and plantings of trees in girls', as well as boys', schools. To date, the project has involved 2230 women in 18 different villages, who have produced over 50,000 trees. Thus, women have contributed substantially to project effectiveness.

If such results can be obtained where women face such social restrictions on their activities, then women's participation in forestry activities elsewhere ought to be equally possible. What seems most vital for achieving such involvement, is the willingness of people to try, to take chances, and to see what strategies for promoting women's participation will be most effective.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

Paula J. Williams
Forest and Society Fellow

Acknowledgements: The SOS Sahel Forestry Project staff were most gracious and generous with their time in explaining project activities to me, as were people working on other forestry and related development activities in Sudan.

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