

SUDAN: PSYCHO-SOCIAL NETWORK

Nobody is certain exactly how many stretchchildren there are in El Fasher, but it is impossible not to see them there.



Sleeping rough, living on what can be spared by the North Darfurian capital's other residents, or what they can steal from already sparsely-supplied food stalls, the youngsters live in an uncertain present, and face a potentially dangerous future, threatened by militia organisations, drugs, disease and hunger.

But a new organisation, which is being developed from a unique RedR project in Sudan, is galvanising support to help El Fasher's lost generation overcome the challenges they face.

Mohammed Makhree is an advisor to the Sudanese Ministry of Education, a schools inspector, formerly a RedR employee and is now leading the registration of Sudan's new psycho-social support network PSNetwork.

He said: 'There have been many years of war.

'When we hear arguments now, we can never be sure if they will end in gun battles and fighting. In death. All people in North Darfur have experienced harassment, killings, carjacking. Adults, and many young people have been driven mad by what they have experienced and seen.

'There are many young people here without families, without homes or possessions. They do not have jobs, so they might steal for food. They become sick or they become highwaymen, carrying guns, breaking into homes, ambushing people in roads. They are aged just 13, in some cases.

'There are younger children begging on the streets, picking pockets or shining shoes. They are very young, aged four or five. They are also alone. They have lost their parents. Our children should not need to be pickpockets and we should not need to fear them. It is a sickness of Darfur.'

Since conflict broke out in Darfur in 2003, vast population movements have taken place as millions of people fled their homes to escape violence and terror. The luckiest reached camps, barely surviving there until they were able to return home. Others remain displaced, but tens of thousands – including thousands of children – lost family members, or became separated from their families.

Many of those children travelled to El Fasher – whether hoping to find lost family members or simply because as capital of North Darfur, the town offered the most likely nearby place where they could find shelter, food, or just the chance to disappear – and there they remain.

Mr Makhree continued: 'There are many orphans. And others who do not know where their parents are. Whether they are alive or dead. They know that because there are lots of people here, they might be able to get food. These children have nothing. It is very hard even to watch them sometimes.'

But he did not only watch.

In July 2010, when Mr Makhree was working for RedR, he helped create the world's first RedR psycho-social network.

Open to all humanitarian workers, community members and government employees who had been trained by RedR – particularly those who had taken courses in staff welfare – the network started as a chance for members to exchange experience, update one another on developments in different regions, and call upon one another for help and support when they needed it.

He explained: 'It was a matter very close to my heart. I used to work for Oxfam GB, and in 2005, we were attacked by government soldiers and Janjaweed.

'We fled, and there was a terrible car crash. One person died and six were injured. It affected us all. We were crying and very shaken and shocked for a long time. But there was no psycho-social support provided. It was only when RedR arrived that we could learn how to provide that support. I am very happy to have helped train others to provide it.'

By 2013, the network had 142 members, from organisations including the Sudanese Red Crescent, the Ministry of Social Welfare and the Ministry of Health, as well as a number of national NGOs.

They worked together on an ad hoc basis at first, with interactions occurring on a case-by-case basis, such as when a member happened to be on the scene at a bad traffic accident in which several children were hit by a truck and killed in front of their parents. She called other members who were able to swiftly reach the scene and help her assist in the emergency.

But its engagement with El Fasher's street children came about almost by accident.

Mr Makhree explained: 'We hold regular meetings and we were looking for a new venue for them. One potential place was a children's centre. When we visited, we decided we should try to help the children who attended the centre.'

The network's members went out to meet youngsters: 'To learn about why they are suffering,' explained Mr Makhree. 'The major finding was that in almost all cases they had no parents, and the rest had parents who were very poor. They did not have food, so they became pickpockets. So we decided to do something to help.'

The network gathered clothes and shoes and distributed them to the children at Eid 2013 (7th-8th August 2013). The organisation distributed clothes, shoes and blankets the following year, as well as working with children throughout the rest of the year on educational and social initiatives. So far, more than 400 young people have been helped by the programme.

Mr Makhree said: 'The Ministry of Social Affairs said last year there were 878 street children in El Fasher. But we have evidence it may be three times as many.'

Babikara Ali, an employee of the Ministry of Social Welfare, who has been trained by RedR and is now an active part of the psycho-social support network running regular interaction sessions with El Fasher's street children, said:

'We gather information about who is here, and we help them. All across El Fasher, there are children who have no parents and have to beg for food. Some have to steal because of this. It is not their fault, they need help. We invite them to come here, we teach them and we can give them some food. But we are limited by time and money.'

'The government is not collecting this information. These children have mothers and fathers who have died in the wars. They need food, clothing, a place to sleep under a roof. We need to help them. The children are not safe here. We need to help them.'

Mr Makhree added: 'The psycho-social support network ngo is being registered, it will operate in Darfur, and in Khartoum.

'It's all come from a unique RedR idea, and one that will continue even when the new ngo is in full operation.

'Before, we all thought something needed doing. Because of RedR, we know how to do it. We are doing it. RedR opened our eyes and provided us with the skills we need to do this. We are doing a new thing for Sudan.'

Case Studies

'When we first started humanitarian work, I think most of us thought about providing food. But RedR has come and fed our minds.'

Issam Hamid

6.1 million people in Sudan urgently need humanitarian aid, the UN reports.

Refugees fleeing war and terror in states including South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Eritrea, have crossed into the country, and conflict within Sudan itself has forced hundreds of thousands of people from their homes since January.

There are now more than two million internally-displaced people (IDPs) in Darfur alone.

Added to this, the government's 'Sudanisation' policy has seen more than 25 international aid organisations leave the country in the last five years.

The UN describes Sudan as facing an 'overwhelming humanitarian crisis' and the dedicated but inexperienced Sudanese national humanitarian staff face a vast challenge to ensure water, food, and shelter, are supplied in safety across the country.

But they are not alone. RedR – one of the few international NGOs remaining in Sudan – is training those workers in the skills they need to save lives.

We trained 2,896 people in 2013. In 2012, we trained 1,607. Ninety-eight percent of those trained in the two years are Sudanese.

And we have not stopped there. In Sudan, we have not only trained lifesavers, we have set up a support network, the Partnership Strategy (known to its members as the Network), open to everyone who has taken a RedR training course in Sudan.

It has 600 members from community groups, aid organisations, and the Sudanese government, who help each other in emergency situations, organise large-scale events and exchange experience and expertise.

Issam Hamid is Programme Manager of the Al Abassy Humanitarian Development Organisation, which works at Mellit Camp, an IDP centre 50km north of North Darfur's capital, El Fasher.

He has taken RedR training courses, in Management of Staff Welfare, Communication, Managing People in Emergencies, Proposal Writing, Disaster Management, and Monitoring and Evaluation. He is also a member of the Network.

He said: 'Our organisation works with displaced people, adults and young people.

'People have had to run from their homes. They have left their prosperity behind. They are poor and have no job. Some commit crimes – others are victims of crime – because there is not enough food for them all and there are not jobs for them.

'They have seen terrifying and terrible things, and many need help to get over that. For the first time, they are away from their fellow tribe members, with new people from tribes they do not know – and sometimes do not trust.

'We give psycho-social care to those who need it. A healthy mind is vital and many people have seen and experienced violence and burning of homes, deaths and terror. We help those people, so they can adjust and become part of a community again.

'We run workshops and we are helping them create a new community. By bringing people together, we are showing them they do have a community – not based on a tribal system, but on the fact that they are all displaced and live in the same place with the same interests and needs. They work together.

'And we teach them new skills, in health but also in crafts, which can help them bring in money and improve their lives.'

'I could not do my job without my RedR training.

'But equally vital is the Network. We meet and share experiences and stories. You can learn how to deal with challenges you face from how others did. Whether that is learning a new way to help a displaced person, or to overcome your own stress, it is vital.'

Thouraya Ahmadia is a Psycho-Social Support Social Worker for the Sudanese Ministry of Social Affairs. She works across Darfur and took RedR training in Foundations of Humanitarian Practice, Proposal Writing, and Report Writing.

She said: 'I work mainly with children who have been separated from their families. There are about 1,000 I know of, but there are other departments working on this issue, and there are many we never see. Almost always, we find them new families, because their families are dead.'

'I also work with women. One very big project is to help prevent Female Genital Mutilation. I spend time letting women know the dangers like being unable to have children, and helping them to see they can say no.'

'The Network is really very good and works very well. It helps us cope with stress to help other people.'

Ismail Ahmed, from the Ministry of Health is also a Network member. He said: 'Most of us travel across Darfur. It means we can be caught in gunfire or intense questioning. Sometimes you see burned villages or places where people have been killed. It can really affect you.'

'The Network helps. Knowing there are people to talk to and share experiences helps.'

'Before the Network I think all of us – government and humanitarian workers – did not have all the expertise we needed. We knew about one thing but too little about others. But now we can share tools and expertise, we can respond to crisis much better.'

Thouraya added: 'My favourite work with the Network was when we all worked together to organise a happy day, during Ramadan, for street children in El Fasher. We distributed clothes and shoes to them. I am proud of that.'