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Local Committee Members--'We Are the Children of Conflict & Pioneers in the New Sudan.' - posted Wednesday, May 16, 2007

By Roger Hardister, Vice President for Program Development

On my recent trip to NEF (Near East Foundation) projects in Dar Es Salaam El Rabwa, the displaced persons settlement where we concentrate our varied activities, I had a chance to visit with the area's Local Committee. Elected by residents only 18 months ago, the committee has 15 members, 12 men and three women, who serve without pay. They hope to coordinate local activities and encourage community participation--and are part of the emerging structure of local government of Sudan.

Like the now 30,000 residents of Dar Es Salaam, committee members come from across Sudan, far north to the south, east to west, reflecting the vast ethnic diversity and language of their country. What they all have in common is how they came to Dar Es Salaam--fleeing civil war and conflicts that have plagued Sudan for decades. As Local Committee Chairman Mohamed Osman Mohamed, a 35-year-old trader originally from South Kordofan, put it: "We are the children of conflict and pioneers in the new Sudan. Our struggle is a shared one."

We talked at their headquarters, a one-room, mud-brick building, near the Tagwa School NEF supports, and once used by an international aid agency to store relief supplies. The building now doubles as headquarters for the committee and a storeroom for donations and purchases for community projects run by the committee.

WHAT DOES THE COMMITTEE DO?

According to Committee Secretary El Dowa Suliman, 38, a government employee: "We try to help people solve problems--and we have a lot of them. You can imagine what happens when you put so many people together in such a small area; many of them without jobs and little money to live on. And the fact that they come from different areas of the country with different customs and traditions, and even from different social backgrounds and classes, creates further problems and misunderstandings."

He continued: "Many of them previously lived under tribal leaders and local elders who made decisions for them. Now they have to come together and decide for themselves. And most of them don't know how. It's our job, as some of the few educated people in the community, to try to bring people together and teach them how to solve problems."

WHAT ARE YOUR PROBLEMS?

"Almost everything is a problem," according to "Sheik" Ahmed Omer Mohamed, founder of one of the local schools, where he teaches. "A large number of people are unemployed...many are unemployable. Over 80 percent of adults are illiterate...many of the remainder are functionally literate at best. Many young people lack education and training and have no skills to market and little understanding of the world they have been born into. They have little



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interest in education and don't understand its importance for the future."

He continued: "We have no water system and wells and pumps often run dry. There are few latrines and no public sanitation facilities. You can imagine how this affects the health status of people who have also little access to health care. The NEF-sponsored Health Clinic in Dar Es Salaam, which began its operations only two years ago, is a blessing for us. Before we had no health care, and still many can't afford it. We committee members live the same lives as others in the community. What we have is our education.

"These are some of the problems we face," he summed up, concluding, "and we have no budget other than what organizations like NEF and HCI (Human Concern International) can provide us with and the little funds we can raise within the community."

WHY WOULD ANYONE WANT TO BE ELECTED TO THIS COMMITTEE?

"It's our responsibility," answered John Goodfuel, Committee Deputy Chairman and a Christian from the south. "We have the education and we have a responsibility. Like my colleague, Mohamed El Tayeb, founder of the Tagwa School and another committee member, has already expressed, someone has to lead and we think we can. We also work well as a team and for the community--not for ourselves," he emphasized, prompting Chairman Mohamed Osman to add, "People see that we are interested, that's why they elected us. Now let's see if we can meet their expectations."

"But you all have jobs," I wondered aloud, "How can you find time for all of this volunteer work?" "It's not easy," admitted Mohamed El Tayeb, founder of the Tagwa School. "I drive a taxi in addition to being principal at the school; Sheik Ahmed has his religious duties; Mohamed Osman has his business; El Dawa works for the government. We all have jobs, but we have to find time. It's a matter of planning," he continued, "dividing our time among our private work, our involvement in social services and education, family and kids, and religious obligations. Planning is the key," Sheik Ahmed agreed as did the others.

YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGE TO DATE?

"Water!" they all replied in unison. "We have to find a solution to this increasing shortage," El Dawa elaborated, "affecting our lives and our livelihoods daily and in almost every imaginable way. We are now working on establishing a water distribution system that will connect water into a majority of houses in the community. The committee has taken out a loan to make this happen. We can only hope that people can pay the cost of water--an increase from \$1 per month for water delivered by donkey cart to \$5 per month for the new system."

"And then," added Mohamed Osman, "we have to make sure that the existing wells and water pumps continue to work and provide water for the system. If not, no one will pay and who will repay the loan?"

El Tayeb joined in, "We learned a lot over the last two years from working with NEF and HCI on water issues in our community. We have three water committees located in the three areas into which the community is divided. All of us took the training provided by NEF/HCI and, although we made a lot of mistakes, we learned many lessons. Two of these committees are now working well and have on-going activities for collecting fees and maintaining water stations. We need to work on the third. We also need to replace one well and pump to assure a continuing supply. We have a plan for this and will

be discussing it with NEF over the next few weeks."

AND YOUR FUTURE?

"We need more involvement from women in the community. Their participation is critical," stated El Tayeb. "Also we need to focus on increasing incomes for people, providing vocational skills and employment. We have over 50 university graduates in Dar Es Salaam who have no jobs. How can we say that education is important when graduates can't find work?"

"We also want to expand the credit program established earlier by NEF," El Dawa added, speaking in his capacity as credit committee chairman. "We had some problems the first time. Despite the fact that we had some great successes, we also had some failures. A few people did not repay their loans. We are now working on that and hope to have all our loans repaid in full within the next six weeks. We then hope to be able to renew the program with NEF and to expand it. This is the type of assistance we need to be able to help ourselves," he summed up.

AND WHAT ABOUT NEF?

That's a question I can answer. NEF and its partners and the people of Dar Es Salaam came together almost by accident...as if our paths simply crossed as a matter of fate. We responded to their situation and they to our assistance. Everyone is learning. It is a perfect scenario for us where each round of help seems to encourage further action and involvement on the part of local residents and community leaders. Mistakes have been made on both sides, but everyone is learning.

And we are moving now from individual small projects to a more integrated approach, planned and implemented in concert with local people. It is exciting and I hope we can continue to provide the support these people need to put their lives back together. It is not relief; it is helping a community build itself. We can only thank those individual sponsors who have made it possible for us to do what we do. And we have to thank as well those volunteers--committee members, teachers, health workers--who are doing their part to help themselves and those around them."

"The future looks much brighter to me and I think that just maybe I can make it on my own," commented 16-year-old Mohamed, a case in point. He added tellingly, "At least I can try."