

Health

There are severe health problems in Sudan. Illnesses such as measles, whooping cough and TB combined with malnutrition mean that even in normal years many children die in infancy. Adults also suffer: malaria, diarrhoea and chest infections are common complaints. The stresses of recent years when food and money have been short, and traditional lifestyles disrupted, have worsened the situation. Yet the formal health system is desperately underfunded and understaffed, lacking sufficient training facilities, adequate buildings, regular drug supplies or suitable equipment.

Many of the health problems could be easily prevented or cheaply and simply treated: for example, measles, whooping cough and TB are among the five key childhood diseases preventable by immunisation; malaria and diarrhoea are effectively treated at village level in many parts of Africa now. However, only in recent years has there been a move away from attempts to create a Western-style system based around hospitals and doctors. The concept of low-level, cheap and locally accessible 'primary health care' has been officially endorsed, but it is only slowly being effectively implemented.

A great many of Sudan's doctors have left to work abroad because salaries at home are so poor (a mid-level Government doctor may earn the equivalent of £60 per month). Those who remain are concentrated in the large towns and Khartoum, often with a private practice to make ends meet. Most regard the required post-qualifying work in rural areas as distinctly uninviting.

Rural hospitals usually lack most of the staff, equipment or drugs to justify their title or intended role. Understandably the morale of even the most dedicated staff suffers as a result. However, for many rural people, faced with long distances and lack of transport, such hospitals are effectively beyond their reach. Even in some urban areas, where large numbers of people who have settled in recent years now live in poor conditions, access to health care is limited.

The primary health care system is supposed to put a locally-recruited person back into the community with a range of simple skills in preventive and curative medicine to serve perhaps 5,000 people living within walking distance. However the high levels of ill-health and strong public demand have meant that most primary health workers spend far more time on curative work than on preventive measures — such as helping people improve sanitation — despite considerable efforts by some officials, doctors and health workers, with the support of several aid agencies.

Selection and support of primary health workers has had many problems, not least the lack of fuel or vehicles to ensure regular supervision and drug supplies. A shortage of drugs not only affects the health workers' curative role, it also crucially undermines their influence in wider community action to improve health.

The health system is not sufficiently coordinated and lacks the resources to act as an effective famine forecasting or malnutrition monitoring force, but work to improve this kind of role — and the finances to make it possible — would help it perform all its other tasks. Aid agencies and the Sudanese Government are now working on ways of providing effective support to the health services. Given Sudan's economic problems, it seems likely that extensive help from abroad will be necessary for some time to bring about an improvement in the health situation.

Local Government:

Responsibility without power

LOCAL GOVERNMENT has not been allowed to become an effective agent for change in rural areas or a powerful voice for the poor.

Instead it has often been used merely to pass on the policy of the centre without the resources even to perform the imposed tasks well.

The colonial government 'froze' the shifting leadership and tribal structure at the time of take-over, giving political power under what was called the Native Administration only to the leaders it chose to recognise, who then depended less on their people for authority.

While the Native Administration was not as destructive of indigenous cultures as many colonial systems, it was not designed to develop rural areas, but merely to control them using minimum force and a network of expatriate District Commissioners.

With independence approaching in the early 1950s the colonial government set up English-style rural councils across Sudan, which were intended to have a wide range of responsibilities independent of the central government and to derive their authority from regular local elections.

Unfortunately the central government and local officials of Khartoum ministries were never willing to give up power, and the rural councils, left without any real role, fell prey to corruption and the divisiveness of tribalism and national politics.

Nimeiri's regime passed the 1971 Local Government Act which abolished the Native Administration, downgraded tribal leadership and may have made it more difficult to resolve the tension between tribal groups that has risen as drought intensified.

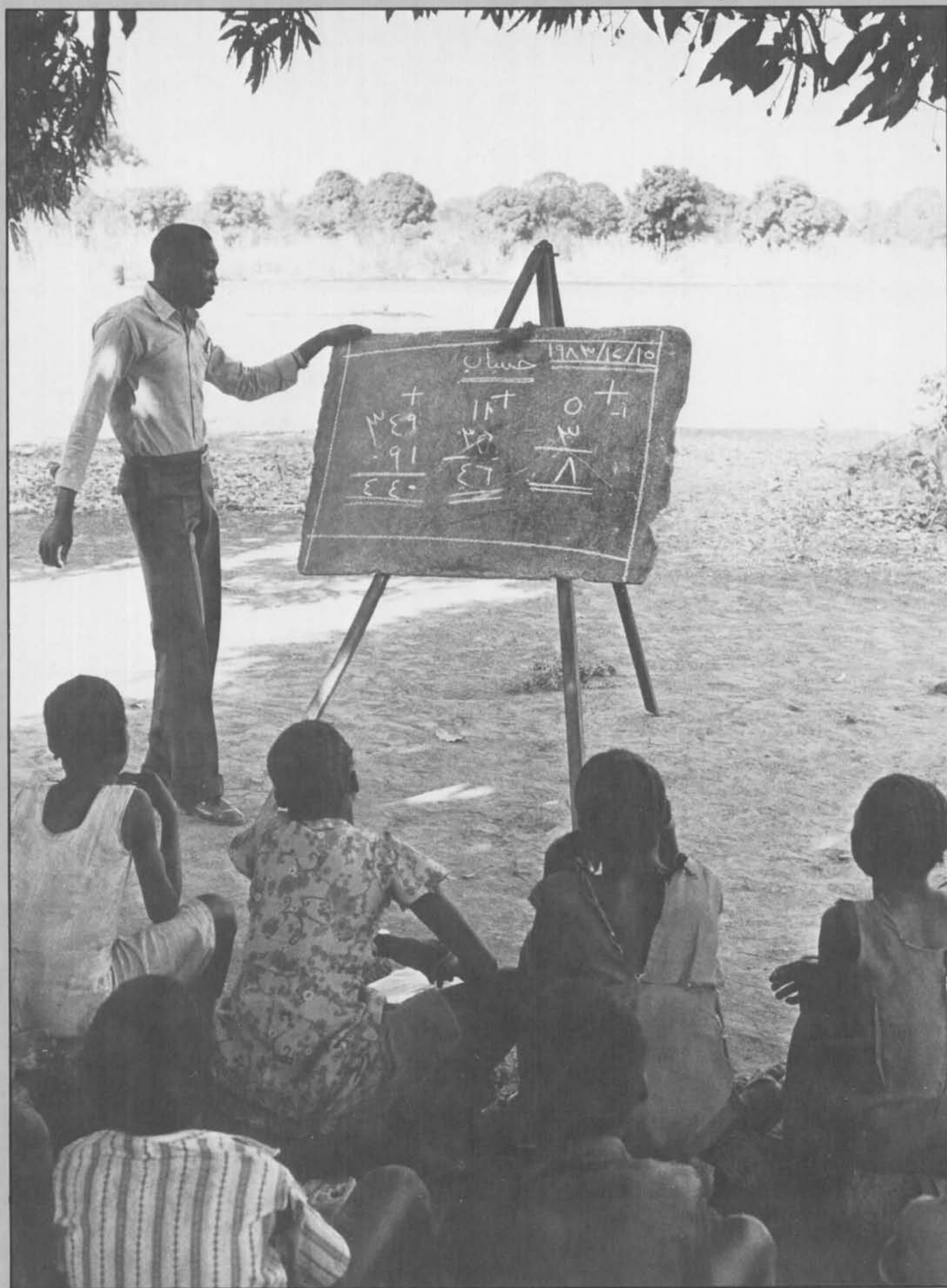
The Act reduced the powers of the rural councils and created new tiers of local government while increasing the powers of centrally-appointed provincial commissioners and local officials of central government. The councils themselves were intended to work in a spirit of self-reliance, depending on self-help projects and voluntary contributions, which meant in effect that they had very little money to spend.

The central government's influence and top-down control was further entrenched by the role of the Sudanese Socialist Union, the single legal party, whose sections — 'women', 'youth' and so on — coincided with the reserved places for those groups on councils. The indirect elections from one tier to the next, so the members of the People's Village Councils are the electoral college for their rural council, also made local government less responsive.

The most basic unit — People's Village Council — does not even have any budgetary powers, so the one directly elected body is forced to depend on the favours of senior officials. In all, local government under Nimeiri during the 1970s was impotent, and certainly failed to help Sudan tackle the linked crisis of poverty and environmental decline.

Decentralisation, Nimeiri's last major political restructuring in the early 1980s, was the Local Government Act writ large, with even larger areas of responsibility passed down, while most of the money and the taxation powers stayed in the centre, which means that nothing changed.

... but surely the Government in Khartoum must listen to the poor and help?



Central Government:

Ignoring the grass-roots

The Brain Drain

Sudan's towns and cities are expanding far faster than the population as a whole, as people migrate in the hope of finding work and benefiting from the services — electricity, piped water — and commodities, like imported fuel and subsidised foods, that only urban areas usually enjoy.

Similar pressures are at work in education, where a degree may be the passport away from hot, hard work in the fields to clean hands in an office in town. The education system is not one designed for a rural country where most people work on the land, and provides few skills that might prove useful in the wider context of development. The system's supposed 'failures' stay as farmers, and the orientation of the 'successful' is towards more academic study, urban areas and jobs abroad, which has an effect on all aspects of Sudanese society.

While hope for an escape from the heavy work of the fields is hardly surprising, the skills, wealth and political muscle that the educated acquire after leaving almost never return to the rural areas that need them most, except as investment in agriculture for a cash return, which may do more harm than good.

Duplicating the flight from the countryside, many of the educated and skilled go abroad, particularly to the Gulf. While hundreds of thousands of Sudanese have individually done well out of the oil boom that helped beggar their country, Sudan has lost their skills, which would have been essential to the plans for modernising the economy during the 1970s, and much of the foreign currency they earned has never come back to Khartoum.

IN MODERN TIMES THE SUDANESE PEOPLE have had very little control over their own destiny, and certainly those who are poor and economically vulnerable have been denied a real voice. The last 100 years in Sudan have seen only seven years of extremely patchy democracy, and even these were times of fighting between north and south, and of bitter wrangling in the north between the fragmented political parties.

If Sudan appears unprepared for democracy, many inside and outside the country would put much of the blame on the colonial government, which divided the borderless territory into two, closing off the south and encouraging Christianity there as it dithered about separating it from the mainly Muslim north and incorporating it into African nations to the south.

The closure of the south, with very little spending or trade allowed, left an underdevelopment that has continued to this day. This fuelled a second guerrilla war which has prevented the use of southern resources such as oil and water, while leading the Government into higher military spending and giving the army more authority within society. During the 1960s' democracy, military spending took 23-29% of the total government budget. Unsubstantiated reports suggest that recent fighting has cost a million Sudanese pounds a day — or about \$100 million a year.

While the multi-party democracy of the 1960s brought little progress, the peculiar nature of the Nimeiri regime guaranteed that Sudan would continue to ignore its traditional agricultural roots while attempting a modernisation programme of benefit to the elite that the President needed to keep himself in power.

Nimeiri's personal insecurity and violent political swings were reflected in the increasingly erratic state he created, first 'socialist' with nationalisations and State takeover of all land, then turning right, after a left-led coup attempt, towards a more pro-Western foreign policy, though the State intervention and the big public corporations were only very slowly given up.

That common African resort against tribalism, the single party State, was tried but instead of drawing the opposition into government and allowing a safe forum for dissent, while encouraging responsiveness to the grassroots, the Sudanese Socialist Union turned into a centrally directed mechanism for further supervision and control.

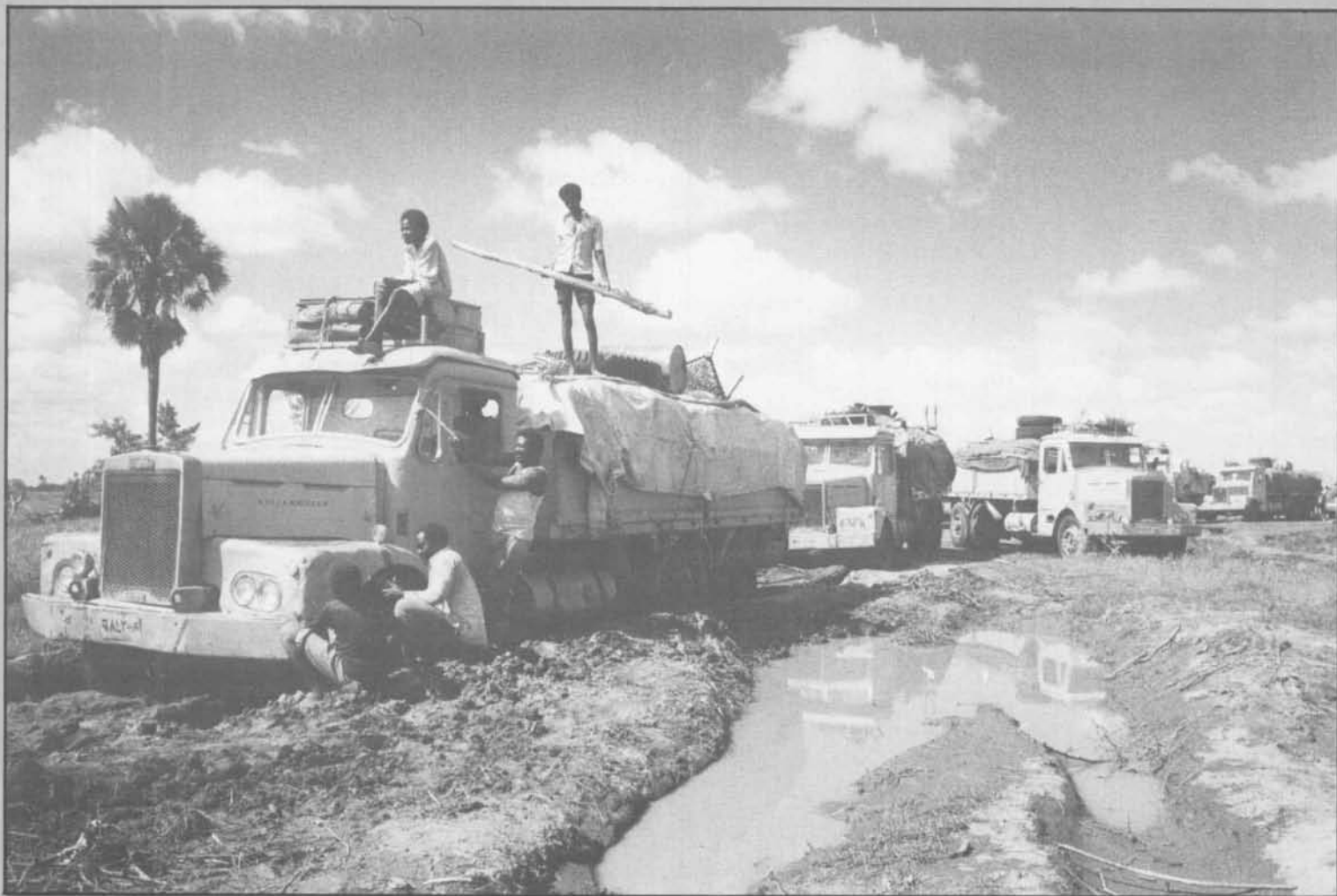
While Nimeiri was neither as despotic nor corrupt as many other Third World rulers, and it was his regime that gave women the vote, his energy increasingly went into his regime's survival, not his country's development. After the April 1985 change of government, it was reported that in the final years large quantities of the country's imported fuel, its single most important resource, had been controlled by his secret service.

It was Nimeiri himself who ruined his regime's greatest achievement — ending the civil war in 1972 — by failing to fulfil the promises of development and by his 'divide and rule' manoeuvrings in the face of southern resistance to what they saw as northern looting of their resources.

Some people did well out of the Nimeiri years, but most, particularly the traditional farmers and nomads, felt the tightening effects of mismanagement and missed opportunities, when the catchwords of "unity" and "progress" lost meaning as war resumed and the economy collapsed.

When the famine began to bite, Nimeiri refused to admit the crisis, which crucially delayed the request for international aid and the Government's assistance to drought victims.

... but what about the \$9bn debts — where did that money go?



Lorries loaded with grain for south Darfur – stuck in the mud

Economy:

Deeper in debt

Roads and Rail

Sudan is 10 times the size of Britain, yet has only a few thousand kilometres of tarmac roads. Those roads are not spread evenly across the country, but were built with outside help and encouragement between the main cash crop growing areas, the bigger Nile towns and the main port.

In the rural areas the roads are dirt tracks, very few of which are passable all year round. Navigation consists of following the rutted tracks of those who have gone before. Great quantities of agricultural produce, including much for export, have to travel hundreds or thousands of kilometres across roads most British drivers would regard as impassable.

The spending on roads in recent years has been at the expense of Sudan's elderly rail network, which achieved prominence in 1985 by failing to carry enough famine relief food out to Darfur.

Badly maintained, slow and vulnerable to floods and sandstorms, the railways have received far less investment than was needed to keep up with demand.

Motorways and fast trains into the remotest regions of Sudan would probably just mean an expansion of cash cropping by outside investors, but improvements in rural roads, if linked with help for local industries and markets, could expand the rural economy of the regions, which is far more likely to bring benefits for poor farmers.

INTERNAL POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RECESSION combined during the Nimeiri years to turn an economy that was underdeveloped and totally dependent on agriculture into an almost complete disaster.

His supposedly socialist regime began by nationalising many businesses, foreign and domestic, and setting up public corporations, which have all proved to be beyond the administrative capacity of the civil service. The corporations lost large sums of money while failing to achieve their objectives.

Nimeiri began a shift right in the 1970s, towards a capitalist economy, and in a mood of optimism, fuelled in part by the peace deal ending the southern war, vast investment schemes were started, most of them too large and complicated to be managed by Sudan within the planned time-scales.

The oil price rises in 1973 and 1974 were disasters for all the Third World, Sudan included, except that the overflowing Gulf treasuries soon inspired the most ambitious plan of all — that Western expertise, Arab money and Sudanese land could together produce the “breadbasket of the Middle East”. It never got off the ground, but the mechanised rain-fed farms have proved that low cost, high productivity agriculture can only be achieved over the short term, and then only by destroying the soil.

Sudan was just as incapable as any other country of resisting the lure of cheap loans from petrodollars, recycled or direct. Debts mounted, corruption grew, the luxury imports increased and inflation took off. The booming Gulf economies offered large salaries to lure away the educated and skilled Sudanese, whose presence would have been crucial to a modernising economy.

While Government spending rose, some sections of the economy, notably the elderly railways, remained underfunded, while investment on roads increased. And despite all the spending on new agricultural schemes, most took longer than planned to get underway, cost far more than estimated and produced far less than predicted.

There was a crunch in 1978, with some oil supplies cut off because of unpaid bills, and the International Monetary Fund moved in to force through currency devaluation and cuts in fuel and food subsidies. Intended cuts in civil service costs — through sacking — proved far more difficult.

At the end of the 1970s when the West's recession was already pushing up interest charges, a World Bank study predicted a gloomy 1980s for Sudan, with imports outstripping exports, even with an enforced priority on cash crops, and more outside aid needed just to keep the country afloat.

Rehabilitation of agricultural schemes became the strategy, but even as some of these began to show results, the political situation was declining — there were plenty of coup plots — while the rush to exploit the oil found in the south helped set off another war.

In late 1985, the post-Nimeiri finance minister summed up Sudan's position as extremely troubled. It had a falling gross domestic product, debt repayment obligations far exceeding foreign exchange from exports, a declining Sudanese pound, 100% inflation, falling or stagnating agricultural production since the mid-1970s and total debts of \$9 billion.

Where did the money go? Not to the poor, or to rural development. The largest share remained in Khartoum and the Central Region, and in the pockets of the elite — businessmen, army officers and politicians — with origins in Northern Province, and Sudan's merchant class.

... but didn't all the international aid help the poor?



The Jonglei machine — tribute to almost every mistake that can be made in development

Aid:

Big is still beautiful

A Cautionary Tale II: The Jonglei Canal

Somewhere in southern Sudan in the largest swamp in the world lies what is believed to be the largest mobile machine in the world. It is also a tribute to almost every mistake that can be made in development.

It is a specially-made excavator, used for digging the Jonglei canal, a still uncompleted project first thought of when Sudan was run by the British.

The 160-mile canal is intended to cut across a curve in the Nile where the river spreads into a swamp the size of England. Billions of gallons evaporate from the slow moving swamp. A canal would drain part of the swamp, and water that would have evaporated could be used downstream in Sudan and Egypt. Under the Nile Waters Agreement, both have a set maximum of water they can use — and both are close to their limits; Egypt in particular will need more water soon for its agriculture.

So, a good idea — wasted water saved to grow food for people affected by famine? Not quite.

The machine, its technicians, fuel and spares were very expensive in foreign currency Sudan does not have; it fell way behind schedule because the country could not always afford to pay its share of the contract to the overseas firm running the work. The scheme provoked enormous resentment in the south, where it was feared the swamp draining would have an adverse environmental impact and attract foreign farmers.

Its construction disturbed tribal relationships over a wide area and completion would have completely changed the lives of those in its path. The route and construction plans had to be changed several times to lessen the impact on people and wildlife.

At least in Sudan most of the extra water would not necessarily be used to grow food, but to expand irrigation schemes for export crops. But even before money could be made to pay the canal's costs, further imports — equipment, pesticides, fertilizers — would be needed to get the irrigation schemes working. And to grow cotton and other export crops would need more tenant farmers and migrant labour from food-growing areas.

The Jonglei canal would have been a short-cut with long consequences — if it had ever been finished. The Sudan People's Liberation Army, realising its symbolic value, as well as its political and economic importance, kidnapped the foreign workers and closed it down.

DESPITE RECENT REVERSALS, the World Bank, international funds, most Western governments and many Third World countries appear to continue to believe in the theory of 'trickle down' development — that giving economic opportunities to the rich will eventually help the poor. Sudan is graphic proof that it does not work.

Enormous quantities of aid money have gone into trying to build the Sudanese economy, which has had the effect of reinforcing the geographical bias in services and infrastructure, widening the development gaps between regions, rather than trying to make sure in the long term everyone has enough to eat.

Perhaps taking their cue from Gezira project, 'big is beautiful' seems to have been the message from the World Bank and others, which have concentrated on dams, roads and electricity supplies to urban areas.

The World Bank's first involvement in Sudan set the tone: a bumper cotton crop from irrigated schemes in the late 1950s met a collapsing world price, preventing a planned expansion of irrigation through lack of funds. The World Bank stepped in, not to help diversify agriculture to reduce vulnerability to erratic markets, but to pay for the increase in cotton-growing irrigation. Since then, big donors have been enthusiastic backers of irrigated schemes and mechanised farming while all but ignoring the people who were soon to become famine victims.

While much Arab 'aid' has actually been investment in the over-ambitious 'breadbasket' plans for Sudan, other loans and grants, such as almost all British aid, have been 'tied', so the money comes back into the donor countries in contracts for staff, materials and expertise. Thus Britain's £154.1 million 'aid to Sudan' in the years 1980 to 1984 was mainly spent on equipment from British firms and salaries of British staff. While £5 million went to agricultural work in the Southern Region, nearly £6 million was spent on irrigation or cotton schemes, and in one of Britain's largest overseas aid projects, £74 million is being spent improving the electricity supply for Khartoum. Famine relief and refugee aid totalled £5.5 million in 1984/85, all of it from the existing aid budget.

Britain has limited its military help to a training force, but the Americans have included large arms shipments as part of their support for an increasingly Western-oriented regime, a geographical 'domino' in American calculations for the Middle East, which made Nimeiri's Sudan the largest recipient of US aid in Africa after Egypt.

So is there any solution for Sudan?



Conclusion:

A future after famine

SUDAN HAS BEEN SUFFERING the worst period of hunger and human dislocation in its modern history, and its disaster is only part of the wider crisis in Africa and throughout the Third World.

Encouraged by Western governments, banks, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, this impoverished agricultural country has 'gone for growth' by turning its back on traditional farmers to favour large-scale projects, a policy which has stifled democracy, rural rights and community participation to reward the wealthy and comfort the urban populations.

The Nimeiri regime in particular went for the quick fix, big schemes, easy loans and the fast buck. Money has been wasted on bureaucracies that never worked, factories that never opened and wars that seem never to end. The results have been debt, conflict and poverty, bringing hunger for millions.

A great deal can be done to help improve the situation for Sudan's hungry. Sudan clearly cannot pay its \$9billion debts and the interest is dragging the country down. Last year's interest bill would have cost \$800million — at least \$50million more than the entire year's estimated income of foreign exchange from exports. Western and Arab governments and banks and the multilateral institutions must therefore ease the burden of those debts by at least allowing Sudan to make its repayments a small fixed percentage of its income from exports.

Western governments particularly can help Sudan to cope with market fluctuations by stabilising and improving the prices they pay for its commodities, such as cotton or groundnuts, while preventing the dumping of surpluses, such as sugar, onto world markets. Oil-producing countries could help Sudan and the world's other poorest countries by guaranteeing supplies of petrol and oil products at cheaper prices.

Among factors preventing progress that only the Sudanese can solve are the enormously wasteful war, the absence of democracy and the lack of a national strategy to create a more equitable society.

Oxfam's experience suggests that donors can help Sudan and other developing countries by concentrating their resources on increasing the income of the small farmer through improved agricultural advice, access to credit and better local marketing. Among Oxfam's initiatives in Sudan are helping peasant farmers with small-scale irrigation and communal schemes of tree-planting for much needed fuel and fodder.

Aid agencies in Sudan will have to gain a greater understanding of traditional ways of life and develop an awareness of the need to conserve the environment, because the priorities for Sudan — and for any future loans or aid — must be the rural areas, the poorest people and sustainable food production, which should include soil protection, water conservation and tree-planting.

Only by going back to the land and giving a real say to rural people will Sudan be able to prevent more famines.