

Sudan, Sudan, a Trainer's Journey

by Michael Donnelly

In February 2009 I was sitting beside Sandra Janoff in Derry, Northern Ireland in near-to-zero temperature. We were about to facilitate a Future Search on developing a shared vision of success for the city and region. Derry had suffered the worst of 30 years of civil conflict with polarisation and economic devastation. People were tired, burnt out, and frustrated and anyone could tell you the name of a pet initiative that had started with fanfare but gone nowhere – at that moment there were 73 separate strategies for the city from different departments, agencies, and funders. For the purposes of this story, Derry is a long way from Khartoum but still intimately connected by the invisible tentacles of our favourite large group, whole system, transformational, elephant in the room, organisational development methodology.

You will be delighted to hear that the [Derry Future Search](#) was a big success and the inspiration being unlocked in the City is accelerating its development in the right direction, past what anyone had believed possible even a few years ago.

In the midst of the preparation for that city-wide Future Search event Sandra was rushing around glad handing all the important officials who needed reminding they were very important to the process and that they really must make the best effort to be there on the day. It was all a bit hectic and between two of these meetings Sandra sat down to take a breather and drink a cup of coffee, when I say take a breather, I mean so that we could listen and marvel at the buzzing noise coming from her treasured Blackberry.

Once more it buzzed and on this occasion Sandra's once again apologetic smile changed bit by bit into bemusement, then contemplation, then confusion, then finally settled into a self satisfied grin, one of those knowing faces she can pull, you know the one. Anyway the message she received there in freezing Derry was from Abdel Rahman El Mahdi, in Khartoum, with confirmation that he wanted to arrange a Future Search training in Sudan, as soon as possible. They had obviously talked about it before as an idea but knowing that Sandra couldn't attend because of ongoing difficulties in the national relationship between the US and Sudan, how was the Future Search Network going to make it happen?

Mostly because I was sat there and offered straight away to help her out, and because we had been working together for a few years we agreed that I would take on the role. From the start it was apparent it was going to be a bit more complicated than organising your regular Future Search training workshop at Villanova for sure but with extra motivation and adventure the Future Search training was made to happen, right there in sunny Khartoum.

It was the brilliant vision of Abdel Rahman through his NGO ([Sudia](#)) that brought the process to reality. He had seen how the possibilities that sharing the global lessons and learning's from communities all around the world could help the Sudanese in their development and in particular those parts of Sudan that really need a different way to have their conversations. Where I come from we had heard about Sudan for all the wrong reasons and it resonates because Northern Ireland has suffered the same fate for years and years. We know too well the reality on the ground, of how there are thousands of people and communities trying to do the right thing and to make a contribution to society, but are stuck with operating in the local conditions that discourage rather than encourage success and getting tarred with the same brush along with worst extremists on every side. It is normality and the celebration of normality that are the victims of a long term struggle. Extremism is rewarded with celebrity, notoriety, and media attention – that becomes the public face to the world and an aspiration within.

In setting out for Sudan I knew that I needed to go there with few expectations and to be prepared to be challenged and counter-challenged by the experiences, the sounds, the smells, the people, the religion, the politics – it was a nice aspiration and on arriving - overwhelming.

I arrived in Khartoum from sub-zero temperatures in the depths of Europe's coldest winter in decades to wall-to-wall sunshine: the big yellow disc in the deep blue sky, hot and dry. We don't see that much in Ireland, jeepers we even call our summers liquid sunshine. It was 95 degrees Fahrenheit – in the shade – and this was in the depths of their winter.

There are some places you go where your senses are assaulted by newness. I had never been to an Islamic or Arabic country before. The sun sets quickly in Khartoum to the soundtrack of minarets and chattering insects, noisy tuk-tuk motor bike rickshaw taxis, roadside tea sellers, hawkers, dusty buildings, garish too-bright neon signs on food stalls, stereos blasting Arabic pop music from cars and vans with UN on the side, army pickup trucks mounted with Rambo's machine guns, men dressed in white Jalibiyas everywhere – like a national uniform, women in colourful Toabs and wearing the hijab, the sounds of the river – fishermen in dugouts, children playing soccer on the shores of the river, farmers shouting orders in Arabic, the ever present tik tik tik tik tik of the old diesel irrigation pumps drawing water up out of the Nile to irrigate crops in lush riverside pastures. The markets where most trade happens are nothing short of organised chaos. It is stunning to watch the world as you know it in the west be subverted, ripped apart and reassembled in thousands of shacks and halls along narrow dusty streets. The parts are all there but not where you last saw them at home. Stereo hifi's, branded laptops and televisions for sale in a pile 20 feet high at the side of the road, next to a stall making cast iron gates. Clothes being made in the open air by small squads of seamsters with electric and foot powered sewing machines. Heaps of henna, hibiscus, and groundnuts piled high with teas, herbs, and spices. We learned that all production in Sudan is organic. Even the locally produced fruit we recognise only from supermarkets was abundant on the stalls – sweet grapefruit, bananas, oranges, mango, and papaya.

The language was mesmerising. Total immersion in Arabic is a head-melter for an Irish man with a few words of French and Spanish in the multi lingual conversation bank. Yet no matter where I went or who I spoke to, there was friendship in the smile, the handshake, the offers of trips, food, and most of all tea. Tea ladies sat under every tree with a basic kit of a charcoal fire, a kettle, glasses, sugar, and the most exotic brews of hibiscus, chai, Turkish coffee with cardamom and fennel. All day long they ply their trade and in the heat of a Khartoum evening, are very welcome.

I had the good fortune of undertaking the work in Sudan alongside Dumisani Ncala. Dumisani, a South African Zulu who is steeped in the emergence story has seen it all. The wisdom of being a participant in a real revolution is worn lightly but runs deep. Dumisani has deep laugh that like himself is warm and embracing. Encouraging others to share the moment, he has considered thoughts that when vocalised bring forth humms and aha's of agreement, and best of all he has a no rush – get the job done right attitude that takes the bumps and hollows out of your delivery.

During the week we had for preparation in Khartoum we had time to see some of the sights, the tomb of the Mahdi (who united the tribes to defeat the Egyptian – Turkish rulers in 1892 and was responsible for the defeat of General Gordon), the home of his second in command, the Khalifa, the Naga (camel) market where we went looking for camels only to find sides of camel meat and the smell of cooking (it was the market for Camel meat rather than live camels), the surreal beautiful Sufi Whirling Dervish ceremonies at the Tomb of Hamad El Nil, the Blue Nile sailing club where metal boats left by the

British in the 1950's race every week from the bridge where the Blue and White Niles meet and where General Kitchener's metal gunboat sits marooned since 1898.

When the training started at the University of Khartoum we had 66 participants turn up, more than were expected: Sheiks

Figure 1: Academics, Consultants, Peace Leaders, Local Politicians - some of the participants at the Training alongside Dumisani and Michael



from the three provinces of Darfur, peace centre workers from internally displaced camps, Nomads (yes real Nomads), consultants and academics from Khartoum, and managers from the International NGO's and Donor agencies. Participants dressed in a fantastic mix of western and eastern dress. The women were exotic, with exuberant flowing Toabs and hands and feet intricately painted with henna designs.

As you might imagine the greatest practical challenge for everyone was translation – this was the very first time this global process was being delivered in Arabic! So the concepts, the language, the history were crucial to deliver effectively.



Without a formal translator the group looked after their needs and everyone helped with a helpful heart and we were able to explain how Future Search had been built on 80 years of action research in the social sciences, with important lessons for how groups work together, how they can change the nature of debate by approaching complex issues from a certain angle, how they can work together to conceive a different, collective, inspiring future and agree what it is they can work on together to make success a reality. It resonated because the basics are

Figure 2: Familiar Posters? Future Search Posters in Arabic Language

the same no matter where you are in the world. That was obvious to

the room and became even more so to me the trainer as the days passed.

Future Search has been proven to work: hundreds and hundreds of times in conflict zones, in congregations, in local communities as well as in governments, corporations, schools and universities. Telling those stories made it all come to life and bring a sense of opportunity.



We spoke of leadership, the right kind of leadership, the one that asks people to be partners in the future, the ones that hands responsibility to the group to make things happen and the ones that facilitate action rather than smother it and control it.

The conclusions of the training identified dozens of live working opportunities where participants could tackle issues of concern – from education to accessing natural resources, and we spoke of the sheer challenge of bringing all parties to the same

Figure 3: Women and men - equal passion and equal status in Future Search

table to talk together as equals – women and men, poor and wealthy, literate and illiterate, nomads and settled communities, local and international players.



Figure 4: A Multi-Cultural World - Analysing World Trends on the Arabic Mind Map at the Sudan Future Search Training

translated into Arabic and used in the urgent areas ripe for intervention. A local network of practitioners is planned and a series of future searches across the country should be happening in the coming months. Watch out for the growth of Future Search in Sudan and the rest of the Arab world.

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The stories and learnings were not a one way process and Dumisani and I were regaled, humbled, intrigued and amazed by the testimonies, the day to day realities, the subtleness, and the complexities of living and working in Sudan. The country is massive, the real crossroads of the continent between the Arab north and the black, Christian south. It has land borders with nine countries and has over three hundred separate living tribes and a hundred languages. It is a mix of new and ancient having only achieved independence from the British in 1956, it has countless temples and pyramids from the age of the Pharaohs. It stretches from the deserts in the north and west to the Red Sea in the East and to subtropical rain forests in the South, and through the middle runs the Nile.

I've been telling Sudan's story to hundreds of people since the event and in every conversation I hear goodwill and hope for a better future. The Future Search community are delighted and proud to have Sudan as part of their growing community and are waiting to collaborate, support, share information and experiences to make success even more likely.

Sudia is currently entering into a partnership with Future Search Network, which in the coming months and years should see a flourishing of the network with the materials