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**إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين**

**Panel: Questioning an Emerging Multi-Polar World?  
The Role of African Networks and Connections  
in Shaping the New Global Order**

**DRAFT VERSION  
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**War, business and development models: methodological and  
ethical aspects of doing research on ICT and society in Sudan**

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## **Abstract**

In 2007 we carried out a study into mobile telephony in Sudan in its interaction with socio-economic relations and the wider context of communication technologies. The research was funded by the Kuwait-based telecommunication company Zain that is also active on the Sudanese market. These kind of companies are representatives par excellence of the new multi-polar world in which western multinationals no longer dominate the scene.

In this contribution we propose to discuss several methodological and ethical problems that are related to this type of research with large business actors in the current historic moment. A first issue concerns the methodological aspects of qualitative research in an extremely volatile political context; in Sudan communication technologies have become a weapon in the tensions and contradictions that are informing national and everyday politics. The ad-hoc policies, strategies and decisions of the telecommunication companies themselves in this controversial political context became part of the research theme.

The second issue relates to the unequivocally positive image that is cherished in such companies when evaluating the relations between communication technologies and development. It is often assumed without any further analysis that new ICT, such as the mobile phone and internet, will automatically contribute to the development of marginal regions. How can researchers meaningfully react to these assumptions?

This automatically leads to a third issue: if research is funded by such a company, what new questions in relation to ethics and research emerge?

Finally, we wish to relate this latter issue to doing research in a country in war. What are the ethical implications of doing research in a wartorn region?

The above questions and issues are mainly discussed on the basis of a case study in Juba in Southern Sudan and a visit to Darfur that was organized by the telecommunication company Zain.

## **Introduction**

In the course of 2006 we (ie: Mirjam de Bruijn, Francis Nyamnjoh and Inge Brinkman) developed plans to conduct research on mobile telephony in its interaction with mobility, marginality and social relations in various parts of Africa. Research plans and results oftentimes remain within the realm of academia, but we felt it important to exchange with representatives of other sectors as well: business, development, policy making, the media, etc. Within this framework we contacted a Dutch-based company called Celtel that at the time operated mobile telephony in eighteen African countries, at a very early stage of the research plans. The managers of Celtel showed keen interest in the project and in the end they even proposed to sponsor part of the study. In the meantime, however, Celtel had become part of a Kuwait-based group that changed its name from MTC to Zain in 2007. As this group also took over a Sudanese company (at the time called Mobitel, later also called Zain), they were eager to acquire more information about the Sudanese market and the communication sector in the country. They therefore proposed to carry out a pilot study of half a year in the Sudanese context, with the prospect of a longer financial engagement (3-4 years) in case of success. The costs of this study were covered by the company, but the researchers were independent scholars attached to the African Studies Centre in Leiden and in the contract it was stipulated that academic freedom would be respected.

So it was that in July 2007 we set out to conduct research on mobile telephony in Sudan. The aim was mainly to conduct qualitative research and interview people from various networks, so as to come to an understanding of the relations between social hierarchies and mobile telephony within the wider context of Sudan's history of communication technologies. The research was conducted in the capital Khartoum, in a small town with a history in the transport sector in the North and the southern town of Juba, that recently emerged from a long civil war but was still in an extremely volatile situation. The research was partly carried out by two commissioned researchers, Peter Taban Wani (Juba University in Khartoum) and Hisham Bilal (Khartoum University) and through three visits to Sudan each lasting several weeks. It is on the basis of the case study on mobile telephony in Juba that we would like to discuss methodological and ethical problems related to our research in Sudan. Before explaining more about the Juba case-study, we first want to situate the recent development in Sudan telecommunications sector in more detail.

*Sudan: telecommunications operating in a vast land*

Sudan is the largest country in Africa. This fact is not mere background information; it has serious implications for the history of communication, mobility and transport in this area. The presence of the Nile and the link to the Red Sea also historically shaped connections in the country. Like most countries in Africa, the international borders of Sudan were formed in the context of foreign domination. When the country became independent in 1956, war broke out between the North and the South, A peace agreement was signed in 1972, but some ten years later war started anew and fighting lasted until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005. In the meantime conflict also broke out in Western Sudan, in the Darfur region, causing international critique on the regime concerning human rights and even genocide. Sudan's recent political history has also been influenced by the Cold War and also by the attacks on 9/11 in 2001, after which the United States accused the government of Umar al-Bashir of sponsoring, harbouring and supporting Islamic terrorists. As a 'rogue state' the US posed an embargo on various Sudanese companies

Matters went fast after 2007, when we visited Sudan. In January 2011 a referendum was organised and in July South Sudan became an independent country. The conflict in Darfur has sharply diminished since 2010, although by 2011 war raged in other regions of Sudan, notably South Kordofan.

These developments changed the telecommunications landscape of Sudan considerably. During the prolonged wars in the South especially, the communication and transport system was destroyed and little maintenance could be carried out on the roads, bridges and railways. Many people fled the country or moved to safer places in the North as IDPs. Oftentimes these refugees lost contact with their relatives and friends; the war had serious consequences for social networks. Some people kept contact through letter-writing, although literacy was not general, while oral messaging retained its importance from precolonial times to the present.

Landline telephony was virtually non-existent outside Khartoum and also only limited there, but in the 1990s the number of subscribers quickly rose. At the same time the state postal and telecommunications sector was privatised and Sudatel was established as a private landline company, albeit with the Sudanese state owning the majority of the shares. In line with the privatisation policy, a regulatory body was called into existence: the National Telecommunications Corporation (NTC). In 1997 a group within Sudatel opted to establish a private mobile phone company, that was baptised Mobitel. In 2005 Areeba started as a second

mobile phone operator, a year later Areeba was bought by the South African company MTN. Initially Sudatel possessed shares in Mobitel, but after these were sold, the company started its own mobile telephone provider, called Sudani. With its state ties, Sudani was one of the companies on the US embargo.

With the war, separate operators started activities in the South. Two companies received a licence from NTC in 2005: Network of the World (NOW) and Gemtel. NOW was bought by Vivacell in the course of 2007. It has been relatively small, but with the independence of South Sudan it aims at sharp growth. Gemtel started activities in Southern Sudan in 2003 and during the war it was important in rebel-controlled area. Much controversy rose as Gemtel continued using the Ugandan country code, but by 2008 this changed. In 2010, Gemtel was bought by a Libyan firm.<sup>1</sup>

Many Sudanese people are migrants themselves or have been migrants at some stage of their life. If not, they may have relatives abroad or in other parts of Sudan. Khartoum is an important destination and internationally especially Saudi Arabia has received many Sudanese looking for work opportunities. While migration and mobility have always been factors in Sudanese history, the war added new dimensions to these factors. People were forced to flee to the capital, to Uganda, the US or other countries. It may be clear that in such a context of high and dispersed mobility, communication plays an important role in many people's lives. These three factors together - a complex political environment, a high degree of mobility and the importance attributed to communication - that make Sudan an interesting case to study mobile telephony. In the town of Juba, where the new government of South Sudan has established its capital, these factors have been dominant in history.

#### *The Juba case: politics at the cost of calling*

Juba is a town in Southern Sudan, a region emerging from a long history of war. Before the civil wars (1955-1972 and 1983-2005) Juba formed an important nodal point in the communication lines between North and South Sudan: there was a gravel road, a bridge over the Nile and there was river transport, telegraph lines and mail services. This connection was reinforced by Juba's

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<sup>1</sup> Deepa Babington, 'Rebranding, cheaper offers spur Sudani growth', (Reuters, 5 April 2011). [http://www.sudaneseonline.com/en3/publish/Latest\\_News\\_1/Rebranding\\_cheaper\\_offers\\_spur\\_Sudani\\_growth\\_printer.shtml](http://www.sudaneseonline.com/en3/publish/Latest_News_1/Rebranding_cheaper_offers_spur_Sudani_growth_printer.shtml); Aaron Maasho, 'South Sudan's Vivacell aims to triple subscribers', (Reuters, 7 April 2011). <http://af.reuters.com/article/investingNews/idAFJ0E73603K20110407>.

position as an international trading and transport centre: gravel roads connected it with Kenya, Uganda and Zaire/RDC.

During the war, all this was nearly entirely destroyed. Juba remained in the hands of the central government and was frequently attacked by the opposition army of the SPLA, that exerted more control over the surrounding countryside and bush areas. The roads were mined and no maintenance could be carried out. Food in the town became extremely scarce and hence food prices rose sharply. The port of Juba could only be used by the central government army, as the barges were frequently attacked; so private river transport came to a standstill. Furthermore, Juba's bridge across the Nile was attacked and its state quickly deteriorated, also as a consequence of neglect and overloading with military vehicles. Many civilians felt forced to flee from the town and left for Khartoum, for Uganda, and for other countries. Despite the hardships, some people decided to stay in Juba or in the SPLA controlled zones within Sudan. This resulted in many families becoming separated and people greatly resented the lack of communication during the war as this rendered it impossible to remain in contact with relatives and friends. Transport and communication largely became a prerogative of the military.

In 2005 a peace agreement was signed between the central Sudanese government and the SPLA rebels. This fact has had enormous consequences for the town. Many development agencies started activities in the region, operating with Juba as their base and the Southern government GOSS established its capital in the town. Food became more readily available and hence cheaper: local agriculture started increasing again and importing goods, mainly from Uganda, has become much easier since the peace accords as the roads were opened again. The port, rebuilt by Chinese companies, was reopened in 2007, although of course initially transport was still limited. At the same time repairs started of the Nile bridge to be finished in 2008 by a Kenyan construction company. An ever increasing number of vehicles from development agencies and the Southern government started driving up and down the dirt roads in town. The town itself buzzed with construction works: roads, houses, government buildings, compounds for the development agencies, shops, etc. Markets expanded at a rapid speed and the transport sector started growing fast. Important for our research, many changes could also be observed in the sector of communication technologies, and especially the mobile phone.

The mobile phone first came in Juba before the war ended. It was Mobitel (now Zain) that established itself first and was mainly used by the central government and the army. Any civilians using mobile phones were suspected of being SPLA supporters. Only after the peace

agreement of 2005 the mobile phone became more widespread. This immediately led to problems: the capacity to cater for so many new customers was not available and so the lines congested. When Sudani (also a northern company) and Gemtel (a company that had been used by SPLA and used the Ugandan country-code) started their activities in Juba, at first the situation improved somewhat as customers had a wider range of options. Yet soon after their coming to Juba, the network became worse again and oftentimes it was impossible to call.

Soon after the peace accords, the negotiations between the Government of Southern Sudan, the NTC and the central government stagnated. There existed deep disagreements about the precise conditions of network licensing and gateway usage. Representatives of the Southern government argued that Gemtel (and NOW) should be allowed to operate in the North, just as the Northern operators were entitled to enrol their network in the South. The central government saw it as a major problem, however that Gemtel was using a Ugandan dialling code, an issue also causing major debates in the Ugandan government. While the GOSS wanted its own gateway separate of the North, the national licensing council NTC did not at all agree to this. Accusations of corruption and domination further aggravated the tensions between the various parties.<sup>2</sup> Because of these political controversies, both the Sudani and Mobitel networks only functioned intermittently in Juba and their roll-out plans were stalled by the responsible politicians in the GOSS. The permission granted to Gemtel to use the Sudanese country code has only been realised in 2008 and at the time of research in 2007, the Gemtel network often did not function at all. In this sense, the legacy of the war still influenced the possibilities for communication technologies for a long time.<sup>3</sup>

Because it saw its developments in the south blocked, Zain initiated negotiations with GOSS independently of the central government and the NTC. Zain's CEO, Khaled Muhtadi, in 2008 expressed the following opinion about the relationship:

In the South what we face so far is that the political issues between the governments of the North and the South reflect also in the relationship that they have with and their trust in the northern companies. We have invested heavily in this relationship and now have a healthy

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<sup>2</sup> Interview 7; Interview 15; 'Stalled north-south MOU stalls mobile phone expansion in Sudan', *Gurtong Peace Project*, General News (31 March 2007)

[http://www.gurtong.org/ResourceCenter/weeklyupdates/wu\\_contents.asp?wkupdt\\_id=704&vswuOrder=Sorter\\_WuType&vswuDir=ASC&vswuPage=73](http://www.gurtong.org/ResourceCenter/weeklyupdates/wu_contents.asp?wkupdt_id=704&vswuOrder=Sorter_WuType&vswuDir=ASC&vswuPage=73)

<sup>3</sup> 'Why do South Sudan have the worst telecommunications in the world?' *Sudan Mirror* (30 August 2007): <http://www.sudanmirror.com/newsdetail.php?catid=5&subcat=439>.

relationship. We intend to roll out our network in several of these states. The governments of these states are welcoming us as they have been waiting for telecom for a long time.<sup>4</sup>

As explained, the referendum of January 2011 indicated wide-spread support for secession (98%) and in July this year, South Sudan became an independent country. The relations between the North and the South and between various parties in the South are still extremely sensitive, it is hard to foretell what directions these developments will take and what the implications will be. In any case, Zain, MTN and Sudani are taking prudent steps into a stronger presence in the South. For these companies South Sudan forms a large untapped market, but many disadvantages lead to a cautious attitude. There will be high costs of investment for lack of any infrastructure, the political situation is highly unstable and the chance of conflict very real, it is unclear whether or not the Northern companies will require a separate licensing agreement from the South and widespread poverty does not render the market very lucrative.

#### *Qualitative research: structure and agency*

For this research project we had envisaged qualitative research on a micro-level scale. It was our aim to conduct interviews with common end-users, whose perspectives and evaluations of the mobile phone in Sudan would be framed in their life histories of mobility, social networks and communication.

As the project had been funded by Zain, we received our visas through invitation letters from this company, a company car came to fetch us from the airport, our first contact was with representatives of Mobitel/Zain and they arranged the visitor's registration and a permit for audiovisual material (during one visit a Dutch filmmaker accompanied the researcher). These contacts enabled us to interview several people in the company and to get a glimpse of the company culture. One of the researchers was even invited to accompany a delegation to El Fasher in Darfur. After much deliberation, it was decided to accept the invitation. During the visit the possibilities and risks of expanding the company's network in Darfur were discussed with the political leaders of the region. The most intriguing aspect about the event was the experience of a life 'in the bubble', that was next to completely sealed off from daily life of other people in Darfur. Police escorts with loud sirens whizzed off the delegation to visit locations like

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<sup>4</sup> Interview Khaled Muhtadi (Mirjam).



the television station, a hospital partly built with company money, a local museum, etc. High politicians and officials came to discuss the roll-out with the company delegates. There were exchanges of presents of honey, handicraft and cheese. Speeches were delivered about the success and the important role of Zain for economic development. During this whole time, the connections within the bubble remained intact: there were constant exchanges with Khartoum, Kuwait, and other locations in the Zain realm,

The way in which such a company network functions is of course not haphazard as it follows accepted norms of interaction. Yet, it was also clear that company decisions often depend on coincidental meetings, personality and casual utterances. Thus a decision to visit Darfur may be taken on the basis of personal exchanges and is only partly the result of conscious company strategy. This, so to speak, showed us the micro in the macro. In many respects, also large-scale multinationals depend on interpersonal relations, small-scale networks and ad-hoc decisions.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the boundaries between structure and agency are much more fluid than is often assumed. After all, it is still people who create structures, also the large-scale ones. At the same time, we realised the importance of large-scale political and economic structures and developments, as these directly interfere with local end-users' options. Local end-users may be confronted by mal-functioning networks, because of political controversies.

The speed of the changes in Celtel and Mobitel, that had both become Zain products in a relatively short time had already given us an indication of changing business culture that such companies may experience in a relatively short time. This change had consequences for the project: discussing matters with businesspeople of Dutch background in Amsterdam proved far easier for us than the negotiations by e-mail with Kuwaiti businesspeople whom we had never met in person.

The links with Celte/Mobitel/Zain and the visit to Darfur in Sudan pose two related fields of questions and issues in the realm of the ethical aspects of this project. The first issue concerns research funded and assisted by a multinational company: in how far is independent research possible when it is funded by a company? Is this necessary? Is independent research possible at all? What about the dogma: 'do not bite the hand that feeds you?'

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<sup>5</sup> Uma Kothari, 'A radical history of development studies: individuals, institutions and ideologies', in: Uma Kothari (ed.), *A radical history of development studies. Individuals, institutions and ideologies* (Cape Town, London, New York 2005).

Obviously these questions are enlarged and magnified by the political context of Sudan. Are the ethical problems we discussed in connection with the first set of questions not more related to the Sudanese context than to being funded by a company? Is it ethical to do research in a country where there is war, where international sanctions are upheld as a critique on the oppressive regime that is even accused of carrying out a genocide? Before discussing these questions, we will first discuss researchers' possible reactions to the development discourse in multinational companies.

*Development and corporate responsibility in a multinational business*

In the discourse employed by the mobile telephone companies extreme optimism is the rule. The mobile telephone industry active on the African continent displays an enormous faith in the possibilities that the new communication technologies may bring. In their happy-clappy brochures nothing but radiant faces, smiling children and joyful people: the mobile phone world is a wonderful world. In their explanations and justifications it is supposed that the mobile phone will automatically contribute to development: relations between communication technologies and development are seen as intrinsically positive. The companies view their role in society as constructive and developmental in terms of social dialogue, economic climate, job opportunities, etc. As the CEO of Zain stated:

Our role as a telecom mobile operator is not limited to just selling sim cards and scratch cards. [...] We truly believe that telecommunications is a great tool for development in Africa. When you look to a country like Sudan: infrastructure, travel, the distances; telecom becomes a necessity and it is a grassroots benefit. [...] They are at least in touch. And human beings need to be in touch. And then you have all the benefits of telecoms: trade, small businesses that have increased their income by 40 % with the introduction of mobile telephony. Jobs in the telecom sector will grow. In other sectors as well [...] Obviously this also raises the income of the government: frequency fees, licensing, taxes...<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview Khaled Muhtadi, Khartoum, 2007 (Mirjam).

The companies see these positive changes not only in euphoric terms, but also as revolutionary. One of the leading management staff of Zain referred to their role as 'a change in the culture of Sudan'.

Most companies have an elaborate corporate responsibility programme, involving many development projects mainly in the realm of health, education, environment and sports. Corporate social responsibility is directly connected with the history of multinational companies and its importance increased as these companies grew. In the Sudan case, and elsewhere in the Islamic world these development activities are not only related to the new stress on corporate social responsibility, but also to the longstanding tradition of Islamic business and social work. Islam has historically stressed the importance of re-channelling profits to the poor and knows a strong emphasis on charity. So the telephone companies are all involved in various development projects, social programmes, and emergency relief initiatives. Zain, for example, has sponsored a teachers' training centre in the Nuba hills.

The optimism displayed in the discourse and in the activities of the companies is reinforced in development and policy-making circles. Here also, it is assumed that the 'digital divide' and the 'technology gap' are mere problems of access. Although in these circles there is more emphasis on the 'have-nots' (in a rather literal sense of the word), the problem is situated only in terms of access. The aim is to capacitate people (especially disadvantaged groups) so that they can afford these technologies and are no longer blocked from access. Here also, the relations between new ICT and development are automatically assumed. The assumption is that if only all people had a mobile phone and could call and text each other, the world would be a better place. While obviously there is no reason to assume that more communication will automatically lead to more equality and development. Instead of making assumptions, we felt it important to ask Sudanese end-users to evaluate mobile telephony in the light of development, equality, freedom, etc.

In our findings we cannot but partly subscribe to the positive evaluations. People whom we interviewed pointed to the crucial importance of communication in their lives and many were happy with the possibilities that mobile telephony offered to them in this respect. Many Sudanese families have relatives abroad, not only due to the history of warfare in the country, but also due to migration labour, mainly to Saudi Arabia. In some cases family bonds are (re-)established through the mobile phone. Visits are no longer made in vain, as people can call on beforehand (reducing costs of transport), important family news (such as birth, marriage and

death announcements) can be made within a second and family members who in the past could only rarely be in touch with their loved ones, can now be in contact regularly. People in business also testified to the advantages of mobile telephony. Their business arrangements can be organised with more efficiency, supplies can be ordered in a second, and in many sectors mobile telephone is the easiest way for customers to reach people offering services (such as taxi, henna painting, etc). On top, many people have found work to offer credit services, sell mobile phones and accessories and so new sources for income generation have come into existence. These advantages are by no means restricted to the rich and powerful in Sudan: many less well-to-do also have acquired a mobile phone and people from disadvantaged groups are strong about the benefits they have experienced: the mobile phone gives women more space to develop their own network, youngsters more possibilities to explore the world around them. Of course, the development projects initiated by the companies are appreciated by the recipients: people are indeed happy if they are provided with an ambulance.

Below the surface, however, a different picture emerges. In new contexts, where the mobile phone has not yet or only shortly arrived, people indeed only stress their wish for acquisition: they want the network to arrive where they are, they want to have a mobile phone, they want to have air time. In contrast to this 'culture of aspiration', people in areas where the mobile phone has been present for some years, the views are far more balanced. In Khartoum, for example, where the mobile phone came in 1997 people talked about positive and negative consequences of the introduction of the mobile phone. The problem with the flipside of mobile telephony is that these negative consequences are far less visible. But people testified that there are cases of families running into financial difficulties because the costs for mobile phone use were too high. They told of mobile phone addiction, of the decreased respect for privacy, of their worries about the diminishing quality of social contact and the decrease of face-to-face interaction. People felt that with the mobile phone people could lie more easily, and many expressed worries about the clashing sexual morals of youth and parents, a source of tension severely aggravated by the coming of the mobile phone. The development activities were also regarded with suspicion: in how far are these mere self-promotion and only amount to ad campaigns for the companies, people wondered.

With this we have not even mentioned the wider context of war: through the mobile phone warlords can also organise their activities more easily, and in Congo, with the involvement of Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, the coltan war is being waged. Enormous amounts of money are

made in the multinational business of mobile telephony: but these profits only benefit the country and the people where the money is made to a very limited extent. The companies often use extremely aggressive and misleading campaigns to increase their sales and litter the landscape with enormous billboards and buildings painted in 'their' colour. The policies developed at a national scale, certainly in the case of Sudan, are often clearly related to corruption, self-enrichment and interests that have nothing to do with increasing good services for the citizens. An example that can be mentioned are the negotiations over shares and licences between Mobitel and Sudatel, the latter still strongly related to the government and to NTC; some called the Sudatel claims 'high-street robbery in broad daylight' (information provided anonymously).

In other words, the positive discourse needs to be challenged and a more balanced evaluation should be offered. How can we as researchers meaningfully react to the culture of optimism displayed by the companies and the development agencies? What is our position if the research is funded by one such company? These questions stand on their own and need serious scrutiny. Furthermore, we need to ponder these issues in connections with our methodologies and results. We wish to state very clearly that we have been left free in our choices and there have been no restrictions on our research activities whatsoever. Yet when we sent over the report based on our findings, Zain Kuwait - while initially acknowledging the success of the project - was not pleased with some remarks we had made about gender relations and sexuality, maintaining that these were contrary to decent morals and Islamic values. There had been contractual promises of further sponsoring in case of success, but the contracts had been signed by Celtel, and Zain company hardly paid heed to our calls of keeping to the contract. The matter was concluded with a highly limited funding of a conference panel that was already held 2 years ago and even that payment is still pending. It is still unclear how the matter will be concluded!

#### *Doing research with business funds*

The remarks about business funding need further scrutiny. As indicated, we experienced no restrictions on our research activities in the process of gathering data. All the same, our research has taken some directions that would not have been taken if there had not been this cooperation. In many ways, the people of company in Sudan have been extremely helpful in assisting the research: as explained above, they arranged for some of the complex visitors' bureaucracy in Sudan, booked a ticket to Juba, obtained a film permit, etc, etc. In these instances, the company's

help could not be noticed and hence not influence the research results. The company, however, also in several instances provided us with a car and a driver. What does it mean to drive around in Sudan in a car with the logo of the company on the sides? Does this have consequences for the way in which evaluate mobile telephony during an interview? This question is difficult to answer, but as there was no discrepancy between answers received when arriving by our own means or by a company car, we assumed that there was little or no influence on the research results. In the end we felt that the practical advantages of being offered transport in Khartoum exceeded the possible disadvantage of influence on research results.

Going to a war zone as part of a company delegation is obviously another matter and so we carefully considered the invitation to visit Darfur. It would probably be overestimating the impact of our study to implicate that our presence was of any consequence for the negotiations: it did not make a difference whether or not the delegation was accompanied by a researcher. This fact, however does not diminish the importance of ethical issues. Is it appropriate to accompany a multinational business enterprise on its way to try and make money in an area where a genocide is taking place? Should we accept money from such a company at all? There has been severe critique on both Zain and MTN for this: 'For them, the vast expenses of Sudan's western Darfur region are not so much a disaster zone as one more unexploited mobile phone market waiting to be tapped.'<sup>7</sup>

The visit offered us as researchers insight into the workings of a multinational company on new terrain: this was revealing and helped us in understanding processes of decision-making of such a company in a crisis area. What we saw was of course appalling; fenced off from daily life, the delegation negotiated with all parties involved in a luxurious environment, We indeed felt awkward about the possible implications of the relations with Zain and constantly discussed each detail of the contact in terms of ethics. But would it have been appropriate to accompany and receive money from a development agency? Zain established connections in Darfur with all parties involved: with the central government, with the rebels, with Janjaweed, etc., so as to limit the insecurity risks of installing a mobile telephone network. The development agencies and the diplomatic circles present in Sudan have no dialogue with these parties. Development, diplomatic and business sector may equally be used by the political parties involved to increase their power base. While the aloofness of the development agencies and the diplomatic circles

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<sup>7</sup> Andrew Heavens, 'As other firms exit, phone companies enter Sudan', (Reuters, 15 August 2007), [http://uk.reuters.com/article/2007/08/15/idUKMCD652697..\\_CH..242020070815](http://uk.reuters.com/article/2007/08/15/idUKMCD652697.._CH..242020070815)

does not guarantee a larger independence viz-à-viz the fighting parties, their stance gives little opportunity for exchange. The bubble is in this sense larger in the business sector.

The major warlords and political leaders all already have access through expensive satellite connections, so they are not concerned about the presence or not of mobile phone companies. Like any tool, mobile phones can be used or abused. Perhaps the mobile phone will indeed help families to trace members, to warn people of oncoming danger so that they can flee in time, and spread knowledge about what is happening in Darfur. In a politically volatile and insecure situation, many people stress that the mobile phone has increased the possibilities for safe travelling and contacting lost relatives: this was made amply clear during the Juba fieldwork. We are not convinced of a larger independent status and fuller grassroots-benefits in the case of development agencies. Business companies and development organizations also make similar strategic plans and aim for continuation of their activities. The competition in the development market may even be fiercer than in the business sector, while clarity about the final aims may be less. In business people are open about their goal of making money. In many respects then, the ethical problems of receiving funding are similar with the corporate and the development sector.

*Doing research in wartorn Sudan:*

This brings us to the second aspect of the ethical issues related to our research. Perhaps the ethical problems we are discussing are not so strongly related to being funded by a private business company, but more to the political context of Sudan. The government of Sudan is being held responsible for what was happening in Darfur at the time of research: the accusations of war crimes and even genocide were widely reported in the international press. Less well known is that the government has also actively quelled protest against the construction of the Merowe dam in the North, right in one of the case-study areas for this research. After the research was concluded the construction plans were carried out, mainly by Chinese firms, and people were forcibly resettled. Many of the displaced people expressed discontent about the conditions of removal and the compensation regulations.<sup>8</sup> The central government policies towards the south also do not contribute to a stable climate: at present al-Bashir threatened not to recognise the new state of Southern Sudan for disputes over oil fields.<sup>9</sup> Also the problematic negotiations

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<sup>8</sup> 'Merowe Dam, Sudan', (International rivers: People, water, life)  
<http://www.internationalrivers.org/africa/merowe-dam-sudan>

<sup>9</sup> 'Sudan: Bashir threatens south over Abyei', (BBC News Africa, 28 April 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13230498>.

about the regulation of telecom companies can be understood as a means to stall healthy political relations. The GOSS largely consists of corrupt former warlords who are not ready for their political and diplomatic tasks, and, on top, are not prepared to view the central government as anything else than an enemy. Our research permits have been arranged through officials of both central government and GOSS. We have interviewed various representatives of both these bodies.

Should we have interviewed representatives of the central government and GOSS at all? Did these interviews compromise our independence as researchers? Can research be entirely independent at all? Does not all fieldwork involve taking sides in one way or the other? And is it just because in this case so much violence was occurring that these ethical issues became more prominent? Should one carry out research about mobile telephony in a country where a genocide is taking place, a war is being created by the political leaders, and political protesters are being shot at? Should we even have visited Sudan? Perhaps the fact that we were so strongly aware of the ethical implications already helped to safeguard independence? Will research about this subject contribute to a better understanding of what is happening in the country? The constant dilemmas we faced as researchers made us sharply aware of the advantages and disadvantages of doing research with corporate funding and doing research in a country with a problematic leadership. Especially with the combination of these two factors it was not easy to find a balance. We believe that the advantages of having done the research outweigh the ethical dilemmas. After all, our research results lead a more profound understanding of the wishes, needs and perspectives of ordinary Sudanese citizens and of the inside workings of a multinational company. All the same, this contribution does not end with fixed answers, but is meant to raise questions about ethics, money and violence.



## **Glossary and abbreviations**

Bharti - Indian-based company that bought Zain

Celtel - Dutch-based mobile telephone company, later owned by MTC.

Gemtel - A mobile telephone company established by SPLA, at the time using the Ugandan country-code. Now bought by a Libyan company.

GOSS - Government of Southern Sudan (established after Peace Agreement in 2005)

Janjaweed - nomadic militias, supported by the central government to quell resistance in Darfur

Mobitel - Now Zain, Sudanese mobile telephone company.

MTC - Now Zain, Kuwait-based mobile telephone company

NTC - National Telecommunications Corporation, national regulatory body installed after the privatization process of 1993.

NOW - Network of the World, southern mobile telephone company, now bought by Vivacell.

SPLA - Sudan People's Liberation Army, that has fought the central government and now forms

GOSS.- Government of Southern Sudan

Sudani - Sudanese mobile telephone company of Sudatel, the privatised company in which the Sudanese state has many shares: at the time on US embargo list.

Zain - Formerly MTC, later Middle-East and Sudan mobile telephone company, now bought by the Indian-based Bharti.