Ever wonder what bees have to do with peace-building efforts in Darfur?

“Where did all this top quality honey come from?” wondered Nertiti villager Hassan Harka. Well, that would be from Central Darfur where the Near East Foundation’s (NEF) is implementing beekeeping project.

NEF is training communities in Darfur to produce top quality honey that meets international standards. The training includes honey comb removal and bee migration techniques that ensure sustainable honey production. A recent training brought together 38 men and women from six different tribes including members of the Misseirya, Fur, and Salamat – all of which have a deep history of conflict and distrust with each other.

It was a rare opportunity for the members to interact in ways previously unimaginable. They shared equipment, tools and specialized clothing used in honey production and collection. By spending time working and interacting, they discovered, despite their different ethnic backgrounds, they share common interests and challenges.

Just three months after the training, 20 trainees from the village of Nertiti managed to earn over USD7,600 by selling 1440 pounds of honey cultivated with their newly acquired skills. Honey is a major ingredient in traditional medicines. Darfurian honey is considered to be the best in the country and highly sought after in the capital city of Khartoum where it now sells for five times more than it did two years ago.

Over time, the trainees became a close knit group and this has positive implications for the peace and stability in the region. The beekeeping practices taught beekeepers a more sustainable alternative to harvest honey combs that leaves hives and bee colonies unharmed. Prior to NEF’s intervention, local woodlands were often severely damaged when trees were torched to produce smoke that dispersed the bees—destroying their habitat in the process. “I am astounded to see so many bees in the field after the honey has been gathered. Before we had to keep going farther away from our villages to find new sources,” noted one of the trainees.
Abdallah Abbakar Abdallah is a perfume salesman from the village of Gurra Farjawiya in the locality of Kebkabiya, North Darfur. In 2013, life in Abdallah’s village changed dramatically with the discovery of gold in nearby Jebel Amer. New arrivals and local residents fought over the precious metal and the already-stretched scarce resources. Instances of conflict and violent crime skyrocketed. The village became unsafe for Abdallah and his young family. Finally, in March 2014, they were forced to flee to Kebkabiya, where they stayed with his brother. When Abdallah left Gurra Farjawiya, he had to leave all his possessions. So, when he arrived in Kebkabiya, he immediately had to set about rebuilding his business from scratch. But with no start-up capital or connections in the market, Abdallah was forced to accept bad deals and struggled to make enough money to support his family. When Abdallah heard about the microfinance scheme offered by Zulfa (SUDIA’s local partner) as part of the DCPSF, he submitted an application and was granted a loan of 5000 SDG. With this loan, he was able make trips to Nyala and El-Fasher where he could buy goods at cheaper prices, resell and thereby increase his profit margin. Now Abdallah is the proud owner of a thriving business selling small household essentials. His successful business also means he is able to repay his loan on time. With his new stable income, Abdallah feels more secure in his future and has been able to invest in his children’s education. Now all four children are enrolled at the Al-Marif Private School in Kebkabiya.
Adam Barku, a farmer in Taweng village in the locality of Habila. He was cultivating a piece of land in a wadi (seasonal river) when one day, Hassan Mohammed, a herder passed through with his cows. Assuming the land did not belong to anyone, Hassan let his cows in to graze. The cows ate the sesame and millet that Adam was cultivating. Upon his return, Adam and Hassan got into a serious argument about whether Adam has the right to cultivate on that land. Adam and his relatives threatened to use force and were ready to take up arms to fight Hassan.

To resolve the case the Habila High Reconciliation Committee hurried to help the Taweng’s Local Reconciliation Committee. The committee met the two sides, listened separately to their grievances and negotiated. Eventually they agreed on the culpability of the herder, who was requested to repay Adam with one sack of sesame and two sacks of millet as compensation. Incidences such these remain common in many parts of Darfur. The work of reconciliation committees is central in performing a law and order function through addressing local conflicts that would otherwise escalate into serious tension. Partners such as INTERSOS whom are working in Taweng village play an important role in supporting these committees to gain the necessary skills and understanding to perform their functions in resolving communal conflicts.

Sheikh Haroun Ahmed, a member of Habila High Reconciliation Committee said, “Thanks to INTERSOS, the committee is more active and can reach remote areas. Through trainings, members have more knowledge on how to solve the disputes peacefully using different methods. INTERSOS also helped to raise awareness on the areas for crop protection so the communities are now aware of their responsibilities”.

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Over the next day, we visited four villages and listened to the committees voicing their concerns about the nomads, droughts and limited resources available. Too many times, the main grievance is that more needs to be done and more resources are needed. While peace resolution committees have been largely successful in most villages resolving social and communal tensions, I was informed that there remains a strained relationship between the villagers and nomads. One villager said, “It’s hard to discuss anything with them because they simply don’t show up if there’s no incentive.”

That being said, it was obvious that there is a sense of determination to keep trying as they continue to wait for the arrival of the nomads to join their discussions. The role of women in the discussions was minimal, with only two being present that we had and their involvement was merely as observers.

All is not bleak in Mornei though. One of Concern’s interesting projects that I had the opportunity to see was tree seedlings production in Romalya village. With enthusiasm, Adam, Concern’s Livelihood Officer explained, “we provide seedlings to vulnerable families who plant them in the demonstration farm. We teach them to plant different things too. When the seedlings grow, we buy them and redistribute them to other poor families. That way, we get our seeds for redistribution and families get a small income too. We also plant them at schools so there’s additional income for teachers too.”

Mill grinding project by Concern as part of their income generating activity in Nabagaia village, Mornei
Rakoba is a small town, close to the locality of Korgei, where women traders from different backgrounds—nomads, residents and others—congregate in one space to sell spices. On afternoon, like any other market day, each trader aimed to get the best price for their goods. Back and forth they bartered, trying to get the best deal possible. Suddenly Jaras, a nomad female trader shouted and accused another female trader, a resident of the town of stealing 50 SDG from her. Fifty SDG (equivalent to about $10) is worth more than a week’s wages. Jaras continued shouting frantically and soon enough, people in the market started taking sides. The nomads supported Jaras while the farmers and residents of the town came to the side of the accused.

Hawa, a local resident, stood there and reflected that such incidences have happened far too many times. And each time, they end badly. Property would be damaged, the market day disrupted and both sides would walk away with distrust and feelings of anger. Quietly Hawa approached Jaras and asked her to step away from the noisy crowd to discuss what happened. Jaras recognized Hawa as a respected woman from the farming community and agreed that continuing the argument would end in undesirable consequences for the Rakoba market and the wider community. Realizing that there were no men to resolve the argument for them, the two women decided to take matters into their hands and minimize potential damage. In 15 minutes, they came to an understanding and the matter was resolved. Pleased with the outcome, Hawa and Jaras then decided that they should form a Joudia committee to help resolve communal tensions amongst themselves.

Joudia committees in Darfur are traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that allow disputes to be resolved at the grassroots level. They aim to mitigate arguments from escalating into bigger conflicts. Joudia committees are often used to resolve issues between the nomads and farmers. Women are traditionally not included in the committees and the elders have limited interest to engage women or listen to their contribution. That is where FAR Sudan came in and pressed for the inclusion of women in committees. FAR’s advocacy worked. Eventually the elders came round to the idea and were ready to accept female participation. Furthermore having heard what happened in the market and how Hawa and Jaras handle the situation, the men were convinced women can be great addition to the work they do.

Today, the number of women involved in Joudia committees continues to grow. Women like Hawa and Jaras have set the path and they continue to work together with other like-minded women from the community to address local tensions and ensure stability. A big step for women and one giant leap for the community indeed.