



Endlessly changing irrigation spaces: a multi-sited exhibition to reimagine proximities between Khartoum and Padua

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Abstract

This article explores the process, also in emotional terms, of setting up a multi-site photographic exhibition in Khartoum and Padua, in the context of the outbreak of the war in Sudan, as a creative way to promote research dissemination. The multi-site exhibition emerged from a long tradition of research, between geographers at the University of Khartoum and the University of Padua, on the reconfiguration of irrigation spaces in Sudan. An “exploration” of the exhibition is presented with a discussion of a few important themes that emerged from the fieldwork. The article examines multi-site visual dissemination as a useful tool to reduce proximities and create new connections between places. Moreover, it reflects on the potentiality of photo exhibitions as a creative way to make research findings more accessible to a non-academic audience, and so to cross academic borders.

Keywords: Visual Dissemination, Photo Exhibition, Proximity, Grief, Sudan

1. Starting from the end

I feel it is important to begin this article with the events that dramatically affected the presentation of this project: the outbreak of war in Sudan. What was supposed to be a description of my research experience in Sudan earlier this year – expounding on its potential as a creative form of visual dissemination - with the resultant organization of two multi-site photographic exhibitions, first in Khartoum and then Padua. My contribution to these events is far from neutral (England, 1994).

I admit I cried a few times recalling memories while writing this article, welcoming and making space for grief as part of the journey

(Gillespie and Lopez, 2019). Many of the places we visited in Sudan are now destroyed, and in many others, we do not know what is happening. The images illustrated in this article captured Sudanese irrigated spaces just before the outbreak of the conflict.

On April 15, 2023, the war in Sudan erupted with little warning of the possible magnitude of the current conflict. That morning, I received a message from a French colleague: “Did you see the coup in Sudan? The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) occupy the airport.” After that notification, I began to check on friends and colleagues, still shocked. From that moment, the situation has worsened day by day, with millions

of people forced to leave their homes because of the brutality of the war. According to the UNCHR (June 2023), more than 2.48 million people are displaced, of which 1.97 million are internally displaced and 523 thousand are dispersed in neighboring countries, particularly Egypt and Chad. Since the outbreak of the conflict, the situation has not improved and hopeful perspectives for the future are blurred. In this realm, the international community has done little to help the Sudanese people inside and outside the Country.

I departed from Khartoum on the 21st of March after two months of field research as part of the project *AtlaSahel*¹. I left Sudan feeling that it was the start of a long research journey. I had organized a photographic exhibition at CEDEJ-Khartoum and had planned another one after my return to Italy at the Museum of Geography at Padua University, with the objective of sharing reflections and fieldwork. The fieldwork was conducted together with Prof. Andrea Pase and Dr. Mohammed Hassan. We obviously could not have predicted how the events would develop when the exhibition was first imagined in February 2023. With the conflict abruptly erupting right before the opening of the Padua exhibition, the event assumed a different meaning: the situation in Sudan now assuming center stage of international debates.

With attention to the multi-site visual dissemination in Khartoum and Padua, this article discusses the potentiality of the exhibitions as creative tools for research dissemination (Bignante, 2011) and for reimagining proximities (Torre, 2009; Bertoncin and Pase, 2022).

The project's research themes are examined in the article, as well as how the idea of holding a photo exhibition came about. Moreover, the organization and content of the exhibition in Khartoum and Padua are discussed. More generally, I suggest that multi-site visual dissemination can offer a tool to creatively share research findings by bringing geographical knowledge into public spaces and activating new proximities.

2. From research to a multi-sited exhibition

The Department of Geography and Environment at Khartoum University has collaborated with the geographers at the University of Padua for over 30 years, conducting research on the changing spatialities of irrigation mega-projects in Sudan (Bertoncin et al., 2019). Thanks to the collaboration with CEDEJ-Khartoum, a thriving French research institute in the heart of the capital, we were able to conduct our fieldwork in February and March of 2023.

In our research, water and land are viewed as intriguing geographical lenses to read, explore, and question societal transformation in Sudan (Casciarri et al., 2015). Conflicts over access to land, as part of a new global land rush, have been redefining relations between people and land in Sudan (Gertel et al., 2014). Mega-development initiatives have been used strategically in this context to reshape rural geographies while controlling territories. Rural areas are frequently redesigned under the auspices of a modernization logic that frequently fosters the idea of "agriculture without farmers" (McMichael, 2014). Mega-projects act as a "laboratory of modernity" in which the reinterpretation of proximity relations is crucial (Bertoncin et al., 2014). Our particular project explores different irrigation mega-projects in Sudan that materialize in different spaces defined as "thin" and "ultra-thin" (Bertoncin et al., 2019). Drawing from Scott (1998), "thin" spaces are fixed and monofunctional, because they are constructed to serve a specific purpose and follow rigid patterns of space organization through the adoption of modern technologies. In the case of Sudan, we were interested in observing the old-style "thin" spaces such as the Gezira Scheme, established in 1925 by the British to supply cotton to the colonizers, and the Kenana Sugar Company founded in the 1970s as part of a broader project of turning Sudan into the "breadbasket" for the Arab World. Both projects have radically changed the development patterns of the region and the trajectories of their territories: "thin-spaces required heavy territorial transformations" (Bertoncin et al., 2019, p. 34).

¹ <https://atlasahel.it/en/>.

Moreover, a new wave of investments in pivot irrigation systems is developing in the River Nile State, leading to the proliferation of “ultra-thin-spaces” which, compared to “thin-spaces”, do not entail a long-term development projection but rather a short-term timeframe. Furthermore, there is limited communication with the local communities, who are frequently displaced by the projects, and these innovative technologies reduce the needs for technical personnel (Bertoncin et al., 2019). “Ultra-thin-spaces”, as a different form of land grabbing, are spreading in Sudan and beyond with the consolidation of the “rentier state” (Magrin, 2013) and with the continued loss of territorial sovereignty of the state in the “name of development”. The future of agriculture depends heavily on the role that domestic and international investors play in managing these resources (Bertoncin et al., 2022). Indeed, Africa’s rural areas are at the center of the new global land rush, where also “new” players like China and the BRICS countries compete with established Western allies for resource control (Pepa, 2021).

During the fieldwork, we visited different irrigation spaces: the White Nile Sugar Company, Kenana Sugar Company, Gezira, the Chinese Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center in Al-Fao, Guineed (Sudanese Sugar Company), Al-Waha (DAL Group), and up to the River Nile State in Ad Damir (Almukakrab Agricultural Scheme), Atbara, Berber (Al Rajhi International for Investment) e Shendi (GLB Group) (Figure 1). Over 150 interviews were conducted in different places, with distinct actors (farmers, land owners, private investors, governmental officials, agricultural experts) adopting mix-qualitative methods. During the field study, participant observation was used in addition to semi-structured and life-story interviews particularly with families of the local communities affected by mega irrigation projects.

Although the use of photographs was crucial for the research and frequently related to technical features, such as images of dams, pumping machines, and canals, the visual component was not initially part of the research design. However, as I was documenting my surroundings and being surprised by them

through photography, I became aware of how effective these images were in sharing our research on land and water: photographs could end up serving as a complementary tool between research and dissemination (Moura et al., 2016). Usually, in academia, dissemination of research findings ends in scientific publications, yet photos open another array of possibilities and a different (visual) language to share our research.

3. Imagining the photo exhibition

“The defining feature of a photograph is the preservation of moments that hold some significance, especially through time” (Falola, 2022, p. 419).

As discussed, the intention of organizing a photographic exhibition in Khartoum, as a creative form to share research findings, unfolds in a specific research process. The idea of incorporating visual research methodologies into our project had not previously crossed our minds. Yet, requests from friends and colleagues in Khartoum, as well as my surprise at the variety of activities taking place in the irrigated spaces we visited, served as the impetus. I took all the photographs so they represent my point of observation, however, the selection of the photo finally displayed resulted from the consultation with different people within and beyond our research group.

On the one hand, I felt a “mandate” from my colleagues and friends in Khartoum to document the places we were visiting. In many cases, our colleagues and friends said: “I have never visited the places where you will be going to”. I think this is due to the fact that many areas we visited are neither touristic nor easy to reach. Moreover, mobility outside of Khartoum cannot be taken for granted. Travel permits are required – and not always easy to receive – and several checkpoints are located along the road; the frequent presence of the checkpoints was actually something that was totally unforeseen to me. On the other hand, I did not expect the diversity of projects, people, investments, technologies, and stories that we encountered in the different irrigation spaces we had visited. This “surprise” and excitement served as the catalyst for the idea of planning an exhibition in Khartoum.

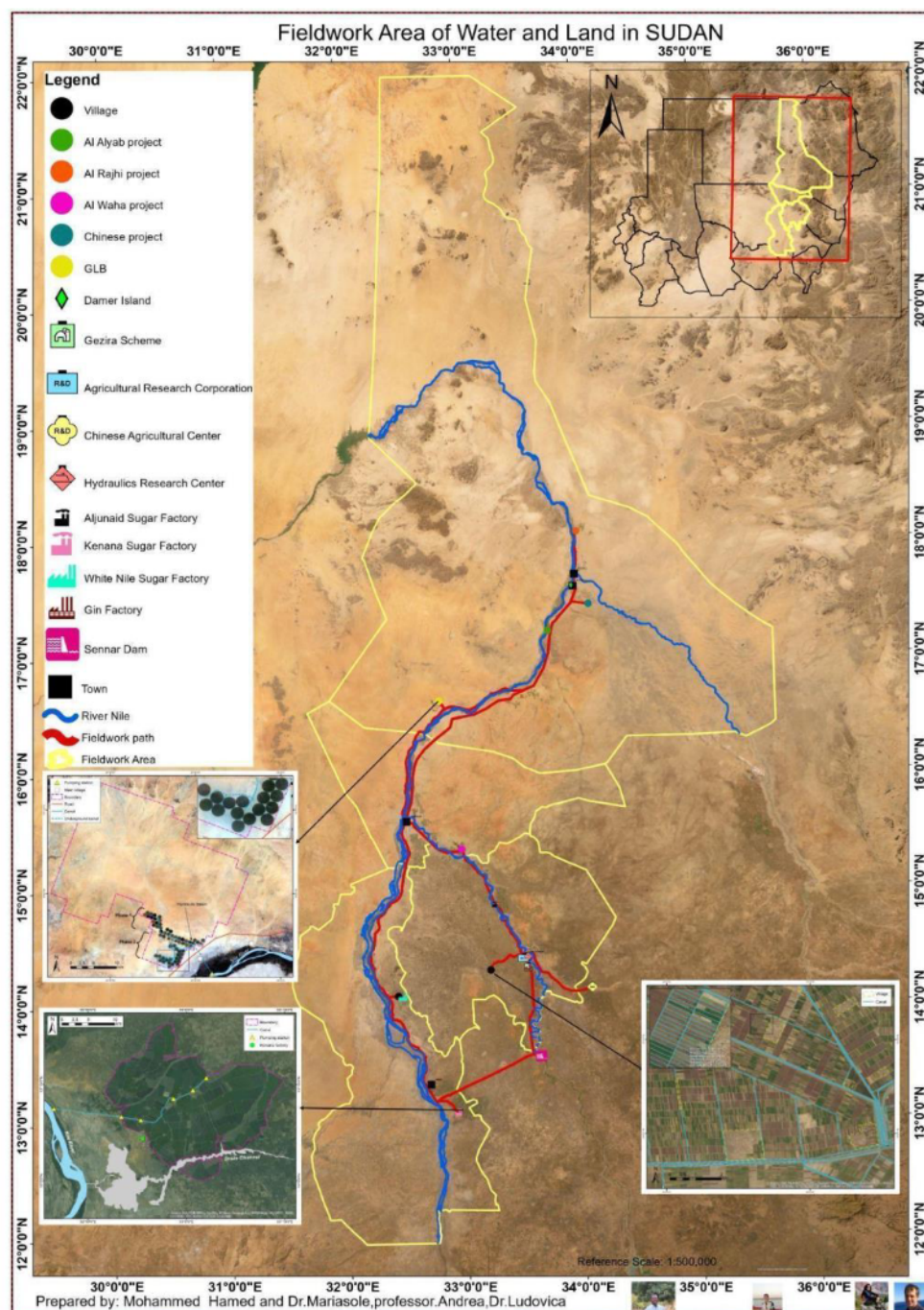


Figure 1. Fieldwork Area, in the version presented at the Padua exhibition. Source: Dr. Mohammed Hamed Hassan, University of Khartoum.

After I shared with Andrea Pase the idea of organizing an exhibition, the steps to set it up were quick. We returned to Khartoum in early March and the exhibition was inaugurated on the 19th of March, hosted and partly financed by CEDEJ-Khartoum, which welcomed the idea

thanks to the openness of the Director of the Center, Prof. Luisa Arango.

A network of people came together to make it happen: the Down Town Gallery team in Khartoum provided me with crucial organizational and setup guidance; Mohamed Hamed designed

the maps; the Italian photographer Cristina Troisi assisted me in the visualization; and various friends from Khartoum and Italy offered feedback on the image selection and text translations. The exhibition would not have been possible without this intricate web of care.

4. “Endless changing irrigation spaces”

“Everything in Sudan is related to land, water, and their inevitable and complicated combination” (Extract from a conversation at Khartoum University).

The contents of the photo exhibition “Endlessly changing irrigation spaces” reflect our research process. I think of water and land as intriguing geographical lenses for interpreting societal transformation in Sudan, and this was the message I wanted to convey with the visual dissemination. The exhibition lacks a unifying theme, yet it nonetheless serves as a call to “think geographically” and interact with the varying levels of complexity revealed by a study of mega-projects in Sudan. In fact, my idea was to “invite” the audience to “retrace” our field trip through images (Figure 1), which was a way to include “Others” in our journey and to reflect collectively on the future of human and more-than-human spatialities of agriculture, and most importantly, on who will benefit from them. In the attempt to create a crossroads of new inquiries using the space of the exhibition, I have been inspired by the words of Toyin Falola (2022, p. 449): “The question of what (apart from a photograph’s visible subjects) exists beyond or within this image has its ready answer: a host of possibilities and knowledge”. I would add co-creation of knowledge. However, I am also well aware of the fact that what we see is never objective (Bignante, 2011) and that, in some ways, we also assist in creating or better imagining “new” geographies.

I shared the photographs selected for the exhibition with different colleagues and friends in Khartoum, especially with my colleagues at the University of Khartoum: Prof. Abdelrahman Eltahir A. Musa, Prof. Eltaib Saeed Mohamed Ganawa, Prof. Ahmed H.I. Elfaig, Dr. Mohammed Hamed Hassan, and Dr. Samrin Adam. In order to ultimately choose 20 pictures,

the selection process evolved into a participatory exchange of thoughts and comments. For example, I initially included the image of second-hand Chinese machinery that we found on the construction site of a new Chinese ginning factory. However, some colleagues argued that it was inappropriate to use this image because it suggested that only second-hand goods are imported into Sudan, which was contrary to the image they wanted to project of their country. This claim made me think about what one colleague commented after he had visited the Chinese project: “They [the Chinese] use second-hand technology in Sudan but in China, they only use new technologies. No one wants to develop the country [Sudan], no Turkish, no China” (extract from fieldnotes). In the end, we chose to use a different photograph from this field trip, which shows the Sudanese workers who are employed for lower-skilled tasks and the “temporary” Chinese workers who were only there to construct the ginning factory for a private Chinese investor (Figure 2). The image evokes a contentious debate in Africa-China studies on the impact of Chinese labor practices in Africa.

Talking about the exhibition’s image and text with different actors was an important step in getting feedback from our fieldwork and, in particular, hearing our colleagues’ perspectives. Reaching a “collective” agreement on the content was essential to me.



Figure 2. Chinese and Sudanese workers constructing a new ginning factory. Photo by the Author.

5. Exploring the photo-exhibition

At this point, I would like to reflect on what and how this exhibition tells about our research project by proposing to explore the exhibition within the framework of this paper. What the exhibition reveals about the research project is the emergence of new elements in the Sudanese irrigated spaces such as the consolidation of “digital territories” along with thin and ultra-thin spaces. These new configurations coexist with the ongoing conflicts over resources and the tensions between companies and local communities.

As a mirror of our process, the exhibition reflects “fresh” visual observations retrieved from our fieldwork. The visual dissemination does not provide a detailed analysis of the material collected but rather is a tool to bridge our field research with a broader community and to facilitate a feedback process. This is also viewed from the standpoint of coming up with innovative ways to make the research findings more approachable to a wider audience and to increase the utility of scientific research for a “non-academic” audience (Von Benzon et al., 2021).

The exposition highlighted the coexistence of opposing models of agriculture and the dichotomy between “old” and modern technologies in reconfiguring the spatiality of rural geographies. One of the scopes of the exhibition is to expose the audience to the variety and complexities of Sudanese irrigated spaces in terms of different ways of doing agriculture, distinct actors, and interests involved which create conflicts over resource control. The role of the Sudanese State in facilitating access to Nile water and control over vast tracts of land has exacerbated land and water grabbing by encouraging new domestic and foreign investments. Other themes that emerge in the exhibition are the proliferation of new technologies in agriculture and the use of solar energies alongside problems related to pollution and air contamination.

To explore what the exhibition communicates about the research project and how it says it, I selected a few examples that are representative. The exhibition follows the route of our

fieldwork, which started with the Kenana Sugar Company, a company co-owned by Gulf countries and the Sudanese state. The Kenana Sugar Company’s images (Figure 3) aim to highlight the company’s recent expansion, which aims to diversify its output while maintaining its core business in sugarcane. Image 1 shows the contradiction between new banana production using compost from cane and animal manure and the pollution from the sugar factory, which, despite years of protest, hardly ever uses filters to keep the air clean. The image of the sugar cane bagasse ash² (Image 2) – that I found in front of my room when I woke up in the morning – is connected to the air pollution spewing from the sugar factory; this confirmed various claims made by the family we spoke with outside of Kenana Company which claim “Yes, burning bagasse in the sugar mill produces dust. The air quality and smell are bad. The pollution causes breathing difficulties and eye problems. We protest but with little result”. Immediately after I snapped a photo of the bagasse, someone came in to clean the floor, creating the false impression that there were no contamination issues. Moreover, pollution is also related to sugarcane burning, behind the women in the picture (Image 3). Yet, even though sugar cane harvest is mechanized, something that the managers of the company like to highlight, the cleaning up after the mechanization is left to several women, paying them a meagre monthly compensation of about 30,000 Sudanese pounds per month (equal to about 45 euros).

² Bagasse ash is an agricultural waste from the burning of sugar cane.



Figure 3. Image 1 (above on the left). Kenana Sugar Company, Kenana, 17th January 202. Image 2 (below on the left). Sugar cane bagasse ash, Kenana Guest house, 18th January 2023. Image 3 (below on the right). Inside Kenana Sugar Company, Kenana, 18th January 2023. Photos by the Author.



Figure 4. Image 1 (above on the left). Al-Waha Project (DAL Group), 15th February 2023. Image 2 (below on the left). Ad Damir Island, River Nile State, 25th February 2023. Image 3 (below on the right). Al-Rajhi International for agricultural and investment, Berber, 26th February 2023. Photos by the Author.

Another example from the exhibition is the proliferation of investments in pivot irrigation systems alongside the emergence of solar energy projects for agriculture (Figure 4). Overall, the use of solar panels and new technologies in agriculture, and so the development of digital territories, appeared totally new compared to what the research group found during the last mission in 2016.

The image of the pivot irrigation system owned by DAL Group (Image 1), the largest Sudanese private company in the country, gives an idea of the magnitude of these kinds of projects. The Al-Waha project covers a cultivated area of 40.000 feddan³ where 105 pivots are fully operating. Pivot projects for alfalfa⁴ production required vast tract of land (each pivot covers from 120 to 145 feddan) and a huge amount of water (each pivot needs 1000 gallons⁵ of water per day). The Sudanese State offers favorable conditions for the development of pivot irrigation areas, for example, all the projects we visited claimed that water fees are really low, and someone even argued that there are no water fees. At the same time, the image of the pivot system encourages the viewer to reflect on the effects that a proliferation of these projects could provoke in terms of territorial conflicts between investors and local communities over access to water and land in the medium/long term. Indeed, in more than one interview, it emerged that both local communities and governmental officials were worried about these investments: "I don't like alfalfa, through alfalfa we export water and land" (Interview with government official).

The other two images portray the development of a new solar project for small farmers and the use of solar pivots. New solar panels for irrigation were recently installed for farmers and financed by UNDP and the Korean Cooperation Agency in Ad Damir Island due to the lack of electricity on the island which can be accessed only by boat (Image 2). While capturing the adoption of new technologies in

agriculture, the images also highlight the lack of knowledge and resources to manage such innovation. For example, small farmers could autonomously control the solar panel through a smartphone, however, many farmers either do not have a phone or do not know how to manage such technologies. Moreover, the increasing use of solar pivots brings to light another issue that has been central to Sudan these last few years: the high price of diesel and the difficulties in buying it. This reality has altered the agricultural activities of the different projects we visited. Another issue, is the lack of knowledge about the maintenance of solar pivots, in Al-Rajhi Project we visited the first pivots in Sudan (Image 3), however, the manager argued "There is not enough knowledge about solar pivots" and for this reason technical problems are hard to deal with.

The last example is that of the Sudanese Sugar Company (SSC), a state-owned enterprise with four factories, one located in Guineed that we visited. The peculiarity of Guineed is that the land is owned by farmers⁶. However, in the last decades, the factory is experiencing severe problems: "In 2009, the SSC reach its capacity of 360.000 tons of sugar...Last year the total production of the four SSC companies was 34.000 tons of sugar, a tragedy". On the one hand, the images highlight the challenges faced by a state-owned company compared to private investors, on the other hand, the images blatantly expose the contradiction between mechanized and traditional sugar cane harvesting present in the scheme (Figure 5). While one part of the scheme relies on modern technologies, the other part, just a few kilometers away, relies on manual sugar cane harvesting (Image 1). The spatial contradictions are multiple in the irrigated spaces, even with short distance. Sugar cane cutters are forced to accept the reality of moving from place to place during different seasons of the year, with limited compensation. For example, our interviews showed that each task is paid 850 Sudanese Pounds (around 1.5 euros) for four hours, and workers can complete up to 6 tasks in one day.

³ 1 feddan= 0.42 hectare.

⁴ Alfalfa (*Medicago sativa* L.) is a perennial forage used as a profitable animal fodder and is in increasingly high demand in international markets.

⁵ 1 gallon= 3.785 liters.

⁶ Farmers are responsible for field irrigation and the Sudanese Sugar Company for inputs and field preparation. According to our interviews the distribution of profit is split into 62% for farmers and 38% for the management of the company.

Returning to my original questions of what and how this exhibition evolved, it was strongly shaped by a process of sharing and consultation. It was highly influenced by the encounters we had during our fieldwork, I intend the stories we heard and the place we visited. For the final selection of the image and the captions, I involved different colleagues and friends in the process. For instance, I spent several afternoons showing the picture and captions to colleagues to hear their perspectives and to change either the photos or the description accordingly. For this purpose, even if I took all the photographs according to my point of observation, in the end, the exhibition was enriched by multiple points of view.

6. A multi-site exhibition in Khartoum and Padua

The novelty of the exhibition consisted in the organization of a multi-site visual temporary dissemination. In Khartoum, the exhibition was inaugurated on March 19 at CEDEJ⁷ in partnership with the Museum of Geography at Padua University, which immediately proposed exhibiting it in their space. The opening of the exhibition at the Museum of Geography took place on April 26⁸. The exhibition was originally planned to run concurrently as a means of communicating across geographies and shortening the distance between places. Yet, with the outbreak of the war on the 15th of April, the scenario around the exhibition totally changed along with its significance. For us, the exhibition became a tool for raising awareness about Sudan and expressing solidarity with our friends and colleagues: it turned into a medium of communication that went way beyond our expectations of the research project.

During the inauguration in Khartoum, no one had foreseen the conflict yet, so the reflections, suggestions, and emotions around the images were very different compared to the ones in Padua. In Khartoum, I briefly discussed beforehand some observations from the fieldwork that could help facilitate

understanding of the visual dissemination. This was followed by a pleasant discussion among the participants –various CEDEJ colleagues, the University of Khartoum faculty, and representatives from other institutions – regarding the future of Sudan’s agricultural sector and the significance of water and land for societal changes in the country. Diverse suggestions on how to proceed with the study, new research questions, and a sense of “hope” in imagining Sudan’s future emerged. The discussion continued while viewing the images with a diverse audience of academics and non-academics (Figure 6). In my opinion, an interesting aspect of the inauguration was the surprise of the audience, the majority from Sudan, about the variety of activities that are happening in the remote irrigated spaces as well as the volume of investments in the agricultural sector.



Figure 5. Image 1 (above). Manual sugarcane harvesting, Sudanese Sugar Company, Guineed, 23th February 2023. Image 2 (below). Sugar cane cutters, Sudanese Sugar Company, Guineed, 23rd February 2023. Photos by the Author.

⁷ <https://cedesudan.hypotheses.org/5729>.

⁸ <https://www.musei.unipd.it/it/museo-geografia-infinito-irregui>.



Figure 6. Inauguration photo-exhibition at CEDEJ-Khartoum. Photos by the Author.

I left Khartoum a few days after the opening, full of excitement for the future visit and collaboration. Even though the exhibition remained at CEDEJ, I received different emails from researchers that passed by the Center because of the curiosity triggered by the exhibition. It was interesting to feel that something of myself remained in Khartoum, a sense of being there while being in Italy – the visual dissemination had created a sense of connection with Khartoum and with other people passing through it.

At the opening ceremony at the Museum of Geography at Padua University, two professors from the University of Khartoum, Prof. Elthair and Prof. Ganawa, who had been longstanding collaborators on the project, were invited. Making use of the university's museum, our intention was to emphasize the value of cooperating with African universities and fostering future opportunities for reciprocal exchanges. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, because of the outbreak of the war, our colleagues never arrived to Padua. The exhibition became a platform of solidarity for Sudan and an opportunity to shed light on the present situation.

The inauguration at the Museum of Geography was attended by over 50 people, mainly students and members of the Sudanese community in Padua (Figure 7). It was a very

emotional time since we received a call from a fellow Sudanese colleague who was waiting to enter Egypt and shared his story of fleeing Khartoum with all of us. Sudanese students at the exhibition intervened, inviting the audience to participate in a demonstration taking place on the 29th of April in Padua against the war.



Figure 7. Inauguration of the photo exhibition at the Geography Museum of the University of Padua. Photos by the Author.

After the open discussion of the conference, the participants proceeded to a room in the Museum where they were able to touch some artifacts that had been gathered during our

fieldwork in Sudan and earlier missions. Combined with the photographs, it became a type of multisensory experience with the public asking questions and giving us the opportunity to further engage them in our research. Another interesting inclusion in the exhibit was a bulletin board where visitors could post further comments and inquiries about the project. Based on the messages we gathered on the board, I was surprised by the variety of people who appreciated the exhibition and our project. The Museum of Geography attracts many students and different audiences on weekends, from families to tourists, so the exhibition goes far beyond academic boundaries: the visual dissemination demonstrates an effective method for raising awareness among the public and shortening the gap between academia and beyond – “to present geography as a public knowledge” (Peterle, 2019, p. 85) – as well as an educational space for students.

7. Sudan outside Sudan: what is next?

This article retraces the experience of organizing a multi-site photo exhibition as a creative form for disseminating research and creating an immediate bridge between fieldwork and the wider public. From this journey, multiple reflections emerged on the potentiality of visual dissemination activities. The exhibition offered the possibility of connecting distant territories and voices while questioning geographical proximities (Bertoncin and Pase, 2022). Absolute proximities (e.g. in terms of kilometers between places) have been reimagined through the multi-site dissemination: by reducing distances both within Sudan, compressing the gap between the centre (Khartoum) and the peripheries (irrigated spaces) – but also by activating temporary geographical proximities between Sudan and Italy (Torre, 2009). These temporary spaces of visual dissemination, which could potentially multiply, question the necessity of permanent proximity and highlight the possibilities of creating long-distance exchanges of information and emotions by adopting different tools (Torre, 2008). Additionally, the space of the exhibition became a tool to weave new cognitive proximities between different places and a way

to reduce the psychological distance (Bertoncin and Pase, 2022).

Organizing a multi-site exhibition of in “progress” research is one tool that can be explored to shorten the space/time between when the fieldwork is concluded and the scientific publication, which usually happens after years. However, it also adds to the discussion about reconsidering how research findings in human geography are disseminated (Von Benzon et al., 2021).

The exhibition creates a straight channel to connect a research project with and beyond academia and facilitates the accessibility of research to a wider public. This experience was in line with the call from the Italian “Manifesto for a Public Geography” to support initiatives that communicate and disseminate research in more approachable ways to increase the visibility and presence of geographic knowledge in public debates. The experience described in this article is just one of many ways that geographers can encounter creativity in their research practices and dissemination processes (e.g., Gay et al., 2019; Lancione, 2011; Peterle, 2021; Richardson et al., 2023). It also serves as an invitation to try out other modes of sharing stories that we have not yet imagined.

In this critical moment for Sudan, what we can do as researchers is to imagine new ways of collaborating and doing research in a time of war. Creativity and a “sense of hope” are needed to work with people in Sudan and with the Sudanese diaspora. For example, collaboration with Sudanese artists and collectives can represent a way to foster new research collaboration. The work of Sudanese artists has been crucial both during the revolution and before (El Melik and Abbas, 2022) in reimagining the past and future of the country (Fuhrmann and Albaih, 2019). Many Sudanese artists are still using social media today to post their work as a way to either document what is happening in their homeland or to support the Sudanese people. The Instagram page “Postcard from Khartoum” which collects images of daily life in Khartoum/Sudan beginning on April 16, 2023, is an intriguing example, as well as the story collection launched on Instagram titled “About a Saturday”. At a time when international attention has already shifted away and there is

little documentation, it is one way to create archives of daily life in Sudan and to track what is happening.

After the end of the exhibition in Padua, we reflected, and we are still imagining, how to proceed with research as allies to our Sudanese colleagues. We are now in the process of thinking together about what to do next and how research can become instrumental for Sudanese people. One recent example is the publication in Italian of stories of Sudanese people after the outbreak of the war, collected thanks to the help of our friend and colleague Abdelrahman Musa Elthair (Pase and Pepa, 2023). At the same time, we are attempting to bring the exhibition to different places to raise awareness about the conflict in Sudan. Convinced that “Images have the power to take people somewhere else, and to explore, generate, and assemble words, registers, and space” (School AGeI Cesarea Terme collective, 2022, p. 218), I am simultaneously planning activities to carry out with students using the photo as a starting point to activate geographical imagination.

8. Concluding with vulnerability

While I am writing this article (June 2023), Sudanese people are trying to leave their homeland and begin life again in other places with uncertainty about how long the war is going to last and what will happen next. After crossing the Egyptian border, one friend told me: “I left my heart in the country [in Sudan], the people, the street, everything”. I feel grief for what is happening in Sudan and a sense of guilt for not doing more: these emotions have paralyzed my work for some time. Over these last few months, I have come to realize the privilege I have to choose to leave the field when it became too risky, a privilege that my colleagues are not finding (Clark, 2019) and that again questions many of the underlying power inequalities and persistent colonial structures of neoliberal academia (Bilgen and Uluğ, 2022). This journey has been another confirmation that research is never an objective process, never neutral or rational, foremost in emotional terms. Feeling sad, crying, and embracing grief can be part of our lives and of our research (Gillespie and Lopez, 2019). Being honest about this in our

writing is, for me, part of humanized research (making visible the intricate, and precious, web of care that the research is weaved on and without which it would not exist). In speaking frankly about my feelings, I have been encouraged by the work of Ruth Behar (2022) – your book found a reader that needs your words – by recognizing and accepting being a vulnerable observer which, in turn, has emboldened me to open the door to creativity and find my way to share stories. To conclude, I found solace in the words of Hanna Clark (2019, p. 38) that resonate with my process: “We are inherently vulnerable for the fact that our existence as human beings is tied to the existence of others. That vulnerability is entrenched in research: the storytellers we become, the professions built on these stories, and our own well-being are dependent on both the voices and the well-being of others”.

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