

# The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur

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## The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur

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Perhaps as a presage to the discursive divide and historical incongruities that would later plague the premise of its social movement counterpart, the contextual beginnings of Darfur's conflict are highly contested. Within a small reprieve of consensus however, both dominant and peripheral discourses (Tatum, 2010; Mamdani, 2009; Cheadle, 2007; de Waal, 2007) convene on a regional conflict exploding early on in 2003 when a domestic rebel movement raided and seized Sudanese government garrisons in a Darfurian town. The Sudanese government responded, in what had become familiar fashion to its peripheral regions, by launching a counterinsurgency militia to forcibly quell the rebellion. Despite the government's use of similar domestic strategies in the past and the presence of equally violent conflicts in other African countries at the time, this particular ripple incited a waterfall of transnational reaction that has had lasting impacts on both the Sudanese people and social movement theory.

The seeds for this global response were sown almost a half a world away in American soil where the protection of human rights had become an extremely salient issue in light of the country's recent invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. Although this environment eventually catapulted reactions to Darfur onto a global scale, the movement was surprisingly slow moving in its infancy. No alarm sounded until a year after the conflicts started and even then there was no visible public response until months afterward. Despite multiple articles in the Washington Post and New York Times, like almost every other African conflict, the American public initially paid little heed. So how were Darfur whistle blowers, an unlikely English literature professor and a seasoned journalist, able to open the floodgates of American and global public opinion (de Waal, 2007)?

"Save Darfur", as the movement was later named, was a contemporary social phenomenon that was born out of the increasingly globalized nature of civil society. Although contextual complexities have made it difficult to fully understand how a global response of this size was created and sustained, the significance of its impacts on global governance actions is clear. One of the movement's most impressive resolutions has been the indictment of the Sudanese president, who is now the first sitting head of state to be charged by the International Criminal Court (ICC) with genocide (de Waal, 2007). This is no small feat considering the traditional stance of the powerful American hegemony against using the ICC or even invoking the term "genocide" (Lanz, 2009, p. 669). In light of the magnitude of its influence, the following paper will look to deconstruct the foundations, structure and impacts of the Save Darfur movement. In deepening the reader's understanding of this recent case study, I will seek to elucidate how in an increasingly globalized world, civil society has become more effective in inciting transnational movements that have considerable influence on foreign policy. The Save Darfur movement specifically, had a significant effect on American politics and United Nations (UN) processes by framing Darfur's conflict in a flexible, relevant, and resilient manner that both appealed to a broad cross section of the global public as well as forced global intervention. The ease of this outcome however, belies the true complexity of Darfur's conflict and the intricacy involved in understanding the various spheres in which Save Darfur's actors, structures, and discourses intertwine. Therefore, the following paper will present Darfur's conflict and its related social movement in a structure that fosters a thorough understanding of the phenomenon not only in its consequences but its contexts as well. (Mamdani, 2009, p. 5).

The first section will introduce the reader to the Save Darfur framework. The movement's use of the term "genocide", despite controversy surrounding the accuracy of this claim, has been instrumental in adding political pressure due

# **The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur**

Written by Kathryn Brunton

the mounting priority of human rights issues at the global level. The movement was also able to simplify the conflict into terms that were easily understood and relevant to a wide range of individuals and groups throughout the world. In stripping the conflict of its history and politics, Save Darfur was able to create a clear-cut and moralistic story of good and evil that created inherent humanistic suasion. To reinforce the simplicity of this discourse, the movement also racialized the conflict into a clear intersection of “Arab” perpetrators and “African” victims (Mamdani, 2007).

The second section will delve into the specifics as to how and why this framework incited a massive global response within the contexts of a globalizing world. Transnationalizing technologies have created an environment where movements are able to flourish using strategies and tactics that create and maintain solidarity across broad, transnational networks. Save Darfur was particularly effective in its use of symbolic politics (Keck, 1998, p. 16) that drew in and bound together a broad range of constituents. This was largely facilitated by a well-oiled marketing engine at the movement’s core that was able to simultaneously reshape the movement’s broad message for divergent audiences while delivering it through relevant medium. Although this gave the movement the added power of numbers in influencing global governance processes, this section will also look at how the message’s misrepresentation of the true context of the conflict had unintended yet significant effects on Darfur’s fledgling peace process.

Finally, section three will review how the Save Darfur framework was helpful in pressuring and gaining support from states and global governance institutions. The growing importance of human rights discourse in the UN (Grono, 2006) meant that issues involving the term “genocide” gained immediate attention. The United States’ position as a global hegemon was an important consideration in affecting change at the global level as well. Therefore, in addition to global attention, the movement’s framing was also successful in that it engendered the support of the American government. In light of American interventions in other Arab nations at the time, the framework gained powerful hegemonic support through its racialization of “Arab” Darfurian groups as the perpetrators. Although US backing helped to propel Darfurian issues to the global agenda and enabled greater UN involvement, this section will also look at how these resolutions served to undermine the region in reinforcing another African relationship of dependency on the Western World.

## **The Save Darfur Framework**

As Barnett and Duvall (2005) present, Foucault’s theory of power demonstrates, “humans are not only power’s intended targets, but also its effects” (p. 56). This conceptualization is aptly applied to the Save Darfur movement which was able to fix salient meanings and discursively produce identities that have been pivotal in attracting support and generating outcomes. Mamdani explores what Duvall and Barnett (2005) have termed “productive power” (pg. 39 abstract) in his article (2007) and book (2009), both of which are instrumental in explaining “the politics of naming”. He posits that the meanings that Save Darfur invoked by the term “genocide” and the identities created through its racialization of the conflict served the movement’s growth and level of impact well. To grasp the importance and gravity of these labels and their connotations however, it is essential to first review the historical context of the Darfurian conflict and how they in fact deviate from its beginnings.

Darfur is a poor, periphery region of Sudan which is situated in the Horn of Africa. Like most other regions outside of the Sudanese capital of Khartoum, it has been marginalized and exploited by the central government as a result of chronic political instability (de Waal, 2009). Since Sudan’s independence from colonial rule in 1956, the country has had limited peace due to an unending stream of military coups. Therefore, although a center of immense Sudanese power, Khartoum’s intense power struggles amongst multiple elite factions have fostered ineffective domestic strategies based on distrust, and short-term focus (de Waal, 2009). Darfur and other hinterland Sudanese regions have born the negative brunt of this political dynamic in a variety of ways. Darfur’s experience with the central government is unique in that its underlying regional problems of environmental degradation and complex land tenure laws have put added pressure on the relationship. Severe droughts and subsequent desertification in Darfur have pitted various tribes against one another in a fierce battle for arable land which had previously sustained the diverse and mainly pastoral population (de Waal, 2009). Local land laws have aggravated these conflicts as they are both complex in nature as well as contested, with an informal, traditional system currently in application despite a formal, modern system stated within the country’s constitution. The traditional system historically enabled both sedentary

# The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur

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and nomadic tribes to live synergistically in a structure that promotes both agricultural and nomadic livestock pursuits. Landless nomadic tribes had typically entered into lease-like agreements with land-owning sedentary tribes in a unique system that was conducive to both lifestyles (de Waal, 2009). However, as arable land receded, anxiety built around the need for tribes to secure permanent and exclusive access. Therefore, when rebel groups took to the stage in 2003, various regional tribes were already actively engaged in widespread violence across Darfur (de Waal, 2009). Despite land struggles being the fundamental source of the conflict, the new rebel movement's message had a broader focus with "demands for more equitable distribution of power and wealth for all of Sudan" (p. 71). Although seemingly out of step with Darfur's most pressing problems at the time, Southern Sudan's liberation movement had been making significant headway with Khartoum which encouraged similar demands from a neighbouring, marginalized region such as Darfur. Therefore, it is this maelstrom of actors, structures and influences that culminated in the first rebel attack on the government in 2003. Mired in financial debt and "deeply unsettled by the rebels' stunning early military successes" (p. 71), Khartoum chose a cheap, familiar and, once again, inherently short-term solution of mobilizing the region's nomadic, Arab population around the promise of land rights in exchange for their services as an outsourced militia.

Emphasis has been placed on the former adjective "nomadic" rather than the latter "Arab", as multiple sources (Mamdani, 2007 & 2009; de Waal, 2006 & 2007) have highlighted the dominant discourse's inaccurate racialization of a struggle which is in fact based on land. It is actually very difficult to sort the various tribes in this region into two distinct ethnic identities as "they speak the same language (Arabic) and embrace the same religion (Muslim). In addition, also due to the high measure of intermarriage, they can hardly be distinguished in their outward physical appearance" (Mamdani, 2007, p. 7). A UN commission reinforced the absence of racial pressures by stating that "many 'Arabs' in Darfur are opposed to the Janjawid [government militia]" while "at the same time, many "non-Arabs' are fighting with the rebels" (p. 7)

As one can see, untangling the context of the conflict's beginnings is a complex process, and untangling the meaning of the term "genocide" is unfortunately no different. Power (2002) provides a solid foundation in beginning with the UN's definition of genocide as acts, violent or otherwise, carried out with intent to destroy a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group. Power highlights that this definition does not "require the extermination of an entire group, only acts committed with the intent to destroy a substantial part" (p. 57). Therefore although Save Darfur is correct in asserting Darfur's genocidal level of destruction and deaths, it neglects the equally important aspects of intent and the coherence of the victimized group. "...There is no doubt about the horrific nature of the violence against civilians in Darfur" (Mamdani, 2007, p. 5) and that tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people have died. Save Darfur's condensation of the above context however, into a simple story of an Arab government's intentional destruction of its African population misrepresents the true beginnings of Darfur's conflict as a counterinsurgency and its later progression into a civil war. One of Save Darfur's main actors contends that "one of the most consistent responses to genocide and other mass atrocities by governments around the world is to deliberately portray matters as more complex than they really are" (Cheadle, 2007, p. 90). This may be a valid statement; however, I would argue that it does not justify the liberal use of this potent term without a thorough understanding of the situation first.

However accurate the movement's genocidal connotation, Don Cheadle, a Hollywood actor and another main proponent for Save Darfur, aptly noted that by invoking the term "genocide" "the cause suddenly had a different feel; people's sense of responsibility was triggered" (Cheadle, 2007, p. 102). The term lent power to the movement in generating moral suasion and simplifying the conflict into a discourse of good vs. evil that was more easily ingested by a divergent, transnational audience. As Mamdani (2007) points out, the movement brought together "a unified chorus [of] forces that [were] otherwise ranged as adversaries on most important issues of the day: at one end, the Christian right and Zionist lobby; at the other, a mainly school and university-based peace movement" (p. 6). The UN's 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and the Western World's increasing focus on human rights in the new millennium also meant the term "genocide" lent pertinence to the global governance level as well. Lanz (2009) illustrates that "Darfur [...] became a favoured topic of the French and UK governments" which was epitomized in their magazine advertisement of their commitment "to save the Darfuris" (p. 672). Identifying Arabs as the sole perpetrator within this genocide was also particularly poignant to the American government, as it helped to justify their controversial "War on Terror" which was being enacted upon two Arab figures. As Mamdani (2009) demonstrates, in "arabizing" Darfur's conflict and rallying around this point "Darfur

# The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur

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[became] not just an illustration of the grand narratives of the War on Terror but also a part of its justification” (p. 71). Therefore, through the productive power of labels and discourse, Save Darfur was able to propel this civil war into the minds of many and the agendas of the most powerful. All despite the growing number of civil wars, which was highlighted in 1994 by a UN report that stated that “there were 52 major [ongoing] conflicts in 42 countries and another 37 countries affected by political violence” while “half of the world’s states had recently experienced ‘interethnic strife’” (Allen, 2000, p. 164, my emphasis).

## Within a Globalizing Civil Society

In exploring counter-movements to neo-liberal globalization, Evans (2008) emphasizes the greater opportunity for a transnational approach in the twenty-first-century. In light of increasing economic, political and cultural interconnectedness, social movements now have the opportunity to generate greater awareness and wider support (p. 288). Common policy templates at the global level such as the human rights framework are particularly conducive to transborder action. Therefore, “targeting the organizational embodiments of global [...] governance” presents “continual opportunities to bring together movements with a panoply of national origins” (p. 289). Sending and Neumann (2006) highlight the importance of Evans’ claims by noting that a transnationalized civil society has become increasingly crucial to the task of governance at both the national and global level. “Political power [now] operates through rather than on civil society” where “governing is performed through autonomous subjects, not on passive objects.” (p. 669, author’s emphasis). Therefore, both the possibilities to create transnationalized movements and their role as a conduit of state power continue to grow in an increasingly globalized world.

The ability for a movement and its message to transcend multiple borders and cultures is inextricably linked to evolving communication technologies and the contemporary relevance of various medium. As technologies have evolved from the printing press to the Internet, so too has the distance at which information is received and the types of actors that produce it. Ammon (2001) aptly noted that “in addition to collapsing time and space, the evolution of communications technology has consistently eroded monopolies over knowledge” (p. 10). For example, as the web becomes a more crucial form of communication (through websites, emails and social media), populations have greater access to instant and multiple news and information sources from around the world. In addition to making the general public more aware, web communications has also given non-state actors, such as NGOs and INGOs, a more crucial role in the dissemination of news and information. Therefore, with the help of media tools that are relevant to the technological climate, social movements can transcend national borders and more easily disseminate their messages to the global public.

Bob (2002) contends that although some groups have used the Internet effectively to get their message out, “dozens of other insurgents, from Ethiopia’s Oromo Liberation Front to the Western Sahara’s Polisario Front have Web sites and use e-mail. Yet they have failed to spark widespread international enthusiasm” (p. 44). I would argue however, that his later case study of the Zapatistas better illustrates my point in demonstrating how a transnationalized approach was instrumental to internet-based success. Crucial to the Zapatistas’ case was not their direct use of the web communications, but “the appeal of their message (and masked messenger) to international solidarity activists, who then used new technologies to promote the cause to broader audiences” (p. 44). Globalization has given global civil society technological tools such as the internet, as I have illustrated, as well as real-time broadcasting and adaptive marketing strategies, which have become extremely conducive to transnationalizing social movements.

As the technological means for disseminating social messages allows for an increasingly broader reach, the need for a flexible and dynamic message becomes more crucial in attracting and retaining this wider audience. Keck and Sikkink (1998) posit that since transnational advocacy networks “are not powerful in a traditional sense of the word, they must use the power of their information, ideas, and strategies to alter the information and value contexts...” (p. 16). They provide categories of tactics – information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics (p. 16) – that social movements use to persuade, socialize and pressure public opinion. Engle Merry (2006) situates these tactics within a contemporary context by exploring the “localization of human rights” (p. 39). The human rights framework became a global pillar of world order upon the culmination of World War II (Keck, 1998, p. 84). Although it is often rejected as a strictly Western concept that is ill suited to other cultures, Keck and Sikkink argue that human rights “resonate with basic ideas of human dignity common to most cultures” (p. 205). Therefore,

# The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur

Written by Kathryn Brunton

NGOs and INGOs often strive to translate local issues of unequal wealth and power into a human rights framework as it brokers greater resonance amongst transnational audiences.

Save Darfur's framing of the Darfurian conflict as a human rights issue where Arabs were committing genocide was conducive to the social and political transnational climates in multiple ways. As mentioned previously, a civil war in the peripheral region of Southern Sudan, which had pitted Arab Muslims against African Christians, was moving towards a resolution. A coalition of Christian organizations who had advocated for the South therefore served as "a pool of experienced and well-connected advocates" (de Waal, 2007, p. 341) that rallied around the similarly framed conflict in Darfur. Additionally, the year the alarm was sounded was also, coincidentally, the ten year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Therefore, by invoking the term "genocide", Save Darfur was able to draw on the decennial honouring of the Rwandan conflict to renew a transnational sense of guilt in failing to stop a similar instance of senseless violence 10 years earlier (Mamdani, 2007, p. 7). In addition to drawing in the general public, the genocidal frame also had a particularly powerful influence on Jewish coalitions due to its links with the Holocaust. The racialization frame also gave Americans a rallying point that was much simpler than their current "War on Terror". Whereas Iraq was politically messy, Darfur became "a place without history and without politics; simply a site where perpetrators clearly identified as 'Arabs'" (p. 5) were more easily vilified. In addition to relevant and flexible framing, Save Darfur gathered added support through its effective use of and promotion through mainstream medium, which was particularly pertinent to North American student networks. Internet campaigns, mainstream TV network promotions, high profile American actors and athletes, and the promotion of a recently released Hollywood movie on genocide all ensured that Darfur was a topical issue to a massive youth network.

However, as both Bob (2002) and Gill (2009) demonstrate in their exploration of transnational solidarity, in striving to sell a social message at the global level, transnational movements often lose sight of the realities at the local level. As a result, demands for solutions can be made in isolation from or in opposition to the local's best interests. In Save Darfur's case, introducing a human rights-based discourse meant that later resolutions were based on individual justice rather than peace and reconciliation. As an illustration, the focus of one of the main local actors, the African Union (AU), was to foster a Darfurian peace process. This goal however, was completely at odds with Save Darfur's call for immediate justice and external intervention. Save Darfur's insistence "led to the use of 'deadline diplomacy'" (Lanz, 2009, p. 676), which in turn brought the peace talks to a premature end. Therefore, not only were Save Darfur's demands in opposition to local interests, they also served to undermine a fragile peace agreement that could have drastically altered the course of Darfur's violent conflict.

## Within a Globalizing Governance System

Although Save Darfur is significant in that it is perhaps the largest transnational movement since anti-apartheid (Lanz, 2009, p. 669), it remains to be seen how this was effectively translated to influence international foreign policy. Held and McGrew (2007) provide a departure point in theorizing that:

The locus of effective political power can no longer be assumed to be simply national governments – effective power is shared and bartered by diverse forces and agencies at national, regional and international levels. (p. 211).

Barnett and Duvall (2005) expand on this theory by including the local level as well in observing the compulsory power of transnational movements on global governance processes. They posit that actors within transnational movements "have demonstrated the ability to use rhetorical and symbolic tools, as well as shaming tactics to get states, multinational corporations, and others to comply with the values and norms that they advance" (p. 60). In light of them speaking on the topic of global governance, I will assume that their use of the term "other" encompasses the UN, considering it is the fundamental institution in shaping global governance policy. In exploring the reversal of global power on the local, it is important to note that the UN's ability to intervene in Darfurian national affairs is restricted by its charter. Sassen (2005) demonstrates however, that "specialised transnational regimes being implemented to govern global processes" (p. 524) create novel borderings. These regimes therefore permit interventions in special circumstances as a result.

# The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur

Written by Kathryn Brunton

One specific transnational regime that has bearing on the Darfur case study is that of international human rights. As mentioned previously, the human rights framework has become a main pillar of the post WWII world order (Keck, 1998, p. 84), which means that in addition to broadening opportunities for transnational support, the human rights framing also lends power to an issue's ability to generate intervention-based resolutions. In juxtaposition to the promotion of human rights however, the UN charter lists the promotion of national sovereignty as one of its basic mandates (Grono, 2006). The relative importance of these opposing forces within global governance processes has shifted back and forth since the UN's inception as a reflection of changing world opinions on the proper balance of "the rights of states with the rights of people" (Held, 2007, p. 192). In Darfur's case one such shift occurred in 2005 when the UN Commission for Africa reported that poor African development rates would persist as long as national and interregional conflicts continued unchecked (Grono, 2006, p. 621). As a result, the UN approved a "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) formulation that essentially condoned humanitarian intervention and the use of international force when states failed to protect their populations against "genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity" (p. 623, my emphasis).

In addition to framing issues effectively for international regimes, issues also have certain challenges to overcome within institutional structures and in dealing with specific actors in the global governance process. In Barnett and Duvall's (2005) conceptualization of power, "the institutional core of global governance, while seemingly resting on the production of joint gains through cooperation or coordination" (p. 59) also harbours asymmetrical institutional power structures. The United States, through its position as a global hegemon, therefore operates as the "epicenter" (p. 59) of these structures: a position reinforced by the compulsory power of its "decisive material advantages" (p. 59). This is an accurate reflection of the UN system where the United States has large levels of both institutional and compulsory power, while Darfur is relegated to the far less powerful periphery.

Save Darfur's genocidal framing of the Darfurian conflict had massive implications for garnering the attention of a wide, transnationalized audience. However, it also played a crucial role in the global governance process as it lent added pressure for interventionist resolutions in an increasingly rights-focused, post-R2P environment. As a direct result, Darfur currently plays host to "the world's largest humanitarian operation, alongside one of the largest and most expensive peacekeeping missions..." (Lanz, 2009, p. 669). Although the Sudanese prime minister has yet to be apprehended, the genocide label has also led to the ICC's issuance of two warrants for his arrest, one of which encompasses charges of genocide. Save Darfur's framing, as previously mentioned has also been instrumental in garnering the support of the American government: a powerful actor in the global governance process as Barnett and Duvall demonstrated. According to Power (2002), since before the Holocaust, American governments have been historically reluctant to label conflicts as genocide. They have also been staunchly against the use of the ICC due to other issues not relevant to this discussion. Therefore, the combination of President Bush's 2004 admission of the Darfurian conflict as genocide and the American government's abstention in referring Darfur to the ICC "was an unimaginable coup" (de Waal, 2007, p. 343).

However, to ensure a balanced perspective, one must revisit Bob (2002) and Gill's (2009) case studies of failed transnational social movements due to global misrepresentations. Other outcomes, such as Save Darfur's push for a UN peacekeeping mission in Darfur in 2005, served to undermine the region as it effectively replaced an AU mission (AMIS) that had been in Darfur since 2004 (Mamdani, 2007). Although the AU was suffering from funding issues at the time, instead of redirecting aid and reinforcing the legitimacy of this African institution – that had proven its competency in brokering a peace process – Save Darfur insisted on UN intervention. Not only did this replacement force prove no more successful than AMIS, it served to reinforce yet another relationship of dependency on the Western World.

## Conclusion

After deconstructing the conflict and social movement within a thorough historical, social and political context on both a local and global scale, one is better able to appreciate the amazing accomplishments of the Save Darfur movement. Perhaps the most important lesson however, is that if we assume the world is to continue to globalize, an

# The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur

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increasingly transnational civil society will have mounting power to affect foreign policies: both positive and negative. The nature and level of violence perpetrated in Darfur was heinous with hundreds of thousands dead and many more severely and irreparably traumatized. The following is UN report excerpt that demonstrates only one example of the sheer brutality:

Various sources reported widespread rape and other serious forms of violence committed against women and girls in all three states of Darfur. According to these sources, the rape of individual victims was multiple, carried out by more than one man and accompanied by other severe forms of violence, including beating and whipping. In some incidences, the women were further berated and called "slaves or Tora Bora [black dust]." (Tatum, 2010, p. 150).

Acts like these are not unique to the Darfurian conflict. Civil wars within former colonial states has risen drastically since World War II and according to a 1994 UNDP report, the percentage of civilian vs. military war casualties has risen drastically over the 20th century (Allen, 2000, p. 167). Consequently, there is an urgent need for research that fosters a deeper understanding of the structures, external forces and actors that cause these types of conflicts. In the interim, civil society groups need to exert greater caution in expanding their analysis of conflicts beyond consequences to the tangled yet crucial contexts as well.

Although Save Darfur achieved monumental proportions in the size of its constituency and significance of its impact on global governance processes, it also served to severely undermine peace efforts and reinforce African dependencies. One of its most negative influences however, has been Save Darfur's racialization of the conflict. In addition to inferring impunity on the victimized "African" groups which have committed brutal acts of violence as well – the ICC has charged rebel group leaders with crimes against humanity – this framing technique has had the lasting impact of entrenching antagonistic, racial identities that had not previously existed. de Waal (2007) identifies that this racialization has had a radical change as he notes that "in 2005 and 2006, a number of non-Arab groups felt they had no choice but to organize their self defence on a tribal basis, as opposed to based on local communities" (p. 301). Save Darfur therefore serves a poignant case study of the powerfully negative impacts – despite being unintended – that an increasingly global or transnational civil society can generate. It is my hope that it will serve as a cautionary yet inspirational tale for social movements that are guaranteed to be increasingly monumental in the future.

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# **The Growing Power of Transnational Social Movements: The Cautionary Case of Darfur**

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