

# A Conversation with Nisreen Elsaim on the United Nations, Sudan, Youth, and Climate Change

Interview by Hafsa Ahmed

## **Editorial information**

This publication is produced by the Life & Peace Institute (LPI) with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The articles are the opinion and research of the authors not the donor or LPI. LPI has provided editorial support to the author, however, the content, opinions, and recommendations are those of the authors.

## **Editorial principles**

The Horn of Africa Bulletin ('the Bulletin') is a publication that monitors and analyses current and pressing peace and security topics in the Horn to provide knowledgeable and locally informed analysis for relevant debates and policy processes. For close to 30 years, the Bulletin has published current analysis on regional peace and security issues prioritising local insights, community perspectives, new methods, and alternative opinions. The material published in HAB represents a variety of sources and does not necessarily express the views of the LPI.

## **Comment policy**

All comments posted are moderated before publication.

## **Feedback and Subscriptions**

For subscription matters, feedback and suggestions contact LPI's Horn of Africa Regional Programme at [HAB@life-peace.org](mailto:HAB@life-peace.org). For more LPI publications and resources, please visit: [www.life-peace.org/resources](http://www.life-peace.org/resources)

## **Life & Peace Institute**

Kungsängsgatan 17  
753 22 Uppsala, Sweden

ISSN 2002-1666

## **About Life & Peace Institute**

We build peace one change at a time. For more than 35 years, we have promoted nonviolent approaches to conflict in the Horn and the Great Lakes Region. Working across 8 key programmes in 6 countries and with more than 70 staff, we support the capacity of people living with violent conflict to transform their own communities and societies into inclusive, just, and peaceful ones. We also work to influence regional and global policy agendas, making sure local voices are heard around the world.

In October 2022, Hafsa Ahmed, Global Policy Officer at the Life & Peace Institute, met with Nisreen Elsaïm. Nisreen is from Sudan and is one of seven members of the United Nations Secretary-General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. At the time of the interview, Nisreen chaired the Youth Advisory Group. The discussion focused on her role on the Youth Advisory Group, the challenges of climate change in Sudan, and how youth can play a role in climate-focused policy processes.

**Hafsa:** *Nisreen, tell us a little about yourself.*

**Nisreen:** My name is Nisreen Elsaïm. I am from Sudan, and I am currently the chair of the UN Secretary-General Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. Prior to this tenure, I was the chair of the Sudanese Organisation on Climate Change and I have been working on climate change for over ten years.

**Hafsa:** *What is the mandate of the Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change? What role do they play and how many people are there?*

**Nisreen:** The Youth Advisory Group was created at the request of young people at the Youth Climate Summit on the sidelines of the 2019 UN General Assembly. They asked for a way of reaching the secretary-general and he responded by creating the Youth Advisory Group. We are seven people representing the world regions. Our main mandate is to advise the secretary-general – to bring our young perspective and be the bridge between young people and the secretary-general. We want to make the UN friendly to young people and bring them closer to the decision-makers at the international and national levels.

**Hafsa:** *Beyond the advisory role are you invited to decision-making rooms?*

**Nisreen:** Sometimes but not all the time. With climate change, there is some room for young people when it comes to decision-making. The decision-makers might not do what we suggested but at least we are there. This is the first step. Listening and doing are the next steps.

**Hafsa:** *Hafsa: What would you say are the main threats of climate action to people in Sudan?*

**Nisreen:** The main threat is that the livelihood of Sudanese people depends on climate-sensitive activities. Many people depend on agriculture and pastoralism, and most agriculture in the country is rain-fed not system irrigation. Any variation in

the rain has a significant impact on the agricultural sector. One of the main drivers of conflict is climate change because of how it impacts conflict over natural resources and migration. Host communities are not always welcoming. One of the biggest conflicts in Sudan is the conflict between farmers and pastoralists.

Temperature rise is another threat. The past five years have been extremely hot summers and almost no winters. Climate change makes everything extreme. If we do not have rain, it's drought. If we have a lot of rain, it floods. This also makes it harder to build infrastructure, plan for a business, especially an agri-business, and decision making is challenging when it is hard to predict what to expect next. Another problem we have in Sudan now is political instability. We haven't had a government for a year now. This has made international interactions, internal planning, and accessing funds challenging.

**Hafsa:** *You mentioned the conflict between the farmers and the pastoralists. Can you expand on how these conflicts are occurring in Sudan?*

**Nisreen:** The normal equilibrium of the system is that the pastoralists are in the North. Farmers have land in the South. Pastoralists pass through farming areas in the winter once farmers have already collected the cash crops. Their animals eat the leftovers of the harvests, while also tilling the lands with their hooves and leaving behind the waste that fertilises the land. Pastoralists then wait for the rain and go back during summer, which repeats the process mentioned above.

Now, the seasons are not the same. Winter might come later, and the rain is unpredictable. It might rain or might not. As a result, the movement of pastoralists has changed. Farmers' ploughing schedules have changed. Problems occur when the pastoralists move before the harvest. The cattle then eat the cash crop. Farmers kill cattle to save crops or as revenge. Then conflict escalates and pastoralists kill the farmers.

One suggestion to solve this problem was to have paths designated for cattle movement. But these paths are no longer agricultural land, which means cattle don't have the same access to food and water. Now, farmers and pastoralists have problems since the cattle don't have food during movements and farmers are losing out on the benefits of cattle migrations. The equilibrium of both benefitting from each other is not there. This problem is driving conflict.

**Hafsa:** *Are there other conflicts that impact people beyond the farmers and the pastoralists? How has climate change impacted people living in urban areas?*

**Nisreen:** They are linked together. Many people whose farms have failed or whose cattle have died are moving to urban areas. When they get there, they take on informal jobs. Some participate in crime to earn money. Challenges getting jobs, particularly for those without skills and education outside of farming and pastoralism, lead some to steal.

Another thing is that the infrastructure of the country is not ready for floods. Floods are destroying houses and streets. Even if the infrastructure is not destroyed, mudslides are creating problems for movement. The pool of water is a habitat for mosquitos and has increased malaria cases. We also don't have sanitation systems, so when there are floods, the sewage makes it to the drinking water, causing cholera outbreaks and other diseases.

**Hafsa:** *Are there awareness efforts to engage the pastoralists and farmers to sensitise them on the root cause of these conflicts?*

**Nisreen:** Yes, we noticed that people in rural areas feel climate change more than people in urban areas, but they do not understand why it is happening. They see the symptoms, but they do not know the causes. We tell them that solving this issue is complicated and must happen globally. But what you can do is called an adaptation, and adaptation for many here means climate-smart agriculture. Many things soothe the impact of climate change but do not solve the issue.

**Hafsa:** *What does the Higher Council for the Environment and Natural Resources (HCENR) do? Do they engage farmers? What kind of initiatives do they carry out? Do they bring conflicting parties together to dialogue?*

**Nasreen:** The HCENR is an inter-ministerial government agency responsible for the protection and sustainable development of natural resources in the country. The problem is mainly about adaptation. The HCENR is focused on adapting to climate change, so they don't interact with problems like peacebuilding directly even though they are trying to prevent the conflict from happening in the first place. If there is an expected problem, for example, early warning systems indicate an upcoming failed rainy season, HCENR

will provide water so that farmers can sustain their agriculture even if the rains do not happen.

**Hafsa:** *How long have you worked with the Youth Advisory Group? What do you think are achievements you have contributed to?*

**Nisreen:** The achievements of the Group are hard to measure. Since our mandate is to advise the secretary-general, it can be hard to see how that advice leads to achievements. We hold regional and international consultations with young people regularly and report back to the secretary-general. We think it is an achievement that the highest policy maker in the UN understands the youth's wants and needs. That is something!

Yet, I think one of the things we proved is that young people can be professional in their approaches and their work. We started something because many organisations and bodies are now trying to develop youth advisory groups modelled on us. They realise that having young people included is important.

**Hafsa:** *What are young people in Sudan doing in response to climate change?*

**Nisreen:** Unfortunately, there are numerous efforts from young people, however, they still don't have enough knowledge to participate in solving the problem. Not all of course! Some young people who are well-capacitated are doing wonderful work, but most of the population of Sudan is now in the stage of raising their awareness, learning more about climate change, listening, and trying to figure out how things are happening and how we can solve it or at least be part of the solution.

**Hafsa:** *Thank you so much, Nisreen!*

*N/B This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.*