BETTER ASSISTANCE IN CRISES RESEARCH

# Supporting Mutual Aid in Sudan: Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Risk and Accountability

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# Summary

Mutual aid has been a lifeline for many in Sudan's conflict. This study explores how mechanisms of social solidarity have been shaped by the war as well as by their interaction with external funders. It adds to the evidence base on community-led response during protracted crises and on conflict sensitivity, and considers how international actors could strengthen the quality of their partnership with grass-roots bodies by reconsidering approaches to risk and accountability.

### Keywords

Sudan; mutual aid; locally led; conflict sensitivity; humanitarian response; social assistance; social protection

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# Executive summary

Undertaken as part of the Better Assistance in Crises (BASIC) Research programme, this study sets out to answer two questions:

1. How have community-based social support mechanisms and their capacities in Sudan been affected by, and how have they evolved and adapted in response to, the current conflict?
2. What are the lessons from this experience for external actors which provide cash and food transfers in conflict, and for longer-term support for social assistance in Sudan?

The research deepens the evidence base on the community-based response during Sudan's conflict through a thorough literature review and remote interviews undertaken between October 2024 and January 2025. The interviewees were 18 community volunteers and local and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with grass-roots groups, in addition to 16 international aid actors. Building on a previous study (Birch, Carter and Satti 2024), this research deliberately includes perspectives of volunteers from a range of conflict-affected areas and types of groups, as well as voices who may not have participated in other research. The semi-guided discussions with informants have produced a rare insight into the experiences of diverse grass-roots groups in different areas in Sudan.

The research captures how local action is embedded in communities and because of being so embedded, how this action is conflict-sensitive, accountable and adaptive in ways that have implications for how international actors approach risk and accountability for humanitarian and development aid.

## Key findings

The following findings are relevant for community volunteers and coordinators, local and national NGOs, international NGOs, UN agencies and donors.

- Grass-roots initiatives in Sudan are providing essential support in the face of great need, including to women and girls and displaced people, and at great personal risk. Volunteers have died, some deliberately targeted, and others have been detained and injured. Their activities depend upon community and diaspora support and some groups receive some external aid. Volunteers we talked with explained how their conflict-sensitive practice relies on their relationships of trust with communities and their skills in communication and adaptive management. However, limited funding, widespread need, and successive waves of displacement impede their conflict-sensitive practice. Furthermore, as the crisis has extended and deepened, volunteers have become exhausted and traumatised.
- Some donors have flexed their funding modalities and bureaucratic requirements to support these community initiatives, mainly by providing group cash transfers, with the Sudan Humanitarian Fund and some international NGOs playing key intermediary roles and adapting their risk management approaches. Yet a compliance-first mindset still appears to drive many funding decisions. Donor and intermediary approaches to political, reputational, and financial risk, and how this is transferred down aid delivery chains, can limit the quantity and quality of external aid to grass-roots groups. Support for the protection of community volunteers has also been slow and uncoordinated. Donors should clearly commit to sharing the consequences of risk and provide grass-roots groups with capacity alongside financial support.
- Some international actors are engaging with grass-roots groups using approaches that prioritise open conversations and support local leadership on aid design and implementation. National NGOs can play a key bridging role between external actors and grass-roots initiatives, but they are sometimes bypassed. They also require funding to (re)build and sustain their capacities lost during the conflict. Partnerships between international aid and community groups, and broader civil society, can learn from past experiences of empowering survivor and community-led response in Sudan and elsewhere.
- As international actors seek to build the evidence base on the effectiveness of their funding to community-based initiatives, this should avoid overburdening grass-roots mechanisms with complex reporting requirements. External partners can learn from and support local groups' own reporting and monitoring processes, as these underpin their conflict-sensitive practice and accountability to their communities.

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# List of acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| BASIC | Better Assistance in Crises |
| BHA | Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance |
| CBPF | country-based pooled fund |
| CCS | Cash Consortium of Sudan |
| CWG | Cash Working Group |
| ECHO | European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| ERR | Emergency Response Room |
| FCDO | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office |
| GCT | Group Cash Transfer |
| HAC | Humanitarian Aid Commission |
| IDP | internally displaced person |
| INGO | international NGO |
| LCC | Localization Coordination Committee |
| NGO | non-governmental organisation |
| NRC | Norwegian Refugee Council |
| OCHA | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| RSF | Rapid Support Forces |
| SAF | Sudanese Armed Forces |
| SARHO | Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations |
| SLA | Sudan Liberation Army |
| UN | United Nations |
| USAID | U.S. Agency for International Development |
| WFP | World Food Programme |

# 1. Introduction

In Sudan's 'spiralling' emergency (UNHCR and UNICEF 2024), community social solidarity is seen as the one bright spot – a 'beacon of hope' (Osman and Rehman 2024). Neither state social protection nor international aid can respond adequately to the 30.4 million people – that is, 64 per cent of the population – who need critical assistance in 2025; of this figure, 26 million people are facing acute food insecurity (OCHA 2024d). The Famine Review Committee of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) reported on 24 December 2024 that famine (IPC Phase 5) was detected in August 2024 in Zamzam camp, North Darfur state; that it had persisted and expanded to Al Salam and Abu Shouk camps and the Western Nuba Mountains from October to November 2024; that it was projected to expand between December 2024 and May 2025 to North Darfur localities; and that a risk of famine was projected in the Central Nuba Mountains and in areas in North and South Darfur with likely high influxes of internally displaced people (IDPs) (Bilukha *et al*. 2024). At the end of January 2025, the World Food Programme (WFP) reported 27 locations that were in or at risk of famine, with more than a third of children in hardest-hit regions acutely malnourished – 'well above the threshold for a famine declaration' (WFP 2025). These projections do not take into account further disruptions following the USAID funding freeze which in February 2025 was reported to have led to the closure of more than 1,100 emergency food kitchens (Plett Usher and Soy 2025).

A lifeline for many has been aid organised by communities themselves, grounded in a rich Sudanese tradition of social solidarity and organised around familial, neighbourhood or other ties. Community groups have become hubs for local actors to come together and provide a range of essential services, including community kitchens, clean water, shelter and safe spaces for women and girls, body retrieval and burial, basic medical care, evacuation assistance, and support to the victims of sexual violence, among other activities (Birch *et al*. 2024; Carstensen and Sebit 2023; Olson *et al*. 2024; Shabaka 2023).

There has been a groundswell of calls for the global aid system to support these grass-roots mechanisms (Bradbury *et al*. 2023; Sudan INGO Forum 2024). In particular, emergency response rooms (ERRs) have attracted a growing 'buzz' (Loy and Worley 2025). The ERRs were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2024 and 2025; their representatives visited the United Nations (UN) in New York (UN News 2024). Upon taking up his post in November 2024, one of the first calls made by the new UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher was to an ERR volunteer in Khartoum (Fletcher 2024). It is worth mentioning that a variety of community support mechanisms are active in Sudan including women's, youth and neighbourhood initiatives. However, the proportion of overall official humanitarian funding that has reached community-based groups is very low, likely barely 1 per cent. No accurate figure exists as official aid funding to the groups passes through intermediary UN agencies and international NGOs, and sometimes also national NGOs, and is not comprehensively tracked.

This paper sets out the findings of a qualitative research study into community-based social support mechanisms in Sudan and their relationship with external aid since the conflict began in April 2023. We look at how these mechanisms have evolved and adapted during this conflict and at how contact with official aid has affected their approaches and capacities. We use various terms to refer to these local initiatives, including mutual aid and local community groups (Box 1.1).

## Box 1.1: Terminology

We use the term 'community-based social support mechanisms' to emphasise that we are concerned with initiatives that are organic to, emerge from, and are led by communities; that we are focused on social support, in particular food and cash assistance as well as other connected activities and services; and that we are looking at a range of mechanisms embedded in Sudanese society that take a variety of organisational forms. Other terms in the literature, and which we use interchangeably as shorthand for these initiatives, include grass-roots mechanisms, mutual aid, and self-help groups. Community-based social support mechanisms in Sudan are best understood as solidarity nodes that provide an essential social safety net for people in need, and that are comprised of active women and men in the community with links to a wide range of humanitarian actors.

We use the term 'external aid actors' to refer to the full range of non-Sudanese aid organisations involved in the provision and/or implementation of aid in Sudan. These include bilateral and multilateral donors, UN agencies, international NGOs, and other international organisations. To avoid repeating the full term each time, we sometimes use external actors or international actors.

Sudanese diaspora supporters can be seen as part of community-based support across international networks and are a critical source of funding for mutual aid initiatives in Sudan. This paper's primary focus is on the engagement of the international aid programming and financing system, over which Sudanese actors, in Sudan or among the diaspora, exercise limited leverage.

*Source: Authors' own.*

Undertaken as part of the BASIC Research programme, our study seeks to answer two questions, with findings relevant for community volunteers and coordinators, local, national and international NGOs, UN agencies, and donors.

1. How have community-based social support mechanisms and their capacities in Sudan been affected by, and how have they evolved and adapted in response to, the current conflict?
2. What are the lessons from this experience for external actors which provide cash and food transfers in conflict, and for longer-term support for social assistance in Sudan?

To answer these questions, we pursued three lines of enquiry that build on the findings of our previous research on conflict-sensitive social protection in the Horn of Africa published in 2023 (Birch *et al*. 2023), and a follow-up in-depth study on Sudan published in 2024 (Birch *et al*. 2024). These lines of enquiry are the intersecting themes of conflict sensitivity, risk management, and accountability.

- **Conflict sensitivity** can be understood on a continuum from the minimalist 'do no harm' to purposeful and positive engagement with peace and conflict dynamics (Birch *et al*. 2023). While local actors in Sudan may have the contextual understanding and relationships of trust with communities that are fundamental to conflict-sensitive practice, their subsidiary position in the aid system, combined with external actors' restrictive stance on risk, means that local actors are often subcontracted to deliver activities rather than empowered to lead interventions. In this study we explore how conflict-sensitive practice of community-based groups is affected by their interaction with external partners.
- **Risk management** by donors, and the consequences for their implementing partners, can have critical implications for the conflict sensitivity of aid, as decisions on risk dictate whether funding modalities and interventions can flex and adapt to changes in the operational environment. Furthermore, risk is often transferred downwards in aid delivery chains, with often limited agreement between international and local actors on how best to share risk. We consider how approaches to risk by both community groups and their external partners shape conflict-sensitive, locally led aid.
- **Accountability** to affected people is another priority for humanitarian actors and is central to conflict-sensitive practice (Birch *et al*. 2024). In this study we explore whether and how relationships of trust and accountability between grass-roots groups and the people they serve are changed by external aid. Is downwards accountability supported or undermined by upward accountability to donors? How does this in turn affect conflict-sensitive practice?

# 2. Methods

We explored the research questions through a mix of literature review and remote, semi-guided stakeholder interviews conducted between October 2024 and January 2025. The thorough (but non-rigorous) literature review identified relevant materials through keyword searching (in English) in online search engines and the online resources of international aid and research organisations; searching through the reference lists of other reports; and looking at documents shared by stakeholders. We carried out 18 interviews with community volunteers and with staff from local and national NGOs working with grass-roots groups, seeking to build a rich data set through broad coverage. Our interviews were representative of a range of situations – of *de facto* governing authority, conflict intensity, and displacement dynamics – as well as type of group, considering dimensions such as their origins, longevity, formality, thematic focus, leadership, services, beneficiaries, funding, effectiveness, and coordination. Of our 18 informants, 11 were from ERRs while seven were from other grass-roots initiatives. Geographically, the interviews covered most conflict-affected regions, including Darfur, Kordofan, Blue Nile, Sennar, Al Jazirah, Khartoum, and eastern Sudan. In addition, we conducted 16 interviews with international NGOs, UN agencies, donors, diaspora organisations, and researchers, again identified through purposive sampling and referrals. Our findings are based on this comparatively small sample of informants and relied on remote interviewing, which has its limitations. Our study did not allow for independent follow-up, and therefore we are unable to verify informants' claims. Nevertheless, we sought to take a critical approach, triangulating perspectives and findings by comparing across individual informants and different categories of informants, and also undertaking a wide reading of the literature.

We intentionally set time aside at the start of the study to consult with selected national and international actors on our focus and research methods. We were acutely aware of the personal risks to informants, particularly in areas controlled by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and of the need to be sensitive to the trauma they are living through, as well as the need to avoid overburdening the same individuals with repeated research requests (Conflict Sensitivity Facility 2023a). Learning from our previous research and that of Shabaka (2023b; 2024c), we devised a careful approach for identifying participants and eliciting their informed consent, building on personal networks and introductions as well as our previous research on Sudan. When internet access facilitated by Starlink was deemed too risky for volunteers in RSF-controlled areas and in other locales, we adapted our approach on a case-by-case basis to interview representatives from national NGOs and civil society organisations that work with these groups. To protect the participants in this study, we refer to the regions where their grass-roots organisations provide their services, without directly referring to their communities.

Our report begins by setting out our findings on the community-based social support mechanisms and the support they have received from external actors (Section 3). A discussion of our three themes – conflict sensitivity, risk and accountability – follows in Section 4. The report ends, in Sections 5 and 6, with concluding remarks and recommendations.

# 3. Findings

## 3.1 Community-based social support mechanisms in Sudan

In this section we summarise our findings on the functions, capacities, activities, and evolution of grass-roots humanitarian initiatives during the current conflict.

### 3.1.1 Emergence of mutual aid

**As in previous crises, a wide range of community-based mechanisms have emerged to assist people affected by violence, displacement, and other shocks.** Voluntarism is integral to Sudanese culture. Across the country, people have spontaneously organised themselves to deal with the ramifications of conflict on their communities, helping each other as well as fellow Sudanese who have been displaced from other states, supported internationally by a large diaspora (Shabaka 2023). The emergence of these initiatives is often perceived as filling the gap created by the evacuation of international organisations from Sudan or the collapse of government social assistance programmes in many parts of the country (Shabaka 2023; Fitzpatrick *et al*. 2022). In fact, mutual aid precedes the presence of official social protection programmes and is delivered irrespective of any assistance provided by formal institutions. Whether it is the regular sharing of meals in the practice of *darra* or the *ad hoc* collective work to rebuild destroyed houses through the practice of *nafeer*, socially embedded community support networks have always been 'the first line of defence against shocks' (Birch 2022: 13; Birch *et al*. 2024).

**These community mechanisms can range from a small kitchen in a single neighbourhood, to an emergency response room (ERR)**[1] **which works across a whole town, or even a consortium of initiatives coordinating their interventions across a whole state** (Shabaka 2023). Some of these structures were present before the war, active in cultural or political domains (Shabaka 2024b), but the suffering of fellow citizens encouraged them to adapt their objectives and provide relief to the injured and displaced. Some organisers of ERRs have political roots in earlier neighbourhood civic action that was in response to shrinking civic space and increasing repression under the government of Omar El-Bashir. These civic action movements developed into loose coalitions called Resistance Committees that organised non-violent protest and offered visionary local democratic governance models (Birch *et al*. 2024). Meanwhile, three of the 18 grass-roots organisations interviewed were established with a cultural, peace-building or women's economic empowerment focus, and then shifted their priorities towards humanitarian action in response to the ongoing crisis.[2] Those groups set up after April 2023 began at different times and in response to different events. In eastern, central, and southern Sudan, many local initiatives and ERRs were established immediately after the war erupted. In parts of Darfur, some ERRs only started recently but they build on pre-existing community-led activities. It is worth noting that many formal and informal structures in Darfur were already operational when the conflict broke out in Khartoum. This is attributed partly to the fact that the region has long been affected by protracted crisis, and partly to the decades of development interventions that invested in community-based organisation (Shabaka 2024b).

**In some parts of the country (Khartoum, eastern Sudan, and parts of Darfur) grass-roots initiatives have established coordination bodies at locality or state levels.** Coordination allows them to identify gaps, avoid duplication, and collectively tap into funding opportunities.[3]

**A nation-wide Localization Coordination Council (LCC) has been established which brings together ERRs with national and international NGOs** (Kuka 2024) **and has made efforts to strengthen harmonisation, such as through a single reporting system for ERRs.** In the next section we discuss how this relates to formal international aid structures. In their first newsletter published in December 2024, the LCC and ERRs reported providing services in nine states (Khartoum, South Darfur, Central Darfur, North

[1] Emergency response rooms (ERRs) are local crisis management groups that bring together a range of civil society actors including resistance committees, women's and youth associations, Sufi sects and other faith groups, private sector bodies, and professional and student associations. ERRs are mostly unregistered with the authorities. Their legitimacy is derived from their communities. Like many other community-based social support mechanisms, food and cash assistance is one of many services they provide (Birch *et al*. 2024).

[2] Interviews with informants from grass-roots organisations in Blue Nile, eastern Sudan and Kordofan.

[3] Key informant interviews (KIIs) with two ERRs in Darfur and three youth initiatives in eastern Sudan.

Darfur, East Darfur, West Darfur, West Kordofan, Kassala and Sennar), and contributing and coordinating with other emergency rooms in other states (Emergency Rooms of the LCC 2025).

**There are no robust estimates of the numbers of mutual aid groups active across Sudan.** According to some accounts, in 2024 there were 335 communal kitchens, more than 40 health centres and more than 75 women's cooperatives managed and supported by ERRs in Khartoum alone (Kuka 2024). In Darfur, in April–July 2024, Shabaka identified 35 grass-roots organisations of which 21 are ERRs that provide services in different localities and six are ERRs based in a specific locality (Shabaka 2024b). In the Zamzam IDP camp in North Darfur, in November 2024, eight communal kitchens were preparing two meals every day for around 10,000 arrivals (ICRC 2024).

### 3.1.2 Diversity of operational contexts and risks

**The operational environments in which social support mechanisms provide their services vary significantly, shaped by differing historical and contemporary realities** (Box 3.1). The context could be massive influxes of IDPs, as in eastern Sudan or Central Darfur; a blockade, such as Al Fasher in North Darfur and Dilling in South Kordofan; or pervasive lawlessness, criminality, and attacks on civilians, as in many parts of Darfur, Al Jazirah and Khartoum. In areas affected by recurrent waves of IDPs, particularly under Sudanese Armed Forces' (SAF) control, mutual aid groups work in a highly securitised and policed environment that is shaped by fear and suspicion of the authorities, due to the political antecedents of some groups, or because of their funding from external supporters (Eltahir and Abdelaziz 2024; Nasir 2024). In insecure environments under the control of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), uncertainty prevails, and the delivery of aid could be life-threatening to those involved. Under blockade conditions, the supply of food and cash is extremely limited, and the price of food is soaring. Our interviews found that community-based mechanisms across Sudan carefully consider the conflict dynamics in their respective environments.

### Box 3.1: Evolving zones of control and violence in Sudan and displacement dynamics, as of 7 March 2025

Following the outbreak of war in April 2023 in Khartoum, military confrontation has spread across the country. Some areas have been relatively stable but there has been significant fighting in many others, including Khartoum and the wider Khartoum region, Al Jazirah, White Nile, Sennar, the Kordofans and the Darfurs (ACLED 2025).

By April 2024, the RSF had the upper hand as they pushed the SAF outside Khartoum and controlled large parts of central, western and southern Sudan, leaving the SAF in control of the east and north (Crisis Group 2025). By early 2025, the SAF was in an offensive position, pushing the RSF out of the capital of Al Jazirah state, parts of Sennar State, and territories in eastern and western Khartoum State (Crisis Group 2025). The situation is fast-moving and nuanced, with many shifts in conflict dynamics taking place during the study period. There are also several other factions to the conflict: one of them, mentioned in this report, is the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA)-Abdul Wahid which holds the Jebel Marra region in Central Darfur (Crisis Group 2025).

One study estimates that there were more than 61,000 deaths in Khartoum State between April 2023 and June 2024, a 50 per cent rise on the pre-war death rate, and a significantly higher death toll across all regions than previously reported (Dahab *et al*. 2024). As civilians have been targeted, sexual violence committed against women and girls, and communities destroyed, there are reports of war crimes by the RSF and allied militias targeting Massalit and other groups in West Darfur in 2023 (Human Rights Watch 2024a), and in South Kordofan state in 2024 including against the Nuba people (Human Rights Watch 2024b). In January 2025, the International Criminal Court (ICC) sought arrest warrants for those responsible for the atrocities in the Darfur region (Wintour 2025), having earlier stated the belief that both the RSF and the SAF were involved (UN News 2023). Meanwhile in March 2025 Sudan instituted proceedings against the United Arab Emirates at the International Court of Justice, alleging violations of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Karsu 2025).

The situation has become the largest displacement crisis in the world. By mid-February 2025, 12.5 million people were forcibly displaced, either to other areas in Sudan (nearly 9 million) or to neighbouring countries (more than 3 million) (UNHCR 2025). The states with the largest increase in IDPs during 2024 were: Gedaref, North Darfur, River Nile, South Darfur, and Blue Nile (IOM 2025).

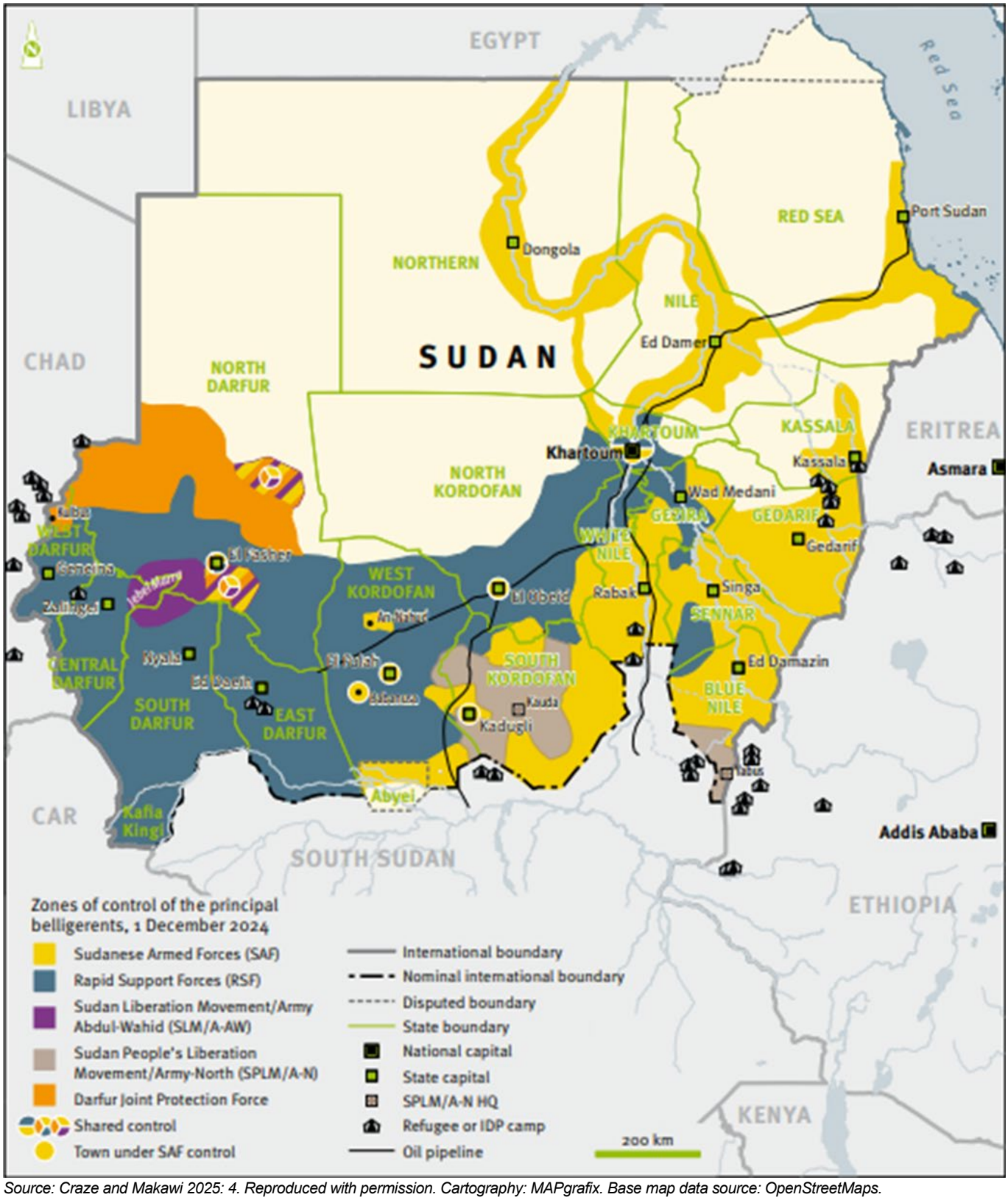
*Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.*

**Grass-root initiatives face different sets of risks depending on their geographical location and the type of authority (or lack of it) that is in control on the ground.**

- **Insecurity:** Overall, security risks (concerning funds, food items, cash, and the personal security of front-line workers) come to the fore in RSF-controlled areas.[4] Rule of law issues have long been part of the reality of Sudan (Oette and Babiker 2014) but based on the experience of our informants, the level of lawlessness and criminality that directly affects interventions in RSF-controlled areas is far worse than in areas controlled by the SAF or by the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA)-Abdul Wahid. Local responders have faced harassment, detention or worse from both the RSF and the SAF (Nasir 2024; Shabaka 2024a), while as the lines of conflict ebb and flow, some responders have been accused of collaboration due to their relief activities (Nasir and Emad 2025).
- **Sexual violence:** The warring parties have weaponised the use of sexual violence against civilians (OCHA 2024b). Female mutual aid volunteers fear sexual violence, with reports of female ERR members being raped by the RSF, in particular in Khartoum (Shabaka 2024a).
- **Market disruption:** Insecurity has disrupted markets in several parts of the country and has significantly hindered the flow of goods.[5] RSF blockades of Al Fasher in North Darfur and Dilling in South Kordofan have disrupted the movement of goods into local markets. In eastern Khartoum, for example, few markets are functioning. Those that are operating supply goods looted by the RSF from farmers, other markets, relief stores or industrial areas (Craze and Makawi 2025). Described as a 'looting machine' (de Waal 2024), the RSF has set up their own 'Dagalo markets' named after their leader (Craze and Makawi 2025; Amin and Rickett 2023; ACAPS 2023).
- **Intimidation:** In SAF-controlled areas, the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), which oversees aid activities, and the security departments treat community-based social support mechanisms with suspicion, often summoning volunteers for investigation, in some cases leading to arrest. This was confirmed by mutual aid group interviewees in Sennar, eastern Sudan, southern Sudan and Khartoum (see also Nasir 2024). Other researchers have found similar actions by the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO) in RSF-controlled areas.
- **Official interference:** The looting of funds and food is the most frequently reported risk by our informants working in areas controlled by the RSF. There are also clear indications of attempts by individuals within the HAC to divert aid for individual or group benefit. In one sheltering centre in eastern Sudan, the HAC made the provision of social assistance to IDPs conditional on the same assistance being provided to state government staff working in the centre.[6] Our informants described how the HAC continues to place bureaucratic hurdles on the operation of community structures (while other researchers identify similar actions from SARHO). In different SAF-controlled states, our informants indicated that the HAC attempted to control aid or dictate where IDPs should settle in order to be supported. However, in every case described to us, the local volunteers and communities were able to push back and reject attempts at interference by any form of authority.
- **Inter-communal tensions:** In many areas there is a potential risk of disputes among IDPs, or between IDPs and host communities which also need assistance. Volunteers fear that complaints by host communities and some IDP groups about their marginalisation in service delivery can generate resentment.
- **Disease outbreaks:** As a result of the destruction of health and sanitation facilities by the conflict, accompanied by floodings and significant reduction in vaccination rates, there have been reported outbreaks of cholera, dengue fever, malaria, measles, poliomyelitis (polio), and rubella (Venkatesan 2024). Cholera has been declared in different states in Sudan. Volunteers interviewed in these areas expressed concern about spreading the disease through their food interventions and are aware of their responsibilities towards the beneficiaries and the authorities in this regard.
- **Limited communications:** Lack of reliable internet access from conventional service providers means that front-line workers cannot communicate regularly with their supporters. Sharing information about the humanitarian context or security situation can be risky.[7] Phone calls are monitored and in RSF-controlled areas, soldiers may ask to check WhatsApp messages and texting history when front-line workers use Starlink.

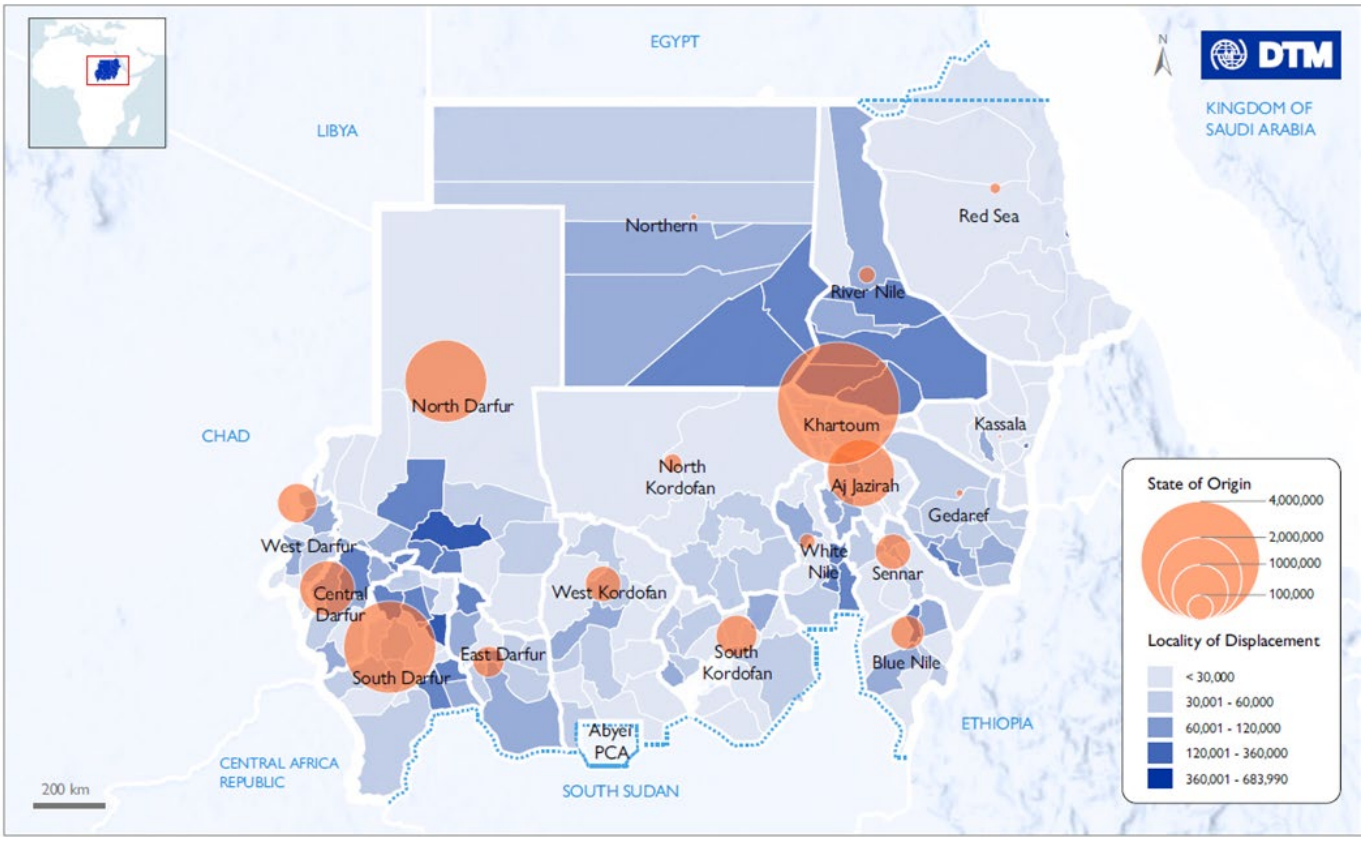
[4] Interviews with volunteers from an ERR in Al Jazirah (12 December 2024) and an ERR in Khartoum (27 November 2024).
[5] Interview with national NGO staff member supervising communal kitchens in eastern Khartoum State (19 November 2024).
[6] Interview with ERR volunteer in eastern Sudan (20 December 2024).
[7] Interview with ERR volunteer in Sennar (18 November 2024).

## Figure 3.1: Map of zones of control as of December 2024




*Source: Craze and Makawi 2025: 4. Reproduced with permission. Cartography: MAPgrafix. Base map data source: OpenStreetMaps.*

## Figure 3.2: Map of estimated IDP numbers across Sudan, 17 December 2024




*Source: IOM 2025: 6 (Map 3). Reproduced with permission.*
*Note: This map is for illustration purposes only. Names and boundaries do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.*

### 3.1.3 Adapting to risk

Informants from community-based mechanisms described how they apply adaptive management skills to manage the myriad risks they face.

**Reviewing and adapting priorities, objectives, and interventions.** Community groups have demonstrated the capacity to reflect, learn and adapt, testing different social assistance interventions and making decisions based on the context. In neighbourhoods of Khartoum North where the number of RSF fighters outweighed the number of community members, some ERRs opted to provide food baskets instead of community kitchens in order to protect people from aerial bombardment by the SAF. Another ERR shifted from running community kitchens to supporting evacuation when fighting intensified. And in a town in Al Jazirah, the ERR worked with a national NGO to evacuate people in coordination with another ERR in eastern Sudan. Despite these successes in adaptation, the rapid evolution of events in Sudan leaves mutual aid groups with limited room to manoeuvre. When conflict disrupts access to internet and telecommunications, the delivery of funds is suspended until access is restored.

**Spreading risk.** This is a common strategy in situations of pervasive criminality and lawlessness. It involves, among other things: (1) storing food items in different places; (2) transferring funds to different front-line workers; (3) using banking apps for transactions instead of cash; and (4) transporting purchased food items in different shipments. Another strategy is risk-shifting, where front-line workers ask their supporters and donors to transfer funds directly to food traders. These strategies are similar to ways in which local groups in other settings manage risk (for example in Myanmar, Harvey *et al*. 2023b).

**Decisions about registration.** Community mechanisms in SAF-controlled areas are more inclined to register with the HAC or find ways to build trust with local authorities.[8] In some states, youth initiatives registered with other government departments, such as those with culture and youth mandates, which also enabled them to function legally.[9] These moves towards institutionalisation have helped some mutual aid

[8] Interview with ERR volunteer in eastern Sudan (20 December 2024).
[9] Interview with coordination body volunteer in eastern Sudan (10 January 2025).

groups to obtain legal status, allowing them to respond to humanitarian need, open bank accounts, and manoeuvre through the HAC's bureaucratic impediments. One ERR informant in an area controlled by SLA-Abdul Wahid also indicated that they work closely with its HAC department.[10] However, an international informant also shared that registration is not a realistic proposition for many local groups in both SAF and RSF areas, with the HAC and the SARHO continuing to add bureaucratic impediments to registration and recognition of local responders.[11]

**Political savviness.** Some groups made a conscious choice not to use the term 'ERR' because they recognise that it is treated with suspicion by the authorities. They also judge that the HAC and other local government departments have a vested interest in their activities continuing because they are unable to support IDPs themselves. One informant noted: 'We invited a representative from HAC and representatives from other government departments to our initial meeting. Currently, we have no issues with HAC and our work and movement permits are facilitated by different line ministries.'[12] These examples show the local responders' robust understanding of the political and conflict dynamics in Sudan, and their capacity to establish relationships and negotiate with other stakeholders persistently.

### 3.1.4 Objectives and activities

**While the focus of this study is on food and cash assistance, our findings reveal that the thematic focus of community-based mechanisms is very broad.** Their interventions can span a wide range of activities including shelter, health, food security, protection, and evacuation (as also captured in research by Shabaka 2024a).

**Food assistance, rather than cash, is the dominant modality.** Only one of our 18 interviewees said that they provided cash to households. Food is provided in different forms, including hot food and food baskets.

**The two most common activities are communal kitchens and central kitchens.** In central kitchens, widely adopted in towns that host large numbers of IDPs, food is prepared and distributed to IDP sheltering centres. In communal kitchens, which tend to be used by neighbourhood groups or in rural areas, food is prepared and distributed directly to beneficiaries. Some kitchens focus on supporting medically vulnerable groups, such as those with kidney failure[13] or children suffering from acute malnutrition.[14] All these modalities require access to markets, and when this is disrupted, food options are limited and activities must be planned on an *ad hoc* basis.

**Voluntarism is key to implementation.** There are usually supervisors responsible for the distribution of food and volunteers who cook the meals for communal kitchens. Other volunteers handle financial transactions with suppliers and supporters (who is providing support to the groups is discussed in section 3.2). This division of labour has helped to ensure effective delivery of assistance as it capitalises on the existing pool of human resources within each community. Without it, mutual aid groups would not be able to feed the numbers of households they currently reach.

**Grass-roots mechanisms are largely reactive and do not generally set long-term social protection objectives.** Eastern Sudan has experienced waves of displacement. Many groups there responded to the first displacement from Khartoum and then stopped until the next displacement from Wad Madani. After some months of activity, they paused again, later restarting in response to new displacements from Sennar and eastern Al Jazirah.[15] These ebbs and flows are at times associated with a lack of funding (Shabaka 2023), but they are also a product of the groups' short-term focus on emergency needs.

[10] Interview with ERR volunteer in Darfur (26 December 2024).
[11] Personal communication with international researcher (9 March 2025).
[12] Interview with key informant from a coordination mechanism in eastern Sudan (10 January 2025).
[13] Interview with voluntary organisation informant in northern Sudan (4 January 2025).
[14] Interview with ERR volunteer in southern Sudan (24 December 2024).
[15] Interview with ERR volunteer in eastern Sudan (13 January 2025).

**Volunteers become exhausted and traumatised as the crisis extends and deepens.** International informants described how volunteers have become exhausted,[16] experiencing deep trauma and feelings of hopelessness. This can lead to volunteers deciding to or being forced to move on or to stop their activities, in the face of pressure and intimidation from authorities.[17] An international informant also shared how the diaspora, who have been providing such critical support to the local groups, are also exhausted, and while they continue to provide support (especially funds), their resources are stretched.[18]

### 3.1.5 Programme design and monitoring

**Our informants told us how they lead on programme design and that this is done in consultation with communities.** In northern Sudan, a participant from a voluntary organisation indicated that they take account of the cultural preferences of IDPs from different parts of the country by consulting with each IDP group. Another interviewee from a Darfur ERR indicated that they design interventions based on a ground assessment which draws on the academic experience of some of their volunteers.

**The networking of community-based groups in some areas has helped to develop their capacities in programme design and proposal development.** Groups benefit from members with relevant experience, knowledge, and skills in the network[19] and, in some places, from the guidance of experienced national humanitarian practitioners.[20] This is the case in parts of Darfur and eastern Sudan, where coordination has given mutual aid groups greater bargaining power with international NGOs, drawing on their understanding of needs at a locality or state level, not just at community level, and enabling them to respond on a wider scale. Coordination among the groups has also enabled some to share information on interventions and to plan for more coordinated coverage, in response to perceived duplication and gaps in services in some areas.[21]

**Some community mechanisms have developed monitoring and evaluation capacities.** Monitoring and evaluation are integrated into programme cycles which allows the volunteers to gather evidence on needs, impact, and gaps.[22] Monitoring is also commissioned by external supporters, but some of our volunteer informants indicated that the amount of data required can be disproportionate to the funds provided: 'You cannot ask a head of household to answer a ten-page questionnaire when you only provided them with one soap and two toothbrushes', one volunteer explained.[23]

### 3.1.6 Beneficiary selection

**The community volunteers lead the process of beneficiary selection in consultation with community members.** Our informants shared their opinions on vulnerability, and generally prioritise women, children, and older people. Other considerations include the level of looting experienced prior to displacement (by those from Sennar and eastern Al Jazirah, for example)[24] and cultural factors (such as South Sudanese refugees in Kordofan whose sense of dignity is thought to prevent them from asking for help).[25]

**Volunteers interviewed in areas with influxes of IDPs (Omdurman, Central Darfur, eastern Sudan) indicated that women and girls are especially vulnerable, particularly to sexual violence, and are prioritised for sheltering and food assistance.** They are seen as being the most affected by displacement. Female volunteers facilitate women's participation in decision-making. In Khartoum and eastern Sudan, women-led initiatives and gender departments were established within some community-based structures to give specific attention to women's needs and priorities. For example, community initiatives in some areas have supported women IDPs in meeting the costs of safe birth and with the distribution of dignity kits.[26]

[16] Interviews with international NGO informant (27 November 2024), international peacebuilding expert (13 December 2024) and international researcher (20 January 2025).
[17] Interview with international NGO informant (27 November 2024).
[18] Personal communication with international researcher (10 March 2025).
[19] Interview with ERR volunteer in Darfur (13 December 2024).
[20] Interview with youth initiative volunteer in eastern Sudan (21 January 2025).
[21] Interview with coordination body in eastern Sudan (10 January 2025).
[22] Interview with ERR volunteer in Darfur (26 December 2024).
[23] Interview with ERR volunteer in eastern Sudan (20 December 2024).
[24] Interview with volunteer in eastern Sudan (13 January 2025).
[25] Interview with ERR volunteer in Kordofan (20 January 2025).
[26] Interview with youth initiative in eastern Sudan (19 January 2025).

**Our informants shared promising examples of community-based mechanisms that address the needs of particular categories of vulnerable groups.** In southern Sudan, an ERR established a communal kitchen specifically to feed children diagnosed with malnutrition. In northern Sudan, a voluntary organisation established a sheltering centre for IDPs who have kidney failure which provides them with health care services, including dialysis, and a kitchen to prepare suitable meals.

**However, the assistance provided to these different groups does not match the magnitude of need and some of the most vulnerable may not be supported.** One coordinator of youth initiatives in eastern Sudan identified one limitation of their approach as being overlooking the needs of people with disabilities.

**Overall, the activities of community kitchens and central kitchens are designed with the objective of providing the greatest good for the greatest number.** Once funding is secured, all households in that community will automatically benefit from the food provided. At times it may not be enough, due to a shortage of materials or the arrival of new IDPs. In such cases, the communal kitchen reduces the amount each household receives in order to cover most people. Groups such as older people, who are unable to go to the kitchen, usually receive food at their homes.

### 3.1.7 Funding and other support

**Contributions from the community and from Sudanese living abroad have been instrumental in establishing and maintaining services.** In different parts of the country, there are community kitchens whose funding has been the sole responsibility of community members living outside Sudan[27] (Shabaka 2023). In Darfur, community contributions are often made in kind. Volunteers interviewed here explained that in response to the influx of IDPs, they collect food items from households such as millet, dried okra, and dried tomatoes.[28]

**Grass-roots mechanisms repeatedly run out of resources.** Displacement, job losses, poverty, and inflation are depleting community reserves, especially in areas with active fighting or those receiving large numbers of displaced people. Diaspora support is not limitless,[29] and as early as December 2023 it was described as 'exhausted and overstretched' (Harvey *et al*. 2023a: 8). In 2024, there were reports of local groups having to pause their assistance or having to close[30] (Sudan INGO Forum 2024). Our informants report receiving some international assistance which is discussed in section 3.2.

**The Bank of Khartoum app (Bankak) is the main modality used to transfer funds to community-based structures, including by those in the diaspora.** This is due to its wide use and acceptance among individuals, merchants, and wholesalers when compared to other banking apps. In areas where lawlessness and criminality are pervasive, Bankak transactions are safer than cash and can be the only available option. Bankak also allows financial supporters to reach grass-roots mechanisms in the most remote areas.

### 3.1.8 Coordination and communication

**The ability of community groups to coordinate with each other and plan their services is context-specific, and strikingly absent in areas that lack order.** Coordination between community groups and with external actors, as well as strategic planning, are easier in areas where there is relative stability and access to telecommunications, where the groups enjoy considerable levels of independence, and where direct contact with local government departments and humanitarian actors is possible. In SAF-controlled areas, community groups have at times also lobbied and mobilised communities to influence or oppose decisions made by local authorities on humanitarian action, as noted above.[31]

[27] Interview with volunteer from an ERR in Khartoum (27 November 2024).
[28] Interview with ERR volunteer in Darfur (26 December 2024).
[29] Interview with international researcher (20 January 2025).
[30] See, for example, news reports of community kitchen closures in Khartoum South Belt region in July 2024 (Sudan Tribune 2024) and in East Nile region in January 2025 (Sudan Tribune 2025).
[31] Interview with ERR volunteer in eastern Sudan (13 January 2025).

**ERRs have coordinated their work through national and state councils and systems.** The national LCC enables planning and reporting harmonisation among individual ERRs, and with international funders. It has developed the 'F-system' to align reporting requirements and processes among ERRs and international aid organisations. At state level, the LCC's January 2025 newsletter reports that the 113 ERRs in East Darfur State have founded the State Coordination Council of Emergency Rooms, holding a conference with 40 representatives from nine localities that are participating (Emergency Rooms of the LCC 2025).

**Coordination mechanisms among grass-roots groups do not appear to undermine the autonomy of their members or impose priorities on them.** In some areas, our informants indicated that coordination had enhanced their effectiveness. Three participants from eastern Sudan shared examples of coordination that facilitate co-implementation and effective targeting (Box 3.2). Two of our informants from mutual aid groups reported that the LCC is seen as a good way to ensure the effective allocation of funds from international NGOs. However, it is important to note that not all community support mechanisms are represented in the LLC or are able to secure funds from it. Moreover, this kind of coordination structure requires adequate funding and institutional support to succeed.

### Box 3.2: Coordination among mutual aid groups in eastern Sudan

Since the early days of the conflict, eastern Sudan has been receiving IDPs from various parts of the country, including Khartoum, Al Jazirah, Sennar and the western regions. In response, the number of youth initiatives and mutual aid groups multiplied. In one town the lack of coordination between different grass-roots responders resulted in the accumulation of services in some IDP centres while others were barely served.

Volunteers from different initiatives therefore came together and established a coordination body comprised of more than 100 community-based social support mechanisms. These mechanisms have been clustered by theme, with some focusing on food and others on health and protection, and other activities. Each cluster then works with IDPs to identify the needs in their centres and to design interventions accordingly.

This coordination has reinforced inclusion and enhanced the efficiency of aid delivery. Resources from international NGOs are channelled directly to the groups based on an assessment of their differing capacity. The role of the coordination body is to support their activities through programme monitoring. The coordination mechanism also facilitates communication between different grass-roots initiatives and the government.

*Source: Authors' own.*

**However, in other areas, grass-roots groups are very isolated.** In Khartoum North, Al Jazirah, and southeast Khartoum, for example, many groups run community kitchens with no links to other grass-roots organisations. These are mostly funded by the diaspora or national NGOs. An international informant described an initiative that provides hygiene and sanitary kits to women. It lacks connections with other groups to access supplies, and it also operates in an area where communication is very risky, making it difficult to connect with international actors.[32]

**Communication with supporters, whether in the community or externally, is key.** It helps to build transparency and relationships of trust with donors.[33] Some groups have developed strong communications capacities and outreach (ERR Khartoum State n.d.) (discussed further in section 4). Effective communication also encourages supporters to help at times of emergency. In eastern Khartoum, for example, a community kitchen was looted, but the partner national NGO immediately covered the lost funds due to the trust they had in the group.

[32] Interview with conflict sensitivity experts (21 November 2024).
[33] Interview with national NGO staff supervising communal kitchens in eastern Khartoum State (19 November 2024).

**Effective communication is also an important tool in ensuring conflict-sensitive practice.** Front-line workers use it to tackle emerging problems, such as disputes between beneficiaries over targeting or the assistance provided. In Kordofan, the volunteers of one ERR manage seven community kitchens in the same town but cannot support all at the same time. Disputes can arise when volunteers from different kitchens have concerns about fairness. Front-line workers encounter this risk quite often and tackle it by using their communication skills and knowledge of local culture and community dynamics.[34]

### 3.1.9 Summing up: conflict sensitivity implications

As seen in this section, community support mechanisms in Sudan operate in very difficult environments shaped by security, governance, and access challenges. They are striving to manage these risks and deliver social assistance in a conflict-sensitive way. They do this by drawing on their deep cultural understanding of each community, establishing close and trusting relationships and maintaining open communication. Our informants described how they take account of the vulnerabilities of different groups based on gender, age, and health status and are alive to the potential risk of inter-communal tension. They operate in context-specific ways and have demonstrated an ability to reflect and adapt as required. However, limited external resources and increasingly depleted communal resources mean that they resort to tough choices such as cutting the portions of food distributed or halting their services altogether. This is further exacerbated by the power dynamics that place grass-roots organisations in a very vulnerable position in areas where the context is shaped by intense security measures or lawlessness.

## 3.2 External aid to community-based social support mechanisms

**In this section we turn to the external aid received by community-based social support mechanisms since April 2023.** We start by positioning this within the broader context of humanitarian response in Sudan, and then summarise our findings on the level and nature of support to grass-roots groups during the conflict.

### 3.2.1 Context

**Aid in Sudan has a long history of politicisation which continues to shape the relationships between international and national actors and therefore has implications for progress on localisation.** The Sudanese state has a history of using aid as a political tool, forcing external actors to work through specified organisations, for example, and controlling access through bureaucratic measures and close monitoring by the HAC and the security services (CSF 2023b; ACAPS 2024). National and international agencies have often had to work under the threat of deregistration and suspension (CSF 2023b; ACAPS 2024). The current conflict has further fragmented aid control mechanisms, with the RSF introducing its own regulatory and coordinating body, the SARHO (ACAPS 2024). At the same time, some humanitarian assistance has entrenched processes of marginalisation within Sudan, with food aid in particular becoming 'part of Sudan's exploitative political economy' (Jaspars and Oette 2023). Young (2012) describes the instrumentalisation of humanitarian aid by all (local, national, international) parties in the decade following the start of the Darfur conflict in 2003, and how rising insecurity has diminished international presence and prompted staff to be pulled back to state capitals or Khartoum. Meanwhile development assistance, including for social protection, has also fluctuated according to Western governments' political stances (Birch *et al*. 2023).

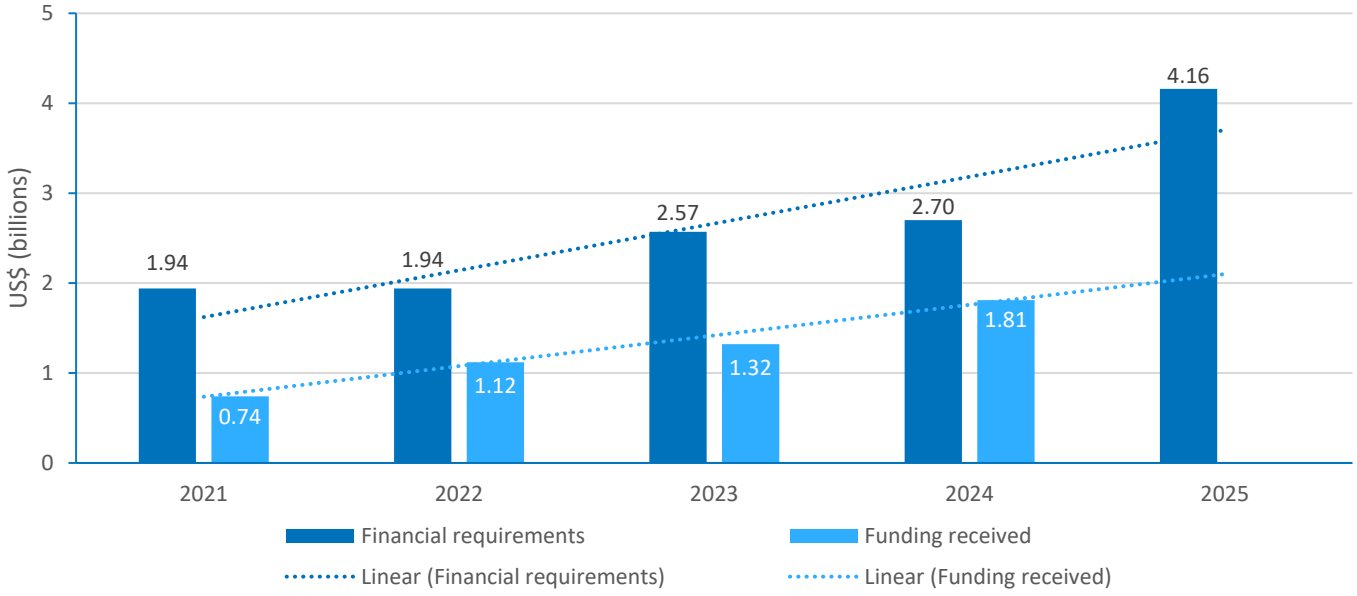
**In the crisis, humanitarian provision has been the main form of support, with government-led social protection mostly suspended.** The transitional government's flagship Sudan Family Support Programme launched in early 2021; it was critiqued for its failure to match the demand for bolder social policy change (Ali and Mann 2023) and was suspended following the October 2021 coup. After a lapse of six months, in April 2022 the associated multi-donor support through a World Bank trust fund was redirected to the WFP to deliver food and cash transfers to 2.3 million households for 12 months (Birch *et al*. 2024; Smith 2025). When that emergency safety net intervention ended in November 2023, there was another lapse in cash or food aid financed by the multi-donor trust fund (Smith 2025), this time lasting for more than a year, until in January 2025 the World Bank announced a US$100 million emergency safety net programme to reach 140,000 food-insecure households (World Bank Group 2025). One ongoing social protection intervention is the Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus (MCCT+) programme, run by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), which began in the Red Sea and Kassala states, expanding to the River Nile in 2024 (Smith 2025). Also, health insurance through the Ministry of Health is reportedly still somewhat functional in stable areas (Mohammed

[34] Interview with ERR volunteer in Kordofan (24 December 2024).

and Awadalla 2024). There is criticism of the gaps in safety net provision by development actors. Some of the critiques argue that this highlights the continuing and unhelpful silos that exist between development and humanitarian funding structures and mandates, which end up harming people most in need (Smith 2025).

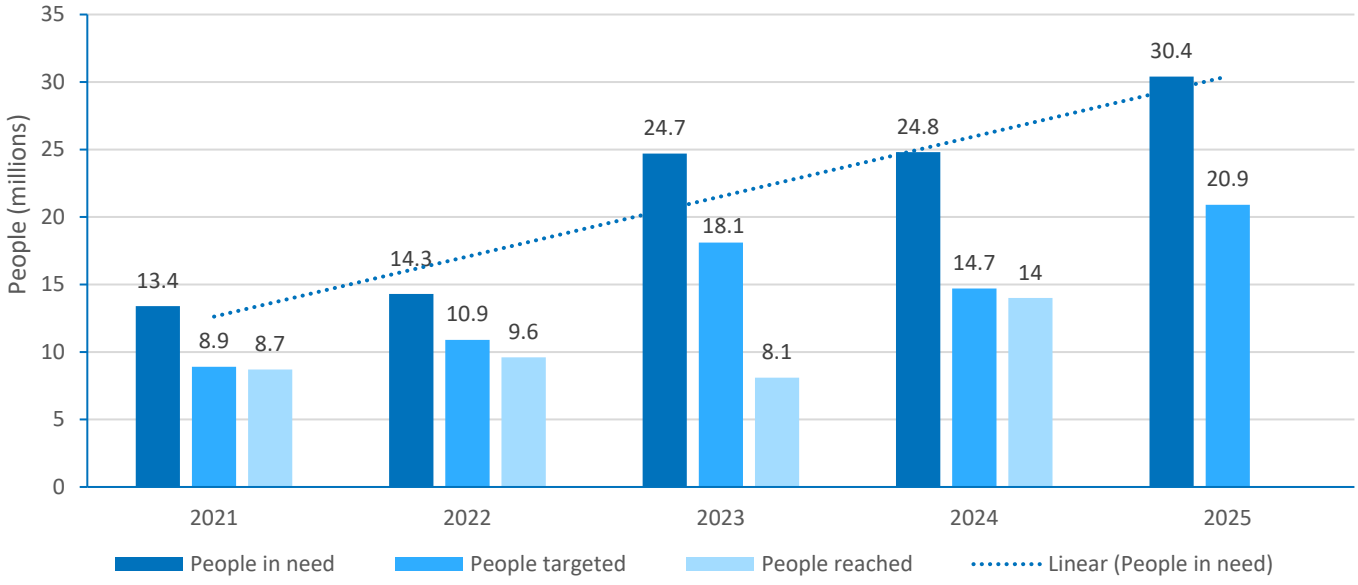
**International humanitarian assistance to Sudan has often been substantial but never sufficient.** Sudan has frequently been among the top global recipients of humanitarian aid. Even before the current conflict, in 2022, 30 per cent of the population (more than 14 million people) needed humanitarian assistance (OCHA 2021). However, year-on-year, the level of assistance has fallen well short of needs. In 2023, 67 per cent of people in need received no assistance, as the international humanitarian response proved unable to keep pace with the exponential rise in needs following the outbreak of conflict. While funding of the response rose from 51.5 per cent in 2023 to 67 per cent in 2024, and more people were reached (up from 8 million in 2023 to 14 million in 2024), still 43.5 per cent of those in need received no assistance in 2024 (Figures 3.3 and 3.4).

## Figure 3.3: OCHA humanitarian response requirements and funding for Sudan 2021–2025




*Source: Authors' own. Created using data from OCHA Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans 2021–2025 (Humanitarian Action 2023).*

## Figure 3.4: OCHA humanitarian response – people in need, targeted and reached 2021–2025




*Source: Authors' own. Created using data from OCHA Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plans 2021–2025 (Humanitarian Action 2023).*

**Humanitarian response in the current conflict has been hampered by insufficient field presence of international aid actors and capacity and access constraints** (Humanitarian Action 2024a). Donors consulted for this research are coordinating their operations remotely from bases in neighbouring countries. UN agencies and international NGOs have headquarters in Port Sudan in the east of the country, with regional hubs. The constraints on access to those in need by UN agencies and NGOs include parties to the conflict refusing permission for aid supplies to move; uncertain, time-consuming and dangerous checkpoints; the insecurity of transversing front lines and areas affected by fighting; and telecommunications blackouts which prevent millions of people in Darfur, Kordofan and Khartoum from accessing banking and other services (OCHA 2024d; Harvey *et al*. 2023a).

**There is, however, also a history of some external actors trying to support innovative locally led action in conflict crises in Sudan**, for example in the Nuba Mountains (Corbett 2015). Previous partnerships with grass-roots initiatives in various endeavours (peace-building, basic services, protection, upholding the rule of law, monitoring human rights and humanitarian needs) in Sudan and elsewhere can inform today's approaches to engaging with community actors. These experiences also illustrate that the inequalities in the distribution of humanitarian funding have long been recognised, and that, while insufficient resources are of course a critical issue, the unequal balance of power in the international aid system limits locally driven humanitarian and protection responses (Corbett 2015).

### 3.2.2 Official aid to community groups

**The international humanitarian community frames its support to community-led groups within the context of its commitments on localisation and conflict-sensitive response.** A 2024 review of localisation in Sudan commissioned by the UN Humanitarian Country Team, which donors joined in 2023 (Humanitarian Action 2025), recommended increasing timely, direct funding to local groups and simplifying due diligence, as well as building participatory structures to improve coordination and communication among the full range of stakeholders (Musa El Saeed 2024).

**So far, debate about how to channel support to community groups has mostly taken place on the humanitarian side as this has been the main focus of international support.** As development actors seek to stay or re-engage, they are also considering how to engage with, or at a minimum align with and not undermine, community-level efforts. Consider, for instance, the Project Appraisal Document for the new 2025 World Bank safety net programme: while it does not mention the community-led mutual aid groups providing food aid, it refers to supporting local capacity, and specifies setting up and training community committees to support a community-based approach to targeting (World Bank 2024).

**Supporting community-led humanitarian response has required a shift in risk appetite by external actors: there have been repeated calls for a 'no-regrets' approach in the face of complex and deepening needs.** These include calls for lower 'risk aversion levels' to scale up support to ERRs (Sudan Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster 2024: 2), and for leadership from donors – in particular the US, the EU and the UK – on adopting 'the right level of risk' given that so many lives are at stake (International Development Committee 2024: 15–16). The largest donor to Sudan's international humanitarian response (providing 44 per cent of the US$1.8 billion humanitarian funding reported to the UN Financial Tracking Service in 2024, OCHA FTS 2024) is the US, which is recognised as having played a key role in supporting a more permissive funding culture and mechanisms for mutual aid groups through USAID (Khair 2024). According to analysis by Mitchell and Hughes (2025), of the 26 poorest countries in the world, Sudan is one of eight where more than a fifth of international aid is provided by USAID (from OECD CRS data). The impact of President Donald Trump's executive order on 20 January 2025 to freeze foreign assistance for 90 days (The White House 2025) has included closures of community kitchens in Sudan, exposing the vulnerability of the grass-roots groups to sudden and unexpected change, with ERRs reporting that the US was providing an estimated 70 to 80 per cent of their official external cash support (Joselow 2025; Plett Usher and Soy 2025).

**Aid organisations' risk assessments have to weigh up both the severity and likelihood of identified risks, and how these compare across different aid provision options.** Many of these risks are also faced in direct implementation by international organisations and larger Sudanese NGOs. UN agencies and international NGOs also face security risks, delivery constraints, fraud risks and in some respects, are less able to manage these due to less proximity and presence. Some risks are specific to supporting or not supporting mutual aid initiatives: for example, the risk to life if the groups are not supported when they are the primary or sole providers of assistance in some places. Safety, reputational, financial, co-option and saturation risks are among the other specific risks that international aid actors have had to understand and design mitigating strategies for when considering supporting community groups (Box 3.3).

### Box 3.3: Perceived risks of supporting or not supporting community groups during the conflict reported by international informants

**Risk to life** if groups are not supported.

**Security and safety:** volunteers and other local actors supporting community groups face arrest, harassment and even death from all parties to the conflict, who view their activities with suspicion, at times banning their activities.

**Delivery:** including that unpredictable and insufficient aid may cause harm by increasing tensions within communities; that support to some groups, and not to others, causes tensions; and that humanitarian standards are not upheld, given the conflict conditions and the large numbers of people in need, combined with the lack of experience and support.

**Political:** warring parties seek to control external aid, including to community-based groups, through access and other bureaucratic restrictions.

**Reputational risks:** early in the conflict, international donors were wary of and sought to understand the relationship between ERRs and the politically motivated Resistance Committees. During the conflict, community groups are perceived to have sustained neutral delivery of humanitarian assistance.

**Aid fraud and capture:** whether relatively unknown groups, many unfamiliar in handling funding, can be trusted to use aid responsibly; also, the risk of aid being captured by warring parties and of aid fuelling the war economy.

**Co-option:** where aid and its conditions may change the nature of community initiatives, weakening their organic accountability to community members.

**Saturation:** where there is a limit on how much funding groups can absorb and maintain the effective, efficient provision of services.

*Source: Authors' own. Created using information from key informant interviews.*

**Some donors have flexed bureaucratic requirements to provide groups with support, chiefly small cash transfers** (Box 3.4). At the start of the conflict, international actors needed to change compliance requirements and application processes in order to support hyper-local groups. Initially, this required numerous waivers and exemptions depending on the internal processes of each organisation (The New Humanitarian 2023). Gradually, donors and implementing agencies coalesced around a common approach to providing funds to the groups through small group cash transfers or 'donations', reducing the pre-conditions (key ones being registration with authorities and organisational bank accounts), and simplifying the application process and reporting requirements (albeit with perceptions of a continued need to make this appropriate to the small grant sizes involved[35]) (SHF 2024; Sudan CWG 2024).

[35] Personal communication with international researcher (10 March 2025).

## Box 3.4: Examples of official aid to community groups

**One platform for channelling funds to mutual aid groups is the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF) (the OCHA-managed country-based pooled fund, CBPF), although this accounts for a small proportion of its total allocation** (OCHA n.d.). OCHA tracks and provides transparent data on direct and indirect organisational recipients of CBPF allocations, but this does not capture how much reaches community-based groups (United Nations CBPF n.d.). The SHF 2024 Annual Report states that US$3 million was allocated indirectly to community-based humanitarian groups in 2023 (3.5 per cent of its total US$84.6 million allocation), and US$6.5 million in 2024 (4.5 per cent of the total US$146 million allocated that year) (OCHA 2024c; 2024a). This funding has been channelled through international NGOs but comprehensive information about their onward allocations is not readily available, although there are isolated insights. For example, one international NGO intends to use SHF funds to partner with 20 national NGOs in 2025 (at least a quarter of them women-led) to support mutual aid groups, and involving coordination with ERRs in a number of states and the LCC.

**The Cash Consortium of Sudan (CCS), a partnership of 18 international and national organisations has been supporting the mutual aid groups.** At the time of this research the CCS was being funded by the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). By June 2024, the CCS had provided group cash transfers to 190 community-based organisations in each of Sudan's 18 states, indirectly reaching 115,000 people (Mercy Corps *et al.* 2024). Since then, cash transfers have continued and expanded. In 2024 one member of the CCS, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), provided nearly 1,000 cash grants to 446 local responders, including community-based organisations, national NGOs, ERRs and other community-led initiatives, that reached more than 648,000 people (NRC 2025).

**WFP is also contracting national NGOs to work with ERRs to provide hot food through community kitchens in Khartoum State** (WFP Staff 2024; WFP Supply Chain 2024). In October 2024, Reuters reported that WFP and local aid groups in greater Khartoum had helped some 200 kitchens serve 175,000 people daily over the previous four months, spending more than US$2 million (Eltahir and Abdelaziz 2024).

*Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.*
*Note: The total of US$84.6 million allocated in 2023 is reported in the SHF's 2023 Annual Report (OCHA 2024c). The CBPF data hub reports the lower total of US$81.2 million (United Nations CBPF n.d.).*

**However, there has been criticism of the slow pace and small proportion of official aid that reaches the groups, with little direct funding to local actors reported to OCHA's Financial Tracking Service (FTS), and promises not matching allocations.** The inadequate pace and insufficiency of funding in the face of urgent and extensive need has been criticised for 'putting millions of lives at risk' (Sudan INGO Forum 2024). Official aid reported to the community groups is a very small share of overall humanitarian funding,[36] while the low level of direct funding to local and national actors reported to FTS has declined further during the conflict.[37] With a lack of transparent data, estimates are that barely 1 per cent of the official humanitarian response has gone to the grass-roots groups (International Development Committee 2024). Moreover, promises have not always come to fruition: in 2023, the Khartoum ERR coordination unit received pledges of nearly US$2 million but by May 2024 had received only approximately half of this (Carstensen and Sebit 2023; Shabaka 2024a). Other groups, for example in Darfur, have received little or no funding from international humanitarian financing (Shabaka 2024b). Interviews from Central Darfur show that international funding for groups there only started towards the end of 2024. In April 2024 a representative of the ERRs called for 5 per cent of the official humanitarian response to go to these groups (Kuka 2024).

[36] There is a lack of comprehensive data on exactly how much aid funding reaches the grass-roots response as funding to the groups tends to be channelled through intermediary international organisations; this kind of pass-through funding is not transparently reported and tracked (as explained in Development Initiatives 2024), in spite of repeated calls for donors to improve the transparency of funding to local initiatives globally, and with regards to mutual aid groups in Sudan.

[37] According to FTS data, direct funding for Sudan's coordinated humanitarian response to local NGOs and civil society organisations fell from US$17.4 million (1 per cent of overall funding) in 2023 to US$6 million (less than 1 per cent of overall funding) in 2024. This US$6 million in 2024 was provided by Saudi Arabia, and the first-level recipients recorded in FTS do not include mutual aid groups (OCHA FTS n.d.(a), (b) and (c); data downloaded 2 February 2025).

**Our local informants reported receiving some international support, but found it to be intermittent and limited.** Interviewees reported receiving mainly cash, but sometimes food and equipment such as cooking and serving utensils. In some areas, support from international NGOs increased in response to worsening humanitarian conditions. In eastern Sudan, two informants from mutual aid groups indicated that their international NGO partner increased funding in response to the most recent influx of IDPs from eastern Al Jazirah which allowed them to establish a new community kitchen.[38] In North Darfur, an ERR member said that they were negotiating a pot of money to be spent in community kitchens across the state in response to worsening food insecurity, particularly in Zamzam camp. One informant said that stronger coordination and outreach by ERRs have helped them to attract funding, for example by obtaining information from their neighbourhoods and sharing this with donors.[39]

**Some international organisations have provided training alongside funding, although this has been slow to start and limited.** Initially the focus was on financing the groups,[40] with some training on project management.[41] According to a youth initiative leader in eastern Sudan, their project management capacities have increased as a result of the training workshops organised by international NGOs. He said: 'we noticed a significant improvement in our capacities. We are more organised in managing the funds we receive from the international NGO'.[42] International informants had received requests to strengthen the groups' protection. Informants had heard of requests from mutual aid volunteers for training on negotiation techniques and managing communications and data protection risks in insecure areas;[43] on cybersecurity and security risk management in hostile environments;[44] as well as trauma training, psychosocial support services and life insurance.[45] However, only a few had taken action. For example, since June 2023 the diaspora organisation Shabaka has been delivering training with international NGO partners to mutual aid groups on topics including humanitarian principles and governance, digital security, project reporting, financial management, and managing health issues (Shabaka 2024b).

**Frustrated with the performance of traditional aid, philanthropists and charitable foundations have stepped up initiatives to channel funding directly to mutual aid groups** (Bradbury *et al*. 2023; Khair 2024). One such initiative is the Coalition for Mutual Aid in Sudan, a group of global philanthropies and other organisations[46] which has committed to provide US$6.5 million direct to mutual aid groups from September 2024 to 2026, disbursing at least US$2 million by end 2024. This initiative plans also to invest in building the evidence base on mutual aid in Sudan, to advocate and influence aid donors and implementers (Clinton Foundation n.d.). There is also the similarly named Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition, a collective of philanthropies and implementing partners, with a US-registered non-profit to manage disbursements and contributions,[47] which is coordinating with ERRs and the LCC (Loy 2024).

**The international humanitarian community plans to increase engagement with community-based groups and to scale up cash transfers and other support.** OCHA referred to community-led groups once in the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP). In contrast the 2025 HNRP sets out intended financial support and capacity building, including scaling up cash transfers to reach 4,288 community-based groups with US$27.6 million (Humanitarian Action 2024b). This amounts to less than 1 per cent of the total HNRP ask of US$4.16 billion, and 14 per cent of the planned spend of the Sudan Cash Working Group (CWG) – the principal coordination forum for cash and voucher assistance comprising of more than 50 member organisations (UN agencies, local and international NGOs, the Sudanese Red Crescent Society, donors, and financial service providers) (Sudan CWG 2024). There are also plans in the 2025 HNRP for ERRs to play a role in emergency food assistance by delivering hot meals (Humanitarian Action 2024c), and for the

[38] Interviews with mutual aid groups in eastern Sudan (20 December 2024 and 12 January 2025).
[39] Interview with national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024).
[40] Interview with national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024).
[41] Interview with UN agency staff (19 November 2024).
[42] Interview with youth initiative leader in eastern Sudan (21 January 2025)
[43] Interview with UN agency staff (19 November 2024).
[44] Interview with national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024).
[45] Interview with international aid consultant (18 December 2024).
[46] Nine donors that started financial contributions to the Coalition for Mutual Aid in Sudan are: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Center for Disaster Philanthropy, Global Giving, Global Fund for Women, Humanity United, Saphira Fund, Urgent Action Fund – Africa, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and Vitol Foundation (CDP n.d.).
[47] Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition (n.d.a) and Proximity to Humanity (n.d.) (accessed 15 February 2025).

protection sector to support the capacities of women-led and disability groups in recognition of their critical role in ensuring that assistance is accessible, equitable, dignified, and inclusive (Humanitarian Action 2024d).

**One notable development has been the use of group cash transfers (GCTs) to support community-based groups and other local actors.** With GCTs (see Box 3.5), in recognition of the groups' informality and inherent vulnerability, external funders treat the groups as beneficiaries, changing compliance contracting and reporting requirements accordingly (University of Oxford 2025).

### Box 3.5: Group cash transfers

Small cash grants, sometimes called group cash transfers (GCTs), have been used in various conflict and disaster contexts, including Sudan, for different objectives. One informant to this research recalled how during the Bashir regime and the revolution, micro-grants were given to youth and women for peace-building and human rights activities, supporting existing initiatives with up to US$5,000 through an appreciative inquiry approach. With the outbreak of the conflict in 2023, some of these groups turned to humanitarian activities and continue to be assisted by the same international organisations with SHF funding.[48]

GCTs are 'an approach that provides resources in the form of cash transfers to unregistered, emerging or self-mobilizing community groups to implement projects that contribute to immediate survival and recovery needs of a crisis affected population, benefiting either a sub-section of the community or the community at large' (Leighton and Shrestha 2023: 3; see also Tønning and Kabeta 2021). There is a CALP Group Cash Transfer Thematic Working Group that aims to support coherence and coordination on the use of GCTs between organisations and between country, regional and global levels (CALP Network 2024).

*Source: Authors' own. Information sources cited.*

**Our informants described some common characteristics of GCTs to community groups** (Table 3.1) **and mentioned ongoing debates over transfer size, modality, predictability, cost-effectiveness, processes supporting inclusion and de-duplication, and coordinating approaches with individual cash transfer provision.** The evidence base on the use of GCTs in Sudan since April 2023 is only in its infancy, although some useful lessons are emerging (see, for example, Manell 2024). There is a growing concern to invest in more learning on GCT delivery and impact: one evaluation planned by the INGO Collaborative Cash Delivery Network (CCD) is focusing on the effectiveness of combining GCTs with Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance (MPCA) and targeting marginalised groups such as women and children (CCD 2024). An international informant pointed out the need for a coherent strategic approach to providing cash transfers to community groups and cash transfers to individuals and households,[49] while the 2023 *State of the World's Cash* report highlights that evidence shows small GCTs 'are most effective when implemented to complement other activities, including regular CVA targeted to households' (CALP Network 2023: 61).

[48] Interview with national aid expert (21 November 2024).
[49] Interview with international financial inclusion expert (28 November 2024).

## Table 3.1: Characteristics of GCTs to mutual aid groups in Sudan

| Dimension | Detail |
|---|---|
| **Beneficiary** | Registered and unregistered groups that are responding to the crisis. |
| **Objective** | To provide social support and food aid.<br>To empower communities and community-based groups by funding their own identification of needs and activities. |
| **Targeting** | Prioritisation of hard-to-reach areas and localities. |
| **Applications** | A light-touch concept note or application setting out the need and the activity to be funded. |
| **Amount** | Ranging from US$500 to US$10,000, with a common ceiling of around US$5,000. |
| **Repeat funding** | Groups can apply for repeat funding; how often depends on the international organisation, from twice a year to unlimited.<br>A pre-condition may be that the received funding has to be spent first. |
| **Capacity inputs** | Some international organisations provide capacity strengthening and protection support along with the cash transfer. |
| **Funding chains** | Back donor to intermediary international NGO to community group.<br>Back donor to international NGO or UN agency to national or local NGO (or consortium) to community group. |

*Source: Authors' own. Created using information from key informant interviews and Sudan CWG (2024).*

# 4. Discussion: A transformative approach to conflict-sensitive partnership?

The previous section has shown how mutual aid is providing critical assistance in a very challenging context and in ways that potentially strengthen the conflict sensitivity of the overall response. In a crisis on the scale of that in Sudan, and for the foreseeable future, mutual aid can only ever be one element within a mix of different interventions. Some key questions are how this element of the humanitarian system can develop, what might motivate external actors to support its growth, and how they can do so in ways that reinforce conflict sensitivity and mutual accountability. This section considers these questions from three perspectives: partnership arrangements (4.1), risk management (4.2), and accountability (4.3).

## 4.1 Partnerships

**Across crisis contexts, the international system is perceived to default to sub-contracting community-based response as a 'stop-gap solution' to overcome access challenges. This is in lieu of investing in long-term equitable partnerships that transfer decision-making power as well as funding to local actors.** Researchers and an ERR representative have pointed this out in the Sudan context (Kuka 2024; Loy and Worley 2025; ACAPS 2024). Access will always be a critical consideration: the 2025 coordinated humanitarian response plan explicitly links supporting local actors with the aim of reaching hard-to-access areas (in particular Darfur, Al Jazirah and Khartoum states where international staff presence is limited or non-existent) (OCHA 2024d). Yet, some external partners also intend to support local groups' 'decision-making power and agency, with the understanding that communities know themselves best and can most adeptly respond to their own unique set of needs' (Sudan CWG 2024: 7; see also Manell 2024). The survivor and community-led approach, developed by the Local to Global Protection initiative (Box 4.1), offers lessons about transformative models of assisting mutual aid groups during a crisis.

### Box 4.1: The survivor and community-led (sclr) approach

The Community of Practice on the survivor and community-led approach, led by the Local to Global Protection initiative, documents how to use micro-grants within an approach that aims to transfer power and resources to existing and emergent self-help groups and organisations that mobilise during every crisis. The sclr approach is therefore about more than just financial support: it is explicitly about transferring decision-making power (alongside resources) to individuals and communities affected by crisis. It also espouses a 'safe-to-fail' (in place of a 'failsafe') approach by allowing an acceptable level of mistakes from which to learn and grow, replacing rigid control with support for innovation and adaptability. According to Tebbutt (2024), in 2023 the sclr approach had a programmatic volume of around US$16 million in 14 countries, with funding from institutional donors such as Start Fund, Irish Aid, Danida, Sida, FCDO, and ECHO, and by philanthropic donors.

*Source: Authors' own. Created using information from. Local to Global Initiative 2021; Local to Global Protection 2024; Tebbutt 2024.*

**Some key dimensions of partnership arrangements include which groups benefit, which organisations are involved in aid delivery chains, and what forms of support are provided.** Our informants highlighted the following issues for each dimension:

### 4.1.1 Coverage

**Community mechanisms are diverse in their origins, antecedents, objectives, and organisation** (Birch *et al*. 2024; Carstensen and Sebit 2023). The diversity of the actors interviewed as part of this study is at odds with a perception among many humanitarian actors that ERRs are the sole grass-roots organisations in Sudan. While many ERRs have been established nationwide to deliver community-based aid, they are just one form of voluntary action in Sudan. Indeed, ERR has become a 'buzzword' that implies a benign form of humanitarianism whose advantages are perceived as unmatched by other forms of civil society organisation, including national NGOs. However, like any other organisation, ERRs vary in their capacities, effectiveness, and operational models (Birch *et al*. 2024).

There is a perception that some groups 'get most of the funding, legitimacy and visibility from the international aid system'.[50] The LCC is considered an important step forward in collating information on who needs funding and who has received support.[51] But as the LCC does not cover all areas or all groups, this information needs to be supplemented by an understanding of which groups are included and represented in the LCC and which are not. Furthermore, a number of complex factors shape the relationship between the international aid system and community-based response, including: historical dynamics of inequality between the centre/east and the west of Sudan (Darfur and Kordofan regions); uneven international presence; security and communications constraints in more remote and RSF-controlled areas; gender and other inequalities that shape whose needs are front and centre; language barriers; and the unfamiliarity of some groups with the international aid system.[52] The Sudan CWG guidance states that areas with a lack of NGO presence or humanitarian access should be 'strongly considered' for GCT support to mutual aid groups (Sudan CWG 2024).

### 4.1.2 Aid delivery chains

**Donors are channelling their support to community groups through international intermediaries, enabling them to scale engagement with local groups and manage risks.** Previous research highlights the tension in relying on 'friendly INGO partners' to manage donor bureaucratic requirements while trying to scale up locally led humanitarian action (Corbett 2015: 31). While some international NGOs may have the long-term strategic commitment to work themselves out of the equation,[53] the money involved may incentivise the status quo over the drive for change.[54] Global debates and evidence on the value-for-money of lengthy pass-through arrangements find that moving to local collaborative coalitions can drive cost-efficient localisation at scale, including support to self-help groups.[55] As noted by Mutual Aid Sudan, every intermediate step in the aid delivery chain 'reduces the total value available for real goods and services' (Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition n.d.b). Meanwhile, individual international intermediaries offer particular strengths. For example, some may have a focus on supporting women-led groups; some may invest in accompanying capacity inputs.[56]

**Sudanese NGOs are actively supporting grass-roots groups and acting as a bridge to international donors** (ACAPS 2024; Birch *et al*. 2024; Buchanan-Smith 2024); **however, international aid actors may bypass national and local NGOs due to perceptions of their capacities and risks, and Sudanese NGOs continue to receive very little direct funding.** Interviews with local informants revealed how in Darfur, years of investment primarily by national NGOs has built a resource for mutual aid groups to draw on. The 2024 SHF Risk Absorption Note states that the preferred delivery chain is 'SHF, an SHF NGO partner, a national NGO sub-partner and community level [mutual aid groups]', with the national NGO playing a key role 'to verify the appropriateness of engaging with selected [mutual aid groups] based on local, contextual knowledge as well as enhanced monitoring' (SHF 2024: 6). However, some international NGOs choose to work with the mutual aid groups directly and not involve local NGOs. This may be due to perceptions of national NGO capacity and how this has diminished during the conflict;[57] research by Harvey *et al*. (2023a) described the looting of Sudanese NGO offices and vehicles from the start of the conflict and their need for support to rebuild basic infrastructure. Alternatively, it may relate to views about risk (for example, NGOs' on-the-ground presence makes them vulnerable to security actors who may be suspicious of their support for community groups).[58] Relationships between international aid actors and Sudanese NGOs are complicated by a long history of politicisation, with the government directing support to pro-regime organisations (CSF 2023b; Harvey *et al*. 2023a). Meanwhile Sudanese NGOs continue to receive very little direct funding from the

[50] Interview with conflict sensitivity experts (21 November 2024).
[51] Interview with international NGO representative (27 November 2024).
[52] Interview with conflict sensitivity experts (21 November 2024).
[53] Interview with international NGO representative (27 November 2024).
[54] Interview with conflict sensitivity experts (21 November 2024).
[55] See for example Cabot Venton 2022; Cabot Venton and Pongracz 2021; Cabot Venton *et al*. 2024.
[56] Interview with international aid official (5 December 2024).
[57] Interview with international aid worker (4 December 2024) and international NGO representative (9 December 2024).
[58] Interview with national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024).

international humanitarian response (as set out in section 3.2), and there is a perceived risk of financing streams unintentionally provoking tensions between formal NGOs and informal mutual aid groups.[59]

### 4.1.3 Restricted or unrestricted funding

**Unrestricted funding allows community groups to make their own identification of needs and appropriate activities** and is encouraged in the Sudan CWG (2024) guidance on GCTs. Several informants expressed concern that restricted models of support would disempower community groups, constraining their ability to flex as needs and conflict dynamics change (see also Manell 2024). Some international organisations fund groups to provide community kitchens or food baskets: one informant noted that this risks treating them as 'service providers or distributors on the ground' if such a model is rolled out without considering the best fit with local conditions or the views of volunteers.[60] Community volunteers described how external actors sometimes fund interventions that differ from the priorities identified by grass-roots groups. In these cases, the groups were able to carry out the interventions without abandoning their own priorities. They continue to plan and fundraise for activities that they believe are crucial in their areas.

**Another concern is whether funding to community groups covers their core and coordination costs.** Manell (2024) refers to the expensive cost of communication for women running ERRs and reports that a proportion of the group cash transfer was allocated to cover it. There are also reports of international aid funding provided to ERR coordination mechanisms.

### 4.1.4 Voice in humanitarian decision-making

**Local actors in Sudan lack influence and leadership in aid decision-making processes** (Plan International 2024). International humanitarian structures are notoriously poor at enabling the meaningful participation of local actors (Holland 2024), although there is an intention to improve (for example, establishing a Sudan's Women Advisory Group, Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group 2024). Research in 2023 reported that Sudanese youth and civil society groups found 'UN and INGO offices are like fortresses – you just can't get in and if you try you are humiliated', with the use of English rather than Arabic and connectivity issues limiting the access of local organisations to funding information (Harvey *et al*. 2023a: 9). One volunteer from a coordination mechanism in eastern Sudan said that it would be a great opportunity to join OCHA's SHF coordination. The LCC is one mechanism through which international actors can engage with one set of community groups. A broader Sudanese-led platform that brings together the full range of local actors, from community groups to local and national NGOs, with international NGOs, UN agencies and donors remains an aspiration.[61]

**There have been some efforts at collective learning and building familiarity and relationships of trust between local responders and external actors.** In July 2024, representatives of the international aid community and community volunteers came together to collectively discuss risks and develop mitigation and risk-sharing strategies.[62]

[59] Personal communication with researcher (12 March 2025).
[60] Interview with conflict sensitivity experts (21 November 2024).
[61] Interview with aid official (5 December 2024).
[62] This participatory exercise set out to operationalise the risk sharing framework developed by the Grand Bargain Risk Sharing Platform established in 2021, co-led by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the ICRC and InterAction (Risk Sharing Platform 2023).

## 4.2 Approaches to risk

### 4.2.1 Protection and security

**The vulnerability of volunteers remains acute, and our informants agreed that their protection should be a priority.** With the warring parties suspicious of both the community groups and the international aid they receive, and with the failure of the UN and other regional and international institutions to protect civilians or facilitate a path to peace, external actors have adopted low-profile approaches to engaging with local groups. The impact of this on volunteers, who lack recognition as official aid workers, or on national NGOs who then operate without an institutional layer of protection, needs to be understood and addressed.[63] There is no coordinated duty of care commitment from international actors to community volunteers in Sudan.[64]

**Some protection support and training is being provided to some groups, following a slow start**, as described in section 3.2.[65] International informants to this study suggested that the protection and security of mutual aid groups could be supported by investing in human rights documentation, sharing risk mitigation strategies, providing psychosocial support and funding for evacuation,[66] and ensuring that advocacy and communication do not inadvertently cause harm.[67]

**Open conversations between aid organisations and grass-roots responders on security risks and protection strategies can build understanding and trust, and identify areas for support.** Protection risks are higher in some areas than others and are constantly evolving. For example, it is particularly dangerous for women to be involved in community humanitarian activities in RSF-held areas. Safeguarding plans, security management, and trauma support from external actors need to be calibrated to these differing risk levels and incidence. These types of conversations can deepen understanding of the risks experienced on the ground, and of the risk comfort levels and mitigation strategies deployed by community members.[68] The conversations can also inform resourcing decisions on what basic duty of care is provided, as well as which specialist services are contracted to support the intervention.[69]

### 4.2.2 Risk transference?

**Pass-through arrangements may transfer reputational, financial and security liability without adequate sharing of risk mitigation measures, or of the consequences when risks materialise.** This can lead intermediary organisations to increase compliance measures in an effort to reduce the likelihood of the risk occurring. This may involve adding more sub-partners into the aid delivery chain, or increased reporting requirements, or it may result in smaller grants, or delays in grants, reaching the groups.[70] Meanwhile, some intermediary organisations try to mitigate risk by providing day-to-day capacity-building support to the community volunteers, but this dimension of the intermediary role is not always budgeted as a direct project cost.[71]

[63] Interview with national aid expert (19 and 28 November 2024).
[64] Interview with national aid expert (19 and 28 November 2024).
[65] Interview with international aid consultant (18 December 2024) and international NGO representative (27 November 2024).
[66] Interview with international peace-building expert (13 December 2024).
[67] Interview with international researcher (20 January 2025).
[68] Interview with donor (5 December 2024).
[69] Interview with international aid consultant (18 December 2024).
[70] Interviews with international NGO representative (27 November 2024) and international aid consultant (18 December 2024).
[71] Interview with international aid consultant (18 December 2024).

### 4.2.3 From waivers to a designated specific approach

**The Sudan Humanitarian Fund, the OCHA-managed country-based pooled fund, has been a key channel for support to community groups, with the fund donors agreeing a new risk absorption approach.** OCHA (2024a) promotes the CBPFs as having the core advantage of being able to strengthen efficiency through managing multiple partners to establish a collective approach to risk management. The SHF issued new risk absorption notes in 2023 and 2024. Developed as emergency procedures, this is the first known example of an OCHA-managed country-based pooled fund developing country-specific risk absorption and flexibility guidelines[72] (Box 4.2). The SHF stakeholders think that this experience of creating such guidelines could inform the development of a standard package of measures to draw down and activate at the start of other emergencies (SHF 2024).

## Box 4.2: Changes to SHF management systems to absorb risk for conflict-sensitive assistance to mutual aid groups

At the start of the conflict, with only Médecins Sans Frontières and community-based responders providing assistance in Khartoum, the banking system in collapse, and no means under existing guidelines to work with local groups, the SHF managers recognised the need to move quickly to adapt to this very specific sudden-onset emergency.

The SHF donors held discussions on the risks of providing assistance to very small unregistered groups that had no experience of humanitarian grant management, and the financial processes and standards required. This led to the decision, set out in a June 2023 Risk Absorption Note, to flex procedures to enable small donations of up to US$20,000 to these groups, channelled through intermediary international NGOs, and contingent on an action plan, a final report, and a signed receipt of funds. The community groups only had to submit a simple plan, not a full proposal, and the final report could be one page.

While the reporting for donations did not require receipts, some partners tried to collect them, creating potential security risks. The second iteration of the Risk Absorption Note published by the SHF in November 2024 therefore provided more detail on reporting requirements and stated that collecting receipts, although encouraged as good practice, was not necessary. While the intent had been to allow flexibility and avoid being too prescriptive, this experience showed the need for clear and specific instructions on changes in standard requirements.

*Source: Authors' own. Created using information from interview with international aid worker (4 December 2024); Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2024; SHF 2023 and 2024.*

### 4.2.4 Compliance and flexibility

**Alongside the efforts of the SHF, this study gathered other positive perceptions of flexibility by international actors in funding community groups.** Two key informants representing youth initiatives in eastern Sudan indicated that they experienced no challenges with regards to the financial requirements of their international NGO supporters.[73] One explained: 'they are not strict, because they understand that there are contextual difficulties that would prevent us from meeting a lot of their compliance requirements'.[74]

**However, some international informants perceive that overall, operational decisions continue to be characterised by a compliance-first approach.**[75] As more groups are supported over longer periods of time, fiduciary risks remain a concern for international organisations which must report back to their donors and domestic constituencies.[76] For some, decisions on the upper cap on grant amounts, or the frequency of repeat funding, appear to be influenced more by financial and compliance departments than by an understanding of the absorptive capacity of these groups or of the actual performance of lump sums (taking into account increased needs, inflation and informal charges of 20 to 30 per cent when paying with or cashing out of the Bankak app with traders). One international informant described how, while endeavouring to make repeat funding applications relatively straightforward, community groups do not have a predictable

[72] Interview with international aid worker (4 December 2024)
[73] Interview with youth initiative volunteer in Sudan (21 January 2025).
[74] Interview with volunteer from a coordination body in eastern Sudan (10 January 2025).
[75] Interview with conflict sensitivity experts (21 November 2024) and international researcher (20 January 2025).
[76] Interview with national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024).

funding pipeline;[77] some of our national informants said that they have to live with uncertainty as they are not sure what will happen when funds are used up.[78] Part of this is also due to intermediaries running out of funds, as they do not have regular, predictable funding from back donors.[79]

### 4.2.5 Careful learning approaches

**Some international actors report managing the risks involved in their partnerships with mutual aid groups through a careful, informed learning approach.** One informant described how confidence is fostered by piloting micro-grants to the groups, building up relationships and better understanding how communities hold volunteers to account.[80] Another described how they triangulate the information they receive in a variety of ways: through visits to the groups; commissioning research into community-led response in Darfur (Shabaka 2024b); reaching out to the diaspora to understand what was going on; and learning from previous experiences of peace-building networks using group cash transfers in areas such as the Nuba Mountains in Kordofan.[81] A third described how ensuring duty of care for the local staff of NGOs or mutual aid volunteers is enabled when international NGOs use informed, adaptive and flexible approaches that adjust to changes in context, and encourage slow and steady engagement. This flexible approach is made possible by donor support and organisational unrestricted funding.[82]

**Yet, while capacity exchange between local groups and international groups is critical** (Saferworld 2024)**, our small sample of community volunteers are not aware of any initiatives to share learning with external aid actors on conflict-sensitive approaches.** In some places providing this type of support is dangerous and difficult with constraints on telecommunications. In areas such as eastern Sudan, no one mentioned planning or conversations on the issue of conflict-sensitive programming.

## 4.3 Accountability

**The accountability of mutual aid groups to their communities is the foundation of their approach to providing support during the humanitarian crisis in Sudan.** The interviewees from community-based social support mechanisms shared considerable commitment to the principle of accountability to affected people. This was the priority of the majority of our participants, and it was not perceived as being contradictory to accountability towards donors. A volunteer in Sennar State explained that they are community members trusted by the community, and they do not want to be viewed as corrupt by their people, adding that 'above all, we want to maintain the dignity of our people by ensuring that they understand that everything we do is their right and not a gift from us'.[83]

**Various mutual aid informants shared that community members participate in the groups' decision-making processes, perceived as promoting a sense of ownership of the activities within communities**.[84] One volunteer indicated that they shared the financial status of the kitchen with the community members during the meal distribution. She explained that they present the amount they received from different supporters and the expenses by showing the financial transactions in the mobile banking application.[85] Some mutual aid groups explained that consultation with women in the community is facilitated by women volunteers.

**The majority of our informants shared that they view their accountability to the community and their accountability to donors as mutually reinforcing, although, as pointed out by an international informant,[86] different accountability priorities could pull in different directions.** That is, they need to be accountable to the community to gain the trust of the donors and they need to be accountable to donors to secure additional funds to support their communities. As reported by Buchanan-Smith (2024), the videos and

[77] Interview with international NGO (27 November 2024).
[78] Interview with ERR volunteer in Kordofan (24 December 2024).
[79] Interview with international NGO representative (27 November 2024).
[80] Interview with UN agency staff (19 November 2024).
[81] Interview with international NGO representative (27 November 2024).
[82] Interview with international NGO representative (9 December 2024).
[83] Interview with volunteer in Sennar State (18 November 2024).
[84] Interviews with volunteers in eastern Sudan (13 January 2025).
[85] Interview with volunteer from a communal kitchen in Sennar State (18 November 2024).
[86] Personal communication with international researcher (10 March 2025).

photos of meals distribution are widely used by the groups as a means of reporting back to donors, particularly in RSF-controlled areas.[87] In eastern Sudan, mutual aid groups reported using receipts for financial reporting.

**Some of the volunteers we spoke with were keen to assert their independence when working with external actors.** One volunteer from eastern Sudan indicated that their engagement with any supporter depends on having a shared understanding of the context and the needs of target communities. He added that they engage positively with the donor by sharing the community views and priorities, but if the donor insists on approaches or interventions that they deem to be irrelevant, they abstain from cooperation.

**Local and international informants also pointed out how restricted and unpredictable funding, with excessive reporting requirements, can affect the relationship between mutual aid groups and their communities.** For example:

- Volunteers in Darfur and the southern states of Sudan describe funding that is restricted to assisting displaced people. They were therefore unable to support vulnerable groups within host communities, thus risking fuelling tensions between host communities and displaced people.
- Trust-based accountability requires predictability in funding.[88] One ERR representative noted how a breakdown in the funding pipeline can critically damage the trust the community places in the ERR and the protection the community gives its volunteers.[89] This is a particular concern for groups that are totally reliant on external funding, less so for those that are already deeply rooted within their social structures.
- Early grants to community groups came with rigid and onerous reporting requirements, inappropriate for understaffed groups working in very difficult circumstances (ACAPS 2023; The New Humanitarian 2023). Efforts to improve reporting requirements were reported to be slow because of limited coordination between NGOs and the lack of open discussion with local responders.[90] A particular point of tension arises over requests for lists of named beneficiaries, often viewed as essential monitoring data. These lists are difficult for volunteers to compile, sometimes for security reasons, and sometimes because those receiving the assistance do not want to be included on a list for dignity reasons.[91] There have been efforts to make reporting requirements more suitable, with some international actors seeking to align their requirements with the ERR-led reporting system;[92] reducing the number of data points; providing Arabic translations of need assessment materials; and accepting voice notes and photos in lieu of a written final report (Shabaka 2024b; SHF 2024). Some of our local informants in eastern, northern, southern, and central Sudan shared that they had no challenges meeting external actors' reporting requirements.

**In sum, our findings show evidence of effective accountability pathways between the volunteers and the communities they serve, but there are also limitations.** Overall, the accountability measures deployed by mutual aid groups focus on addressing short-term needs, which could be attributed to the emergency-driven thinking that characterises mutual aid during conflict. With regard to targeting, the wider culture of social solidarity means that groups prioritise the inclusion of as many people in need as possible. Finally, our findings also show that mutual aid groups have gained experience in dealing with complaints and grievances through open communication with community members. Future research could investigate whether these approaches to grievance resolution support positive relationships between different groups of beneficiaries.

[87] Interview with national NGO staff member supervising communal kitchen in eastern Khartoum State (19 November 2024).
[88] Interview with researcher (20 January 2025).
[89] Interview with international aid consultant (18 December 2024).
[90] Interview with national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024).
[91] Interview with national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024); and with member of an ERR in Khartoum North (27 November 2024).
[92] Interviews with UN agency staff (19 November 2024); national aid expert (21 and 28 November 2024); and international NGO representative (27 November 2024).

# 5. Conclusion

*First research question: How have community-based social support mechanisms and their capacities in Sudan been affected by, and how have they evolved and adapted in response to, the current conflict?*

**Community volunteers and diverse community groups play a vital role in providing assistance to people affected by the conflict in Sudan, for displaced and host populations, and for the most vulnerable, in particular women and girls**. Embedded in a Sudanese cultural tradition of solidarity and mutual support, a wide range of community-based mechanisms have evolved from pre-existing groups or have emerged as new first responders.

**These varied initiatives have evolved and adapted in response to highly localised conflict and governance dynamics, protection risks, and displacement needs**. The initiatives vary in their organisational formality and scale, as well as their degree of connectedness with other actors, inside and outside Sudan. External partners must continue to deepen their understanding of these dynamics. The challenge is how to do so while also minimising the information burden on, and protection risks for, local volunteers. It remains critical that all aid actors understand the impact of their interventions on the political economy and the war economy in Sudan (Birch *et al*. 2024).

**Some common findings emerged on the self-reported conflict sensitivity of the small sample of community group representatives included in this study.** These include the importance of the role of the mutual aid groups in distributing food; their active and adaptive support to respond to the large displacement that is occurring across many areas in Sudan; their inclusive approach to women and girls, the different cultural needs of displaced groups, and providing last-mile support for older people; and the multiple and context-specific risks that people brave in providing humanitarian assistance in their communities. The informants also highlighted the critical role of diaspora supporters and NGOs in supporting the groups, as well as some support from international aid actors. Community groups' conflict-sensitive practice relies on their knowledge of the local culture and community dynamics, their trust-based relationships with communities, their communication skills to diffuse tensions over the allocation of insufficient aid, and their adaptive response to changing risks. Coordination among the community groups has helped them to advocate for funding and to start to extend coverage and look for gaps and duplication in support.

**Of the many challenges discussed in this research, some in particular stand out**. The volunteers operate under highly difficult conditions, affected by lawlessness and criminality in RSF-controlled areas and intimidation in SAF-controlled areas. Protection support from external partners has been slow to get started and is uncoordinated. The proportion of the overall humanitarian response that reaches community groups has been very low. While there are plans to ramp up cash transfers to the groups, there remains a sense that some external actors' risk appetite is limiting support. The overnight pause and questions over the future strategic direction of US funding is a disaster for providers across the humanitarian systems, from the mutual aid groups to those that might support them. The US was the main donor of the humanitarian response in Sudan and a recent proponent of support to local actors, including the mutual aid groups.

*Second research question: What are the lessons from this experience for external actors which provide cash and food transfers in conflict, and for longer-term support for social assistance in Sudan?*

**To sum up the key findings, there are a number of inter-related lessons for conflict-sensitive engagement with community groups providing humanitarian assistance during the conflict in Sudan.** Empowering approaches to support the grass-roots groups require unrestricted funding and adaptive approaches. Recent efforts to simplify reporting requirements show how the international aid system can adapt to take into account local conditions and processes. Approaches that invest in longer-term relationships and open conversations as well as accompanying cash with protection and capacity support and careful monitoring can help to build trust between international actors and groups. The challenge is how to achieve this more resource-intensive partnership approach at scale, during the complex operational and security challenges in Sudan.[93] There is a perception that compliance-first mentalities may still be restricting options to improve the amount and predictability of funding to the community groups, with risk transference

[93] Interview with international peace-building expert (13 December 2024).

resulting in more cautious intermediaries. Preparatory planning to develop coordinated approaches to draw on when risks materialise (as they will), is perceived to be limited. National NGOs can play an important bridging role but there is a lack of investment in their core capacities and they may be bypassed. Meanwhile there is continuing advocacy to include mutual aid groups in humanitarian coordination mechanisms and decision-making forums (NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security 2025).

Community-based social support mechanisms have largely focused on responding to immediate humanitarian needs with little space or time to consider the longer term. Some groups are used to operating across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and planning for reconstruction;[94] when the emergency is over, some may want to return to their original thematic focus. The international aid system's efforts to support the local groups have mostly come from humanitarian actors and through humanitarian financing. However, given that the conflict in Sudan is likely to be protracted it is crucial to start thinking about how community-based support can be sustained, what role development as well as humanitarian actors can play in this support, and what that means for how these mechanisms relate to other channels of more formal social protection. Organic short-term responses to emergencies may fluctuate according to events and needs; longer-term social protection design would benefit from understanding these community dynamics and relationships, at a minimum to avoid undermining, and potentially to identify how engagement and partnership could lead to more effective interventions. Thinking of this type is nascent but will be important to foster as development actors seek to re-engage through support to social protection. This will require bridging the current development-humanitarian silos in aid coordination structures and discussions, as well as within donor organisations.[95]

**Our study identifies four over-arching conclusions for cash and food transfers in Sudan for the short and the longer terms**, drawing on our findings and the wider literature:

- Firstly, as the mutual aid volunteers know their communities intimately, identifying needs from 'the bottom up' and operating through relationships of trust, they can play a critical role in ensuring that aid interventions during the current crisis and beyond are effective and inclusive.[96]
- Secondly, these community-embedded capacities are vital not only for emergency response: longer-term social assistance programmes in fragile settings tend to rely a lot on the skills and capacities of community volunteers and collaborators[97] (Van Halsema, Bansal and Barca 2024). Investing in community groups is an investment in societal accountability mechanisms, which are key to effective social protection.[98]
- Thirdly, as key civil society actors, investment in the groups and their volunteers should go beyond a narrow focus on strengthening humanitarian capacity to building their resilience (Buchanan-Smith 2024), considering the experience of some across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and their role to play in future reconstruction. This has implications for how success is measured: according to delivery on aspects of the crisis that meet international organisations' predetermined programming needs, or on building (the less easily quantifiable) capacity[99] 'to survive and thrive'? (Buchanan-Smith 2024)
- Lastly, community-led groups have proven their worth by supporting people in great need and at great risk. They need more support to do that safely and to expand their scope. While some promising efforts have been made, these need to be continued and scaled to enable more support to reach where it is most needed, more reliably and more directly.

[94] Personal communication with international researcher (10 March 2025).
[95] Interview with donor (9 January 2025).
[96] NIDAA *et al*. (2023) document one example where ERR support for the targeting and the distribution of cash transfers in Khartoum 2023 were essential given the very mobile target population and need for in-person contact for follow-up and delivery.
[97] Interview with financial inclusion expert (27 November 2024).
[98] Examples of grass-roots initiatives and actors playing a delivery and accountability role in centralised social protection systems are identified in a short paper by SPACE (Cabot Venton 2021).
[99] Interview with international peace-building expert (13 December 2024).

# 6. Recommendations

These recommendations are relevant for donors, UN agencies and NGOs. The first over-arching recommendation is that:

1. **Given the criticality of need and presence of famine, all donors need to step up to provide more support, especially to community responders on the front line.**
    - Official aid can link with and support grass-roots assistance in a conflict-sensitive way by:
2. **Strengthening protection for community responders on the front line**, through advocacy with parties to the conflict to recognise the humanitarian activities of mutual aid groups, support to human rights documenters, and practical support on protection and security for local groups.
3. **Understanding the diversity of community-led crisis response**, and supporting this in areas most in need, particularly the more isolated groups, building on efforts to avoid duplication and improve coverage.
4. **Continuing to adapt funding modalities and modes of engagement to support the priorities and leadership of community initiatives**, through empowering approaches that provide:
    a. Predictable and unrestricted funding that covers core costs and coordination mechanisms;
    b. Meaningful participation of grass-roots representatives in humanitarian and development decision-making spaces;
    c. Strengthened capacity of local groups included in measurements of aid success.
5. **Understanding the approaches of community groups to needs assessments, beneficiary selection, and monitoring and accountability to communities, and how the requirements of external actors can build on these** (Buchanan-Smith 2024).
6. **Improving pass-through funding arrangements to support equitable partnerships** by
    a. Seeking a strategically coherent approach to utilising the various aid delivery chains and intermediaries, understanding their different strengths and weaknesses;
    b. Clarifying how reputational and financial risk are shared between donors and intermediary organisations;
    c. Setting out how risk consequences will be shared among donors, intermediary organisations and grass-roots groups, including by preparing for coordinated responses when risks materialise;
    d. Budgeting for the costs incurred by intermediary organisations in capacity support and relationship-building with local groups;
    e. Investing in internal organisational learning on approaches to funding grass-roots groups, bringing together organisations' compliance and legal departments with their operational teams.
7. **Understanding grass-roots groups as part of the local aid ecosystem and investing also in Sudanese NGOs that are playing a key bridging role between international actors and grass-roots groups**, including through partnerships that invest in the core capacities of these NGOs (Birch *et al*. 2024; CSF 2023b).
8. **Working closely with diaspora supporters and organisations**, as well as new philanthropic initiatives, on support to local initiatives, given their long-standing relationships with community groups and critical support to them during the conflict.
9. **Ensuring that donors and intermediary organisations know their partners**, including investing in political economy and conflict analysis, to be cognisant of any links with conflict and security actors (Birch *et al*. 2024).
10. **Continuing to investigate how the experience of grass-roots response could inform the inclusivity and accountability of food and cash transfers in the short and longer term,** including as part of a national social protection system, and through sharing lessons learned and planning between humanitarian and development actors

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