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The Role of Nafeer and Social Networks in Sudan's Humanitarian Response: Challenges for International Humanitarian Actors in Adapting to Local Mechanisms



Photo credit: Sari Omer

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Together, hand in hand, we can reach far.¹

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Introduction:

This paper explores the vital role of Nafeer, a traditional Sudanese communal practice that exists alongside broader social networks, in responding to the humanitarian crises that have gripped the country, particularly since the onset of the 2023 conflict. As Sudan's humanitarian landscape faces unprecedented challenges, community-resilience mechanisms like Nafeer, kinship-based and social networks have become vital for mobilising resources and providing support. These systems have garnered significant attention in the current context, where formal aid structures struggle to meet the needs or even access the affected populations. Yet misconceptions and misunderstanding persist about the origins and working mechanisms.

Nafeer originated in rural Sudanese agricultural settings as a means of mobilising communal Labour for collective tasks. However, the adaptability of this practice has allowed it to evolve, becoming a critical mechanism for addressing urban emergencies as well. In recent years, as migration and urbanisation blurred the lines between rural and urban communities, Nafeer has extended its reach, demonstrating its flexibility in tackling both local and national crises. Moreover, social networks play an equally important role in Sudanese society's resilience mechanisms. While Nafeer is rooted in communal Labour and rapid collective responses to crises, social networks offer long-term, sustained support based on familial, tribal ties or beyond. The ongoing war has amplified the role of such community-based responses.

These two systems are the base of Sudan's informal social safety nets. Both Nafeer and social networks share common characteristics: they rely on community trust, are self-sustaining, and are deeply embedded in Sudanese culture. However, Nafeer is typically event-driven and voluntary, while kinship networks provide a more enduring, ongoing form of social support. Kinship networks are also part of the wider social network support. This distinction is crucial in understanding how communities respond to different types of crises. The transition from Nafeer to kinship and wider social networks as discussed in this paper reflects their interconnectedness in building resilience in Sudan.

This paper seeks to examine how Nafeer and social networks, including kinships, operate as decentralised, community-based systems. By understanding these responses, we can challenge the conventional view of such initiatives as merely voluntary or civil society actions, instead recognising community-mechanisms' role in mobilising resources, whether through traditional means or modern mechanisms like crowdfunding in response to humanitarian emergencies. This paper also provides recommendations for how international actors can engage more effectively with these indigenous systems, aligning their efforts in a conflict-sensitive and context-driven manner. The research relies on secondary sources and interviews with key actors familiar with both the humanitarian sector and Sudanese communities.

The role of Nafeer in Sudanese communities and emergency responses

Nafeer is a common tradition in Sudan that embodies the principles of communal Labour and mutual assistance. It's a collective call to action for a specific activity, where people voluntarily gather to participate in delivering a task.¹ Specifically, it plays a crucial role in rural Sudan in agricultural communities, where collective effort is essential to complete tasks that are too challenging for one person or a single family. This includes agricultural activities, constructing homes, or addressing emergencies like floods. As Nafeer is a common and well-known tradition, it's captured in various forms of Sudanese cultural expressions, including songs and oral traditions, reflecting the importance of coming together as a community for collaboration and managing hardships.² With the blurring of rural-urban boundaries due to accelerated migration from rural to urban centres, Nafeer was also gradually adapted and applied in urban communities.³ This adaptability emphasises that Nafeer is an integral part of Sudanese culture. Although the term is commonly used across different practices and communities, the way Nafeer manifests varies, reflecting the social and economic histories of these communities.

Nafeer in rural Sudan: A common tradition with varied local adaptations

Nafeer variations are particularly evident in community farming, where regional histories and land tenure systems shape how Nafeer is practised. For example, in northern and central Sudan volunteer to assist landowners in harvesting their lands or trees. This form of Nafeer highlights communal support within the agricultural sector, established during colonial periods in these regions⁴. In the greater Darfur region, the participants of rural Nafeer are mainly women and children. This usually happens at the beginning of the agricultural season for removing harmful weeds and at the harvesting stage, usually in lands that were historically distributed to individuals by the tribe. Young men may also participate.

In contrast, in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile, agricultural Nafeer is a more communal activity involving men, women and children working together on lands collectively owned by the community and managed by tribal authorities. The collective ownership and participation underscore the deep-rooted communal bonds in the region.⁵ The common element in agricultural Nafeer in different parts of Sudan is that it's a seasonal and voluntary phenomenon with zero financial incentives for individuals who decide to participate other than social capital.

¹ Vittorio Felci and Aya Altom, "An Oral History Study of Social Memory and Flood Resilience in Tuti Island, Greater Khartoum, Sudan," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 55, no. 3 (September 2022): 347–72; Samer Abdelnour, "Actorhood and Institutions: Three Studies of Social Intervention in the Sudan" (phd, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2015), <https://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3143/>.

² Annie Gagiano, "The African Library: The Jungo: Stakes of the Earth by Abdel Aziz Baraka Sakin," *LitNet*, July 5, 2022, <https://www.litnet.co.za/the-african-library-the-jungo-stakes-of-the-earth-by-abdel-aziz-baraka-sakin/>; *The country of light*, accessed September 2, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvYDhKOmaZg>.

³ Samah Abdel Rhman Mohammed Ahmed Tambal et al., "Increasing Urban Flood Resilience through Public Participation: A Case Study of Tuti Island in Khartoum, Sudan," *Journal of Flood Risk Management* 17, no. 2 (2024): e12966, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jfr3.12966>.

⁴ Jay Spaulding, "Slavery, Land Tenure and Social Class in the Northern Turkish Sudan," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15, no. 1 (1982): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/218446>; Mohamed Abdel Rahim Mohamed Salih, *Agrarian Change in the Central Rainlands, Sudan: A Socio-Economic Analysis* (Nordic Africa Institute, 1987); Mohammed Hashim Awad, "The Evolution of Landownership in the Sudan," *Middle East Journal* 25, no. 2 (1971): 212–28.

⁵ Guma Kunda Komey, *Land, Governance, Conflict and the Nuba of Sudan*, Eastern Africa Series (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010), chap. 3; Alden Young, ed., "The Nation, in Whose Name They Could Act: The Military and National Income Accounting, 1958–1964," in *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation*, African Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 107–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316779071.006>; Ibrahim Kursany, "Peasants of the Nuba Mountains Region," *Review of African Political Economy* 10, no. 26 (January 1, 1983): 35–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056248308703527>.

In some cases, state governments have utilised Nafeer to develop or improve social services, such as building schools or health centers. In these cases, inhabitants bring sand, concrete, and other construction materials, and contribute labor, while the government completes the remaining work. Similarly, some international organisations have employed Nafeer to provide labor, albeit indirectly, as traditional local administration manages the Nafeer in these cases at the request of the funding organisation.

- Respondent 1

Nafeer (AL-Fazaa) in conflict dynamics

While traditionally it is associated with the mobilisation of resources, in some cases Nafeer can be involved in conflict. In those contexts, when it involves mobilising community resources to fight or restore stolen livestock it is usually referred to as **Al-Fazaa**. However, in this case, *Al-Fazaa* is *linked* to conflict rather than being a direct driver of it, as it serves to mobilise resources in response to conflict situations. Historically, *Al-Fazaa* manifested in rural communities. Such manifestation is reflected in cultural expressions, which show how communities mobilise to restore stolen livestock, or engage in war or peacebuilding, relying on the same mechanisms.⁶ As Roxane Carlisle accurately described it “*Good Hakkama songs may sweep the whole savannah belt, passed from mouth to mouth, from water hole to water hole by any singer with a good memory*”.⁷ Today, the meaning has gone beyond the original sense to include mobilisation for the national conflict. Since the beginning of the 2023 war, Nafeer has been invoked to mobilise fighters and economic resources among the communities in alliance with the belligerents. These groups are called ‘Mustanfireen’, which means the mobilised, and is associated with unprofessional fighters who volunteered and joined the fight with one of the warring parties.

⁶ Muhammad Al Tinawi, “The Role of Sudanese Rural Women’s Oral Folk Poetry in Their Social Life : With Regard to Darfur Culture,” 4 مجلة أمارابك no. 8 (2013): 151–59, [The Role of Sudanese Rural Women's Oral Folk Poetry in Their Social Life : With Regard to Darfur Culture](#); Heba El Desouky, “Sudanese Hakamat incite tribes with poetry for war and peace,” *Independent Arabia*, May 7, 2021, [جكامات السودان يحرضن القبائل بالشعر على الحرب والسلام | انديبننت عربية](#).

⁷ <https://womensliteracysudan.blog/2021/05/18/her-words-slayed-dragons/>



Photo credit: Faiz Abubakr

Case Study: Modern Adaptations of Nafeer in Response to Crises – The 2013 Floods and 2023 War

With the blurring of rural-urban boundaries, Nafeer has also been increasingly adopted in urban centres, enabling social and economic mobilisation to help tackle different hardships. As Nafeer was leveraged in urban Sudanese communities, it adapted to reflect their needs, for example moving beyond collective response and public participation into the division of Labour and specialised tasks in tackling crises the expansion of economic migration helped to enable this as Sudanese diaspora sent back remittances, providing more resources to support the Nafeer.⁸

In 2013, Sudan experienced destructive floods that impacted more than 182,000 people, particularly in Khartoum, Al-Jazeera, Al-Gadarif and White Nile. Due to the government's slow response, a community Nafeer initiative mobilised thousands of young volunteers through social media and coordinated efforts to provide immediate relief, including food, basic healthcare, and building flood defences.⁹

The management and funding mechanisms were arguably the main factors that made the initiative's impact reach many affected people. To manage the thousands of volunteers, the initiative adopted a horizontal approach, dividing itself into 14 committees. A Coordination Committee oversaw liaisons between all committees (**figure 1**). This allowed the initiative to leverage the experience of Sudanese professionals in emergencies, engineering, medicine,

⁸ Tambal et al., "Increasing Urban Flood Resilience through Public Participation."

⁹ Isma'il Kushkush, "As Floods Ravage Sudan, Young Volunteers Revive a Tradition of Aid," *The New York Times*, August 30, 2013, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/30/world/africa/as-floods-ravage-sudan-young-volunteers-revive-a-tradition-of-aid.html>.

logistics and other professions. The initiative secured over 200,000 USD from Sudanese at home and expatriates.¹⁰ International organisations, recognising the efficiency and professionalism of the community-based initiative, offered indirect support by providing access to their facilities, logistical resources and recognition allowing Nafeer to operate without the usual delays associated with formal aid processes (table 1).

In addition to responding to the humanitarian crisis, the innovative approach has shifted civic space dynamics. First, the decentralised approach facilitated escaping the security apparatus' attempts to hinder the efforts. Second, it created a space for young generations and professionals to engage in public affairs across multiple Sudanese states without the necessity of political affiliation. Most importantly, the connections created from across states and localities became the base for some of the movements during the 2018 events and after.

Item		No. Units Distributed
Ready-Made Meal		4,000
Food Bag ^a		15,220
Plastic Sheet (used as a temporary roof)		13,130
Mosquito Net		10,286
Clothing Item		5,000
Empty Sand Bag (used in flood barricades)		5,000
Baby Formula Milk Box ^b		27
Floor Mats		500
Drinking Water	Bottle Packet ^c	100
	Water Tanker's Load	2

Albahari © 2017 Prehospital and Disaster Medicine

Table 1: Items Distributed by the initiative ¹¹

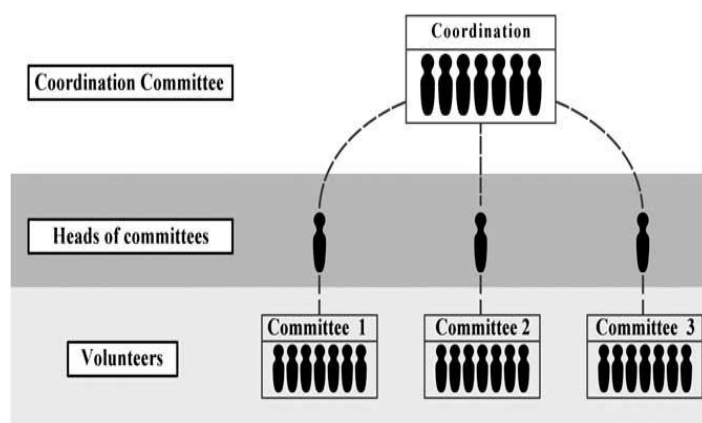


Figure 1: Chart Illustrating initiative Hierarchy ¹²

Similar characteristics of decentralisation, effectiveness and professionalism are evident in the application of the Nafeer phenomenon among different communities since the 2023 war. For example, people displaced from Kutum town – the second largest city in North Darfur - organised themselves in a school in South Al-Fashir, providing food for over 300 people relying on expatriates' transfers.¹³ However, international humanitarian actors have been more hesitant to provide direct resources to community initiatives despite the inability of INGOs to access many conflict-affected areas. Unlike in 2013, these recent efforts have struggled to secure international backing. Even when international humanitarian actors engage, their involvement often emphasises mentorship, training or a push to conform to common international structural procedures. This is despite local initiatives like the Central Kitchens (community Kitchens) and Emergency Response Rooms (ERR) already serving as vital lifelines for civilians with well-established and organised approaches relying on community resources.

The Community Kitchens across the neighbourhoods of Khartoum have become a cornerstone of the local response. Operated by volunteers and supported by community and Sudanese diaspora and community donations, these kitchens provide daily meals to thousands of displaced families and individuals. In addition to food, they have expanded their services to include primary

¹⁰ Amin Albahari and Carl H. Schultz, "A Qualitative Analysis of the Spontaneous Volunteer Response to the 2013 Sudan Floods: Changing the Paradigm," *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 32, no. 3 (June 2017): 240–48, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049023X17000164>.

¹¹ Albahari and Schultz.

¹² Albahari and Schultz.

¹³ Respondent, online interview by the author, September 11, 2024

health care and evacuating vulnerable populations from conflict zones. Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), distributed across Khartoum and other states, work closely with the Central Kitchens to coordinate these evacuations, manage first aid, and transport the injured to medical facilities.¹⁴ Most importantly, those responses are completely distinct from those of traditional civil society organisations, which also play a crucial role in the current crisis.

Al-Gaddarif Emergency Response Room quickly stepped up to provide vital humanitarian assistance to displaced persons as soon as they arrived in the city. They not only delivered food, primary healthcare, and essential services well before the government and international organisations but also tapped into their vast networks of merchants, businessmen, farmers, and the wider community to mobilise resources. Their swift, coordinated efforts were a testament to the power of community resilience mechanisms in times of crisis.

People displaced from Kutum town – the second largest city in North Darfur – organised themselves in a school in South Al Fashir, providing food for over 300 people relying on expatriates' transfers.

- Respondent 2 and 3

The scale and scope of these responses illustrate an adaptation of the Nafeer tradition, leveraging communal resources in an urban crisis. Furthermore, it also highlights that the voluntary nature of these initiatives does not mean that participants are unprofessional in responding to emergencies. It rather reflects the community's response to the severe shortage of available resources while maximising the utilisation of existing human expertise and collective resources.¹⁵ Understanding these efforts from the perspective of the Nafeer framework – specifically as a community-resilience mechanism in response to humanitarian crises – challenges the conventional wisdom of treating such responses merely as civil society or voluntary actions. This is especially relevant when viewed through the lens of international humanitarian actors, who often emphasise the need for institutionalisation and formal training or at least mentorship of local actors. However, this perspective does not overlook the fact that established civil society organisations and many others also play an essential role in responding to the current crisis.¹⁶

Attempting to formalise the effectiveness of these Nafeer adaptations brings the risk of "NGO-isation," where aligning such responses with international norms and expectations around compliance processes and structures could undermine their inherent adaptability, grassroots efficacy and accountability to their communities. As Buchanan-Smith (2021) notes, integrating these local efforts into broader humanitarian frameworks must be approached with caution to

¹⁴ "Khartoum State ERR," khartoumerr.org, accessed September 10, 2024, <https://khartoumerr.org/>; Kushkush, "As Floods Ravage Sudan, Young Volunteers Revive a Tradition of Aid."

¹⁵ Nils Carstensen and Lodia Sebit, "Mutual Aid in Sudan: The Future of Aid?," *Humanitarian Practice Network* (blog), 2023, <https://odihpn.org/publication/mutual-aid-in-sudan-the-future-of-aid/>.

¹⁶ Respondent, online interview by the author, September 1, 2024. Mohammad Ashraf, "The Situation of National NGOs in Light of the Sudan Crisis", Shabaka, 2023, <https://shabaka.org/sudan-programme/resource/the-situation-of-national-ngos-in-light-of-the-sudan-crisis-sccu-publication-9/>.

preserve their community-driven nature while enhancing their impact.¹⁷ Such a distinction is crucial, as it shifts the perspective of international actors, particularly those committed to the localisation agenda. Rather than viewing these community responses as haphazard or spontaneous efforts that require mentoring and guidance, they can be understood as deeply rooted and adapted mechanisms. These responses can be embraced while fostering more balanced engagement and partnership mechanisms in delivering aid.

Finally, this recognition is crucial for differentiating the Nafeer response from the kinship-based responses and national organisations' response. These urban initiatives are driven more by voluntary associations and less by donors as in the case of NGOs and traditional familial, ethnic, or tribal obligations in the case of social networks. This shift in dynamics underscores the evolution of Nafeer in response to contemporary challenges, particularly in conflict-affected urban areas where kinship networks may not be as strong or relevant.

The role of social networks in Sudanese communities and emergencies responses

Kinship

Kinship networks in Sudan date back centuries, forming the bedrock of Sudanese society long before established modern state structures. These networks are the backbone of social life in Sudan, deeply interwoven into the cultural fabric. The Sudanese kinship system is identified as one of the six major global kinship terminologies. The Sudanese system is distinct for its complexity, providing specific terms for almost every type of kinship relation, depending on factors like their distance from the individual, their gender, and their precise relationship to the individual. In other words, kinship in Sudan transcends first-degree family relations to encompass extended family members, forming a complex web of social and economic ties that bind individuals to their communities for life (figure 2).

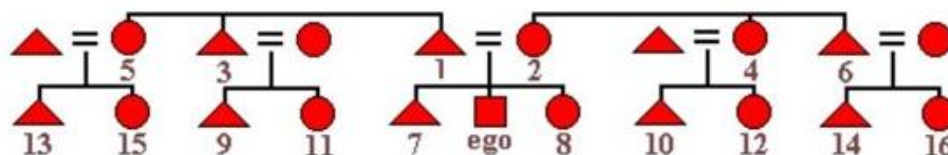


Figure 2: Sudanese Kinship System¹⁸

While kinship networks are rightly criticised for perpetuating patriarchal hierarchies and social and ethnic divisions, it is important to recognise their significant economic and humanitarian roles in Sudanese society.¹⁹ They provide an informal social safety net beyond immediate families, including extended relatives and broader tribal affiliations.²⁰ Kinship networks are critical in supporting community resilience, complementing traditional practices like hospitality and Nafeer

¹⁷ Margie Buchanan-Smith, "The Meeting of Humanitarian and Civic Space in Sudan: Lessons for Localisation," *Humanitarian Practice Network*, 2024, <https://odihpn.org/publication/the-meeting-of-humanitarian-and-civic-space-in-sudan-lessons-for-localisation/>.

¹⁸ Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF), Sudan Context for Aid Workers (slide presentation, September, 2024).

¹⁹ Susan M. Kenyon, "Gender and Alliance in Central Sudan," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 9, no. 2 (April 1, 1994): 141–55, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00972146>; Michael Kevane and Leslie Gray, "Local Politics in the Time of Turabi's Revolution: Gender, Class and Ethnicity in Western Sudan," *Africa* 65, no. 2 (April 1995): 271–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1161194>; Melissa Meinhart et al., "Examining the Linkage Between Social Support and Gender-Based Violence Among Women and Girls in Humanitarian Settings: A Systematic Review of the Evidence," *Current Epidemiology Reports* 9, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 245–62, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40471-022-00310-y>.

²⁰ Merry Fitzpatrick et al., "Harnessing Informal Social Safety Nets for Resilience and Development" (Tufts - Feinstein International Center, 2022), <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/harnessing-informal-social-safety-nets-for-resilience-and-development/>.

during humanitarian challenges. This stems from the intrinsic character of Sudanese kinship networks, which are characterised by social obligations and mutual support stretching across generations.²¹ This extensive network is a survival mechanism, especially in rural areas with minimal economic opportunities and government support against poverty. Kinship networks are also crucial during humanitarian crises when the international community's and state mechanisms' responses are relatively slow or non-functioning. Communities often rely on these networks to mobilise resources to support individuals quickly.²²

Despite the diverse economic patterns and cultural norms across Sudan's communities, kinship networks share common traits that are key to economic life. For Sudanese migrants seeking better economic prospects abroad, the obligation to support their kin remains strong, often manifesting in remittances. According to the World Bank, remittances in rural Sudan account for up to 30% of household income, underscoring their critical role in sustaining communities. In this sense, financial contributions within kinship networks are not merely a cultural expectation but a moral imperative. In communities across Sudan, individuals who fail to contribute to the welfare of their kin are often stigmatised, reflecting the deep-rooted cultural norms that govern these relationships. However, the mechanisms of sharing and support vary across regions. For example, these processes are typically direct and familial in central and northern Sudan, with no intermediaries. In eastern and western Sudan, local leaders such as the tribal chief (Nazir El-Gabila), mayor (Omda), and sheikh may play a role in controlling and distributing resources, reflecting varying degrees of interconnectedness within kinship networks across Sudan. Despite the differences, these kinship networks were the first support when the 2023 war erupted.

Social networks beyond kinships:

Another well-rooted social support source within Sudanese communities are social networks, including social circles of friends, neighbours, and other circles loosely connected to family members or individuals. Arguably, generosity within social networks is the driver of the financial support for individuals within the network. It manifests in different forms in society. Hospitality is one of the most prominent forms of generosity and involves hosting guests with food, shelter, and comfort, regardless of the host's circumstances. Such acts are ingrained in cultural norms, where the host is expected to prioritise the guest's welfare over personal or familial needs. This often extends to the broader community, where neighbours ensure the guest is properly cared for, demonstrating a collective responsibility for generosity.²³ Generosity is also reflected in giving liberally—freely spending money or offering gifts, reinforcing social bonds and reflecting status.

Furthermore, charity or "sadaqah" is a religious duty and social expectation, especially in helping distressed people.²⁴ Such acts of generosity foster strong social bonding and resilience, as they honour cultural values and support those in need during crises, contributing to the informal social safety net the social networks provide in emergencies.

Social networks' significance during emergencies: The 2023 war

The 2023 war in Sudan has brought the significance of social networks into sharp focus. As the conflict intensified in Khartoum, people fled to their rural hometowns across Sudan. While some

²¹ Deng Akol Kuot Leng, "Kinship, Distance, and Obligation: A Study of Sudanese Immigrants in Calgary" (Master, Calgary, Canada, University of Calgary, 2006), <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/101630>.

²² A. Turkawi, "Social Protection and Safety Nets in Sudan" (WFP & IDS, 2015), 67–70, <https://socialprotection.org/discover/publications/social-protection-and-safety-nets-sudan>.

²³ Tore Nordenstam, *Sudanese Ethics* (Almqvist & Wiksell, 1968), 77–82, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:289974/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

²⁴ Nordenstam, 80–91.

displaced people resided in schools or camps, where they were visible to international humanitarian organisations, other individuals became part of their extended families' households. OCHA's September 2023 report highlights that approximately 67% of the displaced populations stayed with host communities, whereas only 9.6% rented accommodation in urban cities.²⁵ The report supports the idea that displaced people rely heavily on kinship networks for survival. This relocation was for physical safety and a return to their kinship support. Moreover, many displaced people were also received and hosted in different cities or villages without necessarily being originally from those places. Namely, social network support beyond kinship was in play in those cases (box).

Box: Social Networks in Action During 2023 War

A displaced household recounted his journey from Khartoum to Al-Jazeera, specifically Al-Hasahisa city, where former neighbours from Khartoum hosted him and his family for over six months. Despite being from a different region of Sudan, these neighbours offered them shelter at no cost.

Another displaced individual shared how his family found refuge in Al-Gadarif, where they stayed with a former university colleague for over three months before relocating to Kenya.

In another case, an individual who fled from Khartoum sought shelter with his extended family in a rural area. Alongside her family, she brought a neighboring family from Khartoum, and both families continue to live together, supported by the extended family's resources. These cases emphasises the vital role of Sudanese social networks in providing shelter and aid during the current conflict beyond the kinship.

However, this integration into local communities made them almost invisible to external observers, complicating efforts to assess the true scale of displacement and need. In these settings, families provided shelter, food, and emotional support to the new arrivals, often at personal cost. The sudden influx of relatives and displaced people placed additional pressure on already limited resources, as households barely sustaining themselves now had to accommodate and care for more people. This new situation is a unique and hidden challenge for humanitarian actors.

The reliance on expatriate remittances adds another layer of complexity and potential for the humanitarian sector. Many families receive financial support from relatives abroad, which is not quantifiable for humanitarian actors. This informal flow of funds, often through unregulated channels, provides a lifeline that complements local resources but complicates the ability to capture the actual needs. For example, while one household might appear self-sufficient due to remittances, another without such support might be in dire need. Yet both could present a similar outward appearance of stability, making it challenging to integrate these communities into broader humanitarian efforts. Hence, the traditional markers of displacement are absent in some regions.

Instead, the displaced are integrated into existing family units, living in conditions that, while strained, do not fit the conventional image of a crisis in need of external intervention. On the other hand, the potential of leveraging expatriate remittances to narrow the humanitarian needs gap is

²⁵ "Sudan Situation Report, 25 September 2023" (OCHA, September 25, 2023), <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-situation-report-25-september-2023-enar>.

yet to be explored.²⁶ These practices often operate beyond the reach of traditional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks, which are designed to quantify and measure aid distribution in more visible and structured environments.

A woman residing in the Eastern Nile Locality in Khartoum reached out to her network abroad for donations to support those in need within her neighborhood. Each day, she documented her efforts through photos and shared them with donors, often via video calls, as a form of accountability. This is one of many examples illustrating how Sudanese social networks respond to the humanitarian situation, with accountability directed primarily toward local community members rather than the international community.

- Respondent 4

The invisibility of these social networks poses significant risks to the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Without a clear understanding of how these networks operate, there is a danger of fragmentation, where assistance is unevenly distributed or duplicated in areas that do not need it while missing those in need.²⁷ This inefficiency wastes resources and risks exacerbating existing community tensions, as perceptions of favouritism or neglect can fuel conflict. Moreover, failing to recognise and integrate these social networks into the broader humanitarian response can lead to a one-size-fits-all approach insensitive to Sudanese communities' unique cultural and social dynamics.

Ultimately, these challenges highlight the need for a more nuanced approach to humanitarian aid in Sudan, one that goes beyond urban-centric models and recognises the critical role of social support mechanisms.²⁸ Such an approach would require rethinking M&E frameworks to account for the informal and culturally embedded support systems at the heart of society's cultural norms.

By doing so, international organisations can better align their efforts with the realities on the ground, ensuring that aid is delivered in a way that is both effective and sensitive to the complexities of the conflict environment. As part of this recognition, understanding the differences between the two systems is crucial. The following table summarises the key characteristics and differences of the community resilience mechanisms discussed in the paper.

²⁶ "Sudan: Staff-Monitored Program" (IMF, 2014), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2016/12/31/Sudan-Staff-Monitored-Program-41746>; "The Potential of Sudanese Diaspora Remittances | United Nations Development Programme" (UNDP, 2020), <https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/potential-sudanese-diaspora-remittances>.

²⁷ "Sudan Crisis Response Plan 2023 | Global Crisis Response Platform," accessed September 8, 2024, <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/sudan-crisis-response-plan-2023>.

²⁸ Jeeyon Janet Kim et al., "Sharing to Survive: Investigating the Role of Social Networks During Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis" (Yemen: USAID, 2022), <https://fic.tufts.edu/publication-item/sharing-to-survive-investigating-the-role-of-social-networks-during-yemens-humanitarian-crisis/>.

Table: Differences and similarities between the Nafeer and social networks

Feature	Nafeer	Social Networks
Origin and Purpose	Traditional Sudanese communal practice focused on collective action in rural agricultural settings; adapted for urban crisis response.	Rooted in kinship ties and the wider community around it, providing a long-term informal social safety net.
Structure	Horizontal, event-driven; spontaneous mobilisation with no formal hierarchy.	Often informal, family-based, with regional variations in hierarchy and organisation.
Type of Support	Primarily rapid, short-term support through community Labour and resource pooling. It provides a wide range and diversified types of support (WASH, Labour for agriculture, construction of houses...etc.)	Sustained, long-term support, often based on remittances and kinship obligations. Mostly, limited to the provision of mainly financial support, shelter and food.
Adaptability	Highly adaptable, has evolved from rural agricultural support to urban crisis response.	Resilient and long-standing, adapted to support communities across rural and urban settings.
Role in Crisis Response	Mobilises resources quickly for immediate, short-term crises, often through collective volunteerism.	Offers ongoing, sustained support during prolonged crises, especially in areas where formal aid is absent.
Urban/ Rural Dynamics	In rural settings, often closely attached to traditional administration; urban Nafeer is more ad-hoc and detached from traditional structures.	Stronger and more deeply rooted in rural areas, while often weaker or less cohesive in urban settings.
Link to Kinship	Linked indirectly through community bonds but operates independently of kinship obligations.	Directly tied to kinship, with extended family and tribal support as a central component.
International Engagement	Limited formal interaction; generally, operates outside formal international aid frameworks.	Engages with international aid indirectly, with remittances often bypassing formal aid channels.

Conclusion:

Nafeer and social networks are culturally embedded in Sudanese society and act as community resilience mechanisms during crises. While Nafeer is rooted in communal Labour tradition and engages a wider segment of the community, social networks are built on individual, familial or tribal ties. Nafeer is usually a horizontally-structured, event-driven, and voluntary effort focused on rapid collective action, distinct from international volunteerism by its reliance on local resources

and socio-political significance.²⁹ Social networks operate as long-term, informal support systems often built on kinship and community ties that transcend immediate crises and are more prominent in rural Sudan. Both phenomena are self-sustaining as they rely on community financial resources, including Sudanese diaspora transfers. Moreover, they respond faster to the crisis than official authorities and the humanitarian sector. However, their capacity, scale, and operational reach are limited. One key limitation is the scale at which they can operate. While Nafeer often responds to immediate needs with urgency and is event-driven, kinship networks tend to provide sustained support over a longer period. Nevertheless, both systems can become overwhelmed in large-scale crises like the 2023 war, as their financial and operational capacities are limited and degrade over time.³⁰ The prolonged nature of such emergencies reveals the need for formal humanitarian support to complement and sustain these indigenous mechanisms during extended crises.

International humanitarian actors often need guidance to engage meaningfully with these local mechanisms. In some cases, international organisations push to adapt these responses to international norms and standards, risking their close-knit with communities, and undermining their operational effectiveness. International actors need to recognise these local systems as complementary rather than trying to mould them to fit conventional aid frameworks.

Humanitarian actors must transcend tokenism and forge genuine partnerships with local actors. This means more than just involving local networks in decision-making processes. It's about recognising their knowledge of the community and involving them from the inception of aid interventions through execution and monitoring. By nurturing these partnerships, international aid can significantly bolster the effectiveness and sustainability of its response in Sudan's intricate conflict environment. The experience proves that the most effective humanitarian response in Sudan is the one that integrates the strengths of local systems like Nafeer and kinship networks with the operational capacity of international aid. This requires a balanced approach that respects local culture and practices while addressing the limitations of informal mechanisms. Through such a collaborative framework, humanitarian actors can ensure a culturally sensitive and effective response to Sudan's ongoing crisis.

Recommendations: Implications for international engagement with local actors and networks

For Programme Managers and Field Coordinators:

Interviewees consistently reported that international organisations often overlook existing community-resilience mechanisms during their assessments of community capabilities. This oversight hampers their understanding of local agency, creating barriers between international aid programmes and effective local responses.

To bridge this gap, it is crucial for international organisations to prioritise understanding these mechanisms as a foundational step towards conflict-sensitive aid. This understanding should be incorporated into programme design and execution to ensure a more cohesive and effective response.

²⁹ Respondentsh, interviewed by the author, Nairobi, September 18 and 21, 2024.

³⁰ Respondent interview.

For International Agencies:

Feedback from local actors suggests that the push to adhere to international norms and the emphasis on capacity building can inadvertently foster the emergence of gatekeepers who may misdirect funds. To prevent this, international actors should reevaluate their approaches to direct partnerships with local entities, simplify funding criteria, and incorporate community oversight mechanisms. These steps would help ensure that funds reach those in genuine need and facilitate true local capacity development without the interference of unnecessary intermediaries.

Donors and Humanitarian Coordination Bodies: Leveraging Remittance Flows:

Diaspora groups and expatriates have historically played a crucial role in a major role in Sudan's political economy by expanding the capacity and scale of community mobilisation and supporting social networks. Yet, the full potential of such mechanisms—including remittances, group crowdfunding campaigns on social media, and collaborative efforts between locally-based organisations like Sadaqat and diaspora-based organisations like Saba—remains underexplored. These strategies have proven vital in expanding resource mobilisation since the onset of 2023 crisis, offering innovative approaches to aid distribution that could be especially beneficial in regions with limited access. A deeper understanding and strategic utilisation of these financial flows could lead to more effective delivery of cash assistance and a more accurate assessment of the humanitarian funding gap. Stakeholders should prioritise the integration of these diaspora contributions into their funding strategies to optimize the impact of their interventions.

M&E Specialists: Rethinking Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Frameworks:

Traditional M&E frameworks often do not adequately capture the complexities of community-based resilience mechanisms like Nafeer and social networks, which are critical outside the conventional visibility of camps and formal aid systems. This oversight leads to ongoing uncertainties about the effectiveness and impact of these community-driven supports. Close collaboration between ERRs and international humanitarian actors has led to the development of the monitoring system.

Although, the system addressed some gaps in tracking community-aid distribution, it remains limited in capturing certain community-mechanisms. To address this gap, it is essential to revise existing M&E frameworks to incorporate other informal support mechanisms, such as remittances and kinship networks. Such a shift would align with the broader localisation agenda, ensuring that local contributions are accurately recognized and reported in formal humanitarian assessments.

This approach not only validates the critical role of these networks in crisis response but also enhances the overall strategy for data collection, enabling a more nuanced understanding of local dynamics and resource flows.



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