



THE CONFLICT
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Why Community Interdependence Matters: How International Aid Can Support Local Resilience and Co-existence in Sudan



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Executive summary

Since independence, Sudan has experienced social, economic, and political conflict, with wide ranging impacts on livelihoods and the relationships between people and communities. Enduring poor governance and recurrent conflict have placed significant pressure on Sudan's peoples and communities, forcing them to seek different means of survival and resistance over time. One means of mitigating negative effects stemming from poor governance is the practice of collaboration or 'interdependence' between people and communities, with the latter referring to networks of relationships between groups through which they become mutually dependent on each other to meet certain needs.

Interdependence serves as a foundation for peaceful coexistence. The benefits derived from interdependence, especially in meeting basic livelihood needs, incentivises addressing grievances, transforming conflicts and building peace while historic collaboration and understanding of patterns of mutual dependence strengthens relationships and the ability to manage conflict.

Interdependence stems from several factors, with the most important being past collaboration between communities, trusted and effective local leadership, a co-created, co-owned and mutually beneficial collaboration, support from experienced and skilled civil society activists. Conversely, factors that hinder interdependence include disruptive actions by one side, such as undertaking cattle raiding or supporting a government military campaign, as they undermine trust and create grievances. One of the most influential factors affecting interdependence is the pressure exerted by outside actors, especially those at the national level, to compel communities to opt for confrontation over collaboration.

Beyond peaceful co-existence, communities and their leaders use interdependence to address localised vulnerabilities and conflict, and help preserve some semblance of their security and livelihoods. The degree to which interdependent relationships and peaceful coexistence are maintained can play an important role in reducing the scale and scope of the violence, reducing the humanitarian need that stems from it, and building local strengths for managing these needs in a meaningful and durable way. Since interdependence supports livelihoods, humanitarian aid that supports interdependence would benefit from amplified results. For instance, a livelihood project that supports the inter-related and complementary needs of neighbouring communities, boosts their interdependence in a manner that supports long-term sustained livelihoods.

Since April 2023, Sudan's people and communities have faced increasing violence and pressure to support one of the warring belligerents. These dynamics have further increased community vulnerabilities and threatens their attempts to create and sustain interdependent relationships with neighbours. To mitigate this, people are attempting to institute newer forms of interdependence to increase collaboration and support as one of the foundations of a localised humanitarian response through mutual aid networks. These new efforts provide entry points for external humanitarian aid organisations, who should ensure that their work is sensitive to this ongoing

locally-led humanitarian response. Ensuring conflict sensitivity¹ includes understanding the relationships of interdependence and networks of mutual aid that are playing an important role in sustaining this humanitarian response, and fully includes local actors in decision making around aid delivery. Furthermore, international aid actors should aim to deliver assistance that complements and strengthens interdependence, for example in working with local actors to design interventions that build on or support existing systems and initiatives, and by taking the inter-related needs and collaboration of communities into account when designing projects. In this way, through recognising the value of interdependence and sustained social relations in counterbalancing the increased risk of violence and fragmentation across Sudan, aid organisations can support continued commitment to co-existence and local efforts to sustain and build peaceful relationships.



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¹ Conflict sensitivity means the ability of an organisation to: understand the operational context, understand the interaction between projects and this context(s), and then act upon the understanding of this interaction, all in an effort to in minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts. See the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, How to guide to conflict sensitivity, 2012, page 2. Also see CSF, “Conflict sensitivity during times of crisis,” June 2023 (<https://csf-sudan.org/conflict-sensitivity-during-times-of-crisis/>).

1. Introduction

The nature of relationships between and within diverse groups and communities in Sudan are great sources of both fragility and strength. Collaboration and interdependence have been long-lasting features of many peaceful inter- or intra- group or community relationships, while other relationships – often due to maligned influences of state and military actors – have been beset by violent competition leading to destruction on an enormous scale. These sources of strength and fragility have the potential to shift the way that Sudan’s current conflicts evolve. The degree to which interdependent relationships and peaceful coexistence are maintained can play an important role in reducing the scale and scope of the violence, reducing the humanitarian need that stems from it, and building local strengths for managing these needs in a meaningful and durable way.

Since independence, Sudan has experienced significant social, economic, and political conflict, with wide ranging impacts on livelihoods and the relationships between people and communities. Sudan’s many wars in Darfur, South Kordofan, Blue Nile, eastern Sudan, and what is now independent South Sudan have further shaped incentives for both cooperation and conflict between communities. The outbreak of the war in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is a continuation of Sudan’s history of militarised actors competing violently for political and economic power.

This perpetual cycle of conflict has caused considerable stress to Sudan’s peoples and communities, forcing them to seek different means of survival and resistance over time. One means of surviving and resisting violent predation is through engaging in interdependent relationships with other groups and communities, especially during times of conflict or other shocks (such as natural disasters). Interdependence in this context is the reality or the perception that an individual’s or group’s well-being is interlinked with that of another individual or group (see box). As such, it has served as a foundation for communities collaborating and, ultimately, peacefully coexisting with one another, helping to reduce vulnerability to violent conflict and other stresses and shocks and to improve the options that communities have.



What is interdependence?

This paper uses the term 'interdependence' to refer to the networks of relationships between groups and communities in Sudan, through which they collaborate and become mutually dependent on each other to meet certain needs. The nature of such interdependence is context specific and may vary a great deal across different locations and groups and over time, however historic interdependence may also help to sustain these relationships.

In its simplest definition, interdependence is the collaboration and mutual dependence of two or more people or factors on each other. It is the reality or the perception that an individual dependence, and pressure exerted by outside actors or external factors.

During times of crisis, interdependence can play a significant role in shoring up shared resilience and adaptive social protection. However, crises can put additional pressures on interdependence, particularly as dynamics may shift suddenly and dramatically.

Interdependence is also a core aspect of conflict transformation models, whereby a key facet of improving relational aspects between individuals or groups includes establishing and acknowledging the patterns of collaboration with an understanding of interdependence. This can play a key role in reducing violence and the root causes of conflict that provides an incentive for peace. Reconciliation often involves rebuilding or transforming damaged relationships to develop a vision of a fair, mutually acceptable and interdependent future.

This paper draws on a review of existing literature and analysis based on the experience of the authors working in Sudan, as well as interviews with key informants in Darfur, Kordofan, Blue Nile, and eastern Sudan, to explore the concepts and history of interdependence between groups and communities in Sudan.² Specifically, it examines the factors constraining and supporting choices for collaboration over violent competition. The authors provide two case studies of these concepts in practice, and give recommendations for how aid actors can understand, work with and strengthen interdependence between groups and communities as a key resource for supporting resilience and responding to humanitarian needs.

The aim of this paper is to support the aid sector in Sudan to understand some of the dynamics affecting interdependence in Sudan and their relevance for humanitarian response. Local-level cooperation, livelihoods and interdependence can be positively or negatively impacted by the ways aid is designed and delivered. Recognising and working with existing interdependent relationships can help increase the ability of communities to reduce and manage humanitarian needs, resist becoming part of the broader conflict, and set the stage for longer term peace and reconciliation. With these aims in mind, this paper has several limitations. The research that was carried out through key informants was structured in a way to gain a wide-ranging understanding of what people and their communities believe about interdependence and its benefits, including with targeted discussions of representatives of marginalized and vulnerable groups. Due to logistical and time limitations, the research is not exhaustive, but meant instead to provide the general viewpoints of a majority of people living across Sudan. By discussing generalities held by many, it also allows this paper to focus on highlighting and discussing key concepts useful in understanding interdependence and how outside actors can ensure their support is complementary to existing norms around community dependence and mutual aid.

2. Drivers of changes in communal relations

Changing historic norms around land use and dispute resolution

Starting in the 1970s, changes to Sudan's economy and political sphere have significantly impacted relationships across people, groups and communities in the country. These changes were linked to multiple factors including environmental changes, population growth, political strategies and economic interests. By driving or coinciding with disruptions to governance, rule of law, and livelihoods and altering historical norms around land use and dispute resolution, these shifts have had considerable impacts on established relationships between people, groups and communities.

These changes have mostly been felt in rural areas where the majority of people are governed by customary norms outside of the formal state. The key shift in rural livelihoods stems from two governance changes. The first is the 1970 Unregistered Lands Act, instituted under Jaafar Nimeiri's rule (1969-1985).³ This Act gave the national government control over all land not

² Key informant interviews were conducted with 40 individuals, either community leaders, local government officials, or civil society activists from eastern Sudan, Blue Nile, Gezira, South Kordofan, West Kordofan, North Kordofan, and Darfur.

³ USIP – Traditional Authorities Peacemaking Role In Darfur, 2012 – page 10.

privately owned and registered with the government authorities, denying rights to those who had used it for centuries as part of their livelihoods of herding and farming, and instead making it available for large-scale, investor-led development.⁴ This was followed a year later by the 1971 Local Government Act, which abolished the Native Administration and placed all local governance under government appointed administrators. While the Native Administration, a system of customary governance with local judicial and administrative functions, was instituted under British colonial rule, it had since become an important institution for dispute resolution.⁵ Taken together, these acts meant that large swaths of land previously used by communities were now no longer available to them, and important local systems that had resolved land disputes were side lined. As a result, intercommunal tensions and violence increased.⁶ These political decisions and increased tensions intersected with severe droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, and together spurred population movements and increased competition for scarce resources, especially in Darfur. At the same time, Sudan's population was growing rapidly putting increased pressure on land and resources, further inflaming intercommunal competition.⁷

As rural livelihoods became more and more strained and wars resulted in increased displacement, people were forced to change their livelihoods. Some individuals migrated to cities, while others remained and worked on the large scale, mechanised farms that had encroached upon their historic grazing and farming areas.⁸ In some instances, people relocated to neighbourhoods with kin, or settled in ethnically-mixed areas. Alternatively, people lived in newly established settlements near areas with a high demand for wage-labour.⁹

These changes to the country's social, economic, political and security realities had profoundly negative consequences on many livelihoods, leaving people and communities increasingly vulnerable to outside shocks and divide-and-rule governance tactics. Specifically, the changes exacerbated tensions and disputes between people, groups and communities over land or other resources, for example because migrating communities came into contact for the first time or because they lost access to the land they previously used. These developments, and especially the cycles of violence, not only increased communal tensions and conflict, but they also increased gender-based violence. Those engaged in violence increasingly targeted women in other communities during periods of conflict, with these practices of gender-based violence then increasingly being used against women in their own communities.¹⁰

⁴ Mohamed Suliman. 1999 *The Sudan: A Continent of Conflicts: A Report on the State of War and Peace in the Sudan*. Bern. Swiss Foundation Institute for Conflict Resolution. The Khartoum government then granted the use of much of this land to companies run by individuals from outside the area, often with ties to political and military elites

⁵ CMI, Darfur: STRUGGLE OF POWER AND RESOURCES, 1650–2002, 2016. Page 168. John Ryle, Justin Willis, Suliman Baldo, and Jok Madut Jok, eds., *The Sudan Handbook*, (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2012), 192-3.

⁶ John Ryle, eds., *The Sudan Handbook*, (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2012), 192.

⁷ According to UN population figures, Sudan's population in 1970 was about 11 million people (which includes what is now South Sudan), while it is approaching 50 million now. See: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/sudan-population/>. Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders from Darfur, South Kordofan, and eastern Sudan who all provided anecdotal reports of how increasing population has led to new clashes over resources.

⁸ Edward Thomas and Magdi El Gizouli. 2020. 'Sudan's Grain Divide : A revolution of bread and sorghum.' London: Rift Valley Institute, page 5.

⁹ Edward Thomas. 2023. 'Paying for Peace: Understanding the political economy of the Juba Peace Agreement', Rift Valley Institute, pages 20-21.

¹⁰ On the evolving practices of gender-based violence see: Jok, Madut Jok. 2006 *Violence and Resilience: women, war and the realities of everyday life in Sudan*. *Ahfad Journal* (1 December 2006). Accessed at: <https://shorturl.at/61kCw>

As Sudan's political processes remained largely closed and unaccountable, there was little ability for people to seek redress for their grievances through non-violent civil political action.¹¹ This, coupled with enhanced competition and vulnerability, set the stage for violent confrontation, which successive governments exploited and militarised as a means to prolong their rule and avoid reform. Specifically, Sudan's government armed local allies as part of a counter-insurgency campaign that divided local communities against each other, while suppressing local grievances and ensuring that there was no threat to Sudan's political and military order.

Sudan's internal wars

Nowhere has the threat to communal relations, and by extension interdependence, been more acute than during Sudan's internal wars. Wars in Darfur (from 2003), South Kordofan and Blue Nile (1983-2005; from 2011), and eastern Sudan (1995-2006) have devastated communities, their livelihoods, and their relationships with one another. This situation has been compounded by the outbreak of violence in April 2023 between SAF and RSF. Violence started in Khartoum and quickly spread across the country with hotspots in southern and western Darfur, Kordofan, Gezira, and Sennar. This war has devastated communities across the country. As of September 2024, more than 12 million Sudanese have been displaced since April 2023 and 25 million are now in need of humanitarian assistance.¹² Food production and imports have plummeted, and the country may be now facing its worst famine in decades,¹³ with famine declared in five places across Sudan affecting more than 600,000 people.¹⁴

In addition to its direct humanitarian impact, the war is also threatening the Sudanese social fabric and relationships between groups and communities. While many groups and communities initially opposed the two organised military forces, an increasing number have become involved in the conflict, whether by choice or not, as it has become more localised. In some cases, different groups within communities have taken on a role as a proxy force for one of the two belligerents, while in other cases the SAF-RSF conflict has reawakened unresolved conflicts. This involvement stems from the fact that across Sudan, many people and their communities exist within multiple realities. These realities include SAF-RSF conflict with its pressures and impacts, but also including their own realities that include different interests and threats. In most cases people or communities who choose to engage in armed conflict that might serve the objectives of others, such as acting as a proxy force for SAF or RSF, do so as a means to secure or reinforce their interests directly through force, as opposed to pursuing this through interdependent engagement with their neighbours. Communities who feel militarily ascendent, especially due to an alliance with a powerful force like SAF or RSF, are thus more likely than not to pursue their interests

¹¹ Srinivasan, Sharath. *When peace kills politics: international intervention and unending wars in the Sudans*. Hurst Publishers, 2021, pages 10, 190, 246, and 287.

¹² Of the 12 million displaced, more than 3 million have left the country as refugees. See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/key-facts-and-figures-sudan-crisis-06-february-2025>. For the latest UNOCHA Reports see: <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>. Prior to April 2023 there were already 3.7 million IDPs in Sudan, see UNOCHA Situation Report, Sudan, 19 March 2023.

¹³ Gasbeek, Timmo. *Sudan: From Hunger to Death*. Clingendael Institute. May 2024.

¹⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/key-facts-and-figures-sudan-crisis-06-february-2025>. See also: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Famine Review Committee (FRC), Famine Review Committee Report Sudan, July 2024. Online: https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Sudan_July2024.pdf

directly, including by using force. Notable examples of this type of behaviour since April 2023 include:

- Many members of the Misseriya Zurg and Hawazma, whose own communities have acute land grievances with their neighbours, have supported the RSF's war effort. Key informants within their communities state that their objective has been to use short-term support for the RSF as a means to acquire military material (small arms, ammunition and Land Cruisers) for use in what they expect to be conflicts with these neighbours over land in the near future.¹⁵
- In other cases, the SAF-RSF conflict has given cover for some groups to resume violent attempts to secure their interests, such as the attacks on Masalit in West Darfur by some members of the northern Rizeigat and allied communities.¹⁶
- In eastern Sudan an uneasy relationship exists between members of the Beja and Beni Amer communities following several years of violent conflict over issues related to identity, land use, and political representation.¹⁷ Since the start of the SAF-RSF conflict some Beja leaders have come out in strong support for SAF, hoping that this, along with past allegations that some within the Bani Amer community support RSF, will ensure SAF support for their local interests.¹⁸

These and other examples demonstrate how the localised dynamics of the conflict can develop their own characteristics and momentum, profoundly reinforcing fragmentation by impacting intra- and inter-community relations in ways which may persist long after the SAF-RSF conflict might be resolved.

3. Characteristics of interdependence

Within Sudan's rapidly changing landscape, communities and their leaders have tried to preserve some semblance of their security and livelihoods. One key aspect of this has been attempts to create or sustain interdependent relationships with neighbouring groups and communities.¹⁹ There is a long history of mutual dependence, collaboration and livelihood sharing, all key aspects of interdependence, in Sudan. Key informants describing these types of interactions as the norm – though they are not necessarily seen as forming part of a specific process.²⁰ However, Sudan's

¹⁵ The Misseriya Zurg are the smaller of the two Misseriya sections in Kordofan. The Zurg live mostly in Lagawa, Sunut, and Abu Zabad localities. Since 2019 they have sought to claim physical control over an expanding area of control that has brought them into conflict with Nuba in Lagawa and the Hamar of Abu Zabad. Some Hawazma clans have also sought to expand their areas of control, which has brought clans like the al-Sira, Dar Ali, and Ayadga into conflict with settled communities in eastern South Kordofan like the Kenana, Kawahla, and Longon Nuba. Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with young men involved in the conflict, community leaders, and two female members of a local women's association (one in South Kordofan and one in North Kordofan).

¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-politics-darfur/>

¹⁷ Rift Valley Institute. 'What next for Sudan's peace process? Political and security dynamics in the east'. Sudan Rapid Response Update 4. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, June 2022.

¹⁸ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with three community leaders in eastern Sudan.

¹⁹ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders South Kordofan, Darfur, and eastern Sudan, two female members of a local women's association (one in South Kordofan and one in North Kordofan), and civil society members active in peacebuilding measures in South Kordofan and Blue Nile

²⁰ Ibid.

changing realities since the 1970s, the disruption to customary land management and dispute resolution mechanisms, and the country's many internal wars have led to politicised and militarised communal identities. This has made it more difficult for communities to find the common ground and shared interests, which are the basis for interdependence, and has meant that in practice many of the past patterns of interdependence are no longer as common. As the case studies below illustrate, however, in some instances interdependence has sustained, or newer iterations have emerged.

What does interdependence look like in Sudan? Some examples:

- In the past, a Nuba family would sometimes entrust their cattle to Misseriya or Hawazma cattle keepers migrating for the dry season, who upon return with fattened cows were given a share of the Nuba farming produce.
- In South Kordofan, the collapse of the National Congress Party (NCP) regime in 2019 gave space to previously conflicting communities to pursue relationships on their own terms. Notably, several communities reached agreements on land and resource use, established joint committees to oversee agreements, and established joint markets to facilitate inter-community trade.
- In some areas, communities have permanent committees who play a vital role in adjudicating disputes that arise from violations of agreements. These committees take the lead when resolving violations of agreements including those related to grazing areas and shared markets.

How do communities decide whether or not to collaborate?

Decades of conflict and changing realities have affected how Sudanese communities interact and collaborate, forcing them to balance their relationships with neighbouring groups and communities and the central government, and sometimes needing to sacrifice their relationship with one or the other. Years of political manipulation and mobilisation by the Sudanese government along ethnic lines has led to a sense that political representation and power is a zero-sum game, where one group's ascendancy is likely to lead to others' decline. Compounding these dynamics is the fact that successive governments, and especially the National Congress Party (NCP) regime, have been able to politicise and militarise the needs of people, especially their livelihood needs. In doing so, governments specifically targeted coexistence and interdependence between communities, with the message "*if you join with us, the government, you can have it all, you do not need to share.*"²¹

In light of these pressures, communities sometimes deliberately maintained or established interdependent relationships or have sometimes decided to forgo collaborative relationships, seeking instead to rely on support from political and military elites to meet their needs. At other times communities also change back and forth between seeking interdependence with their neighbours and relying on support from political and military elites. In the case of the former, this

²¹ A key informant, a local community leader, recalls a meeting with a representative of the NCP regime in South Kordofan in the late 1990s.

has led to deliberate decisions in favour of sustaining interdependence, with groups or communities sometimes actively formalising and protecting their engagement through established rules and systems. In these cases, interdependence is built from a recognition that multiple communities can secure their livelihoods, which serves as a strong incentive for collaboration and peaceful coexistence, and can lead to broader political and security benefits in addition to livelihood benefits. Other times, groups or communities have opted not to prioritise the continuation of such relationships, believing that they will secure their well-being and ability to meet their needs through other means, often involving violence and alignment with central political and/or armed powers. This thinking may also be driven by a range of other factors that inhibit interdependence.

A group's decision-making process may be prompted by changing political, environmental, security, or economic realities, including the outbreak of violent conflict. External forces, for instance a powerful neighbouring community, an armed group or the central government, may also influence such decisions. When deciding whether to pursue their well-being through collaboration or confrontation, Sudanese communities and their leaders weigh a variety of sometimes competing factors in light of historical precedent, current circumstances, and future implications:

- **Material needs and economic benefit:** Mutual dependence or shared benefit in relation to the ability of people, groups or communities to meet their materials needs (e.g. through cooperation and sharing natural resources) and how changes will impact them economically may influence decisions. In considering this, communities may weigh how collaborating or severing ties with a given group may affect their livelihoods and access to economic resources such as grazing areas or markets. In urban areas, implications for employment opportunities may also be a factor.
- **Historic social ties:** A history of collaboration and cooperation that has fostered interdependence will also build historic trust and reliance. In the face of external threats and deteriorating needs, these relationships may be seen as more reliable or useful (particularly when considering long-term implications) than other options.
- **Political/security dynamics:** People, groups and communities assess the potential impact of their decisions on their relationships with local and national elites, including how changes could affect their access to patronage and representation within the political system. Historical political grievances often inform this decision-making, including consideration of past actions of political elites and their trustworthiness. They are also mindful of power dynamics, reflecting on how different courses of action may impact safety and security.
- **Ethnicity/ideology:** People, groups and communities often prioritise relationships with others with whom they share a language, culture, and/or political alliances. Ideology as an aspect of identity was particularly important under the NCP regime.²²

²² The NCP regime was very skillful at using both an Islamist ideology and ethnicity to mobilise people. So, while it sometimes relied more on its 'Arabization' project, it also used its ideology to mobilise support from non-Arab communities, including Zaghawa and Nuba. With the regime's demise there has not been another ideological project that has sought to unifying Sudan's disparate communities and thus ethnicity has taken on a greater role in political, economic, and security decision making.

Enabling and hindering factors for collaboration

Despite challenges posed by increased pressure on natural resources and manipulation by powerful actors, a number of factors help communities to establish or sustain interdependent relationships. In recent years, and especially since the NCP regime's collapse in 2019, there has been a perception that community leaders are increasingly wary of being drawn into national political competitions.²³ According to key informants, this is linked to a growing realisation that being a proxy to violent national competitions can have long-term detrimental economic, social, political and security consequences between communities and their neighbours.²⁴ While proxy war was a common feature under the NCP, the regime's collapse reduced national-level manipulations of local relationships. In the context of the current SAF-RSF conflict, many communities have been seeking to stay neutral or even trying to broker ceasefires between SAF and the RSF. This includes community leaders from the Misseriya Humr in West Kordofan who have tried to keep their communities as neutral as possible, as well as attempts by community leaders from al-Fashir in North Darfur.²⁵

Factors that support interdependence:

- Past collaboration between communities
- Trusted and effective local leadership
- Co-created, co-owned and mutually beneficial collaboration
- Support from experienced and skilled civil society activists can support processes that establish interdependence.

Factors that hinder interdependence:

- Disruptive actions by one side
- Lack of familiarity and understanding between communities
- Pressure exerted by outside actors.

Specific key factors that support collaboration between communities are:

- **Past collaboration** between communities paves the way for renewed arrangements as *“previous dealings are vital in building trust: the chances of reciprocity increase when a custom of mutual reliance and shared concerns exist.”*²⁶
- **Trusted and effective leadership** plays a critical role in building trust with neighbouring communities and rallying internal support among within the community to support the establishment of new agreements or support ongoing agreements. Leadership also plays a crucial role in how communities navigate and effectively manage relationships with powerful actors who may seek to exploit them for their own benefit. Furthermore, leadership is important when it comes to managing individuals from their communities who

²³ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders, local government officials, and civil society activists in South Kordofan, eastern Sudan, and Darfur.

²⁴ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders, local government officials, and civil society activists in South Kordofan, eastern Sudan, and Darfur, two female members of a local women's association (one in South Kordofan and one in North Kordofan), and civil society members active in peacebuilding measures in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

²⁵ On the Misseriya Humr attempts, researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews, West Kordofan. On the latter example of al-Fashir, see: Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker, “Challenges and Opportunities for Local Mediation: The experience of the elders and mediation committee in El Fasher,” February 2024.

²⁶ Johan Brosche, Conflict Over the Commons: Government Bias and Communal Conflicts in Darfur and Eastern Sudan, *Ethnopolitics*, 2023 Vol. 22, No. 2, 199–221, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2021.2018221>

may attempt to spoil collaboration by trying to take advantage of the other community, such as through activities like cattle raiding. Trust established in and within mutual aid networks during the revolution in 2019 and COVID-19 also set a precedent for the current role of mutual aid networks in responding to humanitarian needs.

- **A co-created and co-owned collaboration** helps to increase the chances that both groups or communities benefit from their relationship and have stakes in maintaining it. This is sometimes facilitated by establishing formal or informal agreements supported by jointly agreed upon rules and systems. Such arrangements ensure that engagements are grounded in a shared understanding of the political, social, economic, security context in which communities operate, and that they reflect their respective needs and concerns. The more formal of these arrangements have permanent committees who play a vital role in adjudicating disputes that arise from violations of agreements.
- Moreover, agreements that **promote mutual benefits**, particularly related to livelihoods, are crucial to secure community buy-in. Agreements that are well understood are especially important in ensuring that community or group members understand the potential downsides of not collaborating. These last two factors, when combined, help incentivise members to respect agreements and ensure that swift actions are taken to address any violations that threaten collaboration.

Key factors that hinder interdependence include:

- **Disruptive actions** by one side, such as undertaking cattle raiding or supporting a government military campaign, can undermine trust and create grievances.
- **A lack of familiarity or opportunity to engage** also poses barriers to cooperation, particularly when communities are unknown to one another or do not understand how they may work together to secure their respective well-being. Indeed, research has highlighted that “*levels of cooperation are lowest when the other is unknown [and the] opportunity to build reputation non-existing.*”²⁷ Limited engagement between communities, caused for instance by poor media coverage, deliberate attempts to spread rumours, or limited access to internet and phone services, can also impede understanding over time.²⁸ If a weakening of familiarity over time results in changes to social relations, this in turn can reduce interdependence between impacted communities.
- One of the most influential factors affecting interdependence is the **pressure exerted by outside actors**, especially those at the national level, to compel communities to opt for confrontation over collaboration. For instance, the NCP regime sought to intensify and militarise divisions between communities along the border with southern Sudan during the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005) and again after the war returned in 2011 to South Kordofan and Blue Nile as part of its efforts to suppress grievances and wage a counter-insurgency.²⁹

²⁷ Johan Brosche, Conflict Over the Commons: Government Bias and Communal Conflicts in Darfur and Eastern Sudan, *Ethnopolitics*, 2023 Vol. 22, No. 2, 199–221, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2021.2018221>

²⁸ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders, local government officials, and civil society activists in South Kordofan and eastern Sudan.

²⁹ Gunnar M., Sørbø and Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, *Sudan Divided: Continuing Conflict in a Contested State*, Springer, 2013, page 9.

After the NCP regime collapsed, there was a reduction of government-led external influence and destructive attacks on the social fabric, such as their past efforts to polarise and militarise communal relationships. This gave space for communities to pursue relationships on their own terms. For example, in South Kordofan, this space of reduced external influence allowed communities supportive of the SPLM/A-N and those who previously supported the NCP regime to reach a number of agreements that increased interdependence and peaceful coexistence between them. Notably, they agreed to a set of guiding principles covering land and resource use and a process to settle disputes, and then established joint committees to oversee these agreements. In some cases, joint markets were formed allowing for trade between the communities, which further increased interdependence. These arrangements have proved quite robust, remaining in place since 2019, with many even continuing to exist after the start of the SAF-RSF conflict. This highlights how communities with strong leaders and established mutually beneficial collaborations are better positioned to resist external interference.³⁰

Following the outbreak of the SAF-RSF conflict, both belligerents have increasingly put pressure on communities to pick sides, which has increasingly challenged the ability of communities and their leaders to stay neutral. For instance, in al-Fashir (North Darfur), local community leaders have sought to engage SAF and RSF, and their allies, to deescalate the conflict in civilian areas to try and avoid the conflict's damaging effects on civilian livelihoods. While their efforts have not totally stopped the conflict, it has helped to facilitate humanitarian relief convoys and supported safe passage for injured civilians to travel through frontlines to the main hospital.³¹ Similarly, in West Kordofan, Misseriya Humr community leaders have sought to keep their communities neutral and engaged both SAF and RSF in an effort to convince them to not fight for territorial control in the state. So far these efforts appear to have reduced the war's intensity in West Kordofan as it has avoided the types of large-scale livelihood destruction as has been seen in West Darfur, Gezira, and Sennar even while some conflict between the belligerents has occurred.³² As the SAF-RSF becomes more protracted, however, these local mediation efforts are likely to be increasingly challenged as both North Darfur and West Kordofan remain key frontline areas and thus susceptible to repeated military efforts to control them, along with associated pressures by the belligerents on communities to pick sides.

Interaction between interdependence and peaceful coexistence

Interdependence serves as a foundation for peaceful coexistence, as the benefits derived from collaboration, especially in meeting basic livelihood needs, incentivises addressing grievances, transforming conflicts and building peace while historic collaboration and understanding of patterns of mutual dependence strengthens relationships and the ability to manage conflict.³³

³⁰ Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with key informants, South Kordofan, Darfur, and eastern Sudan, January-June 2024.

³¹ For a description of these community-led efforts see: Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker, "Challenges and Opportunities for Local Mediation: The experience of the elders and mediation committee in El Fasher," February 2024.

³² Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders, local government officials, and civil society activists in West Kordofan, West Darfur, and Gezira.

³³ The Conflict Sensitivity Facility uses Johan Galtung's definition of peace as "the capacity to transform conflicts with empathy, without violence and creatively – a never-ending process." (Johan Galtung, Founder of the Peace Research Institute of Oslo. On Professionalization in Peace Research. <https://www.galtung-institut.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Peace-Practice-Professionalizing-Peace-Practice.pdf>) This definition provides an understanding of peace as not the absence of conflict, but rather

Groups and communities engaged in mutually beneficial interdependence leverage these benefits to incentivise their members to peacefully manage differences with other communities.

4. Interdependence in practice: Case studies in rural and urban settings

To show what collaboration, interdependence, and peaceful coexistence can look like in practice in Sudan this section presents two examples. The first is from South Kordofan where Misseriya and Nuba communities have established durable agreements and shared markets during times of war, in spite of external interference. The second looks at collaboration between displaced individuals and groups from Khartoum and communities from Wad Medani, Gezira state, in the context of the SAF-RSF conflict.

Case study 1: Economic interdependence and collaboration between the Misseriya and Nuba during times of war

The Nuba Mountains, which extend through South and West Kordofan, have been an arena for Sudanese civil wars since the 1980s. These wars took place within a context of heightened communal tensions over access to land and its resources. Land appropriation by security and business elites associated with the increase in mechanised farming from the late 1960s, often by companies with close ties to Khartoum political and military elites reduced the availability of land for farming and grazing by local communities.³⁴ Tensions turned to violence with clashes between some Nuba and Misseriya community members, which took on political overtones as more and more Nuba joined the SPLM/A rebellion in the mid-1980s. Successive Khartoum governments from 1985 armed Misseriya and other Arab communities and organised them into militias³⁵ in order for them to attack SPLM/A positions as part of Khartoum's counter-insurgency strategy. They were also allowed to use their military might to violently occupy and then use valuable land and resources.

While conflict ensued between the two communities, not all Misseriya supported Khartoum's counter-insurgency. Over time some local community leaders realised that their livelihoods and community wellbeing was dependent on resetting relations with Nuba communities.³⁶ Groups from the two sides signed local agreements in the mid-1990s in which they agreed to stop fighting in some areas, to allow the free movement of civilians, and to establish a committee to adjudicate

as a continually managed process of transforming conflict that will always be present in one way or the other. <https://csf-sudan.org/understanding-aids-interaction-with-peace/>

³⁴ For example: "In 1968, the Mechanized Farming Corporation, which was established with credit from the World Bank, supervised the introduction of large-scale mechanised farming at Habila, between Dilling and Delami. Of 200 mechanised farms supported by the State Agricultural Bank in the Habila area, four were local cooperatives, one was leased to a group of Habila merchants, four to individual local merchants, and the rest (191) were leased to absentee Jellaba [northern traders] landlords, mainly merchants, government officials, and retired generals from the north." Mohamed Suliman. 1999 The Sudan: A Continent of Conflicts: A Report on the State of War and Peace in the Sudan. Bern. Swiss Foundation Institute for Conflict Resolution.

³⁵ This started with the Transitional Military Council, which formed after Jaafar Nimeiri's regime was overthrown, and continued through Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi's government and through to the NCP regime.

³⁶ Bradbury, Mark et al. 2006. "Local Peace Processes in Sudan," Rift Valley Institute, pages 63-64.

disputes between community members.³⁷ While these agreements were short-lived due to the NCP regime's aggressive actions to disrupt them,³⁸ they set the basis for future agreements.³⁹

In 2011 as the conflict between the NCP regime and what became the SPLM/A-North resumed, many Misseriya refused to support the regime's war effort, deciding instead to maintain trade and livelihood interdependence with neighbouring Nuba communities. Several markets were established away from conflict areas, allowing communities to trade with each other. Areas under SPLM/A-N were opened up for Misseriya cattle to graze. Furthermore, leaders from both sides, building on the trust established through previous agreements, set up joint committees to resolve disputes peacefully. The two sides also established migration routes to avoid conflict and areas for cattle grazing. This benefited many from the Misseriya who had lost grazing access to South Sudan after its independence in 2011 and provided an increased incentive to collaborate with Nuba communities.

The NCP regime actively tried to disrupt this process by trying to co-opt spoilers on both sides and foment ethnic discord between communities.⁴⁰ Community leaders resisted these tactics, preferring to maintain peaceful coexistence with their neighbours, thus preserving improved trade, livelihoods and food security for both Nuba and Misseriya communities.⁴¹ In addition, many Misseriya had grown wary of the NCP regime, believing that it had not lived up to past promises about development, which even led some Misseriya to join the SPLM/A-N.⁴² The Misseriya's wariness of Khartoum and of being used as a proxy fighting force has continued into the current SAF-RSF conflict, with many so far staying out of the conflict. Preferring to stay neutral, their interdependent relationship with their Nuba neighbours has thus endured.⁴³

The interdependence established between these Nuba and Misseriya communities has not only increased peaceful coexistence between them, but it also created a model that has been replicated by other communities. In particular, Nuba communities have established similar agreements with other neighbouring communities that previously supported the NCP regime. Interviews for this paper highlight that these agreements held because they are based on an understanding of the interests and constraints of the respective communities, support everyone's livelihood, have broad buy-in and are guided by jointly agreed rules of behaviour. Moreover, they are managed by committees made up of well-respected community members who have demonstrated their ability to control potential spoilers and are supported from within their

³⁷ Bradbury, Mark et al. 2006. "Local Peace Processes in Sudan," Rift Valley Institute, page 64. A third similar agreement was reached later with members of the Rowowga, a Hawazma sub-group, in 1996. See: Mohamed Suliman. 1999 The Sudan: A Continent of Conflicts: A Report on the State of War and Peace in the Sudan. Bern. Swiss Foundation Institute for Conflict Resolution.

³⁸ On their disruption see: Mohamed Suliman. 1999 The Sudan: A Continent of Conflicts: A Report on the State of War and Peace in the Sudan. Bern. Swiss Foundation Institute for Conflict Resolution.

³⁹ Researchers' observations and confidential interviews with local community members and local government officials, and civil society activists in South Kordofan.

⁴⁰ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders, local government officials, and civil society activists in Darfur, South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and eastern Sudan.

⁴¹ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders and civil society activists in South Kordofan in both affected Nuba and Misseriya communities.

⁴² International Crisis Group, "Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I): War in South Kordofan," Africa Report, Number 198, 2013, pages i, 8-10.

⁴³ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders and civil society activists in South Kordofan in both affected Nuba and Misseriya communities.

communities to hold rogue elements to account – for instance, in returning stolen cattle or other assets.

Key factors that supported the changing relationships between these Misseriya and Nuba communities as they changed from generalized antagonism towards their current more interdependent relationships include the role of women, youth, and civil society in general.

During initial periods of violence, especially in the 1990s, and then again from 2005-2011, women remained key targets of the belligerents.⁴⁴ Due in large part to this reason, women have then been key leaders in supporting community-led efforts of social protection⁴⁵ and the peacebuilding⁴⁶ efforts described in this case study. Beyond their experiences that informed their roles in supporting protection and peacebuilding efforts, women played key roles in negotiations between communities in conflict due to prevailing social norms that allow for women's safe passage to the opposing community as a man would be immediately suspected of being a military threat.⁴⁷ Youth, especially fighting aged males, also had a role to play in directly speaking to their counterparts in other communities to share messages of peace, as part of broader process of community to community engagement managed through local civil society organisations.⁴⁸

Local civil society has also played a role in supporting the implementation and sustainment of the agreements between Nuba and Misseriya communities. Especially since 2011, local civil society organisations (CSOs) have taken the lead in pushing for the establishment of such agreements, which have become increasingly formalised with jointly agreed upon rules and permanent "*peace committees*". Key informants state that local Nuba civil society leaders who had observed the role of these committees in the war in South Kordofan in the 1990s took the lead after 2011 in pushing to establish similar local peace arrangements based on interdependence.⁴⁹ In doing so they found a strong reception from within the Misseriya community who were uninterested in being part of the conflict and looking for ways to increase their livelihood activities. Early successes created momentum that translated into more agreements between different communities. In some cases, international organisations played a quiet role in supporting these initiatives with seed funding and transferring knowledge of lessons learned from other successful initiatives.

Most of these agreements established after 2011 have held for several years or longer. Furthermore, since 2019 other communities in West, North, and South Kordofan have approached these CSOs to support them in establishing new collaborative agreements, with several being formally established. These organisations have been able to support locally-led processes that resulted in the co-creation of jointly defined methods that advance mutual interdependence and peaceful coexistence. In addition to their deep contextual knowledge, these actors are seen by local communities as more neutral than government actors, and with their past

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Local to Global Protection, "*South Kordofan and Blue Nile, Sudan 2010-15: Experiences with local and global responses to protection crises*," 2015, page 9.

⁴⁶ Key informant interviews with community leaders and civil society activists in South Kordofan in both affected Nuba and Misseriya communities.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

successes seen as increasingly legitimate and capable of solving entrenched disputes and grievances.

Case study 2: Urban mutual aid through household food and livelihood sharing during times of acute crisis⁵⁰

The SAF-RSF conflict has displaced at least 3.5 million people from Khartoum state, with more than 100,000 taking up residence in Gezira state and many going to the city of Wad Medani.⁵¹ While past wars in Sudan were almost always fought in rural areas, this conflict has led to urban communities experiencing displacement for the first time. Because many have also taken refuge in cities, the situation has created a need for a humanitarian action in urban centres. In these cases, as well, interdependence has helped to sustain and build social fabric and reduce humanitarian vulnerability.

While the generally close social ties between displaced individuals and groups from Khartoum and Wad Medani residents helped facilitate relationships, tensions were inevitable, especially around increased demand on accommodation and markets that drove up prices for all goods, including food.⁵² Despite these tensions, members of the different groups and communities found ways to collaborate. For instance, some traders who arrived from Khartoum brought large quantities of items to sell in the local markets, thereby increasing supply and keeping prices lower than they might have otherwise been. Others found ways to put their professional skills to use for the benefit of all. For example, a group of local activists and medical professionals from Khartoum set up a fundraiser to rehabilitate a health centre specialising in kidney health. Once it was rehabilitated, the health professionals from Khartoum ran the centre.

After the outbreak of the SAF-RSF conflict, local civil society activists began operating mutual aid centres, referred to as Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), to help address the needs of those affected by the conflict. In Wad Medani, the ERRs set up central kitchens to support both displaced persons and local residents facing food insecurity. The kitchens were stocked through a combination of donations from local individuals and funds raised by the diaspora. When food was sourced locally, volunteers were intentional about creating opportunity for local people to share meals with displaced individuals, thereby promoting enhanced engagement around food sharing. In addition to creating a space for meeting and sharing, the central kitchens also helped reduce tensions between the different communities, especially over access to food. ERR volunteers also organised cultural events to bring together the experiences of different people, which again served as a means for sharing and learning, helping to reduce tensions between them.

⁵⁰ Researchers' observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders and civil society activists in Khartoum, Gezira, Sennar, Red Sea, and Northern states contributed to this section.

⁵¹ IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix – Sudan, Monthly Displacement Overview (06) February 2024.

⁵² In the case of markets, see REACH, Sudan Joint Market Monitoring Initiative, October 2023 that found an increase of more than 60% from April 2023 in basic commodities in the main Medani market. https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/reach/a5644ebc/SDN_JMMI_Factsheet_Oct23.pdf

These efforts took place against a backdrop of official suspicion and military mobilisation in Gezira, leading to government and security crackdowns on the ERRs and other civil society activists. Political figures have sought to collectively demonise those from western Sudan as being RSF supporters and have instituted crack downs on their livelihoods, using the ‘New Faces Act’ that accused individuals of being RSF sleeper cells based only on their features or political affiliations (RSF have similarly targeted individuals based on their alleged NCP or SAF connections). In other cases, SAF’s Military Intelligence and the General Intelligence Service sought to co-opt the work of ERRs, seeing them as a potential threat to their political legitimacy, as well as a potential way to influence public opinion in their favour. Following RSF’s successful military campaign in Gezira in December 2023, their soldiers have directly targeted many of those running ERRs. This has meant that many ERR volunteers and other civil society activists have had to flee, along with many others, to neighbouring states. This has disrupted much of the locally-driven work to respond to humanitarian needs and sustain and nurture interdependence. Despite this, the work of ERR volunteers and other civil society activists has shown that even in times of acute crisis, there exists real opportunities to support communities in need by understanding how collaboration and interdependence is able to reduce humanitarian needs and maintain social fabric.



Photo credit: Sari Omer

5. Conclusion

This paper highlights how interdependence, through collaboration and mutual dependence, has played a significant role in supporting coexistence and resilience between individuals, groups and communities, both based on historic relationships and via newer forms of mutual dependence such as those demonstrated by mutual aid networks. As the case studies illustrate, there have been many instances where groups and communities have prioritised sustaining and strengthening relationships based on interdependence in the face of violent conflict and severe humanitarian crises, despite increasing pressures or as a deliberate choice to survive shocks and stresses. The analysis also outlined factors that support and inhibit interdependence.

While these efforts were sometimes overwhelmed, as in the case of Gezira after the RSF took control of the area in December 2023, they show that local efforts to increase collaboration and mutual support can be one of the foundations of a humanitarian response. The relationship between interdependence and food security, and how this intersects with the role of external aid actors in supporting the ongoing humanitarian response is complex and challenging. Below are some recommendations which aim to help humanitarian actors understand, complement and work with such relationships and networks of interdependence as part of their broader efforts to ensure their work is conflict-sensitive.

Recommendations:

1) Understanding local contexts, including the diversity of roles and experiences within communities and the role that interdependence plays within community resilience strategies, can help centre decision making on aid delivery around locally-led responses and increase a project's conflict sensitivity.

Aid actors should ensure they have a sound understanding of local contexts, particularly relationships between and within local groups and communities when designing and implementing interventions in different areas. Potential approaches to improve this understanding can include:

- Conducting conflict analysis to understand community strategies, stakeholders and opportunities for engagement (or integrating this into existing processes such as context or market systems analysis).
- Ensuring that operational aid actors go beyond 'visible' community structures, by fostering relationships across the wider systems that are integral to interdependence, such as traders and business communities, mutual aid groups and supporting structures to better understand the context.
- Utilizing and respecting traditional practices and strategies, including involving them in context analysis, programme design, planning and empowering local decision-making processes.

- Donors encouraging and/or incentivising partners to build a better understanding of interdependence strategies and incorporate them into programmes.

External aid actors should ensure that their analysis and work is sensitive to the ongoing locally-led humanitarian response, including relationships of interdependence and networks of mutual aid that are playing an important role in sustaining this, and fully involves local actors in decision making around aid delivery. As support shifts towards more localised responses, there is an increased need to put local actors in the lead, strengthen local systems of mutual support and decision making, and increase responsiveness to local communities' needs which are often multi-faceted and multi-sectoral.⁵³ Such relationships and understanding will be vital as the current SAF-RSF conflict has contributed to a catastrophic food crisis, with famine likely across many parts of the country.⁵⁴

The complexity of diverse groups, interests and relationships must be understood, for example recognising that communities are not uniform and different groups within communities may be marginalised within existing dynamics (e.g. women, youth). Given the heightened risk that belligerents will seek to instrumentalise divisions and that groups and individuals under increasing pressure may choose to forgo existing relationships in favour of strategies of violent competition, context analysis must be regularly updated and risks associated with perceptions of aid being affiliated to one party or another (and the mistrust of aid that may come with this) should be understood. Such analysis alongside building relationships and clear communication with local representatives and leaders are a critical factor in enabling humanitarian access and sustaining the trust of communities in an aid response which is accountable to affected populations.

2) Adapt programme designs to ensure that the humanitarian response and livelihoods support (among other external interventions/involvement) are conflict-sensitive, and do not undermine or supplant existing interdependence, but rather work with, build on and strengthen existing relationships and systems.

International aid actors should aim to deliver assistance that complements and strengthens interdependence, for example in working with local actors to design interventions that build on or support existing systems and initiatives through tailored approaches. Potential approaches could include:

- Rolling analysis that is incorporated into programme governance, mechanisms and community relationships, to inform more nimble and adaptive programming.
- Create monitoring and accountability mechanisms that engage community members in monitoring processes to enhance transparency, accountability and local skills for self-evaluation, in particular creating opportunities for participants to identify unintended side-effects on and share ideas to strengthen interdependence strategies and relationships.

⁵³ See for example, USAID, Policy on Localization: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250126154406/https://www.usaid.gov/localization>

⁵⁴ Clingendael 2024 From Catastrophe to Famine page 13-15. Joshua Craze, Kholood Khair, and Raga Makawi, "Sudan Starves," *The New York Review of Books*, 23 June 2024.

- Working with mutual aid groups and local actors to support existing interdependence, for example, through timely and appropriate provision of material assets and funds, support designed to enable regular convening, and improved access to technical support where requested.
- Integrating or blending humanitarian assistance with approaches that support opportunities for communities to come together and sustain peace,⁵⁵ such as convening around cultural events or sharing and dispute resolution mechanisms alongside humanitarian activities.⁵⁶
- Integrating greater flexibility and responsiveness into programme management systems and approaches, for example through greater flexibility in budgeting, avoiding rigid work plans and targets, or requiring results that can be uniquely attributable back to project activities (rather than more modest ‘contributions’ to relationships or systems).
- Donors should ensure that incentive structures for partners do not undermine long-term positive implications of working with community interdependence strategies. This requires longer term approaches to partnerships that look beyond immediate gains and allow for stronger monitoring of change in relationships of interdependence, including through support to local actors, over the longer term.

As illustrated in the case studies, besides the shared material benefits of interdependence, the benefits of strengthened social relations are not just critical for peace but also on enabling more effective humanitarian response. This can take the form of maintaining and strengthening communication and dialogue which are critical for humanitarian access⁵⁷, ensuring more informed understanding of needs and the multi-sectoral dimensions of this, updating and nuancing understanding of the context, in anticipating potential humanitarian scenarios and trajectories based on historic experience and in providing a basis for quicker recovery once the conflict is over⁵⁸.

How humanitarian aid is planned and delivered can also play a critical role in supporting the resilience and sustainability of systems of interdependence, mutual aid networks, and local organisations and mechanisms. Aid actors must be cognisant of this and ensure that short term gains (e.g. immediate limited response) do not risk undermining the locally-led collaboration and structures which may be critical to a longer-term sustained response. This is particularly important given the high likelihood of a deteriorating food security situation next year if a longer-term perspective on the famine response which ensures support for local food production systems (instead of only focusing on big centralised systems) and livelihoods is not taken. Existing collaboration and interdependence mechanisms can be fragile, and aid projects should seek to complement ongoing efforts and refrain from creating or exacerbating tensions. This is especially true when it comes to livelihoods, as most interdependent relations, especially in rural areas, are

⁵⁵ Local 2 Global Protection, South Kordofan and Blue Nile, Sudan 2010-15: Experiences with local and global responses to protection crises, 2015. Pages 17-18.

⁵⁶ CSF. Understanding aid’s interaction with peace. 2023. <https://csf-sudan.org/understanding-aids-interaction-with-peace/>

⁵⁷ Researchers’ observations and confidential key informant interviews with community leaders and civil society activists in South Kordofan who state that local peace agreements between Nuba and Misseriya communities in both the 1990s and post-2011 led to a reduction in insecurity that allowed aid actors greater access to affected communities.

⁵⁸ Shabaka, Empowering Local Responses: A Call to Fund Mutual Aid, Localization, and Survivor and Community-Led Responses (SCLR) in Sudan and Beyond, 2024 page 7.

based on complementary livelihood activities.⁵⁹ While support for livelihoods and markets in the current context is desperately needed with both having been devastated by the SAF-RSF conflict,⁶⁰ this support should be provided in a way that complements current interdependent relationships, increasing the likelihood that the provision is conflict-sensitive.⁶¹

3) Strengthen structures and culture of collaboration and coordination among national and international aid actors at the sub-national level, in particular creating spaces for Sudanese civil society and local peacebuilders to share perspectives and ideas to inform more effective and sustainable aid response.

Beyond lifesaving aid provision, aid actors must recognise the value of interdependence and sustained social relations in counter-balancing the increased risk of fragmentation across Sudan and support continued commitment to co-existence and local efforts to sustain and build peaceful relationships. The ‘silos’ within the aid system and decreasing size of peacebuilding budgets in the context of civil war and humanitarian pressures makes it all the more important that international actors proactively seek out and integrate perspectives that will help identify opportunities for integrated holistic programmes. Potential approaches could include:

- Donors should encourage partners to increase coordination and collaboration at the sub-national level, including by ensuring that roles responsible for coordination, outreach and community engagement are sufficiently well resourced and incentivised, and that activities are flexible enough to respond to feedback.
- Donors and operational actors to strengthen representation at and/or engagement with structures and platforms that can facilitate more coordinated approaches and are inclusive of local actors, or facilitate establishment of such platforms where none already exist.
- Donors and operational agencies to fund longer-term programmes that can help to strengthen economic relationships and foster trust among both aid agencies and Sudanese communities, rather than short-term projects with limited capacity or incentives for coordination and collaboration with each other or local actors.
- Donors and operational agencies to factor interdependence and social relationships into sustainability strategies and exit plans to enhance the sustainability of interventions and their longer-term resilience to conflict.

Such relationships and insights will become increasingly important as the SAF-RSF conflict continues to rage across Sudan and the risks of spill-over effects into other local conflicts escalate. Support for locally-led peacebuilding and sustained interdependence can play a critical role in reducing vulnerability and the intensity of humanitarian needs while increasing resilience and adaptation to shocks and stresses. In recognition of this, humanitarian actors should do what is

⁵⁹As an example, from Darfur, consider Catholic Relief Service, *Integrating Social Cohesion Sudan: Case Study 4*. 2021. <https://www.fsnnetwork.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/Integrating-Social-Cohesion-Sudan.pdf>

⁶⁰ REACH. Sudan conflict: Intensifying violence, systems collapse, and surging humanitarian needs. January 2024: https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/reach/4f84804d/SDN-Advocacy-Update_January2024.pdf

⁶¹ Conflict sensitivity means the ability of an organisation to: understand the operational context, understand the interaction between projects and this context(s), and then act upon the understanding of this interaction, all in an effort to in minimise negative impacts and maximise positive impacts. See the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, *How to guide to conflict sensitivity*, 2012, page 2. Also see CSF, “*Conflict sensitivity during times of crisis*,” June 2023 (<https://csf-sudan.org/conflict-sensitivity-during-times-of-crisis/>).

within their power and mandate to refrain from undermining this, while supporting and integrating approaches that enable this. As the benefits of interdependence to the humanitarian response are described above, so too the importance of sustaining peacebuilding and co-existence must also be supported as an area of direct focus. This will help individuals, groups and communities to resist becoming part of a civil war by shoring up alternative pathways to violent conflict, strengthening their ability to anticipate and adapt to pressures from external conflict actors and mitigate threats to their work and viability and set the stage for longer-term peace and reconciliation towards a peaceful future for Sudan.



Photo credit: Sari Omer