



SUDAN COUNTRY BRIEF

THE STATE OF THE
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM 2026



3. WHAT IS SHAPING THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN SUDAN?

3.1 A fragmented system under extreme pressure

Across interviews and focus group discussions, people described a response system that is operating in fragments and under heavy strain, with sharp differences in what is possible depending on location and access. On paper, the UN and INGOs remain the official architecture, coordinating through clusters and working through formal channels. In practice, many respondents described a forced 'humanitarian reset', where the formal system has pulled back coverage as resources have tightened and attention has shifted elsewhere.

One respondent from a Sudanese diaspora network said:

'The humanitarian sector changed forever. Less money is entering Sudan right now ... The millions coming from international donors are not sufficient.'

Another noted the scale of reliance on a single funding stream:

'The USAID funding cut hurt us the most, as around 65% of our funding comes from USAID.'

This broader strain is also reflected in the perceptions of people receiving aid: 49.7% of survey respondents said 'not enough aid' is the biggest challenge to receiving assistance in their area and only 16.9% were satisfied with the amount of aid they received.

Respondents consistently pointed to a parallel system keeping people afloat, made up of ERRs, diaspora networks and other community initiatives. These local actors

mobilised early and, in some places, have remained the most reliable presence as the crisis has deepened. This has created a stark divergence. While formal coordination continues through clusters and official channels, many people said the actual delivery of life-saving support in besieged or hard-to-reach areas is falling to volunteers working outside the formal grid. The result is unequal and patchy assistance, where survival often depends less on a central plan and more on whether local networks can bridge the gaps left by a retreating international presence.



Many people said the actual delivery of life-saving support in besieged or hard-to-reach areas is falling to volunteers working outside the formal grid

3.2 Constraints – and how actors adapt

Operating across Sudan requires that agencies navigate two opposing environments of constraint. In areas controlled by the SAF, the primary barrier is an ‘administrative blockade’. Humanitarian actors face heavy security oversight and government bureaucracy, where movement permits and technical agreements can take months to process, effectively stifling rapid response. Activities can be cancelled at the last minute without clear justification. Conversely, in territories held by the RSF, the system faces physical negation. Aid is looted or diverted, and staff are forced to evacuate due to extreme insecurity. An international actor described how organisations closed offices in Khartoum and relocated, noting for those who stayed. ‘... their houses were being targeted by the RSF’. Responders have adapted to survive these conditions. Where physical access is impossible, actors have shifted to remote management, using Starlink satellite internet to coordinate with community focal points and organise aid distributions from afar. To bypass the collapse of national infrastructure, local organisations have turned to solarisation. In North Kordofan, for instance, volunteers installed a small solar system so the only cancer hospital could resume operations at least one day a week. Similarly, local actors have rehabilitated water wells to function off-grid using solar energy, pairing this with technical maintenance training for communities to build long-term resilience and eliminate the need for IDPs to buy water.

To move supplies across frontlines, organisations increasingly rely on intermediaries, who possess the social capital to negotiate safe passage with armed groups. National organisations described contracting vendors to manage distributions and liaising with armed actors where staff could not travel safely themselves. In East Darfur, one local NGO explained:

‘Our vendor manages distribution and coordinates with RSF/SAF... we cannot take the risk of moving independently.’

International actors described relying on personal networks and local authority figures, including sheikhs, mukhtars and umdas (mayors), to negotiate entry into areas they could not otherwise reach.



Part of the humanitarian interface shifts from aid agencies to those who can negotiate passage, manage movement and absorb day-to-day risk

In practice, these arrangements do more than solve a logistics problem. They turn access into a brokered process in which part of the humanitarian interface shifts from aid agencies to those who can negotiate passage, manage movement and absorb day-to-day risk. In a context as constrained as Sudan, this may be one of the few ways to keep assistance moving across contested lines, but it also changes how aid is delivered.

For local and international actors, reliance on vendors and local leaders can reduce direct oversight of how access is negotiated and how distributions are carried out, while increasing dependence on local relationships rather than predictable access procedures. An international actor noted that some organisations insist on distributing aid themselves rather than handing it over to authorities for distribution because, once that final step is outside their control, 'it might not reach the community'.

For intermediaries, their role extends beyond facilitation into politically exposed brokerage. For affected communities, the practical effect is that access to aid can become more uneven and contingent, shaped by assessed need as well as by whether someone is able to secure movement in that specific area and moment.

3.3 ERRs as the backbone of the response

Born from the revolutionary committees of 2018–2019, ERRs and local youth-led groups were the first to respond when war broke out in Sudan. They opened schools as shelters and managed communal kitchens long before international agencies could mobilise. Their power lies in their invisibility and agility; because they are embedded within the communities they serve, they can operate 'under the radar' in besieged zones like North Kordofan and El Fasher, where formal actors cannot enter.

This hyper-localisation has generated immense trust in ERRs. During interviews, displaced people repeatedly described volunteers, including ERR members, as the most credible actors, because they were present at the moment of crisis and remained close to communities. One aid recipient said:

'We really trust the youth and volunteers and ERR more than anyone else, they were present when everyone was running away, they stayed with us at the beginning 24/7.'

However, this legitimacy comes with extreme political fragility. ERRs are viewed with suspicion by both warring parties: the SAF often regards them as opposition structures due to their revolutionary roots, while the RSF targets them as threats to their control. Interviewees described ERRs navigating this by keeping a low public profile, avoiding visible ties with humanitarian agencies, and relying on discreet channels of communication and coordination. One international actor described their experience working with ERRs:

'They don't want to be visible because they are under political constraints ... meeting them in Khartoum for example would create risks both for them and for us because authorities don't like them much.'

In some cases, they engage indirectly through focal points or spokespersons outside Sudan or participate only selectively in coordination spaces to reduce exposure.

Despite being the backbone of the response, ERRs occupy a marginal position within the aid architecture. For example, their relationship with international agencies often resembles sub-contracting rather than genuine partnership. While some INGOs have adapted by offering flexible micro-grants and by accepting video reports instead of receipts, the broader system still largely treats ERRs as temporary gap-fillers rather than enduring leaders. It relies on the risk-taking of ERRs while offering only limited forms of protection, mainly through low-visibility engagement and adapted funding arrangements.



Despite being the backbone of the response, ERRs occupy a marginal position within the aid architecture

Some ERRs described the practical constraints that make standard compliance unrealistic in conflict settings, including markets without receipts and the risks of scrutiny when purchasing items locally. One ERR respondent said:

'some merchants do not have paperwork ... and if we buy items worth more than US\$10,000 ... the government will question us.'

The very features that keep ERRs on the margins of the formal humanitarian system – informal status, low visibility and lean operating models – are also what make them effective in a context where formal systems move slowly or cannot enter at all. Their ability to act quickly, stay embedded in neighbourhood networks and operate



The very features that keep ERRs on the margins of the formal humanitarian system - informal status, low visibility and lean operating models - are also what make them effective

discreetly often gives them reach that more formal actors cannot replicate.

One international actor reflected that Sudan is a rare case where mutual aid groups have become 'an established feature of the response'. They argued that the degree of engagement with ERRs has gone further than in other crises, shaped partly by deliberate efforts from some agencies and donors to adapt how they work with informal groups. For example, an INGO described creating a simplified partnership modality for ERRs by using very light proposals, capped grants of up to US\$30,000 and

lighter reporting requirements, including photos, videos and short narratives instead of standard documentation. In some cases, they provided cash transfers of US\$5,000 to smaller groups without a formal project proposal.

In practice, however, this creates a tension that runs through the system. ERRs are relied on because they can deliver under pressure, yet the same informality that enables their agility limits the levels of recognition, protection and predictable support ERRs receive.

3.4 Diaspora networks as a parallel humanitarian system

Parallel to the physical response sits a financial lifeline that many respondents described as keeping households and local initiatives afloat. Diaspora support was not described as a single organised structure, but as a web of trusted personal networks, small community groups abroad and informal transfer routes that connect people.

One diaspora respondent explained their purpose in practical terms:

***'Our main goal is to bridge the gap between people outside and inside Sudan ... We fund the Takaya [community kitchens], the ERRs, we work with them a lot in Omdurman, and we send the money directly via Bankak.'*²**

What makes these networks distinctive is how they operate. People repeatedly described diaspora-giving as fast, needs-led and relationship-based. The decisions

² Bankak is the mobile banking application of the Bank of Khartoum, widely used in Sudan for digital financial transactions, including direct money transfers between individuals. During the war, many Sudanese have increasingly relied on Bankak as cash access and banking services have been disrupted. Reporting and assessments describe Bankak as a major channel for transferring money to relatives and making payments remotely during the conflict.

to provide assistance are triggered by specific requests coming through trusted contacts in the affected communities, rather than formal assessments. For instance, people go to schools and speak to students and staff, they confirm needs directly, and then they raise money online, with contacts linking the diaspora to school principals and local focal points. A diaspora respondent described relying on 'trusted networks in each state' to check information and guide where support should go.

This approach has enabled rapid support for services and supplies that are hard to fund through conventional procedures, including medicines, school supplies, and the running costs of community kitchens and emergency activities. However, several diaspora respondents stressed that these networks are run almost entirely using unpaid labour from individuals who also have full-time jobs or study, which limits how consistently they can fundraise, coordinate and follow up. As a result, coordination tends to remain highly relational and dependent on individuals.

Like formal assistance, support from the diaspora is also constrained by uneven access, but this is because it is largely contingent on whether a household has relatives or trusted contacts abroad who are able to send money. Some families receive amounts that cover a large proportion of their needs, while others have no comparable source of support. Several aid recipients in Northern State said households always rely on support from outside because local jobs are extremely limited, and they emphasised the instability of this.

'Most families do not receive it regularly ... maybe this month, then after three months, then after two months.'

(Aid recipient respondent, Northern State)

Even when money is sent to households, it is not always accessible as cash. Recipients described coping with liquidity shortages by receiving transfers via shop owners, sometimes in small daily amounts.

'I go to him and he gives me 10 or 20 pounds per day until the full amount comes.'

(Aid recipient respondent, Northern State)

Others described being pushed into in-kind substitutes, even when what they need is transport or treatment. The channels themselves can be unreliable too.

'Bankak is accessible in all Sudan, but sometimes it crashes ... or there are issues with the internet.'

(Aid recipient respondent, Northern State)

Despite the important contributions made by the diaspora to the response in Sudan, this form of support often sits outside formal humanitarian coordination. Some diaspora networks pointed to practical barriers to engaging with the formal aid system, including their unregistered status. These networks struggle to meet the due diligence, documentation and reporting requirements often needed to work with INGOs or UN agencies. Other representatives described deliberate distance from formal systems, driven by mistrust and concerns about diversion and waste.

'UN agencies work closely with the government and the ministries, and we don't want to get there because there are a lot of funds going nowhere and a lot of aid wasted on nonsense.'

(Diaspora network respondent)



Diaspora financing is not simply a source of extra support, it represents a parallel layer of crisis financing that can move quickly and directly

Such accounts suggest diaspora financing is not simply a source of extra support. It represents a parallel layer of crisis financing that can move quickly and directly, but that is shaped by unequal household access, weak cash liquidity, platform disruptions and the limits of sustaining a volunteer-run system over time.

3.5 Protection: emerging, visible and fragile

The war in Sudan has pushed protection from the edges to the centre of how people talk about the crisis. This is not because the humanitarian system suddenly prioritised it, but because the scale of harm became impossible to ignore.

Across locations, respondents noted sexual violence, child protection risks and the everyday exposure that comes with displacement and overcrowding. In Northern State, several aid recipients said protection work has expanded during the war, and that concepts that once felt 'foreign' are now part of ordinary community conversations. This shift matters – it signals not only rising need, but a growing readiness to seek help, report incidents and engage with services that many people previously avoided. One aid recipient said:

'Before, we had no idea about this [protection], now people ask how to protect our children.'

In Gedaref, local actors also described protection becoming more 'visible' over time because needs became more urgent.

'Over time, the need became obvious, especially for women ... The positive thing is that we started providing [gender-based violence] and protection sessions in Gedaref.'

(Local actor, Gedaref)

At the system level, the evidence points to a thin and uneven operational architecture built around project-based mechanisms, referral systems, working groups and agency-specific procedures, as opposed to a strong overarching policy framework. And these arrangements remain fragile. The data indicates that funding cuts and cluster mergers are reducing dedicated protection coordination capacity, with key roles such as coordinators and information management officers increasingly at risk. While protection is becoming more present in discourse and programming, the institutional platform supporting it remains weak and uneven.



While protection is becoming more present in discourse and programming, the institutional platform supporting it remains weak and uneven

In practice, protection activity often takes a community-facing form, through awareness sessions, safe spaces, psychosocial support and referral pathways. In Northern State, people receiving aid pointed to national organisations, including newly established ones, delivering counselling and follow-up for people affected by sexual violence or psychological harm, with confidentiality emphasised as a core condition of support. Others described how reporting mechanisms are being normalised through repeated outreach, for example sustained explanations of complaint boxes because people initially assumed they were donation boxes.

Camp facilitators said that over time the dynamic has shifted from outreach-led to community-led reporting – 'cases now reach us directly, without us having to go out looking for them'. In some camps, people also described trained protection networks inside the camp population itself, linked to hotlines, social workers and case managers. Referrals reach legal and medical teams when families consent and services are available.

There have been some successful approaches in protection programming. For example, Sadagaat's direct work in shelter centres was repeatedly cited by respondents. Staff identify survivors of sexual violence or psychological harm, record cases confidentially, and coordinate with centre supervisors to remove people from harmful environments and connect them to assistance. The Child Development Foundation and partners working with the UN Population Fund have

established child-friendly spaces and run the Safe and Makanuna projects, providing structured activities, social workers, complaint boxes and outreach in host communities, including schools, mosques and neighbourhoods. In Sennar, respondents described a functioning referral system in which judicial authorities, social welfare, child protection departments, the Child Welfare Council and the Ministry of Health coordinate legal, psychosocial and medical support around individual cases.

Yet these gains sit on a very fragile foundation. Funding cuts were mentioned repeatedly as the point where protection services become irregular or collapse entirely. In North Kordofan, the ERR described how women's and children's safe spaces, dignity kits and psychosocial support stopped in February 2025 when funding ended, to the point that no organisation provides protection activities now.

A local actor in Darfur described being unable to secure treatment or legal follow-up for a disabled woman who had been raped, because resources were not available to do so:

'Nothing was done for her until now because there are no resources. We spend from our own pockets sometimes...'

Where services do continue, respondents described volunteerism as a hidden coping mechanism, with facilitators maintaining some level of activity during gaps between projects. This leaves protection present and visible, but structurally fragile and dependent on short funding cycles and the personal bandwidth of volunteers and frontline staff.



Shrinking resources and a narrowing of political and social spaces make disclosure, response and accountability hard to sustain

The operating environment also narrows what protection actors can do and what they can safely say. Several respondents described restrictions linked to government views and security oversight, including workshops cancelled without explanation and protection activities treated as 'sensitive or unacceptable' in some locations. International actors highlighted how conservative pushback and administrative approvals can dilute assessment and reporting, with key survey questions rejected if they contain perceived sexual references.

While protection in Sudan is becoming recognised more and demanded more, it is also being squeezed from both sides. Shrinking resources and a narrowing of political and social spaces make disclosure, response and accountability hard to sustain.

