



# SUDAN COUNTRY BRIEF

THE STATE OF THE  
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM 2026



# 4. DISCUSSION: WHAT SUDAN TELLS US ABOUT THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

Many of the dynamics observed in Sudan – shrinking resources, sharper prioritisation, reduced international operational reach and greater reliance on local actors – reflect broader pressures reshaping the humanitarian system. However, they are apparent in particularly stark form in this crisis.

The humanitarian reset reflects a system having to adjust to sustained funding shortfalls and more constrained operating capacities. This is leading agencies to narrow their priorities, cut costs and make more explicit trade-offs about where and how to respond.

In Sudan, these pressures are being applied on top of a split governance environment under SAF and RSF, widespread systems failure, extreme levels of need and severe access constraints. Locally embedded responders have become central to delivery in many areas, while formal coordination channels struggle to translate plans into consistent coverage across frontlines. In the context of the humanitarian reset, the system in Sudan is having to pivot from being a direct provider to a facilitator of indigenous survival networks.



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## 4.1 Challenging prevailing assumptions

The crisis in Sudan complicates assumptions that are deeply embedded in the formal humanitarian system, particularly among major donors, UN agencies and INGOs. Not least, Sudan challenges the assumption that a centralised international system is the default guarantor of humanitarian response.

Often, in responding to a crisis, actors in the formal system put emphasis on compliance, accountability with donor-facing reporting and verification, and coordination with centralised structures such as clusters, interagency meetings and



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formal planning processes. This is applied through due diligence requirements, subcontracting arrangements, upward reporting systems and coordination hubs to manage risk, standardise delivery and allocate resources across large-scale crises.

In Sudan, this formal system has struggled to scale up and, in many territories, it has retreated or been unable to operate consistently because of access restrictions, bureaucratic controls and funding deficits. This has exposed a gap between institutional capacity, as the formal system tends to define it, and operational capacity, meaning the ability to move, adapt and deliver under fire. While international actors often assess local organisations through their ability to meet complex compliance requirements, Sudan shows that the strongest operational capacity may reside in informal actors who lack certain credentials but can reach people in highly constrained settings.

The crisis in Sudan destabilises the conventional interpretation of accountability too. The formal system prioritises upward accountability to donors via reporting and verification – mechanisms that have proved unviable in besieged areas. Meanwhile, the survey responses suggest that recipient experience of accountability is uneven: while 88.8% of respondents said they were treated with respect and dignity by aid providers, 69.3% said they were not consulted on what they needed before distribution, 64.2% said they were not able to give feedback, make complaints or suggest changes, and 43.8% said they did not understand how aid providers collect, use and store their data. In contrast, the informal response allows for horizontal accountability, where volunteers are directly answerable to their neighbours and communities to help ensure aid reaches those in need.

Finally, Sudan challenges the assumption that coordination requires a single, consolidated structure (such as the cluster system). The fragmentation of Sudan into competing spheres of control, combined with severe access constraints, has meant that coordination efforts centred in Port Sudan have often struggled to translate plans into action. This suggests that effective response in such contexts instead requires a decentralised, area-based approach that empowers local decision-making. Prevailing definitions of capacity, accountability and coordination within the formal humanitarian system may be too narrow for a fragmented war setting such as in Sudan, where delivery under pressure often depends on actors who sit outside formal compliance and planning structures.



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## 4.2 Emerging modalities and actor configurations

The Sudan response highlights that community-embedded responders and diaspora networks are durable and autonomous structures, not merely temporary solutions until the formal system returns. ERRs represent an evolution from traditional implementing partners to civic humanitarianism, where aid is an act of political solidarity and mutual aid.

Similarly, the diaspora-enabled financial ecosystem challenges the humanitarian sector's reliance on formal banking. Utilising informal value transfer networks (e.g. Bankak) and trust-based verification, diaspora groups have created a parallel aid system that is faster and more flexible than international grants in Sudan's current context.

This configuration suggests a future operational model for high-risk environments: where international actors shift from direct implementation to become providers of resources, using remote cash and injections of supplies to fuel the frontline operations of locally rooted networks. Within this, mutual aid groups and diaspora financing are not peripheral, they are part of the response infrastructure and therefore core actors, not temporary substitutes.



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## 4.3 Cross-cutting trade-offs

The response in Sudan has been defined by acute tensions between bureaucratic risk and physical risk, where compliance can delay the provision of aid to besieged populations. Simultaneously, there has been a stark transfer of risk: while international staff have been withdrawn or work remotely, the physical risks of delivery have been transferred to local intermediaries and vendors who lack comparable insurance or protection.

Trade-offs are being made around neutrality too. Adhering to strict rules and maintaining visible neutrality often results in total denial of access. Conversely, a pragmatic approach that relies on sometimes compromised gatekeepers (e.g. tribal leaders or commercial vendors) to negotiate passage has enabled actors to reach starving populations.



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As risk management strategies shift physical danger onto local intermediaries and communities, clearer shared conversations and decisions are needed about 'acceptable' risk, duty of care and support for those carrying that risk.

