



SUDAN COUNTRY BRIEF

THE STATE OF THE
HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM 2026

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ALNAP (Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance) is a global humanitarian learning network made up of over 100 NGOs, UN agencies, Red Cross/Crescent Movements members, donors, funders, networks, academics and think tanks. It exists to help the sector learn and improve, by drawing on shared experience to understand what is working, where challenges remain, and what needs to change.

This country brief was produced as part of a series of country-level research outputs in Afghanistan, DRC, Myanmar, Palestine, Ukraine/Poland and Sudan for the **2026 State of the Humanitarian (SOHS) report 2026**. While distinct from the global SOHS report, these outputs draw on the same country-level data, with a specific focus on national findings. They are intended to inform national and regional audiences and stakeholders, and to contribute to context-specific discussions on the humanitarian system.

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About ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian System report

Humanitarian action can be a lifeline to people experiencing the worst that conflict and disaster can inflict. For over a decade, ALNAP's **State of the Humanitarian System report (SOHS)** has provided a unique, evidence-based understanding of the system and how well it works for affected people. Based on a huge body of evidence including exclusive research with crisis-affected people and practitioners, SOHS addresses key questions about performance and effectiveness in areas such as hunger and mortality reduction, as well as giving a comprehensive picture of funding, resource flows, staffing and organisations. Consultations with people affected by crises were central to the research from the outset, and shaped the focus of the report.

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ACRONYMS

ERR	Emergency Response Room
IDP	Internally displaced person
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
UN	United Nations

1. INTRODUCTION

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan has brought about a fundamental reconfiguration of the response landscape, creating a system that is fragmented and functioning under extreme pressure. As the formal international architecture strains under severe funding cuts and shifts in donor attention, a diverse ecosystem of actors has emerged to fill the void. This includes local youth-led groups and Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), diaspora networks and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) who often act as the primary lifeline in hard-to-reach and besieged areas where international access is denied.

This research brief forms part of the wider research for the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action's (ALNAP) sixth [**State of the Humanitarian System \(SOHS\) report**](#). It examines three distinct aspects that are shaping how aid is organised and experienced in Sudan:

1. How do ERRs and diaspora networks function as the backbone of a response alongside formal structures in a fragmented system?
2. How are actors adapting operations to navigate severe conflict, governance and access constraints?
3. How is the protection sector evolving amid growing visibility but extreme political and financial fragility?

This brief serves as a tool for reflection and dialogue on how this complex system is performing in practice. It draws on qualitative data collected from key informant interviews and focus group discussions with diverse stakeholders and displaced people across Kassala, Gedaref, North Kordofan, Northern State and East Darfur. Interviews were conducted in-person and remotely between June 2025 and November 2025, during an active and highly fluid conflict environment characterised by shifting frontlines, repeated displacement and significant constraints on movement, communications and safe access. It also draws selectively on survey data collected between August and September 2025 from 1,000 aid



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recipients in Gedaref (n=337), Kassala (n=340) and Northern State (n=323), including a predominantly displaced sample, to triangulate some findings on aid adequacy, timeliness, consultation and recipient experience.

The three states were selected based on a rapid mapping of locations or 'hotspots' with high displacement rates using data from the Humanitarian Response Plan 2023–2024, supplemented by in-country verification of evolving

displacement patterns and operational developments as the conflict shifted. The selection also considered practical feasibility, including security and access constraints, connectivity for remote engagement, and the presence of a sufficiently diverse set of active responders and community stakeholders to support meaningful participation.

The intended audience of this brief spans the full spectrum of the humanitarian community. For local responders, national NGOs and mutual aid groups, this paper documents their pivotal role and the structural inequities that continue to limit their influence. For international actors and donors in particular, it provides insight into the 'humanitarian reset',¹ as the humanitarian system formalises a shift towards delivering assistance – to the extent possible – with the resources currently available through sharper prioritisation and efforts to streamline operations. This reset directly shapes what gets funded, where coverage contracts and which operational trade-offs become unavoidable.

The brief also provides insight into the operational choices made to navigate a politicised environment where neutrality is constantly contested. Ultimately, it positions Sudan not just as a crisis to be managed, but as a critical case study for understanding how the humanitarian system adapts, or struggles to adapt, to the changing nature of protracted conflict.



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¹ The humanitarian reset is the initiative launched by UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher and the IASC in March 2025 in response to a sector-wide funding shock and rising needs. It is a reform agenda to make delivery localised, faster, and more accountable.

2. CONTEXT: SUDAN'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Since fighting erupted on 15 April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Sudan has suffered the world's largest displacement crisis (UNHCR, 2025). By mid-2024, more than 10 million people had fled their homes during what UN officials have described as a 'crisis of epic proportions' (IOM, 2024; UN, 2024). The conflict has destroyed the nation's infrastructure, decimating the banking sector and leaving 70%–80% of health facilities in conflict zones non-functional (WHO, 2025). Acute food insecurity has intensified, with famine conditions confirmed in parts of North Darfur and threatening other besieged regions (IPC, 2025).

By mid-2025, the crisis had expanded beyond displacement into a broader collapse of basic services and civilian coping capacity. At that time, 30.4 million people required urgent humanitarian assistance and 24.6 million faced acute food



Access barriers are being reinforced through parallel control systems

insecurity, including around 637,000 people at catastrophic levels of hunger. Many households had been displaced multiple times due to renewed fighting, siege dynamics and insecurity in sites for internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Protection Cluster Sudan, 2025).

Conventional humanitarian delivery and coordination mechanisms have been constrained by need and also by the operating environment, which is characterised by staff harassment and systematic delays due to travel permit denials, refusals to approve projects and import clearances. These constraints are reported to be particularly acute in Darfur and Kordofan (WHO, 2025; IPC, 2025).

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs recorded 198 access denials in the first half of 2025 (OCHA (2025)). The International Rescue Committee (IRC) has also documented severe access constraints faced by international NGOs (INGOs). In SAF-controlled areas, only 40% of INGO visa applications were approved between September 2024 and March 2025 (IRC, 2025). These access barriers are being reinforced through parallel control systems, with RSF authorities (namely the Sudanese Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations) duplicating Humanitarian Aid Commission-style procedures, including oversight demands that create negotiation-heavy delays and leave agencies stuck between the two authorities. IRC has also documented how these constraints play out along key

corridors: aid 'trickles' across the Adre crossing into Darfur, with a World Food Programme convoy that departed on 8 January 2025 reportedly taking three months to reach Tawila due to roadblocks and escalating violence.

These constraints have intersected with major funding shortfalls. In late January 2025, the United States Government ordered a temporary pause in foreign assistance and issued stop-work orders affecting many awards funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Prior to this, US funding was central to Sudan's response, accounting for ~44% of humanitarian funding for food, security, nutrition and health, plus water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) (ACAPS, 2025). In addition, other major donors have scaled back their funding to Sudan, including Germany whose contribution went down from US\$108 million in 2024 to US\$63.5 million in 2025. As of 21 July 2025, UN agencies received only 23% of the US\$4.2 billion required to support nearly 21 million people inside Sudan, while the Regional Refugee Response Plan was only 17% funded. This has limited predictable coverage and reinforced reliance on locally embedded responders and informal support systems in hard-to-reach areas (UN, 2025).



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



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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.



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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.



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



Sudan challenges the assumption that a centralised international system is the default guarantor of humanitarian response

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.



Effective response in such contexts instead requires a decentralised, area-based approach that empowers local decision-making

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.



ERRs represent an evolution from traditional implementing partners to civic humanitarianism, where aid is an act of political solidarity and mutual aid

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.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING AND PRACTICE

The crisis in Sudan teaches us not that the formal humanitarian system is absent, but that its ability to translate plans into coverage is structurally constrained. Consequently, the response depends on locally rooted, politically exposed and often unpaid delivery capacity.

What does this mean for the humanitarian system in terms of architecture, financing, risk, protection and accountability in conflict settings where the centre cannot reliably reach the margins?

- Plan for a dual system, not a single humanitarian system:** In Sudan, the formal architecture and the locally embedded response operate in parallel, with uneven connection between them. Humanitarian practice should work with this reality rather than treat informal delivery as a stopgap until the formal system returns.
- Reframe localisation from policy ambition to operational necessity:** Locally embedded actors are not just partners, they are the delivery layer in many areas because they can operate where others cannot. In localisation debates, this moves capacity narratives to discussions of what the system relies on in practice, including who carries risk and who gets predictable support.
- Treat access as a structural feature that shapes strategy, not an implementation constraint:** Access conditions in Sudan do not simply slow delivery, they determine feasible models of aid, who can move, what can be monitored and what can be said. This implies a shift from designing programmes around needs alone to designing around the intersection of needs, permissions, safety and the likelihood of interruption.
- Make risk distribution explicit and link it to duty of care:** A consistent pattern is the transfer of delivery risk to local volunteers, intermediaries and vendors as international staff are withdrawn or manage responses remotely. Risk becomes a governance issue and a security issue, requiring shared decisions about acceptable risk and stronger protections for those carrying that risk.



the response depends on locally rooted, politically exposed and often unpaid delivery capacity

- **Recognise diaspora finance within crisis architecture:** Diaspora support functions as a parallel financing layer that can move quickly and directly, but this support is uneven, volatile and constrained by liquidity and platform disruption. The implication is that diaspora remittances are not a broadly available coping mechanism. Humanitarian financing and cash strategies need to be designed to reduce inequity for households that lack access to these networks.
- **Treat protection as a test of continuity, safe access and freedom to operate, not just service availability:** Protection performance depends on sustained presence, confidentiality and political room to operate. When these conditions shrink, protection becomes more visible but less reliably actionable. People are more aware of protection services and reporting, but inconsistent programming, stigma and privacy constraints limit what can be assessed or disclosed.
- **Revisit what 'coordination success' means when a country is fragmented:** When frontlines and permissions fracture the operating environment, central coordination can remain active but coverage becomes inconsistent. Here, coordination mechanisms that solve operational problems across conflict zones and enable area-based decision-making are valuable. Coordination quality does not always equate with the existence of structures and meetings.

6. CONCLUSION

In Sudan, it is not just the scale of need that stands out, but the way the response is organised under fragmentation and access constraints. In many locations, assistance has moved through locally embedded networks because these have been able to operate where the presence of formal actors has been limited or delayed.

These local networks have not replaced the formal system, but they have reshaped what it can realistically deliver. The response depends on local capacity, local legitimacy and informal finance, while formal coordination struggles to convert plans into consistent coverage across frontlines. Protection needs are increasingly recognised, but services remain irregular and politically sensitive. Sudan offers a concrete case for rethinking how the humanitarian system shares risk, resources and decision-making when access is structurally contested.



In Sudan, it is not just the scale of need that stands out, but the way the response is organised

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ANNEX: LIMITATIONS

Conditions in Sudan shaped who we could reach, how we could reach them and what respondents felt safe to share.

a. Security, access and data-collection constraints

- Some interviews were conducted remotely. Remote methods enabled us to include a wider range of respondents despite access restrictions, but participation depended on stable phone or internet access. This likely reduced the inclusion of people with limited connectivity or safe access to communications.
- Ongoing insecurity prevented engagement with some groups and areas, particularly ethnic minorities in Darfur. Findings therefore reflect the realities of the locations and populations we could access.

b. Coverage gaps in affected populations

- People in transit and those living outside camp settings were difficult to reach with remote and fixed-site approaches. This likely reduced the visibility of needs and protection risks affecting mobile populations and those in informal settlement arrangements.
- Host communities were not systematically included. As a result, host community dynamics were largely captured indirectly through the perspectives of IDPs and other stakeholders, which may have understated host community needs, tensions and coping strategies.

c. Stakeholder representation gaps

- Interviews with government personnel required formal approvals from the Humanitarian Aid Commission. These were difficult to secure during the research period, which limited access to government respondents. Only one government actor was interviewed. This restricted our ability to fully test and triangulate claims related to approvals, coordination decision-making, constraints imposed by authorities, and allegations of interference or diversion, especially where these issues vary by locality and controlling authority.

d. Sensitivity and response bias

- Several issues carry political and personal risk, particularly criticism of authorities or armed actors, and discussion of diversion or manipulation of aid. Some respondents may have withheld details, softened language or avoided attribution due to fear of repercussions, which may have led to partial or cautious reporting and conservative estimates of the scale of some issues.
- Stakeholders may have emphasised successes, downplayed challenges or presented their role in a favourable light, especially in a context where legitimacy, access and funding are contested.

e. Sampling limitations

- Participant selection relied on existing networks, feasibility under severe constraints and a rapid mapping of displacement hotspots. The mapping captured a time-bound snapshot of humanitarian presence. Given Sudan's fluid operating environment and security risks for participants and the research team, some locations and groups were less visible through this approach. This is particularly true for areas with tight movement restrictions, disrupted communications and rapid displacement.

