

CSRF Analysis: Borderlands of Resilience

Navigating Conflict Impacts on Communities and Aid on the Sudan-South Sudan Frontier

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Summary

This report examines how the war in Sudan, and especially the RSF consolidation in Kordofan, is reshaping South Sudan's borderlands. Recent developments have increased South Sudan's leverage across the frontier and, for the time being, reduced cross-border conflict. At the same time, they have impoverished communities, deepened militarisation, and strengthened elite control over trade and land. These dynamics are driving greater everyday insecurity, including sexual and gender-based violence, fueling conflict over internal borders, and laying the foundations for future local and strategic confrontation. Women are bearing the heaviest burden, both because they absorb the economic costs of war and because militarisation is reinforcing systems that limit representation, weaken accountability, and restrict access to justice. Drawing on primary research in Northern Bahr al Ghazal, Unity State and Ruweng Administrative Area, the analysis suggests key implications and recommendations for aid actors, requiring a fundamental shift in approach.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Once a litmus test of Sudan's unity,¹ the peaceful management of the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands is now essential to preventing future conflict between two sovereign states. For more than two centuries, the region's inhabitants have been the principal casualties of successive external powers seeking to dominate the frontier.² Today, it is this memory that frames the complex interplay of national strategic interests and local priorities that defines life in the borderlands. Aid operations are part of this cross-border system: they influence the conditions for conflict or cooperation in the present, and with them the prospects for war or peace in the years ahead.

This report examines the impact of developments in Kordofan on community resilience, conflict management and aid operations in the South Sudanese borderlands, with particular attention to four evolving dynamics:

- **Fragmentation of Sudan into rival zones of control:** Since 2023, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) have retained control over most of north and eastern Sudan and parts of the centre, while the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have consolidated their position across much of Darfur and West Kordofan. RSF and allied

¹ Deng, L. B. (2010). Justice in Sudan: will the award of the international Abyei Arbitration Tribunal be honoured? *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4(2), 298–313. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2010.487339>

² See, for example, Douglas H. Johnson, *When Boundaries Become Borders: The Impact of Boundary-Making in Southern Sudan's Frontier Zones* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2010).

advances into southern Blue Nile have opened a new front, but they have not yet overturned this broader territorial division.³

- **Consolidation of RSF control in West Kordofan:** The RSF captured Al-Fula in June 2024, al-Meiram in July, Wad Banda in October, and in December 2024 - after a two-year siege - the 22nd Division base in Babanusa, the last major SAF stronghold in the state.⁴ This gave the RSF control over most of West Kordofan, strengthened the Darfur - Kordofan corridor, and set the stage for further eastward expansion.
- **RSF seizure of Heglig/Panthou on 8 December 2025:** This embroiled Sudan's largest oilfield and the main processing hub for South Sudanese crude directly in the war, drawing in South Sudan's fiscal survival and wider border geopolitics. South Sudanese forces moved into this internationally contested territory under an informal tripartite arrangement to secure the site and preserve oil flows.⁵ The terms remain unclear, though informal sources suggest the RSF was promised 3 per cent of transit revenues.⁶
- **Escalation in drone warfare:** The growing use of drones by RSF and SAF has pushed the war beyond the front lines and eroded the SAF's long-standing aerial advantage. In Greater Kordofan, drone warfare escalated sharply in 2025 as RSF gained equipment from external backers and SAF onboarded its own Safarooq attack UAV,⁷ with major consequences for civilians and humanitarian infrastructure: the UN Human Rights Chief reports more than 90 killed and 142 injured in late January and early February 2026 alone.⁸

This analysis asks two key questions: 1) What are the current and potential effects of the shift in fighting in Kordofan on formal and informal border management structures and on aid operations in South Sudan? And 2) What are practical lessons learned and implications for supporting community resilience and conflict management, and for delivering conflict- and gender-sensitive aid? In reflecting on these questions, we also consider major developments within South Sudan, particularly the acute economic crisis, aid draw-down, the war in Jonglei and the politics of succession.

1.2 Aims and Methods

Conflict-sensitive aid seeks to maximise positive effects and peacebuilding opportunities while minimising harm. This requires a clear understanding of the forces driving both conflict and cooperation, and how aid interventions shape those dynamics in turn. This paper adopts a political economy approach to describe how the borderlands work, so we can see interventions as part of the whole and, drawing on border studies, treats the borderlands as a single cross-border system. Its analysis is also grounded in systems thinking for

³ See, for example, EUAA, *Sudan: Security Situation*, section 1.13 2025; and <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/rsf-and-splm-n-seize-parts-of-sudans-blue-nile-region-as-more-than-73000-flee>

⁴ Sudan War Monitor, Rapid Support Forces Capture Heglig Oilfield, 8 December 2025: <https://sudanwarmonitor.com/p/rapid-support-forces-capture-heglig>

⁵ ACLED Africa Overview, ACLED, January 2026

⁶ For example, Focus Group Discussion, Division 3 soldiers, Gabat, 23 January 2026

⁷ E.g. Guy Martin, "Sudan's Military Industry Corporation debuts one-way attack UAV, defenceWeb, 12 September 2025

⁸ OHCHR, High Commissioner Türk calls on States to do more to end the senseless war in Sudan, 9 February 2026

peacebuilding since both the literature and the primary data point to a chronic crisis marked by deep interdependence and self-reinforcing feedback loops.⁹

The questions at the heart of this paper require up-to-date insight into local dynamics, so the findings draw heavily on primary research. This consists of 37 key informant interviews and six focus group discussions conducted in Northern Bahr el Ghazal State (NBGS), Unity State, and Ruweng Administrative Area (RAA) by two field researchers between January and February 2026. Interviewees included traders, officials, members of the armed forces, women’s cooperatives, peace committee members, aid workers, and analysts. This field research was framed and supplemented by desk research, as well as the research team’s prior experience.

2. Strategic context: Cross-border alliances, Juba’s stronger hand, and Militarisation

“The fact is the RSF needs this border open more than we [South Sudan] do”¹⁰

War in Sudan has pushed South Sudanese and Sudanese armed actors into closer cross-border military alliance. It has also delivered South Sudan a stronger hand in borderland affairs.¹¹ Both dynamics contribute to a period of increased cross-border stability, offering some short-term benefits for communities. However, aid actors should understand that these alliances are short term and tactical. They are further entrenching militarisation and weakening civilian government, and they are deepening long-term drivers of deprivation and conflict.

The fragmentation of Sudan since 2023 forced a reversal in the direction of border trade from north-south to south-north and therefore a new reliance in RSF areas on South Sudan for fuel, goods and as a market for commodities emerging from the war economy.¹² This reliance was shown when South Sudan demonstrated its ability to close supply roads early in the conflict.¹³ Recent RSF advances into Kordofan have accelerated this trend, intensifying RSF reliance on South Sudan as it takes additional populations and territory under its wing. The resultant pattern of strengthened cross-border military alliances span Aweil North to Pariang, for example, in Abyei, expanded Titbaai forces and RSF-aligned Misseriya militias conduct joint military operations against cattle raiders.¹⁴ In Unity State and the RAA, an UNMISS staff member said, *“There is peace here because the RSF, South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF), and Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – North (SPLM-N) are cooperating to administer the border”*.¹⁵

Second, the consolidation of RSF power across West Kordofan has enabled the group to expel many remaining SAF supporters, forcing Fellata transhumants and holdout Rizeigat and Misseriya out of the

⁹ CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, *Designing Strategic Initiatives to Impact Conflict Systems: Systems Approaches to Peacebuilding. A Resource Manual* (Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2016).

¹⁰ Interview, National Security Officer, Wanyjok, 25.01.26

¹¹ XCEPT, *Contested Borderlands: Rapid Support Forces Governance and Negotiated Sovereignty in Sudan* (London: XCEPT, 2025)

¹² XCEPT, *Contested Borderlands: Rapid Support Forces Governance in Sudan*, November 2025

¹³ Sudan Tribune, “Sudan-South Sudan border crossing shut over attacks,” 18 January 2023

¹⁴ Interview, anonymous, UNMISS CAD, 05.02.26

¹⁵ Ibid.

area.¹⁶ At the same time, it has been careful to accommodate existing arrangements for control of border crossings by the dominant Rizeigat militias, leaving military power and informal border management structures at the order relatively unchanged. Overall, this RSF domination of SAF-aligned actors in the Sudanese central borderlands and its cooperation with existing formal and informal community civil and military structures has fostered greater cross-border cooperation among armed groups and economic elites.

Third, South Sudan's growing leverage along the border has also reduced the scope for rebel groups to operate from Sudanese territory, as a National Security Officer said, *"Rebels can't penetrate here anymore with the border up to east Ruweng manned by RSF, SPLM-N and SSPDF"*¹⁷ Recent developments in Heglig/Panthou have reinforced this trend, for example, shortly after the tripartite security arrangement for the oil fields was agreed, the RSF - at the SSPDF's request - expelled the remaining Sudan People Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) elements from their camp at Lunyluny - upending the longtime sanctuary provided by SAF.¹⁸ Although these fighters retreated into the forests of Mayom, Rubkona, and Guit in Unity State, the eastward shift of RSF control, combined with its alliance with the SPLM-N, has pushed any viable resupply points into SAF-controlled Upper Nile and Jonglei, effectively beyond reach.¹⁹

All this means that developments in Kordofan have effectively resolved Juba's central border-governance dilemma, for now. For decades, President Kiir has required a strong local elite with cross-border networks to administer the South Sudanese borderlands with some autonomy, though this risked empowering potential rivals. For example, Governor Paul Malong Awan used his long-standing relationships with Misseriya Awlad Kamil to destroy Dau Aturjong's attempts to establish SPLA-IO bases in Kordofan after elections in 2010. However, he also used this very same control of the borderland, and its revenues, to build an independent centre of political and military power challenging Kiir directly in 2018.²⁰ RSF reliance on South Sudan means the task of projecting strategic control and stability has become a lot easier for Juba, with implications as we shall see for community border management structures.

The result is deeper militarisation of every aspect of border governance and the associated retreat of civilian institutions.²¹ The war in Sudan led to increased deployment of SSPDF and NSS forces to border points, increasing military influence over every aspect of economic and social life for South Sudanese communities by pure dint of numbers.²² In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, freed from the need for a border strongman, President Kiir appointed Simon Uber Mawut as Governor (July 2024–December 2025), a Luo with few links at the border. Throughout this tenure, the so-far loyal Division 3 Commander Major General Malong Agat Atheui was able to take almost complete control of borderland affairs.²³ The RSF takeover of Heglig/Panthou on December 8, 2025, has reinforced the militarised political order in Unity and Ruweng,

¹⁶ Interview, former Minister of Information, Communication and Technology, Unity State, Bentiu, 03.02.2026

¹⁷ Interview, National Security Officer, Wanyjok, 25.01.26

¹⁸ E.g. Small Arms Survey, *The Conflict in Unity State*, 29 January 2015

¹⁹ Interview, NSS Officer, Wanyjok, 25.01.26

²⁰ Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, *Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands* (London: Rift Valley Institute, 2022), 22

²¹ Small Arms Survey, *Dominance without Legitimacy: Tong Akeen Ngor's Reign in Northern Bahr el Ghazal State* (June 2024)

²² UNMISS / UN Secretary-General, *Report on the situation in South Sudan* (29 July 2024)

²³ Focus Group Discussion, SSPDF Division 3, Gabat, Mathiang Barrack, 23.01.26

strengthened also by the handover of SAF heavy armour to the SSPDF as it fled.²⁴ And in Abyei, General Kuol Dim Kuol's reorganised Titbaai community defence forces - now an equipped and trained local army funded in part by the wider Ngok diaspora - has at times compelled the police and civil administration to retreat when decisions ran against its members.²⁵

3. The impact of developments in Kordofan on the borderlands

Our assumptions often place external action at the centre of analysis. This report instead explores the impact and implications of recent developments in Sudan on four key understandings of "peace" commonly expressed in community interviews, namely: 1) military alliances and security; 2) the ability to trade and sustain livelihoods; and 3) the existence of rules governing intercommunal relations (informal border management mechanisms); and 4) the redress of structural grievances.

3.1 Security

Peace considered as a state of 'military alliance' is bringing communities and aid operations in South Sudan a measure of stability and limited protection. For example, by underpinning meaningful security guarantees for Sudanese pastoralists to continue their dry-season grazing in South Sudan and through the cooperation of both RSF and SSPDF with inter-community justice mechanisms (see 3.4 below).²⁶ However, whilst patterns of north-south cross-border conflict may be on hold, day to day insecurity for communities is deteriorating.

Recent developments in Kordofan and economic crisis in South Sudan are fuelling everyday insecurity across the borderlands. Interviewees said that the influx of weapons, ever higher prices caused by increased demand as RSF expands, and alcoholism are contributing to violent theft, independent cattle raiding, and tensions over land and local resources spanning Aweil North in the west to Jamjang of Ruweng in the east.²⁷ The capture of Meiram and Babanusa has accelerated already burgeoning arms smuggling from Sudan,²⁸ with weapons looted from SAF barracks sold openly at markets such as Kiir Adem and Majok Yinh Thiou overseen by local South Sudan Military Intelligence (MI) officers.²⁹

Drone warfare in Kordofan is enabling violence far beyond front lines and reducing the ability of military alliances to deliver security within areas of control: In March 2026, OHCHR reported that "*over 500 civilians were killed*" in drone strikes between 1 January and 15 March, with "*the vast majority*" in the three Kordofan states.³⁰ Together with the economic predation and military tactics of RSF expansion, this will likely deliver more irregular refugee arrival patterns and longer stays by Sudanese pastoralists in South

²⁴ E.g. Nicholas Haysom, "Statement by Nicholas Haysom, Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNMISS, to the Security Council," 14 August 2024

²⁵ Confidential interview, Maper, 23.01.26

²⁶ Interview, National Security Officer, Wanyjok, 25.01.26

²⁷ Focus Group Discussions, Youth Men, Malou Aweer, 01.24.2026

²⁸ Joseph Diing Majok, *War and the Borderland: Northern Bahr el-Ghazal during the Sudan Conflict* (Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, March 2024), 16

²⁹ Interview, Youth Focus Group, Malou Aweer, 24.01.26

³⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Sudan: Sharp increase in civilian deaths as a result of growing drone warfare," 24 March 2026.

Sudan.³¹ All of which will intensify internal conflict and growing competition over local resources, especially along the River Kiir/Bahr al Arab (see section 3.4). For now, the intentional spillover of drone attacks into South Sudan by RSF and SAF is unlikely, but a single major change in the course of the war in Sudan - for example in the balance of support to parties by international backers - could change everything. For aid actors, drone warfare and the RSF's campaign in Kordofan will drive more sudden, fragmented, and less predictable movement into South Sudan. In response, aid actors should move beyond camp-centred planning and prioritise corridor- and area-based models of assistance, while more rigorously implementing the South Sudan Country Refugee Response Plan 2026 commitments to conflict sensitivity, joint planning with refugees and host communities, and conflict management.³²

The war in Sudan may also be spreading new norms of sexual violence in conflict. UN investigators, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International have all attributed large-scale violations to both RSF and SAF.³³ Unresolved cases involving RSF-linked groups in Rotriak, Panyagei, and Panthou/Heglig and a perceived rise in inter-community sexual violence in Aweil North suggest similar patterns may emerge across the borderlands with warnings that *“sexual violence to humiliate those not on the same side in a conflict ... that is now considered ok”*.³⁴

Militarisation due to the war in Sudan and a weakened government due to South Sudan's economic crisis have increased reliance on customary systems that often tolerate gender-based violence against women and girls. Women interviewed for this report described gender-based violence as an increasingly severe feature of everyday life, driven by deepening poverty, militarisation, and pervasive alcohol abuse.³⁵ The same pressures are also accelerating early and forced marriage, as families exchange daughters as a survival strategy all too familiar in war.^{36/37} The aid drawdown is reinforcing this trend, for example, UNHCR's reduced capacity to move new arrivals onward from Kiir Adem, Jorbioc, and Majok Yin Thiou, leaves many refugees stranded at border entry points and transit centres precisely where prolonged stays are known to heighten exposure to sexual violence.³⁸

Women and girls face heightened risks of sexual violence in their places of origin in Sudan, during flight, in informal settlements, and in daily life after arrival. With ongoing siege warfare, GBV and protection capacities need to be ringfenced within first line assistance and able to deal with ever-more complex needs. Relief should also be paired with concrete efforts to reduce GBV risks, including early and forced marriage. This will require working more closely with communities and existing initiatives to understand underlying causes and co-produce responses.

³¹ Focus Group Discussion, Youth Focus Group, Malou Aweer, 24.01.26

³² Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan (January - December 2026, UNHCR, 17.02.26

³³ E.g. OHCHR, “Sudan: UN Fact-Finding Mission documents large-scale sexual violence and holds RSF responsible,” 29 October 2024; Human Rights Watch, Khartoum Is Not Safe for Women: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Sudan's Capital, 28 July 2024; Amnesty International, They Raped All of Us: Sexual Violence Against Women and Girls in Sudan, April 2025.

³⁴ Interview, Director of Gender, Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, 05.02.26

³⁵ Focus Group Discussion, Female Rice Workers, Akuem, 26.01.2026

³⁶ Interviews, Aweil Market and Maper West, 24.01.26

³⁷ See, for example, Child marriage in conflict and crisis affected settings: Evidence and practice, Girls Not Brides, 2025

³⁸ Global Protection Cluster, South Sudan Protection Analysis Update, February 2024, 8, 9

3.2 Trade and Livelihoods

*“The more the RSF controls Kordofan, the more prices rise and livelihoods worsen here [in South Sudan]”.*³⁹

For communities in South Sudan’s borderlands, the economic impact of recent developments in Sudan has been disastrous. Border governance has long operated through networks of civilian, military, and customary elites tied together by rents from cross-border trade, checkpoint control, monopolies over fuel and arms, and land acquisition by senior military figures from impoverished communities. The war in Sudan and recent developments in Kordofan have reinforced these patterns in networks spanning the region - one senior national political figure, for example, was alleged to have provided false military credentials, equipment, and a bodyguard to help a local civilian agent move looted vehicles to Juba.⁴⁰ Some taxation does substitute for missing salaries, for example monies collected by the Fire Brigade tax desk at Malek Miir, and therefore helps sustain minimal levels of protection. The central logic, however, is short term elite enrichment at the expense of communities today, deeper humanitarian needs, higher operating costs for aid agencies, greater unpredictability, and further damage to the local markets on which community access to goods and effective humanitarian response depends.

Following the outbreak of war in Sudan, the cost of food and basic commodities for South Sudan’s border communities rose by about 100 per cent as supply shifted from Sudan to Uganda, and by a further 50 per cent after the fall of Meiram and Babanusa as cross-border demand shot up.⁴¹ Aid operations reaching Diling and Kadugli bring some relief, but South Sudanese expect prices to keep rising because of poor rains, millipede infestation, flooding,⁴² and increased population pressure. At the same time, remittances from South Sudanese labour in Sudanese agricultural schemes have been lost, and access to health care and education for South Sudanese in Sudanese towns has disappeared.⁴³ Opportunistic land accumulation from destitute South Sudanese farmers by senior SSPDF figures is also destroying livelihoods, squeezing seasonal grazing land, and narrowing the basis for peaceful coexistence.⁴⁴

Women are perhaps hit hardest. Men face the risk of armed recruitment but their absence at war,⁴⁵ the collapse of migratory labour incomes,⁴⁶ and rising inflation have shifted still more responsibility onto women - accelerating a process in train since at least the early 1990s when men left the South Sudanese border regions in large numbers to join the SPLA. Men are under pressure to secure any livelihood, and there are unverified reports of youth from NBSG and Unity joining the Sudan conflict through Abyei as well

³⁹ Interviews, Division 3 soldiers, Gabat, 23.01.26

⁴⁰ Interview, NNGO Staff, Gok Machar, 29.01.29

⁴¹ Interviews, Aweil Market and Maper West, 24.01.26

⁴² Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

⁴³ Interview, Youth Focus Group, Malou Aweer, 24.01.26

⁴⁴ See, for example, Land scarcity in Northern Bahr al Ghazal: Implications for Returns, Joseph Ding, November 2024, 3; and Focus Group Discussion, SSPDF Division 3, Gabat, Mathiang Barrack, 23.01.26

⁴⁵ Joshua Craze, Dominance without Legitimacy: Tong Akeen Ngor’s Reign in Northern Bahr el Ghazal State (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, June 2024), 7

⁴⁶ Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, Aweil North County, Northern Bahr el Ghazal State: County Profile (Juba: CSRF, 31 March 2025).

as ongoing recruitment for the war in Jonglei.⁴⁷ Women say this has created an additional pressure to earn enough not only to survive, but to keep young men out of war.⁴⁸ At the same time, the task has become even harder as South Sudan's fiscal collapse drives local authorities to expand revenue collection deeper into the informal economy to tax the small businesses on which many women depend.⁴⁹

Mutual aid systems offer a response that challenges these cycles of marginalisation, militarisation and exclusion. For example, Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) originally developed through INGO training, have taken on a life of their own: as one member said, "*savings associations are no longer formed and managed with INGOs, they are dominant everywhere, in churches, markets and villages*".⁵⁰ In Warawar alone, there are more than 70 such *Sanduk* groups in a self-organised movement. On 8 March, for example, Dotku Koc-cok VSLA was recognised as the "*top performer - ending their 9-month cycle with a remarkable 30,834,500 SSP. Each of the 43 members received 717,000 SSP*".⁵¹ Some are reshaping gender relations by hiring men as wage labourers for charcoal production, brickmaking, and pole cutting, and by leasing land directly, for example, at the Aweil Rice Scheme.⁵²

In the face of militarisation and marginalisation, these practical spaces for cooperation, autonomy and locally grounded legitimacy have a value beyond simple economics. Aid actors should now in turn listen to and learn from these women, to understand whether small investments by external actors could have a greater impact than forms of traditional programming, and how external support could play a role in supporting wider adoption.

One of the key findings of this report is that aid actors should make greater efforts to move beyond siloed, sector-specific, or country-based thinking. The economic, security and political dynamics that define the future of borderland communities span the frontier. In Kordofan, goods from Sudan are blocked from reaching RSF-held areas. Farming has been severely disrupted by the conflict, and the markets at Karasana, Babanusa, and Fula have all closed.⁵³ Kadugli faces a famine classification⁵⁴ as well as severe access restraints.⁵⁵ This matters, however, for South Sudanese communities, worsening hardship in Kordofan may lead to armed incursions, following decades old patterns. For example, peace committee members in Gok Machar, Aweil North, believe they are seeing signs of an increase in cross-border criminality by Sudanese who have lost out from the shift of trade eastwards after the RSF capture of Meiram (see section 3.3).⁵⁶ As

⁴⁷ E.g. Radio Tamazuj, 9 December 2025 - <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/iinside-the-armys-quiet-machinery-of-forced-recruitment>

⁴⁸ Interviews, Aweil Market and Maper West, 24.01.26

⁴⁹ Focus Group Discussion, Female Rice Workers, Akuem, 26.01.2026

⁵⁰ Interviews, Aweil Market and Maper West, 24.01.26

⁵¹ Kuac Media, Facebook, 8th March 2026

⁵² Interviews, Aweil Market and Maper West, 24.01.26

⁵³ Interview, Businessman from Keilak, Ruweng, 04.02.26

⁵⁴ Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, accessed, 13.04.26 <https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipcinfo-website/countries-in-focus-archive/issue-137/en/>

⁵⁵ OCHA, Kordofan States Humanitarian Access Snapshot, 29.05.26

⁵⁶ Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

one interviewee put it, *“we do ask what will happen if Kordofan and Darfur become drained and their soldiers become hungry; will they not cross as soldiers rather than civilians?”*⁵⁷

Aid agencies have a responsibility to face difficult questions and review their risk-appetite, whilst facing shrinking budgets and ever-increasing pressure to prioritise. Will the RSF establish a functioning administration and revive livelihoods in the areas it controls before hardship drives Sudanese individuals and groups to raid into South Sudan to meet basic needs? And how should humanitarian benefits and reduced risk of armed incursion into South Sudan be weighed against the legitimacy cross-border assistance might confer on the RSF, and the possibility of reprisals by the SAF?

Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), the pioneering UN-led consortium established in 1989, showed that cross-border humanitarian action in wartime can work. Indeed, a ‘corridor of tranquility’ was established connecting Wau in Bahr al Ghazal with Aweil in Northern Bahr al Ghazal and Babanusa in Kordofan. This required clear ground-rules, negotiated access and engagement with all relevant humanitarian actors. Today, tightly governed cross-border aid into RSF-held areas should be actively explored, with clear, conflict sensitive and impartial operating rules and easily reversible initiatives - designed in full awareness of how OLS also conferred status and legitimacy on military administrations and normalised armed group brokerage over aid.⁵⁸ In the context of squeezed humanitarian budgets and bureaucratic impediments to providing cross-border aid to RSF controlled areas, prioritising support to existing local structures that create the conditions for cross-border peaceful coexistence and the possibility of managing underlying causes of conflict may be a good starting point (see Section 3.3). For most agencies focused on delivering traditional aid, and working through legal states, this would require a complete change of thinking.

3.3 Shifts in Kordofan and informal and formal border management

“[Cross-border] Peace committees work because it is left to the elders to resolve their issues without political interference, and the other actors guide and support this”.⁵⁹

Peace committees and peace markets are rare examples of local legitimacy delivering peace and justice in an otherwise militarised environment. They emerged across the central borderlands in the 1990s because communities on both sides of conflict lines shared the same basic interests: protecting trade and peaceful seasonal migration and delivering the conditions for trade and livelihoods over hundreds of thousands of square kilometres. Rooted in customary practice, “cross-border” refers less to state frontiers than to the meeting points between communities and customary jurisdictions. These committees set rules for interaction, run joint courts, and coordinate with security actors to enforce decisions.

The Dinka Malual–Rizeigat committee oversees a network of sub-committees along the Aweil North-East Darfur boundary, while the Dinka Abiem–Misseriya committee plays a similar role between Aweil East and West Kordofan. In Abyei, the Ngok–Misseriya committee at Amiet is the main mechanism for managing

⁵⁷ Interview, National Security Officer, Wanyjok, 25.01.26

⁵⁸ The 'Agreement on Ground Rules' in South Sudan, ODI Global, 01.03.26

⁵⁹ Confidential interview, Analyst, 2 March 2026

inter-communal incidents. In Unity State and Ruweng, despite strong peace markets and cross-border military coordination - especially between SPLA and Misseriya Awlad Omran⁶⁰ - the history of mass displacement means committees were never so embedded and they have become dormant following the aid drawdown, having been reliant on basic support for the convening of dialogues and the transport required for day-to-day coordination.

Shifts in fighting in Kordofan have not yet challenged the basic arrangements, which demonstrate their embeddedness and community-derived power. The committees rely on a security guarantee to help implement their resolutions, and so far, both RSF and SSPDF are broadly playing their part. They handle everyday disputes over trade, sexual violence, crop damage, and cattle raiding. On 20 January 2026, for example, 24 cattle were raided from Majak Bol in South Sudan and later identified by the Assalaya peace committee in East Darfur. The RSF helped transfer the accused to Gok Machar for sentencing.⁶¹ On the South Sudan side, Major General Malong Agat has similarly used his division to enforce committee decisions, including deploying firewood patrols to reduce attacks on women and girls.⁶²

Like all civilian government, the committees rely on security actors to deliver their administration, but they remain as loci of community power. For example, RSF senior command installed its own military, police, and customs officers at key crossing points with NBSG but left management of inter-communal relations to the peace committees, represented on the Sudan side by the Rizeigat Awlad Hanan⁶³ and Misseriya Awlad Kamil⁶⁴ respectively - who both have strong interests in trade and seasonal migration. In fact, maintaining control of the committees was a red line for Misseriya traditional leaders in their negotiations with RSF as the latter attempted to co-opt them into their sphere of influence.⁶⁵ This degree of independence for community governance at the borders is therefore critical to understanding the contingent underlying conditions for RSF control in West Kordofan, and in turn the period of cross-border alliance. This will hold as long as the current arrangement meets local interests.

Like aid actors, peace committees can fall short. Senior members are alleged to use their positions and clan ties to profit from illicit trade, sometimes in partnership with prominent national figures.⁶⁶ They are overwhelmingly male and, since the withdrawal of external assistance, women's wider participation has fallen. These shortcomings are real, but it stands that the committee and joint court system provides a degree of community-led power and protection across tens of thousands of square kilometres that would otherwise be governed almost entirely at gunpoint. As prioritisation of shrinking aid budgets becomes more pressing, an analysis of the outcomes derived from the modest support required to accompany this critical peace infrastructure versus money spent on traditional aid delivery comes into focus.

Developments in Kordofan and South Sudan have introduced at least three threats to this community-led border management system. The first threat is interference; shown by attempts to capture committees in

⁶⁰ The Choice: Cooperation or Conflict Along the Sudan–South Sudan Border, Chris Milner, 2013

⁶¹ Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

⁶² Interview, National Security Officer, Wanyjok, 25.01.26

⁶³ Interview, Peace coordinator, Chairman of Malual Dinka peace committee, 27.01.26

⁶⁴ Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

⁶⁵ Interview, University Lecturer and local medical staff, Aweil, 23.01.26

⁶⁶ Interview, Assistant County RRC Coordinator, Gok Machar County HQ, 29.01.26

Aweil East and Aweil North in 2025. In Aweil East, Governor Simon Uber tried to remove the county peace coordinator, subordinate the peace committee to the State Ministry of Peace, and divert its tax revenues, but the committee refused, insisting it had always reported to the State Council of Ministers, outside the R-ARCSS framework. Although the governor and peacebuilding minister succeeded in siphoning the funds, they failed to control the committee itself. Instead, the incident demonstrated a degree of community power (though ironically, the incident led to closer cooperation with the military, further deepening military influence over borderland affairs).⁶⁷

In June 2025, an attempt to politicise the Dinka Malual committee in Gok Machar was also resisted. Aweil North Commissioner Deng Kuel Kuel suspended the committee's Secretary-General and replaced him with an influential cross-border businessman and political ally. The Secretary-General succeeded in winning reinstatement through an appeal to his cousin, the newly appointed SSPDF Chief of Defence Forces Dau Aturjong. When the Commissioner then installed his preferred candidate as Chairman, displacing Anguei Atak, a veteran of 22 years, the entire committee threatened resignation and lobbied the new governor. He promised to reverse the move, though he has not yet done so. The committee escalated its campaign and pressed for the Commissioner's removal, which may have contributed to Deng Kuel Kuel's forced resignation on 15 March 2026 over an aid-corruption scandal.⁶⁸

In East Darfur, there is a similar worrying pattern of interference; likely an RSF effort to take wrangle control from southern Rizeigat's top traditional leader, Nazir Mahammud Musa Madibo, who heads up the Rizeigat committee. The Awlad Gдания, Awlad Borma, and Awlad el Zeid, who migrate along the eastern routes through Abuuth, Rumaker, and Jaac, have long complained that the Rizeigat share of the 25 per cent tax revenue allocated to the committee at Gok Machar is monopolised by sub-clans using the central route.⁶⁹ In 2025, this dispute turned deadly when men from these three eastern-route sub-clans, led by Jamal el Zha'ar Hussein of the Borma, killed Chairman Mohamed Sadiq in Regebed market, in full view of the RSF barracks. Interviewees believed the killing was premeditated and could not have happened without at least RSF acceptance.⁷⁰ In response, Madibo appointed Mohamed Sadiq's younger brother, Abdalla Sadiq Saad, also from the Hayej, who has strong clan relations with Dinka around Gok Machar. The February peace conference in Nyamlell was postponed because the new chairman reportedly feared for his life and the committee remains fractured.⁷¹

The second threat is the growing entanglement of security actors in criminality, undermining the committee's ability to deliver results. Committee members in Gok Machar believe that youth and security personnel on both sides, having lost revenue from the shift in trade from Kiir Adem to Majok Yin Thiou following the fall of Meiram, then coordinated cross-border cattle raids.⁷² The involvement of security

⁶⁷ Interview, Youth Focus Group, Malou Aweer, 24.01.26

⁶⁸ Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

⁶⁹ Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

⁷⁰ Interview, confidential, Gok Machar, 01.02.26

⁷¹ Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

⁷² Ibid

personnel in criminality has made perpetrators harder to identify, and cases harder to resolve. The risk is that the committee is undermined, and criminality escalates into conflict.

The third threat is the withdrawal of external support which has *“massively reduced the capacity of [NBGS] peace committees to respond”*.⁷³ This has been particularly acute in Unity / Ruweng, there the peace committees have become dormant. This year, for example, even the Nuer, Dinka, Misseriya, and Fellata migration conference at Panyagei did not take place because UNDP and UNMISS were both unable to assist. Instead, on 21 February, a delegation of six Misseriya pastoralists met the Governor of Unity State to discuss access to Barkour in Rubkhona County, and chiefs and elders played little or no meaningful role.

The threats can be met. Over decades, USAID, UNMISS, and INGOs built support packages that helped these committees work: pre- and post-migration conferences, transport and communications for rapid response, dissemination of rules and procedures, veterinary services to incentivise peaceful migration, and coordination that increased transparency without undermining independence. Peace committees can also play a role in supporting community dialogue and co-planning in line with the recommendations in the South Sudan Refugee Response Plan 2026. However, INGOs not used to peacebuilding, will need to listen to communities, community-led structures and international organisations with expertise in peacebuilding to avoid unwittingly co-opting community-led structures to their agendas and ways of working. It is a tragedy that the withdrawal of modest support to peace committees has not been met by other funds. Whilst elites may come and go, peace committees offer a rare glimpse into local accountability, having long term community interests at heart. This is important during a period of short-term tactical alliance at the border, but helping to maintain their integrity against the twin threats of interference and spiralling insecurity will be invaluable in the years to come.

3.4 Deepening long-term cross-border and internal issues

“This relationship is temporary. Once the war with the SAF is settled, they [the Rizeigat and Misseriya] will reassert their claims to land. This is the only real game - the long-term game”.⁷⁴

In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, the Government of South Sudan continues to encourage South Sudanese returnees to settle in the contested Mile 14 area along the River Kiir/Bahr al Arab, while directing Sudanese refugees to sites further south, especially to Wedweil in Aweil West County. Conflict sensitive aid agencies must recognise this as a political act designed to strengthen South Sudan’s claim to disputed territory. Cross-border military alliances deliver strategic stability today, but this process is increasing the chances of a future border war in the longer term. Agencies have taken some mitigating steps - notably integrated-settlement planning, shared-services language, and host-community inclusion - but these measures have been insufficient to offset the wider politicisation of settlement, especially in Northern Bahr el Ghazal and the Unity–Ruweng borderlands.⁷⁵

⁷³ Interview, Peace coordinator, Aweil, 27.01.26

⁷⁴ Confidential interview, Analyst, 2 March 2026

⁷⁵ See, for example, UNHCR, South Sudan Country Refugee Response Plan at a Glance 2026, 13 January 2026

There is little binding the RSF to the SSPDF and SPLM-N beyond tactical convenience, and the current alignment of strategic and local interests is unlikely to last. For example, RSF senior leadership is deeply unhappy with SSPDF for incorporating SAF's armour into its arsenals following the fall of Heglig/Panthou - a development that almost brought the parties into battle.⁷⁶ Locally, the wars of the 1980s and 1990s devastated Dinka communities, many of whom were almost entirely displaced by SAF-aligned Baggara militias, and the political force of those memories remains overwhelming. Memories of betrayal still shape expectations which explains why communities continue to prepare for war even while sustaining trade and military cooperation today. In Abyei, for example, Titbaai currently cooperate with the Misseriya and the RSF in day-to-day security operations, but its deeper purpose remains preparation for a future confrontation with these very same actors.⁷⁷ External actors should not allow short term alliances, or the focus on technical delivery, obscure the real story of land contestation.

Accommodating seasonal nomads is essential to long term stability; indeed, it is really their militia that still control checkpoints on the Sudanese side. The war in Sudan, and South Sudan's response, is accelerating repopulation, land accumulation, agricultural expansion and fear of drone attacks, squeezing space for peaceful migration. If these transhumants cannot move peacefully through the borderlands, history suggests that some will attempt to do so by force. One peace committee member in Gok Machar said there are warning signs, *"there have already been lots of incidents and frustration from Rizeigat herders"*.⁷⁸ In Sudan, the war has weakened the bargaining power of transhumants - since they no longer control the trade on which South Sudanese communities depend. And in South Sudan, work by State Ministries of Animal Resources on a strategic plan around the seasonal migration has stalled. Rather than using the opportunity of greater leverage at the border to build transformative relationships, South Sudanese elites are instead pursuing short-term gains at the expense of longer-term coexistence, and aid agencies play a role in facilitating settlement patterns that exacerbate potential problems.

Aid agencies must also understand how settlement patterns also interact with internal conflict dynamics within South Sudan. For example, RAA and Unity State both claimed the refugee entry point around the Tor Pariang oil fields, including with a view to controlling potential international assistance. A cycle of conflict followed, culminating in the 2 March 2026 attack by Mayom youth on Abiemnom, which reportedly killed 178 people, including up to 90 children. UNMISS-backed commissioner forums and high-level inter-community visits have failed to halt the escalation, and the conflict has become strategically important to South Sudan's internal power struggles. For example, elders and military elites in Rubkona are actively debating strengthening their own militias. Rumours suggest that commanders from NBGS, Abyei, and Abiemnom now serving in Jonglei have discussed a coordinated response to any renewed aggression from Mayom, despite President Kiir's attempts to retain the loyalty of powerful Mayom generals. Any more

⁷⁶ Interview, Bentiu State Hospital CEO, 05.02.26

⁷⁷ Interview, confidential, Maper, 23.01.26

⁷⁸ Interview, Peace committee former chairman and member, Majak Bol, outside Gok Machar, 30.01.26

fragmented action could shift the balance of Dinka power within the SPLM, intensify succession politics, and create new fault lines in an already fracturing state.⁷⁹

At the local level, aid interventions interact with simmering frustrations between refugee communities, returnees, hosts and pastoralists. This risk becoming structural issues. Around Wedweil, low-level disputes over forest resources, water, and basic services have increased as the host Parek community say that the benefits they expected in return for giving land to refugees have not materialized.⁸⁰ Conditions at Wedweil are said to be so poor that many refugees choose to settle instead along the River Kiir/Bahr al Arab, travelling to the camp only on distribution days. This has heightened tensions, especially at Jaac, Jorbioc and War-cuei, precisely where UNICEF has been forced to close the very facilities that catered for the mix of communities.⁸¹ In Unity and Ruweng, refugees, returnees, hosts and migrating pastoralists are thrown together in Rotriak and Nurtikor, where markets are empty and most major agencies have withdrawn.⁸² The Director General of the Ministry of Local Government in Bentiu shares a general lesson, *“if aid supporting refugees is not shared with host communities, conflicts targeting refugees will arise in Unity and RAA”*.⁸³ Both aid interventions and the pattern of their withdrawal need to be more carefully co-designed with refugee, host and returnees communities, and based on solid, long term, understanding of conflict issues. Existing community structures - such as peace committees - could help coordinate dialogue.

Relations among refugees, and between refugees and host communities, can also be destabilised by sudden events far away and political baggage brought with them. Sudanese refugees and traders were attacked across the South Sudan borderlands after SAF assaults on Darfuri, Nuba, and South Sudanese in Wad Medani in 2025. Although peace committees and others helped contain the violence, the episode showed how quickly distant shocks can trigger local unrest, and how important early rapid mediation is. The recent expansion of conflict eastwards into Kordofan has recently shifted arrivals from predominantly Rizeigat to Misseriya community members, bringing their conflictual history back home into refugee settlement sites currently dominated by Rizeigat. In Ruweng, recent arrivals are largely SAF-leaning Misseriya from Heglig/Panthou and Panakuach. These are uneasy bedfellows with SPLM-N-leaning communities at Pamir and Jamjang - where they refuse to settle for fear of reprisals. All of this means, *“There is now an urgent need for dialogue in any place where refugees, returnees, host communities and pastoralists, are sharing borders”*.⁸⁴

Aid actors should expect all of these tensions to intensify. UNHCR’s 2026 South Sudan Response Plan projects a further 124,000 refugees in 2026, with a growing share likely to come from Kordofan.⁸⁵ RSF operations in Greater Kordofan are likely to focus on isolating El Obeid and pressuring Diling and Kadugli⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Rumours circulate that elements of the SSPDF from Northern Bahr el Ghazal may consider standing with Rubkhona - though for now Malong Agat has been careful to show loyalty to the Chief of Defence Staff and President Kiir by delivering new recruits, throwing his Division fully behind the war in Jonglei, and proffering personal favours.

⁸⁰ Interviews, Local contractors and Lab Technician, Aweil Market and Maper West, 24.01.2026

⁸¹ Interview, Local NGO staff, Gok Machar, 29.01.2026

⁸² Interview, Nyakuine Chal Gatjiek, Rotriak Payam, 06.02.2026

⁸³ Interview, Executive Director, Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, Bentiu, 05.02.2026

⁸⁴ Interview, Director General, Ministry of Local Government, Bentiu Town, 28.01.26

⁸⁵ UNHCR, South Sudan Country Refugee Response Plan At a Glance 2026, 13 January 2026

⁸⁶ Critical Threats, Sudan War Continues Despite Iran War, Peace Efforts: Africa File, March 19, 2026

and to follow established patterns of encirclement, worsening food and medical shortages, and deeper protection risks for civilians, especially women and children.⁸⁷ If the RSF moves from siege to assaults on Kordofani towns, arrivals may come in sudden surges rather than steady flows.⁸⁸ At the same time, ACAPS warns that intensified drone use is creating “*unpredictable front lines*”⁸⁹ making more dispersed movement into South Sudan likely, with more refugees living out of camps and in close proximity to returnees and host communities. For operations in South Sudan’s borderlands, this is likely to mean more arrivals with more acute humanitarian problems, complex protection needs and political baggage, just as cuts to transit support, food assistance, and essential services begin to bite and tensions over local resources are already rising.⁹⁰

Key implications and recommendations for aid actors

1. **A conflict sensitive approach requires agencies to move beyond country-based analysis, silo’ed sector thinking, or single camp dynamics to treat the borderlands as a single system.**
 - Aid agencies must undertake and respond to meaningful cross-border conflict analysis. Conflict sensitive checklists must ensure cross-border and long-term structural dynamics guide planning. This requires a fundamental change in thinking, from short term country- or camp-based technical delivery, to ensuring aid interventions take into account long-term structural issues such as land contestation, transhumance and conflict memory.
 - Aid agencies without experience in conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding need to learn from peacebuilders who specialise in understanding and interacting with conflict systems, including across internal and international borders; convening a simple dialogue and coordination mechanism, or series of consultations, to help bridge these two sectors would be a welcome initiative, simple to deliver and urgently required.
 - Aid agencies should exploit existing coordination mechanisms to advocate, and enlighten donors and authorities, that conflict sensitivity requires a framework that spans the borderland and escapes the country-silo; and that the necessary risks must be taken to explore negotiations with all parties around cross-border aid and enhanced cross-border coordination.
 - In the context of aid withdrawal, analysis and new methods are required to compare investment in mutual aid initiatives such as supporting VSLA uptake, or locally-led community governance structures, against traditional aid.
 - Given expected developments in Sudan, operational planning must be checked against both greater flexibility in the short-term and long-term horizons.

2. **Refugee and returnee support needs conflict sensitivity built in at all stages, especially around land and land use.**
 - Rigorous conflict and gender-sensitive analysis is needed to understand existing and potential tensions and conflict drivers around land and land use. This includes host-

⁸⁷ Interview, Aid Planner, Confidential, Juba, 25.3.2026

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ ACAPS, Sudan: Humanitarian access developments (October 2024–March 2025)

⁹⁰ For example, IOM Sounds Alarm Over Suspension of Life-Saving Transport in South Sudan

community-refugee-returnee dynamics, seasonal grazing patterns and political incentives, to ensure that interventions do not feed long term conflict systems. The best way to do this is to co-produce analysis and planning in an inclusive process of dialogue with all communities and put land at its heart, including to understand and address barriers that women and girls face in gaining safe access to land, services, water, fuel, and markets.

- However, facilitating such dialogue should be recognised as a specialist skill, requiring experience in peacebuilding and mediation, and appropriate partnerships with external peacebuilders or existing local mechanisms should be sought to deliver it.
- Aid actors must integrate conflict and gender-sensitivity and joint-planning more rigorously in their response to expected sudden, dispersed, and protection-intensive movements into South Sudan due to drone warfare and the likely direction of RSF's campaign in Kordofan. Future interventions should be reversible in case of unforeseen consequences or unwarranted legitimacy conferred, and existing interventions such as support to settlement patterns that drive conflict dynamics should be re-designed.
- Aid withdrawal must also follow a similar conflict-sensitive planning process, best achieved through co-designing the sequencing and location of draw-downs with all communities, prioritising the use of some funds to mitigate harm such as through appropriate support to share onwards promising mutual aid initiatives such as VSLA's to areas they have not yet reached.
- Senior managers should continue to build conflict sensitive skills and build conflict sensitive processes into daily culture and workflows. This is critical if they and their staff and partners are able to navigate the complexities of working and delivering aid in the borderlands.

3. Reinvest in cross border peaceful coexistence infrastructure through careful accompaniment

- Investing in existing cross-border conflict management is one of the most efficient ways to improve security and livelihoods for hundreds of thousands of people across vast areas. Aid withdrawal is a major threat to rare community-structures with local legitimacy in an otherwise heavily militarised environment.
- Donors and agencies can leverage limited resources by ensuring consortium funding includes allocations to accompany locally-led border management mechanisms to cover the gap from aid withdrawal. This will help ensure they can continue to operate, maintain their independence, and meet new threats of interference, spiralling insecurity and deepening structural issues in the years ahead. A consortium could begin by conducting an analysis of the benefits and risks of investing in accompaniment for community-led border management structures versus traditional aid delivery.
- This kind of peacebuilding work is specialist and appropriate partners should be required to participate, and bring to bear the learnings from decades of experience by external actors such as USAID, UNMISS, and peacebuilding INGOs.
- The South Sudan Country Refugee Response Plan 2026 demands mediation and dialogue mechanisms alongside aid programs. This is welcome and should be honoured by working with locally-led structures that already exist. Doing so will help manage insecurity, support

joint planning, guard against elite capture, strengthen women's voices in decision-making, improve communication of agreements, and widen community participation in oversight and evaluation.

4. **Peaceful transhumance of Sudanese seasonal nomads is a core conflict sensitivity issue.**

- Transhumance is a lynchpin of stability for borderland communities, not a problem to be contained. Any strategy of engagement at the borderlands that does not integrate this reality will fail to be conflict sensitive, including for patterns of support to refugees and returnees, service provision, and aid withdrawal.
- Cross-border military alliances are short term and tactical, and elites may come and go. But locally-led mechanisms such as the peace committee system have long-term community interests built in. At a minimum, support to pre-migration, dissemination of agreements, and post-migration meetings should be prioritised, promoting women's participation and involving refugee, returnee and host communities as appropriate. Beyond this, communities can advise through dialogues how to manage issues such as water, joint service provision, veterinary services and so on.

2. **Conclusion**

The borderlands can no longer be approached through siloed country frameworks or technical delivery systems. Humanitarian needs and conflict dynamics in Sudan and South Sudan are too closely connected and aid decisions on one side of the border increasingly shape risks and incentives on the other. Agencies therefore need to analyse and plan with the whole frontier in view, and for the long term.

Aid actors must understand that the real challenges are long term and transformative; dealing with the history of conflict, land claims and land-use are the primary questions that will shape the future for borderland communities. Locally-led cross-border management mechanisms can deliver far-reaching protection and livelihood benefits, together with soft borders that build trust and accommodate transhumance as both a lynchpin of peace and efficient livelihood strategy. Interventions that support politicised patterns of settlement are reinforcing internal and cross-border tensions, and set the scene for future war. Conflict-sensitive aid seeks to maximise positive effects and peacebuilding opportunities while minimising harm. To do this, aid planners must look these issues squarely in the face when choosing how to allocate scarce resources.

Military alliances at the border are an elite bargain harming communities now and laying foundations for future conflict, but they represent a rare window in which to build cross-border networks for mutual support and peace. These are critical today and will be more so when short term cross-border alliances fray under the weight of deepening conflict issues. If this opportunity is missed, humanitarian actors may find themselves responding not only to deeper needs, but also to a new cycle of conflict about which the aid sector will have to ask itself even more searching questions.