



# When aid disappears: Lessons from South Sudanese mutual aid

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## Executive summary

The shrinking of the externally-dominated humanitarian aid sector provides an opportunity for assessing community-led responses, which have sustained crisis and conflict-affected communities over the years as humanitarian aid dwindles. There is limited documentation of such initiatives in South Sudan, therefore, the main objective of this research was to assess the presence of mutual aid in the country. Mutual aid is defined in this research in terms of its common characteristics that include volunteerism, spontaneity, flexibility, the sharing of resources, reciprocity and solidarity, with approaches that are less structured, demand-driven and community-led. Based on hybrid research methods, this report reveals a robust, deeply rooted ecosystem of community-led responses, which not only provide the first line of response to crises but also serve as one of the most important elements of the humanitarian crisis response chain, with women and youth playing prominent roles. Examples of these community-led responses are related to (i) flood and environmental crises mitigation, (ii) food security and resource-sharing mechanisms, (iii) peacebuilding, social cohesion and conflict mitigation efforts, (iv) local women- and youth-led resilience community structures, (v) traditional justice, cultural safety nets and indigenous institutions and (vi) community-based emergency rescue and humanitarian support. One key recommendation to come out of this research is for the South Sudan government to adopt national policy that acknowledges and recognises these mutual aid initiatives, as well as providing policy guidance to formal aid actors to forge supportive partnerships with mutual aid groups.

### *Key findings*

The research data was generated through hybrid research methods including a desk-based literature review and field research. The field research consisted of: (i) checklist-guided key informant interviews (KIIs); (ii) semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs); (iii) ethnographic methods; and (iv) an online self-administered short survey.

An analysis of the data highlighted some key findings:

***Presence of mutual aid:*** The overwhelming majority of research participants confirmed that communities in South Sudan carry out their own local initiatives to address crises. These community-led responses to crises are seen as integral elements of traditional social systems, traditional governance and kinship systems across various communities of South Sudan.

***Effectiveness of mutual aid:*** Despite the difficulty in measuring the effectiveness of mutual aid, the vast majority of participants recognised its success. They considered mutual aid as timely, effective, highly flexible and adaptive, emphasising that local responders filled many gaps before external or formal actors arrived on the scene. Local responders were also said to use existing social networks and traditional governance structures to coordinate actions efficiently.

***Foundational pillars of mutual aid:*** Many research participants highlighted that community-led responses are built on a web of interrelated foundational pillars such as sharing and mobilising community resources, volunteerism, and traditional social safety nets and solidarity. The mobilisation and sharing of community resources was recognised by participants as the most important means for advancing and sustaining community-led responses. In addition, participants highlighted Indigenous knowledge as a key pillar of mutual aid, with collective action at the core of their resilience and social capital.

**First responders to crises:** Participants acknowledged that most members of the community take part in community-led responses, yet have different views about the first responders. The type of crisis determines who the first responders are, with each member of the community playing a role. Despite the divergent views on the first responders to crises, women and youth are commonly considered to play a prominent role.

**Challenges facing mutual aid:** Despite its success, most participants recognised that there are a number of challenges facing mutual aid, such as resource constraints, lack of support and recognition, exclusion of marginalised groups, inadequate coverage and poor coordination. The erosion of communities' resource base – as a result of protracted crises, persistent violent conflicts and extreme climate conditions – remains mutual aid's biggest challenge.

**Alignment with formal aid:** The participants had mixed perspectives on the alignment of mutual aid with formal aid provided by national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations agencies, and other international organizations. While the majority of participants did not believe an alignment is possible, a quarter of people who took part in the online survey believe that it is. One of the challenges that participants identified as hindering this alignment is the distinct nature of the two systems: mutual aid is non-hierarchical, flexible and guided by solidarity, while formal aid is hierarchical, bureaucratic and guided by charity. Despite these challenges, the unique characteristics of mutual aid could provide a bridge between formal aid and communities, and could strengthen the legitimacy of formal aid.

**Mutual aid when foreign aid disappears:** The decline in foreign aid raises the question of whether mutual aid can survive in an environment that is accustomed to foreign aid. The majority of people who took part in the online survey held the view that mutual aid will continue even without foreign aid; this optimism was shared by participants from the four research communities and by key informants from other communities, emphasising their belief that mutual aid would continue but with both opportunities and challenges. However, approximately 20 percent of survey participants were pessimistic about the continuity of mutual aid without foreign aid.

### *Key recommendations*

The analysis of this research highlighted a number of recommendations for advancing and strengthening mutual aid in South Sudan:

**More evidence:** Although this research has provided some evidence of the presence of mutual aid, more evidence is needed to map and document the lessons of mutual aid in South Sudan. This would expedite and strengthen the growing momentum to support mutual aid in the country.

**Policy recognition:** Based on evidence from this research of the positive role of mutual aid, the government of South Sudan should adopt relevant policies and legislation that recognise mutual aid as an important component of the humanitarian crisis response chain. This official recognition will provide policy and institutional guidance for aid actors operating in South Sudan, to support mutual aid and forge supportive partnerships.

**Women-led responses and youth integration:** This research shows that women and youth play prominent roles in mutual aid. Women are seen as strong, neutral and fair informal leaders in humanitarian crises, and prioritising support to women-led initiatives will enhance their critical leadership during crises. The

integration of the age-set system into constructive national service, disaster response and peacebuilding programmes will provide a non-militarised pathway for realising the positive potential of young people.

***Earmarking resources for mutual aid:*** This research highlights how resource constraint is the biggest challenge facing mutual aid, particularly in protracted crises. One possible option is to support and encourage the government to assume its mandated disaster response by earmarking resources for emergencies and crises and to prioritise funding mutual aid actors as the first responders to crises. Another practical tool for supporting community-led responses is the provision of microgrants for mutual aid initiatives, as this will mark the explicit and gradual transfer of power from formal aid actors to locally-led mutual aid groups in crisis-affected communities.

***Working with the grain:*** Despite the growing criticism of localisation, there are good lessons that can be learnt for advancing the mutual aid agenda in South Sudan, where this paper concentrated. There are a number of initiatives adopted in South Sudan to promote and operationalise localisation that could act as entry points for strengthening mutual aid. This could help shift localisation from top-down ‘charity’ models to ‘bottom-up’ ‘solidarity’ models, allowing local actors to set the agenda and define their own needs, and to build supportive partnerships with formal aid actors.

***Alignment with formal aid:*** The distinct structures of mutual aid and formal aid provide opportunities for forging a balanced, ‘win-win’ alignment of both forms of aid. This alignment should advance a supportive partnership, recognising local, informal networks as legitimate, independent humanitarian actors, rather than formal aid actors simply absorbing or supplanting them. One of the models for strengthening this alignment in South Sudan is a formal approach known as ‘supporting community-led responses’, where external donors (international NGOs) provide flexible, unearmarked microgrants and training and capacity development for mutual aid groups, without requiring them to change their – usually non-hierarchical – structure.

***Do no harm:*** The reciprocal nature of mutual aid might undermine its positive characteristics and could also risk excluding some vulnerable community members, such as poorer people, people with disabilities, internally displaced people and refugees. About 10 percent of participants recognised the exclusion of some marginalised groups as one of the limitations of mutual aid. This calls for formal aid actors, including the state, to go beyond ‘do no harm’ by prioritising conflict sensitivity and contributing to peace when supporting mutual aid.

## I. Introduction and background

The humanitarian sector faces a period of profound transition. The aid system that has long been dominated by external funding and leadership has become increasingly fragile, with a sharp contraction in international assistance since 2024. The sector’s drastic and erratic transition has manifested clearly in South Sudan – one of the largest per-capita recipients of foreign aid globally. In 2024, more than one in three people in South Sudan received some form of emergency food assistance, which accounts for roughly

a quarter of gross national income.<sup>1</sup> It is argued that humanitarian assistance has been not only a lifeline in South Sudan but also an alternative to state authority.<sup>2</sup>

The massive reductions in aid funding are having severe consequences for vulnerable people's access to support,<sup>3</sup> and this is also occurring at a time when South Sudan is facing escalating political tensions, severe food insecurity, economic crisis and worsening climatic conditions. However, this decline in international aid also presents a strategic opportunity to reimagine aid not as a pipeline of external charity but as a system of solidarity, dignity and shared responsibility.<sup>4</sup> The dominance of internationally centred perspectives and narratives around aid dependency has tended to obscure locally-led responses to crisis. As international aid contributions continue to shrink, it is important to fully understand these locally-owned responses, to inform more transformative and long-term thinking of what will be left behind as the vast majority of international aid disappears. The fragility of the externally-dominated aid sector has renewed soul searching for traditional mutual aid support and solidarity systems that sustain communities through times of political upheaval, extreme weather conditions, and man-made and natural disasters.

This research has been commissioned to understand and document the experiences and lessons from South Sudanese mutual aid that existed before and continue in parallel of external aid. There is limited documentation of mutual aid and community-led responses in South Sudan, and this research aims to contribute to narrowing this knowledge gap by:

- mapping and presenting some examples of mutual aid practices during crises;
- assessing the level of effectiveness of some of these mutual aid practices;
- exploring some of the challenges facing mutual aid;
- providing key recommendations for advancing mutual aid for future crises.

This report has the following structure: this introduction and background section is followed by a definition of the term 'mutual aid' and an outline of the research methodology in section II. The status of mutual aid is briefly discussed in section III, followed by the presentation and discussion of the main findings in section IV. The key recommendations for advancing mutual aid are presented in section V, and conclusions in section VI.

## II. Definition of mutual aid and methodology

### *What is mutual aid?*

The term 'mutual aid' is very broad, with no commonly agreed definition; many studies provide their own definitions (see Table 1). On the basis of these definitions, mutual aid is defined in this research in terms of its common characteristics that include volunteerism, spontaneity, flexibility, the sharing of resources,

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell, I and Huges, S. (2025). Which countries are most exposed to US Aid cuts and what other providers can? <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/which-countries-are-most-exposed-us-aid-cuts-and-what-other-providers-can-do>

<sup>2</sup> Falzetta, J. (2025). Aid cuts push South Sudan into uncharted territory. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/04/29/aid-cuts-south-sudan-uncharted-territory>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Thibault, S. (2025). Moving Beyond Aid: Transforming global development for long-term prosperity: <https://globalgovernancereimagined.com/2025/08/25/moving-beyond-aid/#:~:text=The%20current%20retrenchment%20of%20aid,of%20public%20and%20private%20finance.>

reciprocity and solidarity, with approaches that are less structured, demand-driven and community-led. The term mutual aid is used interchangeably in this research with other terms, such as community-led responses, informal responses, locally-led responses and collective action during a humanitarian crisis.

**Table 1: The definition of mutual aid**

Study	Definition of mutual aid	Main characteristics
Mendez V (2022) <sup>5</sup>	Cooperating to serve community members, by creating networks of care and generosity to meet the immediate needs of a community and its members.	Cooperating, networks of care and generosity.
Carstensen N, Mudhar M, Munksgaard F (2021) <sup>6</sup>	Short-hand for a huge variation of actions that could also be described as self-help, citizen- or community-led response, neighbour help, collective action and local agency.	Self-help, citizen- or community-led response, neighbour help, collective action and local agency.
Posada A, Ahimbisibwe L (2025) <sup>7</sup>	Encompassing the self-forming, self-organised and voluntary actions of individuals, families and communities who support one another during crises; these actions either arise spontaneously or emerge in response to a crisis.	Self-forming, self-organised, voluntary actions, spontaneity, supporting one another, and emerging in response to a crisis.
Humanitarian Advisory Group (2025) <sup>8</sup>	A community response to crisis through community-led procurement, rapid volunteer mobilisation, or culturally grounded practices of coping and care.	Community responses to crises, mutual aid, rapid volunteer mobilisation, and culturally grounded practices of coping and care.
	The most organic and spontaneous form of community-led response using the resources of the people affected and based on informal coordination. It is led by self-help groups defined by their non-hierarchical, reciprocal nature.	Organic, spontaneous, community-led response, people's own resources, informal coordination, self-help groups, non-hierarchical and reciprocal.
CMI (2023) <sup>9</sup>	The voluntary and reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit; an act of solidarity, not charity. It is driven by community members with limited bureaucracy.	Voluntary, reciprocal, exchange of resources and services, mutual benefit, solidarity, driven by community

<sup>5</sup> Mendez, V. (2022). What Is Mutual Aid, And How Can It Transform Our World? <https://www.globalgiving.org/learn/what-is-mutual-aid>

<sup>6</sup> Carstensen, N., Mudhar, M., and Munksgaard, F. (2021). 'Let communities do their work': the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8653332/pdf/DISA-45-S146.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Posada, A. and Ahimbisibwe, L. (2025). Supporting Mutual Aid: What the evidence tells us.

[https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP\\_Exec\\_summary\\_supporting\\_mutual\\_aid\\_101225.pdf](https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP_Exec_summary_supporting_mutual_aid_101225.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group. (2025). Community driving change: Articulating outcomes and impacts of community-led response. <https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/communities-driving-change-articulating-outcomes-and-impacts-of-community-led-response/>

<sup>9</sup> CMI (2023). Mutual aid & rethinking international humanitarian engagement in Sudan. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/8866-mutual-aid-rethinking-international-humanitarian-engagement-in-sudan#:~:text=Mutual%20aid%20is%20defined%20as,community%20members%20with%20limited%20bureaucracy.>

		members, and limited bureaucracy.
This research	Defined in terms of its common characteristics that include volunteerism, spontaneity, flexibility, the sharing of resources, reciprocity and solidarity, with approaches that are less structured, demand-driven and community-led.	Volunteerism, spontaneity, less-structured, flexibility, sharing of resources, demand-driven, reciprocity, solidarity, and led by community members.

*Methodology*

The research used hybrid research approaches, including a desk-based literature review of studies related to mutual aid and field research. The field research consisted of: (i) checklist-guided key informant interviews (KIIs); (ii) semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs); (iii) ethnographic methods; and (iv) an online self-administered short survey. The research was conducted between December 2025 and February 2026 and covered four communities: Acholi and Ma’di in Magwi County in Eastern Equatoria State, Agar Dinka in Rumbek East County, and Jur Bele in Wulu County in Lakes State.<sup>10</sup> The total number of women participants was 101, compared with 135 men participants. The participants represented a wide range of stakeholders, including chiefs, youth, women, faith-based leaders, local authorities, traders, beneficiary households who benefited from the mutual aid, formal aid actors and community-based organisations. Besides the KIIs from the four research communities, 15 KIIs from other communities were conducted through WhatsApp calls, with written responses to some guiding questions on mutual aid (see Annex 3).

The research was led by a senior researcher and two researchers, who all have a wealth of research experience in humanitarian assistance in the protracted crisis environment of South Sudan, and who are immersed directly or indirectly in observing the coping strategies adopted by households and communities during prolonged conflicts. The research tools were developed with feedback from team members of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, and the research team received orientation on some basic security and confidentiality protocols.

The online voluntarily self-administered survey was open to diverse stakeholders and a total of 96 participants filled out the questionnaire, including national NGOs (33), international NGOs (25), civil society organisations (CSOs) (5), and others such as academia, think tanks, private sector and government officials (33) (see profile details of participants in Annex 2). The number of women participants was 12, and there were 84 men participants. The low number of women participants could be attributed to the low employment of women in the humanitarian sector. More than 40 per cent of respondents had more than ten years’ experience in humanitarian work in South Sudan. The participants were reasonably distributed across the three regions of South Sudan: Bahr el Ghazal (22), Equatoria (18) and Upper Nile (13).

Some challenges encountered during the research fieldwork included the resumption of road ambushes and intercommunal violent conflicts in Lakes State, which surged after the replacement of General Rin Tueny, the former governor of the state, who was removed from his position, despite his success in stabilising security in Lakes State following his appointment in 2021. In Magwi County in Eastern Equatoria State, challenges faced included logistical constraints, language barriers, expectation of

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<sup>10</sup> The total number of participants who participated in KIIs and FGDs is 236 respondents, with 99 participants from Agar Dinka (60) and Jur Bele (39) communities in Lakes State and 137 participants from Acholi (88) and Ma’di (49) communities in Eastern Equatoria state (see details in Annex 1).

assistance as some respondents associated data collection with immediate aid distribution, and limited availability of participants – as many participants were engaged in farming and other livelihood activities and cultural sensitivities and hierarchical social norms also limited active participation.

One caveat is that this research is a modest attempt to document examples of mutual aid practices and community-led responses, and does not claim or aspire to be representative of the community-led responses of many diverse communities across South Sudan. As the research relied on the self-reporting of participants, the findings might also suffer from a risk of bias. In addition, the research does not attempt to make generalisations about mutual aid, as it is context specific, varies across communities, is embedded in traditional social systems, and has been pursued in different shocks and crises.

### III. The status of mutual aid

The unprecedented crisis facing the humanitarian system has renewed debate about the efficacy of externally-led humanitarian interventions and whether they are sustainable. The alarming trends of dwindling aid and the erosion of global solidarity, as well as rising needs, clearly show that the current humanitarian system cannot hold. As a result, there has been a call for a resetting of the humanitarian system, to be people-centred and to meet the needs of affected communities.<sup>11</sup> There is also a call for formal aid actors to work closely with local actors by shifting power and building equitable partnerships as an efficient way to meet rising humanitarian needs.<sup>12</sup> Despite years of high-level commitments, the aid sector's localisation agenda is not delivering; it instead accentuates the international dominance of the humanitarian system.<sup>13</sup>

The failure of international aid providers to share power with local actors is attributed to the 'ego-system' and the dominant belief that the humanitarian system needs to be organised around international donors.<sup>14</sup> This calls for donors to advocate for a shift from a centralised, self-perpetuating and internationally-led aid ego-system to an ecosystem that is more legitimate, locally-led, equitable and politically grounded. There is growing demand for a change in the humanitarian business model and to adopt locally-led action in the humanitarian sector.<sup>15</sup> Unlike localisation, locally-led action enables local actors to directly drive resourcing and scaling, outside the orbit of current international humanitarian ego-systems. Others, such as Ground Truth Solutions, call for building a humanitarian response that is agile and adaptive to a more violent world, able to reach the most vulnerable by moving from a supply-driven to a demand-driven humanitarian response.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ground Truth Solutions (2025). What crisis affected communities need from a humanitarian reset. [https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/GTS\\_Globalanalysisreport\\_March2025\\_EN.pdf](https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/GTS_Globalanalysisreport_March2025_EN.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> ALNAP (2025b): Explaining Localization and Locally-led Action. [https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP\\_Explain\\_Localisation\\_Briefing\\_072025.pdf](https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP_Explain_Localisation_Briefing_072025.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Khoury, R. and Scott, E. (2024). Localisation doesn't shift power. It deepens international dominance. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2024/07/23/localisation-doesnt-shift-power-it-deepens-international-dominance>

<sup>14</sup> ODI Advisory Panel on the Future of Humanitarian Action. (2025). From 'ego-systems' to 'eco-systems': renewing humanitarian action. <https://odi.org/en/publications/from-ego-systems-to-ecosystems-renewing-humanitarian-action/>

<sup>15</sup> ALNAP (2025b): Explaining Localization and Locally-led Action. [https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP\\_Explain\\_Localisation\\_Briefing\\_072025.pdf](https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP_Explain_Localisation_Briefing_072025.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Ground Truth Solutions (2025). What crisis affected communities need from a humanitarian reset. [https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/GTS\\_Globalanalysisreport\\_March2025\\_EN.pdf](https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/GTS_Globalanalysisreport_March2025_EN.pdf)

There is growing recognition that communities are the first responders to crises, mobilising their own resources to spontaneously respond and to continue responding even without external interventions. However, the role of community-led responses is largely under-recognised, under-documented and structurally undervalued in the humanitarian system.<sup>17</sup> There is promising evidence that shows how external support can amplify the core strengths of mutual aid.<sup>18</sup> Another study reveals how communities generate their own solutions and benefits through self-mobilisation, local data and ownership, leading to lasting, context-specific change.<sup>19</sup> However, limited evidence was observed in some areas of impact, such as quality of response, conflict sensitivity, and reach or access in hard-to-reach areas.

One interesting study used the case of the COVID-19 pandemic to assess the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in this crisis.<sup>20</sup> The research finds that despite wide variations in COVID-19 responses across contexts, mutual aid, self-help and other spontaneous community measures were vital to the early response to COVID-19 globally, as they are characterised by high levels of volunteerism, spontaneous mobilisation and sharing of locally available resources. The research also shows that citizen- and community-led groups leverage the collective power of all members of society, with women and youth at the forefront of many mutual aid initiatives. However, the study also documents some of the limitations of mutual aid in terms of scope, scale, and sustainability and volunteerism, particularly in the face of a protracted emergency and dwindling resources.

Although South Sudan is highly susceptible to humanitarian crises, there is limited documentation of mutual aid and locally-led responses. The available literature and an extensive search of articles published by media outlets, NGOs and academics indicate the dearth or limited research on and documentation of South Sudanese mutual aid practices and community-led responses during crises. This research aims to contribute to narrowing this knowledge gap.

Despite the limited documentation of mutual aid in South Sudan, some studies do exist:

- **Social capital:** Indicates how social capital – in terms of trust, reciprocity and mutual support – was strengthened amid civil war.<sup>21</sup>
- **Hunger courts:** Shows the widespread use of hunger courts in famine-prone South Sudan and their role in legally enforcing the traditional social safety networks that support the most vulnerable people during crises.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group. (2025). Community driving change: Articulating outcomes and impacts of community-led response. <https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/communities-driving-change-articulating-outcomes-and-impacts-of-community-led-response/>

<sup>18</sup> Posada, A. and Ahimbisibwe, L. (2025). Supporting Mutual Aid: What the evidence tells us.

[https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP\\_Exec\\_summary\\_supporting\\_mutual\\_aid\\_101225.pdf](https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP_Exec_summary_supporting_mutual_aid_101225.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group. (2025). Community driving change: Articulating outcomes and impacts of community-led response. <https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/communities-driving-change-articulating-outcomes-and-impacts-of-community-led-response/>

<sup>20</sup> Carstensen, N., Mudhar, M., and Munksgaard, F. (2021). 'Let communities do their work': the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8653332/pdf/DISA-45-S146.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Deng, L. (2010). Social Capital and Civil War: The Dinka Communities in Sudan's Civil War.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228286299\\_Social\\_Capital\\_and\\_Civil\\_War\\_The\\_Dinka\\_Communities\\_in\\_Sudan's\\_Civil\\_War](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228286299_Social_Capital_and_Civil_War_The_Dinka_Communities_in_Sudan's_Civil_War)

<sup>22</sup> Pendle, N. (2023). Law and Famine: Learning from the Hunger Courts in South Sudan. Hunger Courts are courts formed by chiefs during famine to provide support to the vulnerable individuals and households.

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371151062\\_Law\\_and\\_Famine\\_Learning\\_from\\_the\\_Hunger\\_Courts\\_in\\_South\\_Sudan](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371151062_Law_and_Famine_Learning_from_the_Hunger_Courts_in_South_Sudan)

- **Localisation:** Documents an increase in funding to local and national actors. This study helped to boost interest in the localisation agenda in South Sudan. It also recognises the presence of major challenges, including power dynamics that hinder the implementation of more equitable partnership arrangements between international and national aid actors.<sup>23</sup>
- **South Sudanese NGOs:** Offers vital insights beyond typical international aid narratives, by underscoring the crucial role played by local South Sudanese NGOs – as frontline responders with local knowledge and legitimacy – in delivering aid during decades of conflict.<sup>24</sup>
- **Community-based social protection mechanisms:** Documents the presence of community-based social protection mechanisms, which support vulnerable groups in different communities.<sup>25</sup>
- **Social connectedness:** Provides an in-depth analysis of the role of social connectedness among households in the contexts of protracted conflicts and displacement, as part of their social networks and support systems that help households to cope and recover during crises.<sup>26</sup>
- **Localisation and conflict sensitivity:** Documents some lessons on conflict-sensitive localisation.<sup>27</sup>

## IV. The main findings

Analysis of the research data highlighted some key findings:

### 1. Major crises

The people of South Sudan have been exposed to intricate and multifaceted crises and shocks that affect their lives and livelihoods. Overall, the participants in this research identified the principal crises as communal tensions and violence, extreme weather conditions such as floods or drought, and food insecurity and famine. The participants from the four research communities in Lakes and Eastern Equatoria states considered the extreme weather conditions to be the most significant crisis, which has compounded the other crises. A woman from Magwi County described this as *“A time when we lost both our crops and our peace, years that pushed many families back to zero and a period that tested our unity and survival”*.<sup>28</sup> Almost half (48 per cent) of participants in the online survey considered that the biggest crisis faced was all of these crises combined, followed by food insecurity (18 per cent), extreme weather conditions (17 per cent), and communal tensions and violence (11 per cent) (see Annex 4).

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<sup>23</sup> Willitts-King et al. (2017). “Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors.” <https://media.odi.org/documents/12459.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Leben Moro, Naomi Pendle, Alice Robinson, and Lydia Tanner. 2020. “Localizing Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict: Lessons Learnt from the Histories and Creativity of South Sudanese NGOs.” London School of Economics and Political Science. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/africa/assets/Documents/Policy-documents/South-Sudan-Policy-Report.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> CSRF (2025). Enhancing community-based social protection for sustainable use of aid in South Sudan: Guidance for conflict and context sensitive aid. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/enhancing-community-based-social-protection-sustainable-use-aid-south-sudan-guidance-conflict-and-context-sensitive-aid-february-2025>

<sup>26</sup> Kim, Jeeyon, Alex Humphrey, Anastasia Marshak, Nyuon Moses Gathuoy, Vaidehi Krishnan. 2020. “The Currency of Connections: Why Do Social Connections Matter for Household Resilience in South Sudan?” Washington, D.C.: Mercy Corps.

<sup>27</sup> Alice Robinson (2021). Localisation and conflict sensitivity: Lessons on good practice from South Sudan Alice Robinson Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) Better Aid Forum briefing paper.

<sup>28</sup> A woman participant in FGD, Magawi, February 2026.

## 2. Mutual aid embedded in traditional social systems

Based on the feedback from various participants in this research, community-led responses during crises are seen as integral parts of overall traditional social systems, traditional governance and kinship systems. As observed by one of the leading South Sudanese scholars in anthropology, the social system acts as the first line of defence, absorbing orphans, widows and displaced families into the households of relatives, who are held culturally and morally accountable for their survival.<sup>29</sup> One key informant from Acholi emphasised this interlinkage between mutual aid and traditional systems: “*Mutual aid is deeply rooted in our traditional governance and kinship systems*”.<sup>30</sup> Another key informant from Bor remarked that “*The foundation of Dinka Bor society lies in its clan-based kinship structure, known as Thiëën, which promotes profound solidarity, where extended family obligations function as a primary form of social insurance*”.<sup>31</sup> This intricate link between community-led responses and traditional social systems is observed in many communities of South Sudan (see Table 2, with more details in Annex 5).

**Table 2: Examples of traditional systems related to mutual aid**

Community	Traditional system
Lotuka (Lotuho)	The age-set system ( <i>Monyomiji</i> )
Dinka (Jieng)	Social values and norms that govern the way of life ( <i>Cieng and Dheeng</i> )
Kuku (Bari speaking group)	Traditional authorities ( <i>Mede, Köji, Gwoke, Paranet, Jur, Keri</i> )
Azande	Social systems ( <i>sino raka or sino aboro</i> )
Shulluk (Chollo)	Traditional system of governance ( <i>Kwong Chollo</i> )
Nuer (Naath)	The Naath leadership system (Kuäärmuḁḁn) that consists of (i) the leopard-skin chief or earthy custodian whose responsibilities include dispute settlement, (ii) (wutyḁḁk), who is responsible for animal husbandry and the care of livestock, (iii) (kuäärthḁaay), who deals with environmental matters, including water-related diseases; and (iv) kuäärtan, the defender who protects people during times of conflict and in everyday security matters.
Murle	Social institutions of the age-sets ( <i>buul</i> ), the drumships ( <i>kidoḁwa</i> ), clans ( <i>boor</i> ) and the spiritual authority of the red chiefs ( <i>alat ci meriik</i> ) <sup>32</sup>
Acholi	Traditional leadership structures ( <i>Pa-rwot</i> )
Jur Bele	Communal sharing and solidarity system ( <i>Kaya</i> )
Ma'di	Extended family and clan support systems, including collective labour-sharing during crises ( <i>Ondu</i> )

## 3. Types of mutual aid

Most of the participants in this research confirmed that community-led responses to crises existed both before the arrival of foreign aid and alongside foreign aid. In particular, the participants from the four

<sup>29</sup> Jok, J. M. (2007). *Sudan: Race, Religion, and Violence*. Oneworld Publications  
<https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/research/article/sudan-race-religion-and-violence>

<sup>30</sup> An elder man, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>31</sup> A male key informant, Nairobi, 9 February 2026.

<sup>32</sup> [Diana Felix Da Costa](#) (2018). Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs: Negotiating political, military and spiritual authority in Boma State, South Sudan.

research communities considered these community-led initiatives as central to their lives and livelihoods during crises. One elder from Ma'di community stated that *“Before international NGOs came, our strength was our people. If your house burnt down today, tomorrow you would not sleep outside. The community would rebuild it”*.<sup>33</sup> Another elder from Agar Dinka echoed this, stating that *“Our community has survived famine, disease and floods because of our culture of solidarity”*.<sup>34</sup> In the online survey, the overwhelming majority of participants (71 per cent) – particularly those from CSOs (100 per cent), national NGOs (84 per cent) and international NGOs (60 per cent) – noted that communities carry out their own local initiatives to address crises (see Annex 6.2).

Besides affirming the presence of community-led responses to crises, participants provided a wide range of examples.<sup>35</sup> Members of international NGOs operating in Eastern Equatoria State reported that communities in Eastern Equatoria – including the Toposa, Lotuko, Ma'di, Acholi and Didinga – rely on deeply rooted mutual support systems based on age-set governance structures, clan-based solidarity (kinship obligations), customary authority leadership and livestock-based insurance systems. Generally, communities step in when formal aid actors are slow or unable to respond to crises. The community-led responses are activated precisely in contexts of formal aid absence, government inaction or slow response, proving they are the true first responders.

Analysis of the online survey answers shows that community-led responses in South Sudan are clustered around the following **six major thematic categories** (see Annex 7), with each theme appearing consistently across different participant profiles (region, organisation, gender and work experience):

- (i) Flood and environmental crisis mitigation:** A dominant theme is community-led physical infrastructure construction, especially in flood-prone regions. This reflects strong local engineering traditions using sand, logs, sacks, clay and tools sourced from households. These responses show communities acting as first responders in climate-related disasters, using collective labour and Indigenous knowledge to protect livelihoods and settlements long before formal aid arrives.
- (ii) Food security and resource-sharing mechanisms:** This relates to coping strategies in times of hunger, famine and scarcity. These systems operate as informal social protection networks, preventing starvation during crisis periods. Food-related responses illustrate deeply rooted solidarity norms that prioritise vulnerable groups, ensuring community survival during severe food shocks.
- (iii) Peacebuilding, social cohesion and conflict mitigation efforts:** Communities frequently turn first to locally-initiated peace mechanisms, especially during communal violence or tensions. These initiatives reveal the community's reliance on strong social authority structures – elders, youth leaders and churches – as critical pillars of peacebuilding and resilience.
- (iv) Local women- and youth-led resilience community structures:** Across responses, women and youth repeatedly appear as frontline actors. These responses underscore a growing shift, where women and young people are not merely participants but key architects of localised resilience systems, often filling gaps left by formal structures – particularly in communities that are largely patriarchal.

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<sup>33</sup> A male elder during FGD, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>34</sup> A woman elder during FGD, Rumbek East County Paloch, 4 February 2026.

<sup>35</sup> The community-led responses gathered from the KIIs and FGDs in the four communities in Eastern Equatoria and Lakes States and KIIs from other communities are summarised in Annex 5.

- (v) **Traditional justice, cultural safety nets and Indigenous institutions:** Many responses reference long-standing cultural institutions. These practices illustrate how traditional systems continue to provide governance, conflict resolution, spiritual healing and social protection in settings where formal institutions remain weak. Most community-led response initiatives involve collective labour, joint decision-making and shared resources – an indicator of strong social capital.
- (vi) **Community-based emergency rescue and humanitarian support:** Communities also engage in direct emergency relief and rescue. These responses demonstrate high community adaptability and strong neighbourhood support systems that act immediately, especially where state capacity is minimal.

#### 4. Foundational pillars of mutual aid

Community-led responses are advanced and sustained through a web of interrelated foundational pillars. The participants from the four research communities agreed that mobilisation and sharing of community resources are the most important pillars of community-led responses. One elder from Magwi stressed the critical role of mobilisation and resource-sharing: *“During a period of crop failure, households with surplus maize contributed to a community granary for redistribution to affected families, ensuring that no household went without food for more than a few days”*.<sup>36</sup> A woman participant said: *“We formed a chain of help during crisis. Those with maize shared with those who had none. Our children ate because we acted quickly”*.<sup>37</sup> A religious leader emphasised that *“Prayers alone were not enough during crisis. We combined faith with action – food, shelter and support for those suffering”*.<sup>38</sup>

Besides mobilisation and sharing of resources, the participants in the online survey identified volunteerism, traditional safety nets and solidarity as critical for sustaining and advancing community-led responses during crises (see Annex 6.3). In addition, strong reliance on Indigenous knowledge in responding to crises, which has been passed across generations, was highlighted as one of the foundational pillars of the community-led response, as well as collective action – which is considered to be the core of communities’ resilience and social capital. These findings on the characteristics of mutual aid are similar to findings from other studies.<sup>39</sup>

#### 5. The first responders to crises

Based on the discussions and interviews with the research participants, most community members take part in community-led responses during crises. However, there are differing views on who the first responders to crises are. While the majority of participants (49 per cent) consider all members of the community, particularly elders, women and youth, as first respondents, some participants regarded youth (20 per cent) as being the first responders, followed by elders (15 per cent) and then women (10 per cent) (see Annex 6.4). This variation in views is apparent across organisations, with international NGOs (16 per cent) and national NGOs (12 per cent) viewing women as the second responders to crises after youth, while CSOs did not consider women as first responders. This variation could be attributed to differences in social

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<sup>36</sup> An elder male in FGD, Magwi, January 2026.

<sup>37</sup> An elder female in FGD, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>38</sup> A male religious leader, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>39</sup> Carstensen, N., Mudhar, M., and Munksgaard, F. (2021). ‘Let communities do their work’: the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8653332/pdf/DISA-45-S146.pdf>

systems and crises, making it difficult to draw generalisations. For example, traditional authorities play a dominant role during crises in Dinka communities, as stressed by one key informant: *“During the period of scarcity and famine, a needy person approaches the chief for assistance. In addition to offering assistance, the chief may call upon the relatives of a person in need to give him a milk cow or cows, either as a gift or a loan to be paid at an appropriate time”*.<sup>40</sup>

However, the perspectives of the participants from the four research communities provide a more nuanced and balanced view about first responders. One sub-chief from Rumbek County commended the role of women and other respondents: *“Women were always the first responders. They cared for children, fed the hungry and treated the sick. Youth helped with heavy work, moving grain or repairing homes. Elders guided decisions and ensured fairness”*.<sup>41</sup> Another sub-chief acknowledged that the type of crisis shapes who the first responders are, stating that *“In my experience, the first response depended on the type of crisis. During hunger, elders would assess needs, but women and youth provided immediate help. During floods, men helped rescue people and livestock, but women coordinated shelters and food distribution. Everyone had a role”*.<sup>42</sup>

Participants from Magwi County defined the roles of first responders during crises as follows: (i) elders and clan leaders organised rapid assessment of needs, mediated disputes and coordinated mutual aid distribution; (ii) women groups played a key role in identifying vulnerable households, pooling food, and providing care for children and the elderly; (iii) youth groups acted as mobilisers, helped with physical labour, and offered protection or early warning in insecure areas; (iv) religious leaders provided psychosocial support, organised collective prayers, and mobilised community resources for immediate relief; (v) traders acted quickly in collaboration with community networks, especially during commodities supply disruption; and (vi) extended family networks provided shelter, food and labour to the households most affected by the crisis. One trader emphasised the role of the private sector, stressing that *“Even when the roads were blocked by the flood crisis, we shared our goods. We knew the community depended on us to survive.”*<sup>43</sup>

## 6. Effectiveness of mutual aid

Although it is difficult to measure the level of effectiveness of community-led responses, the hybrid research methods employed in this study may provide some indications. Almost all (98.5 per cent) of the participants in the online survey remarked on the success of community-led responses. This perspective was shared by the participants from the four research communities. They consistently appreciated community-led responses and consider these responses to be timely and effective. They commented that local responders acted immediately, often within hours of a crisis event, with their rapid response filling the gap before external or formal actors arrive. They also highlighted that these locally-led interventions were highly flexible and adaptive, responding to immediate needs such as shelter, food, protection and conflict prevention. In addition, the participants stressed that local responders used existing social networks, mutual aid systems and traditional governance structures to coordinate actions efficiently.

They also reported that these first responders were trusted and respected, which ensured cooperation and minimised tensions. One elder from Lakes State described the community-led responses to the 2024–2025

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<sup>40</sup> A male key informant, Woodstock, USA, 15 February 2026.

<sup>41</sup> A male sub-chief, Rumbek, 28 January 2026.

<sup>42</sup> A male chief, Rumbek East Payam, Akot, 5 February 2026.

<sup>43</sup> A male trader, Magwi, February, 2026.

flood crisis: *“They were very successful. Children survived, the elderly had food, and families remained together. Even when resources were scarce, the mutual aid system worked. It relied on trust, accountability and clear traditional rules”*.<sup>44</sup> Another woman in Lakes State attributed the success of the community-led response during this same period to lessons learnt from the 1988 and 1998 famines, and stated that *“Yes, success of the community-led responses to the 2024–2025 flood crisis was measured by survival and fairness. People contributed willingly because they knew they would be supported in return. For example, after the 1998 famine, families who gave resources received help in later crises”*.<sup>45</sup>

One woman elder in Magwi County stated that *“We cannot wait for outsiders during crisis. When our neighbours suffer, we act first. That is our duty as women of this community”*.<sup>46</sup> One youth participant stressed the role of young people during crisis: *“We were the hands that moved fast during the flood crisis. When homes were destroyed, we carried materials, cleared paths, and made sure everyone had a safe place”*.<sup>47</sup> The timeliness of the community-led responses is largely attributed to the immediate actions of chiefs at the onset of crises, using established social networks and authority to coordinate fast responses. One chief in Magwi highlighted this role by stating that *“Our people trust our guidance; when the crisis came, we ensured everyone knew where to turn and how to help each other”*.<sup>48</sup>

Some of the factors highlighted by the majority of the participants as having contributed to the success of community-led responses include: (i) **effective coordination**: chiefs, elders, women and youth worked together to ensure resources were fairly distributed; (ii) **resourcefulness and adaptability**: communities used local resources and labour to address immediate needs; (iii) **inclusivity**: vulnerable groups, including internally displaced people and people with disabilities, were not left behind; (iii) **cultural legitimacy**: traditional structures, social solidarity, trust and traditional norms facilitated acceptance and cooperation across community members; and (iv) **sustainability**: relying on existing social networks, communal solidarity, and Indigenous mechanisms and responses strengthened community cohesion rather than creating dependency. These findings are consistent with the growing and emerging evidence that shows that mutual aid can deliver timely, relevant and sustainable assistance grounded in local realities.<sup>49</sup>

## 7. Challenges of mutual aid

Despite the impressive examples of the success of community-led responses, most participants also acknowledged the challenges these initiatives encounter. Participants from the four research communities provided a helpful understanding of the challenges:

- (i) **Limited resources (livelihood assets and social relations) and capacity**, which affected most households, especially during prolonged crises as community resources were quickly exhausted. One key informant explained: *“We wanted to help everyone, but sometimes there is simply not enough grain or money. Our hearts are willing, but our hands are few”*.<sup>50</sup> Another key informant stated that *“The success of our collective efforts to take care of each other during crisis rests with the resources, which have been depleted over years by persistent violent*

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<sup>44</sup> A male elder, Rumbek East, Akot, 5 February 2026.

<sup>45</sup> A woman elder, Rumbek East, Akon-Toc, 4 February 2026.

<sup>46</sup> A woman elder, Magwi, January 2026.

<sup>47</sup> A young male, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>48</sup> A male chief, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>49</sup> ALNAP, 2026. Mutual aid and locally-led action: Rethinking international support in times of crisis. <https://alnapp.org/about/events-listing/hnpw-2026-mutual-aid-and-locally-led-action/>

<sup>50</sup> A woman elder, Magwi, February 2026.

- conflicts*".<sup>51</sup> One elder commented that *"Resources were always limited. During famine, there was not enough food or cattle to support everyone. Sometimes social disputes made sharing and resilience harder"*.<sup>52</sup>
- (ii) **Geographic and logistical constraints** that affected isolated villages disproportionately, leaving some households temporarily unassisted. One woman emphasised this challenge: *"By the time we walked to the far villages, the people had already suffered for days. Distance is our enemy during crises"*.<sup>53</sup>
  - (iii) **Increased humanitarian needs** that strained traditional mutual aid networks. One chief highlighted this: *"We welcome everyone, but there is only so much we can carry. Sometimes our generosity is tested beyond measure"*.<sup>54</sup> Another key informant stressed that the severity of the 2024–2025 floods in Lakes State had overwhelmed the capacity of community-led responses, making coordination difficult, with elders struggling to manage limited resources during prolonged crises.
  - (iv) **Inclusion challenges** as people with disabilities, internally displaced people or marginalised households were sometimes missed in community-led responses. A woman key informant stated that *"We try to help all, but it is easy to forget those hidden away or those who cannot come to us themselves"*.<sup>55</sup>
  - (v) **Coordination and leadership limitations**, as occasionally confusion arose between different groups (elders, youth and women) on their roles and priorities; the lack of formal coordination structures sometimes also slowed decision-making in larger-scale crises. One chief summarised this issue: *"We all want to help, but when many voices speak at once, it is hard to decide who needs help first"*.<sup>56</sup>
  - (vi) **Sustainability and volunteer fatigue challenges**, as repeated crises led to exhaustion among active responders and reduced participation, particularly of women and youth volunteers, and continuous demands on time, labour and resources made it difficult to maintain high levels of response over months. This concern was well articulated by one woman: *"We cannot keep going forever. Helping others is our duty, but we too need rest and support"*.<sup>57</sup>
  - (vii) **Weakened traditional authority and age-set systems**, as protracted violent conflicts and the politicisation of traditional authority have weakened the role and legitimacy of traditional chiefs.<sup>58</sup> With widespread proliferation of small arms, the traditional age-set system has also been militarised, fragmented and politicised by the political elites to advance their political interests.<sup>59</sup>

The online survey identified similar challenges facing mutual aid, with participants considering the biggest challenge to be resource constraint in terms of livelihood assets and social relations (54 per cent), followed by lack of support and recognition (22 per cent), exclusion of some marginalised groups (9 per cent), inadequate coverage (7 per cent) and poor coordination (4 per cent) (see Annex 6.6). However, there were variations in perspectives on what the key difficulties are. Many CSO participants considered lack of support and recognition (60 per cent) as the most important challenge, while participants from international NGOs

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<sup>51</sup> A male sub-chief, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>52</sup> A male elder, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>53</sup> A young male, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>54</sup> A male chief, Magwi, February, 2026.

<sup>55</sup> A woman elder chief, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>56</sup> A male chief, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>57</sup> A woman elder, Rumbek East, Akot, 3 February 2026.

<sup>58</sup> Cherry Leonardi (2019). "Making Order Out of Disorder: Customary Authority in South Sudan". The Rift Valley Institute (RVI).

<sup>59</sup> [Diana Felix Da Costa](#) (2018). Changing Power Among Murle Chiefs: Negotiating political, military and spiritual authority in Boma State, South Sudan.

(60 per cent) and national NGOs (54 per cent) reported resource constraint as the principal challenge facing mutual aid. Despite these different perspectives, the erosion of communities' resource base – as a result of protracted crises and persistent violent conflicts – remains the most significant issue. These challenges are consistent with findings from other studies.<sup>60</sup>

### **8. Links between mutual and formal aid**

The formal and mutual aid systems are distinct in terms of structure and approaches to delivering aid. While formal aid is bureaucratic and hierarchical with top-down systems largely based on charity, mutual aid is non-hierarchical, voluntary, embedded in the community and primarily based on solidarity, with greater respect for the agency of all in need. The unique and varied characteristics of the two aid systems make linking them complex: there is an opportunity to create complementary and supplementary interactions, but this also carries a risk of creating adversarial interaction if mutual aid is forced to comply with the bureaucracy of formal aid. Despite limited understanding of the link between the two systems, there is growing evidence that shows that support by formal aid to mutual aid can strengthen its interventions during crises.<sup>61</sup> This research attempts to assess this link, by asking questions related to how formal aid can support mutual aid, how mutual aid performs in relation to formal aid, the alignment between the two systems, and the future of mutual aid if formal aid disappears.

#### **Support for mutual aid**

There is mounting evidence that shows that external support can enhance and reinforce the core strengths of mutual aid in terms of timeliness, resilience, relevance and sustainability. In the case of South Sudan, the online survey shows that the vast majority of participants (85 per cent) agreed that formal aid actors support community-led responses during crises (see Annex 6.11). Support for mutual aid by formal aid actors is more reported by CSOs (100 per cent), followed by national NGOs (93 per cent) and international NGOs (80 per cent). These findings may suffer from self-reporting bias, as formal aid actors are likely to overreport their level of support. It is also likely that formal aid support is directed by the international NGOs towards the mutual aid groups through national NGOs as part of the localisation agenda of supporting local actors. This was evident in Magwi County, where participants identified NGOs as supporting indirectly the community-led response mechanisms via community peace dialogues, disaster risk reduction training and women's empowerment programming, with the exception of direct support to the traditional elders' councils ('*Kyec-mato*').

Despite this support, there are growing concerns that formal aid has weakened community-led responses during crises. Research participants from various communities underscored that foreign aid has created foreign aid dependency syndrome, by weakening traditional self-reliance mechanisms. One leading South Sudanese scholar summarised this syndrome: "*A people well documented as staunchly independent, self-reliant, naturally endowed, proud and dignified, have been reduced to humiliating reliance on foreign assistance, including food aid*".<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Carstensen, N., Mudhar, M., and Munksgaard, F. (2021). 'Let communities do their work': the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8653332/pdf/DISA-45-S146.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> Posada, A. and Ahimbisibwe, L. (2025). Supporting Mutual Aid: What the evidence tells us. [https://alnab.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP\\_Exec\\_summary\\_supporting\\_mutual\\_aid\\_101225.pdf](https://alnab.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP_Exec_summary_supporting_mutual_aid_101225.pdf)

<sup>62</sup> Deng, F. (2025). A call for an end to dependency: a piece of advice from an elder: <https://atarnetwork.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/ATAR-English-Issue-37-A-call-for-an-end-to-dependency-A-piece-of-advice-from-an-elder.pdf>

One key informant<sup>63</sup> argued that foreign aid has inadvertently weakened the very structures it aimed to support or strengthen, through: (i) substitution of mutual obligations, as direct, unconditional food aid to individuals undermines the cultural norm of food sharing (*'Cīēŋ'*) and the kinship obligation to care for relatives, fostering dependency and eroding social solidarity; (ii) creation of parallel structures as humanitarian agencies often bypass traditional authorities, establishing parallel committees and distribution mechanisms; this erodes the legitimacy and authority of chiefs and elders, who are seen as powerless or irrelevant; and (iii) inducing social fragmentation, as targeting aid to individuals rather than through clan structures can create jealousy, perceptions of favouritism and social division, fracturing the social cohesion essential for collective action and solidarity. Rather than blaming foreign aid, one key informant argued that the influx of foreign aid into South Sudan was necessitated by the failure of the state to fulfil one of its core functions of caring for vulnerable citizens, due to corruption and governance deficits that perpetuate violent conflicts.

### ***Alignment with formal aid***

Another important question is whether mutual aid is aligned with the formal aid system, particularly in light of the distinct and somewhat incompatible structures of the two systems. Aligning the two would involve bridging community-led grassroots efforts with international NGOs and ensuring that formal systems support, rather than co-opt, local initiatives to improve access and accountability in complex humanitarian emergencies.<sup>64</sup> The participants in the online survey had mixed perspectives on whether mutual and formal aid are aligned: while 43 per cent did not believe they were, 26 per cent believed that they are, and 31 per cent were in between (see Annex 6.5). More participants from CSOs (60 per cent) do not see alignment between the two systems, compared to those from international NGOs (47 per cent) and national NGOs (37 per cent). The perspectives of the CSO participants are likely to reflect the overall status of alignment, as they are members of the communities where mutual aid is embedded.

Despite this lack of clarity, this finding – that more than half of the survey participants recognise or at least somewhat recognise that alignment does exist – is encouraging, as efforts to align mutual and formal aid are gaining momentum in South Sudan. There are challenges, however, such as: (i) differing philosophies, such as solidarity versus charity; (ii) trust and risk management, as formal aid providers may have strict, bureaucratic compliance requirements that are incompatible with mutual aid systems; and (iii) possible negative consequences, as formalising and institutionalising such cooperation – through funding or integration of the non-hierarchical nature of formal aid – may weaken the flexible and spontaneous nature of mutual aid, reducing it to just another service-provider arm of the state or formal donors.<sup>65</sup> Despite these challenges, the unique characteristics of mutual aid could provide a bridge between formal aid and communities, and could strengthen the legitimacy of formal aid. One key informant commented that *“Alignment succeeds when foreign aid strengthens – rather than replaces – local systems”*.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> A male key informant, Nairobi, February 2026.

<sup>64</sup> Rendall, J., Curtin, M., Roy, M. J., & Teasdale, S. (2024). Relationships between community-led mutual aid groups and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic: complementary, supplementary, or adversarial? *Public Management Review*, 26(2), 313–333. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2022.2084769>

<sup>65</sup> Kenworthy N, Hops E, Hagopian A. Mutual Aid Praxis Aligns Principles and Practice in Grassroots COVID-19 Responses Across the US. *Kennedy Inst Ethics J*. 2023 Jun;33(2):115-144. doi: 10.1353/ken.2023.a904080. PMID: 38468642; PMCID: PMC10927022.

<sup>66</sup> A male NGO official, Magwi, February 2026.

### *Which one works better?*

There is limited documentation of the performance comparison between mutual and formal aid. The majority of the online survey participants (71 per cent) considered mutual aid to perform better or in between better than formal aid (see Annex 6.9). There were slight variations within this, with participants from national NGOs (82 per cent) reporting that mutual aid performs better or somehow better, followed by CSOs (80 per cent) and international NGOs (60 per cent). Interestingly, the formal aid actors (national and international NGOs) accept that community-led responses work better. This recognition could be attributed to the unique characteristics of mutual aid, which participants identified as being embedded and rooted in the community (26 per cent), reliant on community resources (22 per cent), flexibility (13 per cent) and timeliness (4 per cent) (see Annex 6.8). In Magwi County, participants described community-led responses as immediate, reliable, duty-bound and essential for survival.

Despite this recognition, it is not a question of one being ‘better’ than the other; both serve different purposes and have the potential to complement each other, making it irrelevant to compare them.<sup>67</sup> In particular, while formal aid addresses immediate needs during crises through charity, mutual aid relies on community resources and solidarity to respond to humanitarian needs. This underscores the potential for complementary roles, bringing together charity, community resources and solidarity to forge a genuine and supportive partnership that collectively addresses humanitarian needs during crises.

### *Mutual aid when foreign aid disappears*

The growing reduction of foreign aid raises the question of whether mutual aid can survive in an environment that is accustomed to foreign aid. Most participants in this research are optimistic that mutual aid will persist even without formal aid. The participants from the four research communities, as well as key informants from other communities, stressed that even if foreign aid disappears, community-led responses will continue – but with both opportunities and challenges.

The participants identified factors that will sustain community-led responses without foreign aid:

- (i) **The resilience of Indigenous systems** is deeply rooted in culture, social norms and kinship networks. This was echoed by one elder in Rumbek: *“Our traditions are strong. Elders and women ensure that the rules and traditions are followed, enabling community-led responses to continue without foreign aid as long as people respect each other and follow cultural and traditional practices”*.<sup>68</sup>
- (ii) **The role of traditional authorities** would continue to mobilise communities and coordinate support, ensuring that vulnerable households are prioritised.
- (iii) **Women and youth engagement** would remain central in food sharing, labour support and care for vulnerable groups, maintaining the social fabric.
- (iv) **Community solidarity networks** would persist as a first line of support during crises, independent of external aid. This optimism was expressed by one chief in Magwi: *“Aid can come and go, but our people are always here to help each other. That is what keeps us alive.”*<sup>69</sup> Another woman said that *“The source of our survival and livelihoods rests with our land, if*

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<sup>67</sup> The Galan Initiative, 2024. redefining-community-support-mutual-aid-vs-charity <https://www.thegalaninitiative.com/redefining-community-support-mutual-aid-vs-charity/>

<sup>68</sup> A female elder, Rumbek East, February 4, 2026.

<sup>69</sup> A male chief, Magwi, February 2026.

*foreign aid disappears, our land will remain and will not disappear with foreign aid”.*<sup>70</sup> A church leader also stated that *“We may not have aid, but our knowledge, our neighbours and our faith will carry us through. We have survived worse before”.*<sup>71</sup>

This optimism about the future of mutual aid was shared by participants in the online survey. The vast majority (78 per cent) believed or somehow believed that mutual aid will persevere and continue even without foreign aid, while 19 per cent of participants had a more pessimistic perspective (see Annex 6.10). The confidence in mutual aid’s future was more prevalent among participants from CSOs (100 per cent), followed by international NGOs (92 per cent) and national NGOs (72 per cent). Despite this optimism, some participants raised concerns that communities would face significant constraints and challenges without external support, which has become an important resource to communities during crises. In the absence of foreign aid, the participants highlighted the following challenges:

- (i) **Resource reduction** caused by a lack of foreign aid could limit the reach and impact of community-led interventions, causing increased vulnerability.
- (ii) **Increased burdens** and pressures on communal solidarity and on volunteers, with the women, youth and elders who lead responses potentially facing more fatigue and stress without foreign aid, reducing timeliness and coverage of community-led responses. One key informant in Magwi County argued that the continued capacity of community-led responses without foreign aid is not guaranteed, as these responses are threatened by the erosion of traditional authority, the militarisation of youth and the alienation of communal lands.
- (iii) **Market and economic pressures** caused by the absence of foreign aid could exacerbate food insecurity and inflation, making community-led responses unable to meet all needs.
- (iv) **Inclusion risks**, as a lack of foreign aid may lead to the exclusion of vulnerable populations – such as internally displaced people, refugees and people with disabilities – from community-led responses as a result of shrinking community resources and overstretching of community solidarity.
- (v) **The inability of government** to assume its responsibility to take care of vulnerable populations during crises will be exacerbated in the absence of foreign aid.

## 9. Government and mutual aid

The link between government and mutual aid is comparable, but also distinct, to the link between formal and mutual aid. The government has a legal obligation to look after its citizens during crises, while formal aid actors such as NGOs voluntarily take care of people during such crises through charity. This makes the government a key actor in the humanitarian crisis response chain. Similar to other formal aid actors, mutual aid and the government represent two contrasting approaches to social safety and community care, with mutual aid often surging during crises when government responses are seen as too slow, insufficient or exclusionary. In the case of South Sudan, it is important to explore how the government has been responsive to humanitarian crises. There is a wealth of evidence that shows that the government has not only left its role of caring for citizens during crises to international aid actors, but that it has also been widely accused of failing to address, and actively exacerbating, the country's severe humanitarian crises.<sup>72</sup> Besides

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<sup>70</sup> A female elder, Magwi, January 2026

<sup>71</sup> A male church leader, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/02/un-inquiry-finds-south-sudans-political-and-military-leaders-are-driving#:~:text=%E2%80%9CLast%20March%2C%20the%20President%20declared,Sooka%2C%20Chair%20of%20the%20Commission.>

its failure to respond to persistent crises, the government has also neglected to formulate the necessary policies and legislations to guide humanitarian interventions, including community-led responses. The country's Disaster Risk Management Policy and Disaster Risk Management Bill, which are awaiting approval, make no reference to mutual aid as a key element in the humanitarian response chain.

Despite the failure of the national government to assume its obligatory role of caring for vulnerable groups during crises, participants from Lakes and Eastern Equatoria States provided some exceptional examples where local authorities have acted in collaboration with traditional authorities, mobilising resources to take care of vulnerable groups as well as indirectly supporting community-led responses. These examples include: (i) maintenance of peace, security and rule of law; (ii) mobilisation of youth and women; (iii) coordination of humanitarian interventions through the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission; (iv) ensuring the inclusion of vulnerable groups; and (v) support to traditional authorities and the maintenance of traditional values, communal solidarity and the spirit of volunteerism. One key informant stressed the important role of local authorities in supporting community-led responses: *"When local leaders guide us, everyone knows their role, and no one is left behind"*.<sup>73</sup>

## V. Advancing mutual aid: Key recommendations

The following are key recommendations for strengthening mutual aid in South Sudan. These are based on the challenges facing mutual aid, suggested recommendations from the research participants, some lessons learnt from localisation, as well as recent developments within the sector that signal a potential inflection point for humanitarian support to mutual aid.

**More evidence:** Mutual aid is not new to the communities of South Sudan, but understanding and recognition of its potential as a critical resource during crises have faded over the years. Although this research has provided some evidence of the successes, challenges and perceptions of mutual aid, more evidence is needed to document the lessons of mutual aid in South Sudan. Gathering additional data on mutual aid's potential as an important element of the humanitarian crisis response chain will expedite and strengthen the growing momentum to support mutual aid in the country. More documentation of South Sudanese mutual aid practices could be guided and supported by the research initiative of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and Local to Global Protection (L2GP), which focused on understanding and strengthening evidence around supporting mutual aid in crisis-affected contexts.<sup>74</sup>

**Policy recognition:** The findings of this research are consistent with growing evidence from other studies of the positive role played by mutual aid during crises. The government should adopt relevant policies that officially recognise mutual aid. The National Disaster Risk Management Policy and Disaster Risk Management Bill provide an opportunity to acknowledge mutual aid as one of the most important elements of the humanitarian crisis response chain, and language on this should be included before these documents are approved. This official recognition will provide institutional guidance for aid actors operating in South Sudan to support mutual aid by recognising, understanding and internalising mutual aid in their policies and programmes.

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<sup>73</sup> A male chief, Magwi, February 2026.

<sup>74</sup> Posada, A. and Ahimbisibwe, L. (2025). Supporting Mutual Aid: What the evidence tells us. [https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP\\_Exec\\_summary\\_supporting\\_mutual\\_aid\\_101225.pdf](https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP_Exec_summary_supporting_mutual_aid_101225.pdf)

**Women-led responses and youth integration:** This research has shown that women and youth – and particularly women – play a prominent role as strong local and informal leaders in community-led responses. Prioritising support to women-led initiatives will therefore accentuate gender equity and the much-needed leadership of women during crises, and will challenge the prevailing narrative of women victimhood. In various communities in South Sudan, women are generally seen as neutral actors in communal conflicts, more concerned for the welfare of everyone in the community and being more likely to deliver humanitarian assistance fairly and with conflict sensitivity. One key informant stressed the importance of more investment in youth integration, by channelling the energy and organisational capacity of the age-set system into constructive national service, disaster response and peacebuilding programmes, providing a non-militarised pathway for realising the positive potential of youth.<sup>75</sup>

**Earmarking resources:** This research shows that the major challenge facing mutual aid is resource constraint, particularly in protracted crises. One possible solution is to support and encourage national and local authorities to assume their mandated disaster responses<sup>76</sup> by earmarking resources for emergencies and crises and prioritising funding mutual aid actors as first responders. This will contribute to nurturing the social contract and trust-building between citizens and the state. Another practical tool for supporting community-led responses is the provision of microgrants to mutual aid initiatives, which would mark the explicit transfer of power from formal aid actors to crisis-affected communities.<sup>77</sup> These microgrants may benefit from new funding mechanisms, such as the Resilio Fund which is dedicated to community-led responses.<sup>78</sup>

**Working with the grain:** Despite the growing criticism of localisation, there are good lessons that can be considered when advancing the mutual aid agenda, and there are a number of initiatives adopted in South Sudan to advance and operationalise localisation. These include an Oxfam project that supports humanitarian programming among local actors; a Save the Children initiative supporting capacity-strengthening for local actors in humanitarian responses; a CARE project that advances partnership through the localisation agenda; the integration of the Local Response Pooled Fund; and the adoption of international intermediaries to act as a bridge between donors and local actors, to provide opportunities for local actors to receive sustained funding and institutional strengthening.<sup>79</sup> Rather than starting with new mechanisms, these initiatives could be entry points for advancing mutual aid in South Sudan, by shifting localisation from top-down ‘charity’ models to bottom-up ‘solidarity’ models – allowing local actors to set the agenda and define their own needs.<sup>80</sup>

**Alignment with formal aid:** While the non-hierarchical structure of mutual aid limits direct support from donors, it fosters legitimacy and trust within communities. The formal aid hierarchical structure, however, attracts donor funding but does not enjoy legitimacy and community trust. The distinct structures of mutual and formal aid provide an opportunity for forging a balanced and ‘win-win’ alignment of the two systems. Such alignment should advance a supportive partnership, recognising local, informal networks as

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<sup>75</sup> A male key informant from Bor, Nairobi, February 2026.

<sup>76</sup> Corbett, J., Carstensen, N. and Di Vicenz, S. (2021). *Survivor- and community-led crisis response: practical experience and learning*. London: Humanitarian Practice Network. <https://alnap.org/help-library/resources/survivor-and-community-led-crisis-response-practical-experience-and-learning/>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Legatum Group. (2025). Resilio Fund to Empower Community-Led Humanitarian Crisis Response. <https://www.legatum.com/portfolio/resilio-fund/>

<sup>79</sup> Atim, T. (2022). Localization: Views From South Sudan. <https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/Localization-SouthSudan-4.29-final.pdf>

<sup>80</sup> <https://childprotectionforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Shifting-Power-Localizing-Ownership-and-CLCP.pdf>

legitimate, independent humanitarian actors, rather than formal aid simply absorbing or replacing them. One model for strengthening this alignment in South Sudan is a formal approach known as ‘Supporting Community-Led Responses’, where international NGOs provide flexible, unearmarked microgrants and training and capacity development to improve the operational and technological capacities and security measures of mutual aid and informal groups, without requiring them to change their – usually non-hierarchical – structure.<sup>81</sup> Another is the ‘hybrid model’, where mutual aid groups and informal groups handle the last-mile delivery of humanitarian assistance such as food aid, while formal aid agencies provide resources.<sup>82</sup> Such partnerships will enhance the legitimacy of local formal aid actors, ensure access to funding for mutual aid groups, and – eventually – lead to more effective responses to crises.

**Supporting mutual aid:** Examples of other ways to support mutual aid were provided by the online survey participants (see Annex 8). The prevailing example was ‘capacity-building, skills development and coordination’ (29 per cent), followed by ‘own resource mobilisation and sustainability’ (21 per cent), ‘resilience and long-term investment’ (19 per cent), ‘localisation and direct support to local actors’ (16 per cent), ‘governance, coordination and accountability’ (10 per cent), and ‘peacebuilding and social cohesion’ (9 per cent). Other suggestions from key informants for strengthening community-led responses include:

- (i) **Mandated collaboration**, by requiring humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors to engage with and work through traditional authorities and age-set structures, ensuring aid is harmonised with local systems.
- (ii) **Direct financing of informal safety nets**, such as seed capital for group saving (Sanduk groups), flexible small grants to CSOs, and expanding cash and voucher assistance.
- (iii) **Strengthening traditional governance**, including creating formal disaster plans with elders and youth, capacity-strengthening, and customary mediation that integrates human rights.
- (iv) **Technical infrastructure**, such as flood control machinery, solar communication tools, and early warning and early response systems.
- (v) **Reforming partnership models**, shifting from subcontracting to equitable partnership, allocating 10–20 per cent of grants to the institutional development of mutual aid groups, and simplifying reporting requirements for mutual aid.

**Do no harm:** The reciprocal nature of mutual aid could undermine its positive characteristics and may risk excluding some vulnerable members of the community, such as poorer people, people with disabilities, internally displaced people and refugees. The online survey showed that 9 per cent of participants recognise the exclusion of some marginalised groups as one of the limitations of mutual aid. This underscores the risk of harm that might arise from community-led responses. This finding is consistent with another study that highlighted how there is limited evidence on the role of mutual aid in mitigating the potential negative impacts of aid on social and environmental factors.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the ethnic nature of conflicts between and among communities in South Sudan is likely to hinder local aid actors from adhering to humanitarian principles, such as impartiality, when delivering humanitarian assistance. This calls for formal aid actors, including the state, to ‘do no harm’ by prioritising conflict sensitivity when supporting mutual aid.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> <https://www.local2global.info/sclr/>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14719037.2022.2084769>

<sup>83</sup> Humanitarian Advisory Group. (2025). Community driving change: Articulating outcomes and impacts of community-led response. <https://humanitarianadvisorygroup.org/insight/communities-driving-change-articulating-outcomes-and-impacts-of-community-led-response/>

<sup>84</sup> Atim, T. (2022). Localization: Views From South Sudan. <https://fic.tufts.edu/wp-content/uploads/Localization-SouthSudan-4.29-final.pdf>

## VI. Conclusions

This research reveals a robust, deeply rooted ecosystem of community-led responses, which not only provide the first line of response to crises but also serve as one of the most important elements of the humanitarian crisis response chain across South Sudan. These responses are embedded in traditional social systems, which are multidimensional and locally-driven as communities rely on their own knowledge, leadership, youth, women, tradition and collective action to respond to crises. They are resource-limited but highly innovative, as communities mobilise human labour, Indigenous knowledge and traditional governance systems to respond to crises. Importantly, they are also remarkably adaptive and context specific, as communities leverage both tradition and contemporary improvisation to address shocks and crises.

The research shows that these mutual aid efforts are not new to communities in South Sudan, as they existed before the arrival of foreign aid and will persist if foreign aid disappears. The strength of these responses rests with the traditional systems that provide a solid foundation for long-term resilience, even without foreign aid. These systems include but are not limited to social capital, Indigenous knowledge, collective labour traditions, community governance systems, and cultural mechanisms of support, sharing and healing. Overall, these findings highlight that community-led responses are not supplemental to formal aid, but are instead the backbone of livelihood resilience in South Sudan.

Despite its positive features, mutual aid faces a number of challenges in South Sudan. The most significant of these is how protracted and persistent violent conflicts have weakened communities' resource base. As community-led responses largely rely on these resources, the erosion of the resource base leaves mutual aid unable to sustain responses to prolonged crises. In addition, the government has not recognised mutual aid as an important resource in the humanitarian crisis response chain. Without national policy guidance on mutual aid, formal aid actors – including the government – will continue to use mutual aid groups as subcontractors and part of their intervention tools, as in the case of local formal aid actors, such as CSOs and national NGOs.

Besides these challenges, mutual aid has other limitations. The reciprocal nature of mutual aid is undoubtedly a virtue, but it can exclude poorer people, people with disabilities, internally displaced people and refugees. The non-hierarchical and horizontal nature of mutual aid may also lead to difficulties not only in channelling resources from state and formal aid actors but also in ensuring accountability and transparency. In addition, persistent and protracted violent conflicts have created tensions between and among communities, resulting in the erosion of trust and social capital, which weakens mutual aid efforts.

In order to advance, sustain, strengthen and encourage mutual aid efforts for future crises, the government must adopt national policy that recognises community-led responses as the most important element of the humanitarian crisis response chain, as well as providing policy guidance to formal aid actors to forge supportive partnerships with mutual aid groups. Strengthening, resourcing and recognising these systems should be a central strategy for future programming and sustainability and transition planning in humanitarian, development and peacebuilding interventions in South Sudan.