

A satellite map of Sudan and South Sudan, showing the Nile River and surrounding terrain. The map is the background for the top two-thirds of the page.

CSRF South Sudan and CSF Sudan

The humanitarian system at a turning point: Lessons from Sudan and South Sudan

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Executive summary

The humanitarian sector is in a period of profound uncertainty. Long-standing assumptions about the scale, purpose and political foundations of international aid are being unsettled by deep funding cuts, sharpening geopolitical competition, and growing scepticism towards liberal models of humanitarianism and peacemaking. Sudan and South Sudan offer especially important vantage points from which to examine these questions. Both countries have been the site of major international interventions over many years, generating extensive reflection on the strengths and failures of aid, and are now experiencing the effects of contraction in acute and revealing ways. Drawing on the experience of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in South Sudan¹ and the Conflict Sensitivity Facility in Sudan,² and interviews with 27 experts and practitioners in the humanitarian sector, this paper examines what the two contexts can teach global policymakers about the future of aid and provides recommendations for how humanitarian action can be made more effective, accountable and sustainable moving forward.

1 <https://csrf-southsudan.org/>

2 <https://csf-sudan.org/>

Part 1: Recurring themes

Politics of humanitarian assistance. Over time, humanitarian action in protracted crises becomes embedded within governance systems, shaping political incentives, legitimising certain authorities over others and sometimes reinforcing the very governance failures that contribute to crisis. In Sudan and South Sudan, aid has often filled gaps left by public authorities that are unable or unwilling to meet the needs of their people, while simultaneously shielding those authorities from accountability. Aid can also become a tool through which political and military actors (both within affected countries and among some donor countries) reward allies, punish opponents, control population movements or extract resources. A more strategic approach to working with public authorities is therefore needed, particularly in contexts where assistance is contracting. This includes phased engagement with authorities where minimum benchmarks are met, closer attention to local-level governance dynamics, and support to community institutions that can broker access, protection and practical forms of accountability.

Challenges of sustainability. The institutional architecture of the humanitarian system undermines sustainability by privileging short-term delivery, compliance and organisational survival over long-term local capacity. Concepts such as resilience and the humanitarian-development-peace nexus have promised more integrated and durable approaches, but these ambitions have often been layered onto systems that still reward short funding cycles, upward accountability, risk aversion and competition for resources. Aid cuts are making these dynamics more pronounced, as organisations compete for shrinking revenue streams and fall back on familiar partners and delivery models. The sustainability challenge is therefore not simply a function of operating in fragile environments: it is also a product of how the humanitarian system itself is designed.

A more serious effort would begin by recognising that communities possess their own cultural intelligence – their own ways of understanding vulnerability, obligation, reciprocity and collective survival – and then by finding ways of reinforcing these capacities on their own terms without subordinating them to the interests of international aid actors. In situations where local practices reproduce exclusionary norms or otherwise infringe on the rights of vulnerable populations, international actors should make sure that their engagement does not close space or undermine the efforts of more progressive voices in local societies that are advocating for change.

Recognising and reinforcing local agency.

Supporting the agency of local actors requires more than simply moving money closer to them. It requires shifting power, recognising local systems on their own terms, and creating space for communities to define priorities through their own values, relationships and institutions. In both Sudans, communities have organised assistance through kinship networks, faith institutions, mutual aid practices, customary systems, civic associations and locally embedded NGOs. Yet, these capacities are often treated as peripheral or informal rather than as foundational assets. The failure to understand the complexity and nuance of critical locally embedded collective action may result in unintended negative consequences. Until these systems are recognised as primary rather than supplementary, localisation will remain a rebranding exercise rather than a genuine transfer of decision-making power.

Humanitarian neutrality and the challenge of solidarity.

The humanitarian system seeks to set itself apart from politics to preserve neutrality. In practice, this can be at odds with principles of solidarity, which guide much of the local response and which embed humanitarian action in local histories of struggle, reciprocity and shared political experience. In Sudan, mutual aid initiatives have often emerged from civic mobilisation and resistance, while in South Sudan local organisations have cultivated forms of ‘soft voice’ civility to secure space to operate in a militarised and politically restricted environment. The challenge is not to impose a single model of neutrality or solidarity, but to recognise that Sudanese and South Sudanese actors make these choices on their own terms. International requirements around neutrality become problematic when they depoliticise broader pursuits of justice, dilute local legitimacy, or force community initiatives to conform to external models of humanitarian action.

Part 2: An aid system in crisis: Conflict sensitivity risks

Sudan: Prioritisation and piloting. Sudan is one of the few remaining priorities for international aid and diplomatic engagement within a shrinking global space for humanitarian action. The scale of suffering, the war's regional and geopolitical implications, and the strength of Sudanese civic mobilisation have made the country a potential pilot for more locally led responses, particularly around mutual aid, cash programming and community-based response.³ However, Sudan also provides a sobering test case of what happens when international actors suddenly exit from a conflict setting. When war broke out in April 2023, international humanitarian operations collapsed in many areas, and local volunteer networks, including Emergency Response Rooms and other mutual aid structures, filled critical gaps. These experiences demonstrate the importance of recognising and acting in support of local capacities, so that when international presence is reduced or withdrawn, the viable community-level institutions that remain have been strengthened rather than undermined.

South Sudan: Donor darling no more. South Sudan's trajectory has been markedly different. At the time of independence in 2011, the country benefited from extraordinary international goodwill, extensive donor support, and a belief that a new state could be built through petroleum revenues, aid and development financing. The outbreak of civil war in 2013, followed by persistent conflict, corruption, human rights violations and repeated failures of political transition, gradually eroded donor confidence. Though aid cuts were felt before the dramatic shifts of 2025, the US stop-work order and the drastic reduction of US Agency for International Development's (USAID)

support came as a major shock. The effects include disrupted health supply chains, reduced humanitarian presence, job losses among skilled South Sudanese, and a sharply diminished ability to respond to conflict-related displacement, cholera and other emergencies. In the absence of clear communication, communities are interpreting aid reductions through national narratives of abandonment, political punishment or government failure, and are often not fully appreciating the global scope of the changes that are occurring and their structural implications for how humanitarian assistance is delivered for many years to come.

Conflict sensitivity risks in the aid transition.

The central conflict sensitivity concern is not only the gap in service delivery, but the ways in which aid contraction is reshaping power relations, perceptions of exclusion, patterns of dependency, and incentives for cooperation or violence. Withdrawal, downsizing and reprioritisation are not neutral technical adjustments: they are interventions in themselves. Abrupt cuts can disrupt continuity of care, erode local institutional capacity, weaken protection arrangements, and shift leverage towards armed or political actors. Within the aid sector, competition and self-preservation are reinforcing division, mistrust and secrecy at precisely the moment when coordinated, context-aware action is most needed. The risk is not merely that the system will do less with less, but that it will contract in ways that further intensify grievance, reinforce exclusion, weaken social cohesion, and normalise more extractive and less accountable forms of aid delivery. The aid cuts are thereby contributing to and accelerating many of the faults and shortcomings that have been the subject of criticism for decades.

³ The attention that mutual aid and Emergency Response Rooms have received in recent years has also generated frustration and beliefs among some sectors of Sudanese society that international actors are treating the country as a 'laboratory for experimentation'.

Part 3: Pathways for transformative action

Systems thinking approaches to unstick long-term barriers. The changing aid landscape in Sudan and South Sudan is shaped by forces operating simultaneously at local, national, regional and global levels. Systems thinking approaches are therefore useful for identifying ways to navigate complexity and to identify leverage points. Models such as the Berkana Two Loops framework⁴ for example help clarify the roles needed in moments of transition when the existing systems appears stuck or in decline: pioneers who test new ideas, protectors who bridge old and new systems, and hospice workers who guide the graceful decline of what no longer serves. Such approaches are especially relevant now, when the humanitarian system is being reshaped under pressure and when community networks remain largely absent from global discussions about transitions away from dominant aid models.

Reappraising who ‘we’ are: Embracing diversity and emerging collectives. A serious reimagining of aid requires a critical reassessment of who counts as part of the humanitarian system. The actors most relevant to communities during emergency responses are often not those most visible in global forums. They include mutual aid groups, diaspora networks, women’s groups, youth associations, faith institutions, conservation actors, customary authorities, professional networks, and locally embedded national and subnational NGOs. Sudan’s experience shows how crowdfunding, remittances, diaspora medical networks, microgrants and philanthropic funder coalitions can move resources in ways that are faster, more flexible and more grounded in local realities than conventional systems. However, in the two Sudans and in many other conflict-affected countries, frontline responders and crisis-

affected communities are, on the whole, absent from discussions on the future of aid. Without their substantive participation, reform efforts will continue to reproduce the blind spots of the current system.

Do more good: Contributions to wider positive outcomes. Conflict sensitivity should not be reduced to a technical checklist or a narrow ‘do no harm’ exercise. At its best, conflict sensitivity creates space for critical and creative thinking, helps position immediate decisions within long-term trends, and supports changes in behaviours, cultures and systems. The Conflict Sensitivity Facilities have sought to apply conflict sensitivity in this more ambitious sense: building and applying contextual understanding, linking change across different levels, centring local agency and capacities, and integrating gender sensitivity throughout. This points towards a broader shift from merely avoiding harm to deliberately contributing to wider positive outcomes, including peace, stability, inclusion and locally grounded resilience.

Fundamentally reframing what counts. Existing hierarchies are preserved by the value ascribed to certain forms of knowledge, expertise, language and institutional status. Yet, when bureaucratic norms are sustained at the expense of what matters to affected communities, the system becomes at odds with itself. A redesigned aid system must ask what really counts from the perspective of those it is intended to serve and reframe its focus away from outputs of the system and towards the outcomes experienced by affected communities. This requires fundamentally different processes, including recognising local understandings of accountability, reciprocity, obligation, risk and well-being. Supporting community-led response offers one practical framework for doing this differently, by enabling people affected by crisis to identify their own capacities, define their own priorities and lead their own responses, while external actors provide support without taking control.

⁴ The Berkana Two Loops model was developed by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, founders of the Berkana Institute. See: <https://berkana.org/resources/pioneering-a-new-paradigm/>. Other examples of systems thinking frameworks are mentioned in the text.

Conclusion and recommendations

The limited capacity for reform in the humanitarian sector has produced a false choice between dismantling the existing system entirely and continuing with business as usual. The experience of Sudan and South Sudan suggests that neither option is adequate. The system has accumulated important knowledge, relationships and capacities, but it has also proven highly resistant to change. As international assistance contracts, the question is not simply how to preserve what remains – but how to ensure that this moment of rupture becomes an opportunity to re-anchor humanitarian action in the capacities, relationships and solidarity that endure beyond external intervention.

Acknowledgements

This paper draws on the experience of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) in South Sudan and the Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF) in Sudan, alongside that of the authors themselves. We are grateful to the 27 practitioners and experts who generously shared their time and insights through interviews for this study. Their perspectives, drawn from years of work across the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors in Sudan and South Sudan, form the evidentiary backbone of this paper. We are also indebted to those who very kindly gave their time to review the paper, offering rich insights and wise suggestions to improve it further. We thank colleagues at the CSRF, CSF, and Saferworld for their support and feedback throughout the research and drafting process. Any errors or omissions remain our own.

Recommendations:

- Bring voices from conflict-affected countries into humanitarian reform debates in a more substantive way. Sudanese, South Sudanese and other frontline actors should not merely be consulted; they should shape the diagnosis of problems and be at the centre of the design of solutions at national and global levels.
- Draw more deliberately on movement-building and peacebuilding practice. Humanitarian reform should learn from sectors that work through trust, relationships, mobilisation and collective action, rather than focusing primarily on compliance systems and organisational mandates.
- Confront the normative assumptions embedded in foreign aid. Aid actors should recognise that humanitarian systems are not value-neutral and should create space for local actors to situate aid within their own frameworks of accountability, reciprocity, solidarity and justice.
- Invest in trusted conveners and brave spaces for honest discussion. Reform requires spaces where donors, United Nations agencies, NGOs, national actors, local responders and affected communities can speak frankly about power, incentives, risk and institutional self-preservation.
- Treat aid contraction as a conflict sensitivity issue in its own right. Withdrawal, downsizing and reprioritisation should be planned and communicated in ways that minimise harm, avoid reinforcing exclusion and account for the political effects of reduced aid.

Introduction

The humanitarian sector is in a period of profound uncertainty. Long-standing assumptions about the scale, purpose and political foundations of international aid are being unsettled by deep funding cuts, sharpening geopolitical competition, and growing scepticism towards liberal models of humanitarianism and peacemaking. In this context, questions that have circulated for decades about the unintended consequences of aid, the limits of reform, and the relationship between humanitarian action, politics and public authority have acquired a new urgency. Sudan and South Sudan offer particularly important vantage points from which to examine these questions. Both countries have been the sites of major international interventions over many years, generating extensive reflection on the strengths and failures of aid, and are now experiencing the effects of contraction in especially acute ways.

a) Sudan and South Sudan as stress cases

At the time of writing, the humanitarian crises in Sudan and South Sudan are as bad as they have ever been. Fighting between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and between other armed groups and political formations, has killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced more than 11 million, giving rise to the world's worst displacement crisis.⁵ In September 2025, famine was declared in El Fasher and Kadugli, the latest in a series of conflict-induced famines that Sudan and South Sudan have experienced in recent years.⁶ In South Sudan a power-sharing agreement signed in 2018 teeters on the verge of collapse, following renewed fighting between government and opposition

5 Death toll estimates vary widely, with the former US envoy for Sudan suggesting as many as 400,000 people had been killed between April 2023 and August 2025. See Council on Foreign Relations, Center for Preventive Action, 'Global Conflict Tracker. Civil War in Sudan', accessed 18 February 2026 (<https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/power-struggle-sudan>)

6 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification Global Initiative (2025), 'Sudan: IPC Acute Food Insecurity September 2025 – May 2026 (Special Snapshot)', 3 November (https://www.ipcinfo.org/file-admin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Sudan_Acute_Food_Insecurity_Sep2025_May2026_Special_Snapshot.pdf)

forces in parts of Jonglei and Upper Nile and the arrest and trial of senior opposition figures.⁷ In 2025, the surge in conflict caused internal displacement in South Sudan to increase by 40 per cent to 3.2 million people, amid reports of widespread abuses against civilians.

More than four decades of continuous international assistance has done little to remedy the humanitarian situation in either country. The Sudans have hosted major humanitarian interventions over the decades, including Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) (1989–2005), the largest humanitarian intervention of its time.⁸ OLS was one of the first interventions that led the humanitarian sector to examine its unintended impacts and proposing ways of mitigating them.⁹ Despite generations of experience and learning, these lessons do not appear to have resulted in meaningful reforms to the humanitarian system.

b) What are the Conflict Sensitivity Facilities?

The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) in South Sudan and the Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF) in Sudan arose from periods of crisis, which triggered episodes of soul searching and reflection among the aid communities in both countries. In South Sudan, the collapse of the post-independence political settlement and the outbreak of civil war in December 2013 had exposed the limits of internationally driven state-building. In 2016, the CSRF was established to help aid actors navigate the difficult operational conditions and political complexities.

7 Awang FM (2026), 'South Sudan power-sharing collapse drives violence and mass displacement', *The New Humanitarian*, 12 March (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2026/03/12/south-sudan-power-sharing-collapse-drives-violence-mass-displacement>)

8 At the time, OLS was regarded as an innovative approach to negotiated access for war-affected populations on both sides of a civil war, but it has since come under criticism, particularly by political forces in Sudan, for reinforcing differences between Sudan and Southern Sudan and perpetuating divisive policies that date back to the colonial era. Maxwell D, Santschi M, Gordon R (2014), 'Looking back to look ahead? Reviewing key lessons from Operation Lifeline Sudan and past humanitarian operations in South Sudan', Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, Working Paper No. 24, October (<https://dzo.kei.mybluehost.me/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/looking-back-to-look-ahead-in-south-sudan.compressed-2.pdf>)

9 Other precedents that predated OLS include the Biafra famine and the Cambodia refugee crisis, where similar issues were raised.

In Sudan, President Omar al-Bashir was ousted in April 2019 following a civilian-led popular uprising, ending his nearly 30 years of authoritarian rule. A joint civilian-military Sovereign Council was established to oversee the transition, creating new opportunities – as well as risks – for international engagement. Building on the experiences of the CSRF in South Sudan, the CSF was established in 2021 as a specialised support mechanism to help aid actors better understand conflict dynamics in Sudan and ensure their programmes avoid harm and, where possible, contribute to peace.¹⁰

The facilities function as platforms that provide a range of services aimed at improving conflict sensitivity in the aid sector, including: knowledge management, research and analysis on conflict dynamics, aid risks and thematic issues; advisory and technical support to donors, policy-makers and practitioners; convening of problem-solving discussions and the promotion of shared learning across aid communities; and strengthening capacity by providing practical support that organisations and individuals can apply in their day-to-day programming. Typically, the facilities focus on audiences within their specific contexts, but this paper aims to connect country-level lessons with policymakers at the global level who are involved in discussions about the future of humanitarian action.

10 See: Groenewald H (2021), 'Supporting conflict sensitivity through country-focused facilities: Lessons from Libya, Lebanon, South Sudan and Yemen', Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub, October (https://peacenexus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Supporting-conflict-sensitivity-through-country-focused-facilities_CSC-Hub_digital-version-1.pdf). Different iterations of similar models have also emerged in other countries, including Ethiopia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

c) **The purpose of this paper**

Major cuts to foreign assistance in recent years have prompted aid actors to once again reconsider their approaches and look for new ways of delivering humanitarian programmes.¹¹ The core problem in the aid sector comes from a tendency among international humanitarian actors to centre themselves in decision-making, relegating affected communities to passive recipients of assistance who lack the necessary skills and resources to address their own needs. This approach aims to expedite access to humanitarian resources for affected populations in the short term, but it also undermines the agency of local populations in the longer term. The solution therefore lies in systems that are more adaptive, capable of responding to the evolving context through iterative learning loops, and firmly embedded within local response networks.¹²

Despite the apparent consensus on the nature of the problem and how best to solve it, the humanitarian system has repeatedly failed to deliver on its promises of reform. The aid sector now faces a legitimacy crisis on all sides. As one interviewee characterised it, "It's a battle for the soul of humanitarian action"¹³ – between those who would weaponise humanitarian aid in pursuit of their national interests and those who would seize the opportunity to advance 'good practice' and decades of learning in the sector. Whatever course the aid sector takes in the years to come, it is increasingly clear that the status quo is no longer tenable. Meanwhile, the policy space for more transformative action appears to be shrinking at both global and national levels.

11 See, for example: Fletcher T (2025), 'The Humanitarian Reset. Message from Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher to the humanitarian community', OCHA, 10 March (<https://www.unocha.org/news/humanitarian-reset-10-march-2025>); United Nations (2025), 'What is the UN80 initiative?', 15 July (<https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en/news/what-un80-initiative>). These contemporary initiatives are echoes of prior reform efforts dating back to the earliest days of liberal humanitarianism in the 1980s and 90s.

12 Cedric de Coning provides a particularly compelling analysis of the shortcomings in the international community's approach to resolving protracted conflicts. See: de Coning C, Saraiva R, Muto A (eds.) (2023), *Adaptive Peacebuilding: A New Approach to Sustaining Peace in the 21st Century* (Springer) (<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18219-8>)

13 Interview with humanitarian policy expert (19 March 2026).

This paper aims to contribute to this policy discourse, drawing on the experience of the Conflict Sensitivity Facilities and the authors, secondary source material, and interviews with 27 experts and practitioners with experience rooted in South Sudan and Sudan. One particular observation that emerged over the course of this analysis was the contribution that peacebuilding and movement-building methodologies can have to help move beyond sticking points and unlock the transformative processes that are required for systems-level change. These processes include understanding and addressing root causes; facilitating dialogue and rebuilding trust across siloes and divisions; enabling applied learning and adaptive approaches; focusing on transforming relationships, behaviours and perceptions; and shifting to participatory, locally owned strategies based upon agency and collective endeavour.

The paper is organised in three parts. 'Part 1: Recurring themes' looks at key issues that trace a thread throughout years of humanitarian response, drawing on specific examples to help illustrate and ground the lessons. 'Part 2: An aid system in crisis' reflects on how the changing aid landscape has been playing out in both countries, including reflections on how change happens in practice. 'Part 3: Pathways for transformative action' highlights innovative strategies and conceptual framings that have been used to support reforms in the global context.¹⁴

¹⁴ Two other recent papers by the CSRF provide additional viewpoints on critical issues relating to the future of aid. Read together, the three papers provide a comprehensive examination of the topic for policy-makers at all levels. Bottjen A, Rombek Ezron N, Hoth Gony R, CSRF (2026), 'Lessons for a System Under Pressure: What Ten Years of Conflict Sensitivity Work Tells Us About the Future of Aid in South Sudan', March (<https://csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/CSRF-research-An-Aid-System-Under-Pressure.pdf>); Biong Deng L, Nyibol E, Okidi R, CSRF (2026), 'When aid disappears – Lessons from South Sudanese mutual aid', April (<https://csrf-southsudan.org/repository/csr-research-when-aid-disappears-lessons-from-south-sudanese-mutual-aid/>)

Part 1: Recurring themes

The subsections below explore key dilemmas that the aid systems in Sudan and South Sudan have experienced over the years. Many of these challenges take on new meaning in a context of rapidly contracting foreign assistance.

a) Politics of humanitarian assistance

Lesson 1: Over time, humanitarian action in protracted crises becomes embedded within governance systems, shaping political incentives, legitimising certain authorities over others, and sometimes reinforcing the very governance failures that contribute to crisis.

In a protracted conflict with reduced humanitarian assistance and a widening service gap, the role of governments and relevant authorities is of paramount importance. The challenge in Sudan and South Sudan is that public authorities are often unable or unwilling to meet the humanitarian needs of their people. In some cases, they actively benefit from the war, as it shields them from democratic accountability and provides opportunities to profit from illicit trade and wartime economies.¹⁵ As an interviewee observed:

“There’s a fundamental question you have to ask about the authority you’re engaging with at different levels: is this crisis manufactured to their benefit? If so, then it’s more of a hostage negotiation than it is a genuine governance problem.”¹⁶

The counterproductive ways in which humanitarian interventions can interact with public authority have been well-documented in the Sudanese and South Sudanese contexts. One key risk is that aid simultaneously legitimises certain authorities by making them appear more

effective and connected to resources, while also shielding them from accountability by reducing expectations on the government to provide services.¹⁷ An interviewee from South Sudan noted the contradictions in current approaches to working with government: “At the same time that government is launching its aerial bombardment campaign [in northern Jonglei], we were discussing a national development plan for the next ten years. It just doesn’t add up.”¹⁸

Aid can also create incentives for control, by providing a mechanism for government and armed non-state actors to ‘shape the movements of populations – and the control of those populations and any resources accruing to them – by variously denying and enabling humanitarian access to those populations.’¹⁹ Aid becomes yet another tool that political or military actors can use to reward or punish their perceived allies or opponents, thereby increasing their leverage in the political marketplace of war.²⁰

Reductions in aid have not shifted this fundamental logic. For example, in 2025, the government of South Sudan reportedly coordinated with Fogbow, a US for-profit logistics company that has also operated in Gaza and Sudan, to drop food into government-controlled

17 This has led to a shift in some governments, including in the US, to increasingly channel aid through government structures rather than relying on international organisations as intermediaries. While there may be merits to such an approach in a more stable context, this model is far less attractive in protracted conflicts such as Sudan and South Sudan. See, for example: U.S. Department of State (2026), ‘America First in Africa’ (<https://www.state.gov/releases/bureau-of-african-affairs/2026/03/america-first-in-africa/>)

18 Interview with donor representative (8 April 2026).

19 Kindersley N, Rolandsen OH (2019), ‘Who Are the Civilians in the Wars of South Sudan?’, Security Dialogue 50 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335242741_Who_are_the_civilians_in_the_wars_of_South_Sudan). For more on this topic, see: Geneva Call (2021), ‘Understanding Humanitarian Access and the Protection of Civilians in an Era of Depoliticized War’ (<https://docs.southsudanngoforum.org/research/report/understanding-humanitarian-access-and-protection-civilians-era-depoliticized-war>); Human Rights Watch/Africa (1994), ‘Civilian Devastation: Abuses by All Parties in the War in Southern Sudan’ (<https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/s/sudan/sudan946.pdf>)

20 The manipulation of aid serves this purpose alongside the use of violence. For more on political marketplace theory, see: de Waal A (2015), *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Polity Press).

15 This critique echoes longstanding concerns about OLS and the tendency for humanitarian action in political emergencies to expand beyond relief into governance, diplomacy, advocacy and conflict management, while remaining insufficiently accountable for its political effects. Omaar R, de Waal A (1994), ‘Humanitarianism Unbound? Current Dilemmas Facing Multi-Mandate Relief Operations in Political Emergencies’, African Rights Discussion Paper No. 5, <https://cs-rf-southsudan.org/repository/humanitarianism-unbound-current-dilemmas-facing-multi-mandate-relief-operations-political-emergencies/>

16 Interview with humanitarian practitioner (3 March 2026).

settlements in Upper Nile, while denying humanitarian access to civilians in areas controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO).²¹ This prompted criticism from mainstream humanitarian actors that the operation was advancing the government's counter-insurgency strategy without regard for humanitarian principles. There are even more egregious examples. In Jonglei in 2026, civilians reportedly came out of hiding due to promises of food aid, at which point they were fired upon, killing 25 people including women and children.²² The RSF's siege and capture of El Fasher also provide recent examples of how aid and hunger can be manipulated to exact retribution on a population.²³

A more strategic approach to working with government is needed, especially in a context of contracting aid. For example, humanitarian actors could invest more in phased approaches that allow for closer collaboration with public authorities when a local conflict situation stabilises and certain benchmarks have been met. Public authorities at the local level are often more accommodating than their national counterparts, and there may be pockets where more cooperative engagement is possible. In Sudan, this is particularly true in certain localities where relations between civilians and local government are stronger and populations have more meaningful opportunities to confer or withhold legitimacy.

21 Craze J, Falzetta J (2025), 'Fogbow Operations in South Sudan and Beyond Raise Red Flags for Faltering Aid System', *The New Humanitarian*, 16 June (<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/investigations/2025/06/16/fogbow-operations-south-sudan-raise-red-flags-aid-private-sector>)

22 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (2026), 'The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Deplores the Indiscriminate Killing of Civilians in a Food Aid Trap in Pankor, Ayod County, in the Republic of South Sudan', 27 February (<https://achpr.au.int/en/news/press-releases/2026-02-27/african-commission-human-and-peoples-rights-deplores-indiscriminate>)

23 See: Egbejule E (2025), 'Dire warnings over aid and hunger following RSF's capture of Sudanese city', *The Guardian*, 12 November (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/nov/12/sudan-north-darfur-aid-malnutrition-rsf-el-fasher-tawila>)

In Northern and River Nile states in Sudan, for example, communities mobilising around the control of gold mining, environmental hazards and the distribution of mining revenues have at times succeeded in extracting concessions from local authorities and companies.²⁴

Partnerships with community institutions provide additional opportunities (and risks) for engaging public authorities in more contested spaces. Community institutions play critical roles in brokering temporary ceasefires, protecting markets and hospitals, enabling civilian movement, and maintaining access to humanitarian aid and essential goods.²⁵ As discussed in the subsection on 'Recognising and reinforcing local agency' on page 17, any such engagement with community institutions should aim to empower local actors and preserve space for decision-making at the local level – rather than the prevailing approach in which decisions are made in country headquarters. Humanitarian actors must also be sensitive to any discriminatory or exclusionary norms that might exist at the local level, particularly those that affect women, girls or minority groups, so as not to reinforce these dynamics in regressive ways.

24 Centro de Empresas e Direitos Humanos (2025), 'Sudan: Anti-mining protests are rising as companies linked to the military pollute rivers and harm local communities in their pursuit of gold', *Ayin Network*, 29 July (<https://www.business-humanrights.org/pt/latest-news/sudan-anti-mining-protests-are-rising-as-companies-linked-to-the-military-pollute-rivers-and-harm-local-communities-in-their-pursuit-of-gold/>)

25 UNDP Sudan (2025), 'Bridging Divides: Local Peace Initiatives in Sudan', October (<https://www.undp.org/sudan/publications/bridging-divides-local-peace-initiatives-sudan>); Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation (2025), 'Community-led negotiations', August (<https://frontline-negotiations.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/CCHN-Community-led-negotiations-202560.pdf>)

Box 1: Legitimacy and access in contested spaces

One of the ways humanitarian interventions can reinforce existing conflict dynamics is by inadvertently legitimising certain actors over others in conflict situations. This can happen at a subnational level when local authorities are seen to have influence over patterns of aid distribution, or at the national level if aid is perceived to benefit one party over another in the conflict situation.

These dynamics have played out extensively in both Sudans.²⁶ Decisions on recognising legitimacy are made and then reinforced through sustained actions, including by international governments, regional bodies, by the United Nations (UN) and its agencies, and by international organisations and institutions. Such decisions expose the enormous gap between international 'recognition' and perceived domestic legitimacy, leading to genuine operational and ethical concerns. They come with deep implications in terms of perceptions, reinforcing power brokers and enabling international access and influence.^{27,28} They also have direct operational consequences.

For example, UN and Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) mandated staff in Sudan, delegated to protect victims of war, now mainly operate in SAF-controlled areas due to recognition of the SAF as the legitimate representative of the Sudanese state. While NGOs have been able to operate on either side of the conflict, they must navigate SAF-controlled administrative structures for operational necessities. As a result, humanitarian access has become significantly more constrained in RSF-controlled areas.

b) Challenges of sustainability

Lesson 2: The institutional architecture of the humanitarian system undermines sustainability by privileging short-term delivery, compliance and organisational survival over long-term local capacity.

Over the past decade, issues of sustainability have featured more prominently in discussions about aid delivery, due to frustrations among humanitarians and donors with the lack of

progress in Sudan and South Sudan. Concepts such as resilience and the humanitarian-development-peace (HDP) nexus were introduced as mechanisms for bridging the short-term orientation of conventional humanitarian approaches with longer-term development and recovery objectives. While there have been pockets of good practice, the humanitarian system has been unable to fully capitalise on the promises of fostering resilience and HDP nexus programming (see page 17).

At a basic level, funding cycles, compliance requirements and institutional incentives prioritise short-term delivery and organisational survival over long-term transformation. These dynamics are becoming even more pronounced with the aid cuts, as organisations compete over remaining revenue streams and are disincentivised from collaboration and information sharing. As an interviewee characterised the context in Sudan, "The competition is like Hunger Games – dog eat dog."²⁹ An allocation from the US Government of USD\$200 million for Sudan and \$100 million for South Sudan in February 2026 further risks reinforcing the overly competitive and siloed

26 As an unpublished 2018 report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) observes, the large international humanitarian intervention that operates primarily from Juba also serves to reinforce the legitimacy of the Government of South Sudan. USIP, ODI (2018), 'The Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Action in South Sudan', 1 April, unpublished.

27 OLS provides a historical point of comparison. Following global alarm at the declaration of a conflict-induced famine in Bahr-el-Ghazal in the late 1980s, the UN negotiated a tripartite agreement with the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) to allow aid to flow into areas under SPLM/A control. While the OLS model was innovative for its time and effective in terms of allowing access across front lines in an active civil war, it also proved deeply controversial. The formal collaboration with the SPLM/A conferred a degree of political legitimacy on the group, and some Sudanese actors maintain that it fed into divisive policies that dated back to the colonial era and were among the factors that contributed to the secession of South Sudan in 2011.

28 Khalafallah H (2025), 'The civilian façade in Sudan's war: Rival governments and the battle for legitimacy', TIMEP, August (<https://timep.org/2025/08/06/the-civilian-facade-in-sudans-war-rival-governments-and-the-battle-for-legitimacy/>)

29 Interview with conflict sensitivity expert (3 March 2026).

approach to humanitarian programming. The funding is being delivered through the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF), a UN-led pooled fund, with a mandatory six-month timeframe for implementation and heightened compliance requirements that will leave little room for genuine community engagement or meaningful partnerships with local actors.³⁰ Additional restrictions that the US administration has imposed on gender or diversity, equity and inclusion further constrain programme responsiveness.

The way in which the humanitarian system privileges risk reduction and compliance is also evident in the way it supports mutual aid initiatives. Interviewees described funding modalities in Sudan where funds often pass through multiple institutional layers, including pooled funds, UN agencies, international NGOs and national NGOs, before reaching frontline responders.³¹ By the time the funds reach the end user, significant amounts have been absorbed as administrative and compliance costs. According to one interviewee, frontline responders may be left with as little as 20 per cent of the initial amount in extreme cases. The interviewee asked rhetorically, "Are you scared more than 80 per cent of the money is going to be stolen by the warring parties? Because you're basically giving it away before you give it to the frontline responders."³² The inefficiencies of the system have given rise to alternative funding models, which aim to support mutual aid entities directly – such as Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) – with minimal administrative cost.³³

30 UN News (2025), 'UN, US Sign \$2 Billion Humanitarian Funding Agreement for 17 Crisis-Hit Countries', 29 December (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/12/1166678>)

31 Even where pooled funds are intended to provide relatively flexible financing, additional compliance burdens are often introduced further down the delivery chain as intermediaries seek to manage liabilities transferred to them. See: ICVA (2025), 'Risk Sharing in Pooled Funds', July, chapters 2, 14–16 (<https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2025/07/Risk-Sharing-in-Pooled-Funds-July-2025-ICVA.pdf>)

32 Interview with humanitarian expert (3 March 2026).

33 See: Proximity2Humanity (<https://www.proximity2humanity.org/>). Proximity2Humanity first received private funding through a campaign coordinated by *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof, but it has since received traditional donor financing as well. While many UN agencies operate within a 7 per cent administrative cost framework, they often do so by allocating what might otherwise be considered as administrative costs – such as country office personnel, security and logistics support, and programme supervision and coordination – to programmatic costs.

As these examples demonstrate, the sustainability challenge is not simply a function of operating in fragile and conflict-affected environments, but a product of how the humanitarian system itself is designed. Efforts to promote resilience and the HDP nexus have faltered not because the concepts lack merit, but because they remain layered onto an institutional architecture that continues to privilege short-term outputs, risk aversion and upward accountability.³⁴ Another shortcoming of such top-down approaches is that they tend to overlook existing local knowledge and practice.³⁵ A more sustainable approach will require a fundamental reorientation of incentives towards strengthening local institutions, accepting different forms of risk, and redefining success in terms of how well interventions reinforce existing capacities. Humanitarians may also need to revisit what 'exit' means in a context where large-scale humanitarian interventions have operated uninterrupted for decades.³⁶

34 Some individuals and organisations, particularly those who view humanitarian responses as fundamentally short term and focused on saving lives in an emergency context, openly challenge the triple nexus approach. They resist working with more recovery-oriented initiatives and view peace-related initiatives as unavoidably 'political'. Ideological differences such as these present another challenge to efforts to promote concepts such as the HDP nexus and resilience in Sudan and South Sudan.

35 For more, see: Chan N, Schmidlin N (2023), 'Towards a Conflict-Sensitive HDP Nexus in South Sudan: A Collection of Lessons', Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, April (<https://www.csrfsouth-sudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BAC-CSRf-Milestone-Q17B-Towards-a-conflict-sensitive-HDP-nexus-in-South-Sudan-1.pdf>)

36 Among the factors that contribute to the replication of failed models is the fact that they are sometimes very lucrative for international organisations and continue to receive large amounts of funding from donors.

Box 2: Efforts to promote HDP nexus and resilience programming in South Sudan

The UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilization and Resilience (RSRTF) provides an example of a more structural effort to operationalise new thinking around the HDP nexus and resilience programming in South Sudan, illustrating both the opportunities and constraints of prevailing approaches. The RSRTF was launched in 2018 as an inter-agency pooled fund with an area-based approach, which is designed to bring together UN agencies, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), NGOs and local actors around integrated programmes that reduce violence, promote stabilisation and build resilience. RSRTF programmes typically operate in a four- to five-year project cycle, at which point they aim to phase out and hand programming over to longer-term recovery initiatives.

While the RSRTF has had some success in terms of short-term stabilisation in places such as Southern Central Equatoria, Greater Tonj and Jonglei/the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, its longer-term objectives are hampered by a lack of complementary recovery programming to carry impacts forward as RSRTF programmes phase out.³⁷ The fund is also struggling to maintain donor support in a funding environment where many donors are doubling down on the most essential of lifesaving assistance and moving away from programming that seeks to address the drivers of conflict. Meanwhile, frequent government reshuffles, especially at the state governor level, have also directly impacted the RSRTF's area-based approach.

c) Recognising and reinforcing local agency

Lesson 3: Supporting the agency of local actors requires more than simply moving money closer to them. It requires shifting power, recognising local systems on their own terms, and creating space for communities to define priorities through their own values, relationships and institutions.

If the future of aid is to be more effective, legitimate and sustainable, then the goal of unlocking local agency must sit closer to the centre of reform efforts. When international agencies scale back operations in response to waning donor support, local response networks are what remains. Local initiatives possess the necessary relationships, credibility and contextual understanding to respond to crisis in ways that

are socially intelligible and politically workable.³⁸ In both Sudans, communities have demonstrated an ability to organise assistance through a combination of kinship networks, faith institutions, mutual aid practices, customary systems and civic associations, including in ways which intertwine with more formalised national NGOs, professional associations and private sector entities.³⁹ Yet, these same capacities are often treated by the international system as peripheral, informal or illegible, rather than as foundational assets upon which more durable models of response might be built.

³⁷ There is a shortage of developmental programmes that operate at scale to bridge humanitarian interventions and longer-term recovery efforts in Sudan and South Sudan. Efforts by international financial institutions to engage the government in South Sudan have been constrained by evidence of macroeconomic mismanagement and governance failure, limiting both the scope of reform dialogue and the reliability of counterpart commitments. World Bank (2026), 'A Narrow Path to Recovery: The Key Role of Restoring Public Finances. South Sudan: Public Finance Review', pp. 9, 16 (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099012926150542760/pdf/P500556-5b919a16-66fd-4467-b2c6-d9702bea7f7c.pdf>)

³⁸ One way to conceive of 'community' in the context of a humanitarian crisis is as a shock response network, or a web of social relationships, institutions and practices through which people mobilise to absorb, adapt to and recover from crisis. See, for example: Corbett J, Carstensen N, Di Vicenz S (2021), 'Survivor- and community-led crisis response: Practical experience and learning', Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI, May (https://odi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/HPN_SCLR-Network-Paper_WEB.pdf)

³⁹ As Santschi et al. note, humanitarian aid in South Sudan is often pulled between Western approaches that centre on transparency, individual targeting and anti-diversion controls, and South Sudanese social support systems rooted in mutual obligation and culturally embedded expectations of sharing. Santschi M, Gworo R, White E (2018), 'Caught Between Two Cultures: When Aid in South Sudan is Pulled Between Local Norms and Western Systems', Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (<https://csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Caught-between-two-cultures-Report-2018.pdf>). See also: Biong Deng et al., op. cit.; Craze J (2026), 'Grassroots Deals, Not International Processes, Offer South Sudan Its Best Hope for Peace', Centre on Armed Groups, April (<https://www.armedgroupscentre.org/reports-and-articles/grassroots-deals-south-sudan>)

Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the humanitarian system tends to approach localisation in managerial rather than political terms. Localisation is often reduced to questions of funding shares and transaction pathways, with progress measured in terms of how many dollars pass through national organisations rather than whether power has actually shifted to a more local level. The amount of funding that goes to national organisations is not an unimportant issue. Indeed, pooled funds have increased the proportion of resources reaching local and national actors, and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reports that, globally, pooled funds allocated 55 per cent of funding to local and national NGOs in 2025, up from 46 per cent in 2024.⁴⁰

However, progress towards localisation funding targets in Sudan and South Sudan has been uneven. In recent years, the SHF – the second-largest UN-led country-based pooled fund in the world – has increased allocations to national actors, including a quadrupling of support to national NGOs in 2024.⁴¹ However, in 2025, only 5.2 per cent (\$8.36 million) of SHF funds went directly to national actors, while 25 per cent reached them through combined direct and indirect channels. This gap has been especially striking given the scale, efficiency and reach of Sudanese mutual aid structures, which filled major response gaps when international actors could not access many conflict-affected areas. The SHF also underperforms with respect to funding targets for national organisations when compared to peer

funds in Yemen, Somalia, Myanmar and Ethiopia.⁴² The South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) has also outperformed the SHF, having increased the amount of direct funding to national partners to 45 per cent (\$20.1 million) in 2025, up from 30 per cent in 2024.⁴³

The hierarchy of values that accompanies foreign aid poses additional obstacles to genuine localisation. Humanitarian assistance is often presented as if it operates according to universal and neutral principles, and that local actors are too political or biased to operate independently in conflict situations. Such approaches involve assumptions about whose knowledge counts, what kinds of institutions are considered credible, and which types of organisation are viewed as sufficiently accountable or professional. An interviewee observed how the mostly Western-framed values of humanitarianism “allow aid actors to turn a blind eye and hide in the remit of these values, without acknowledging the kind of active interaction that aid actors have in these contexts.”⁴⁴ A more serious effort to unlock local agency would begin from the recognition that communities possess their own cultural intelligence – their own ways of understanding vulnerability and responding to shock – and that any meaningful transfer of power must create space for local actors to situate aid within their own worldviews and institutional realities. Any such shift must also account for the possibility that external support could reinforce existing power imbalances, discriminatory tendencies or vulnerabilities within communities, including with regards to gender. Furthermore, the risk of over-valourising local actors and the role they play due to over-simplified narratives can itself be damaging, placing unrealistic expectations and overwhelming burdens while structural barriers and systemic bias remain.

40 OCHA (2025), ‘OCHA’s 2025 in review’ (<https://www.unocha.org/news/ochas-2025-review>)

41 The Refugees International report explains the SHF’s underperformance on localisation with reference to several factors, including: the unusually difficult operating context; weak institutional capacity among Sudanese NGOs that have experienced repression under successive authoritarian regimes; registration and protection risks, including from the Humanitarian Aid Commission; the SHF’s risk and compliance architecture, which are not adapted to Sudanese actors; and governance and representation gaps in the SHF’s decision-making structure. Noe N (2025), ‘Accelerating Localization: A Roadmap for the Sudan Humanitarian Fund’, Refugees International, September (<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/118949>). See also: OCHA, ‘Country-Based Pooled Funds Data Hub’, accessed 19 March 2026 (<https://cbpf.data.unocha.org/>)

42 Ibid.

43 OCHA (2025), ‘South Sudan Humanitarian Fund 2025 Annual Report’ (<https://www.unocha.org/south-sudan-humanitarian-fund>)

44 Interview with conflict sensitivity expert (3 March 2026).

Another dimension that is not sufficiently reflected in simplified narratives of localisation is the richness of the civil society landscapes in both countries. While the aid system tends to place institutions in neatly defined boxes, in practice the distinction between informal volunteer or community-based organisations and registered national NGOs is often blurred. Locally embedded national NGOs often play a bridging role, owing to their historic relationships and familiarity with the aid system, helping to connect international actors with local response networks. Researchers have also highlighted how more integrated approaches organically emerge from local initiatives – such as a fish-processing initiative in Pibor that helped women, youth and community leaders turn an underused resource into livelihoods, confidence and modest forms of social cooperation.⁴⁵

45 See, for example: Vuijk J (2025), 'Glimmers of Confidence in Pibor, South Sudan – Where the Triple Nexus Grows Unscripted', Global Policy, 29 July (<https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/29/07/2025/glimmers-confidence-pibor-south-sudan-where-triple-nexus-grows-unscripted>)

As noted in Box 9 on page 40, the supporting community-led response (sclr) model seeks to support such approaches through community-owned processes that combine rapid analysis, appreciative inquiry, information sharing, prioritisation and learning, while deliberately building on local capacities and resources.⁴⁶ This approach is juxtaposed against a more common interpretation of the partnership model in which local actors are instrumentalised for their efficiency in humanitarian delivery, minimising their roles as civic actors and relegating them to subcontractors in externally driven programming. At a time when the legitimacy of the international system is under strain, humanitarian actors must reflect on these dynamics and look for ways of supporting the agency of local actors while also making aid more effective and sustainable.

46 See, for example: Jarar M, Sourani A, Jubran S (2020), 'Learning Brief: Gaza community led action in practice', Local to Global Protection, November (https://www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_Gaza_LearningBrief_2020.pdf); Corbett et al., op. cit.; Greene C et al. (2021), 'Learning from Survivor- and Community-Led Response in Haiti', Humanitarian Practice Network, 25 May (<https://odihpn.org/en/publication/learning-from-survivor-and-community-led-response-in-haiti/>)

Box 3: The humanitarian system's impact on mutual aid initiatives in Sudan

When war broke out between the SAF and the RSF in Khartoum in April 2023, international actors fled the fighting and humanitarian operations collapsed, creating a vacuum in emergency response and basic service provision.⁴⁷ In response, local volunteer networks and mutual aid groups – many of which brought a wealth of experience based on both long-held traditions (see below on *nafeer*) and more recently during the 2019 revolution and the COVID-19 pandemic for example – mobilised to meet urgent needs. These networks coordinated food distribution, medical assistance, evacuations and information sharing through decentralised, community-based structures. Their operational modalities were different from international humanitarian assistance in that they relied on local knowledge, trust and social ties rather than formal organisational hierarchies, enabling them to continue operating despite the extremely challenging conflict environment and to adapt their own consensus-based decision-making structures. These local initiatives continue to play critical roles, including providing one of the few lifelines to populations in Sudan that are otherwise cut off by conflict.

In many ways, the humanitarian system is at a crossroads in terms of how seriously it takes mutual aid as a blueprint for humanitarian action. There is a risk that as international organisations increasingly resume direct implementation of humanitarian programmes in Sudan, familiar questions around the capacity of such localised initiatives and the risk (both financial and political) of channelling funds towards them will become increasingly prominent and they will once again be disregarded. On the other hand, increased attention which is clumsy and heavy-handed may come with serious negative consequences. For example, pressure to formalise in order to fit the norms of the system may facilitate access to resources but also risks diluting the characteristics that make such initiatives effective, namely their adaptability, local legitimacy and embeddedness in community networks.⁴⁸ There are fears that if the core tenets of volunteerism, sharing and solidarity are financially incentivised through international funding structures then some of the most crucial mechanisms for withstanding shocks may be undermined. Injections of funding can also affect the character of organisations. An interviewee noted how even modest grants of \$50,000 or \$100,000 can shift priorities for local actors: "That's a lot of money for a small or even medium-sized organisation. It completely changes who they are as an organisation."⁴⁹

At the same time, there will be increasing pressure to understand the importance of and complement such embedded support systems as international aid disappears from many locations. Recent research from the CSRF⁵⁰ and the CSF⁵¹ examines this in both contexts and finds that mutual aid has always been important to communities – before, alongside and despite international aid. However, the complexity, diversity and specific characteristics of such locally embedded collective action and responses mean that prioritising conflict sensitivity is essential to avoid oversimplification and negative consequences.

47 Carstensen N, Sebit L (2023), 'Mutual Aid in Sudan: The Future of Aid?', Humanitarian Practice Network, 11 October (<https://odihpn.org/en/publication/mutual-aid-in-sudan-the-future-of-aid/>)

48 This reflects a broader tension within humanitarian practice, in that efforts to support local actors can inadvertently reshape them in ways that align with external bureaucratic norms, potentially undermining their capacity to operate as resilient, community-driven systems. The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in humanitarian action (ALNAP) has been conducting multi-year research on the impact of efforts to scale mutual aid, and the potential trade-offs based on how this is understood. Posada A, Ahimbisibwe L (2025), 'Supporting Mutual Aid: What the Evidence Tells Us', ALNAP, ODI Global (https://alnap.hacdn.io/media/documents/ALNAP_Supporting_mutual_aid_060326.pdf.pdf)

49 Interview with international NGO representative (13 March 2026).

50 Biong Deng et al., op. cit.

51 CSF (2025), 'The Role of Nafeer and Social Networks in Sudan's Humanitarian Response: Challenges for International Humanitarian Actors in Adapting to Local Mechanisms', August (<https://csf-sudan.org/knowledgehub/the-role-of-nafeer-and-social-networks-in-sudans-humanitarian-response-challenges-for-international-humanitarian-actors-in-adapting-to-local-mechanisms-502.html>)

d) Humanitarian neutrality and the challenge of solidarity

Lesson 4: The humanitarian system tries to set itself apart from politics to preserve its neutrality. In practice this can be at odds with principles of solidarity, which guide much of the local response and which embed humanitarian action in local histories of struggle, reciprocity and shared political experience.

Since the earliest days of the international humanitarian response in the Sudans, aid actors have grappled with their own political identity and how aid is perceived by the populations they are serving. Humanitarian neutrality was a central guiding principle for Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), a critical historical case study of humanitarian diplomacy due to its unprecedented level of negotiated access for humanitarian aid. However, OLS was also accused of providing a non-state armed rebel movement with capacity building and diplomatic recognition (or even facilitating access to weapons).⁵² The humanitarian principles were again tested during the crisis in Darfur that began in 2003. Widespread and deliberate attacks on civilians presented immense moral dilemmas to humanitarian organisations, which struggled between strict neutrality and pressure to advocate against civilian insecurity and human rights abuses. This resulted in adapted forms of 'pragmatic neutrality', which aimed to remain sufficiently non-partisan to facilitate access and sufficiently flexible to allow advocacy.⁵³

⁵² Maxwell D, Santschi M, Gordon R (2014), 'Looking Back to Look Ahead? Reviewing Key Lessons from Operation Lifeline Sudan and Past Humanitarian Operations in South Sudan', Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, Working Paper 24, Feinstein International Center, October (<https://csf-sudan.org/library/7440/>)

⁵³ Humanitarian Policy Group (2007), 'Humanitarian advocacy in Darfur: The challenge of neutrality', HPG Policy Brief 28, ODI, October (<https://media.odi.org/documents/476.pdf>)

Pressures from public authorities further complicate efforts to adhere to humanitarian principles. For example, this is apparent in the long and difficult relationship between humanitarians and Sudan's Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC). The HAC was first established in 1985 to manage and organise humanitarian work in the context of a terrible famine that was affecting the country at the time. The HAC worked in conjunction with the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and later became the centralised unit through which the Sudanese Government sought to mediate all aid. The agency proved adept at controlling aid and placing further pressure on narrow humanitarian mandates which are in principle meant to be free of political objectives. In the current humanitarian response, the UN and most institutional donors require humanitarian organisations to register with the HAC in order to qualify for direct funding, which skews funding towards Port Sudan or Khartoum-based organisations, even if the greatest needs are elsewhere. The manner in which this bureaucracy serves as a strategic tool of control for different regimes in Sudan is well-documented over the years.⁵⁴

When it comes to the principle of neutrality, one of the thorniest areas is its tension with key aspects of solidarity. As noted in the previous section, the imposition of requirements around neutrality becomes a problem if it undermines the agency and ability of local actors to pursue their own agendas, particularly those around rights and justice. According to one interviewee, this has resulted in "humanitarian distortions that depoliticise broader pursuits of emancipation";⁵⁵ to the extent that prioritising meeting basic needs can impede efforts to address drivers of crises and the advancement of social justice – this is "pragmatism used as justification to

⁵⁴ See for example Buchanan-Smith, M (2024) 'The meeting of humanitarian and civic space in Sudan', HPN Network Paper Number 90, ODI, August (https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/HPN_Network-Paper_civic-space-Sudan-final0820.pdf)

⁵⁵ Interview with humanitarian policy expert (19 March 2026).

accept the world as it is”⁵⁶ This was apparent in the humanitarian system’s slow response to recognising and adapting to the essential role of mutual aid groups, despite such groups providing an essential – and at times the only – lifeline to affected populations following the outbreak of war in 2023. The slow response may be attributed, at least in part, to their association with social movements and political resistance (including Resistance Committees which have been at the forefront of organised non-violent resistance).

Locally owned responses rely on an underlying normative framework that binds societies together. Different terms may be used to make this more palatable to humanitarians, such as social cohesion, community interdependence or social fabric, but these conceptual framings do not account for the inherently political nature of solidarity networks at the local level.⁵⁷ Civic values and solidarity are deeply intertwined with local notions of humanitarianism. For example, the concept of *nafeer* (a ‘call to mobilise’) is a long-held tradition in Sudan which originated in Sudanese rural settings as a means for mobilising reciprocal labour for collective tasks.⁵⁸ The adaptability of the practice allowed it to evolve to become a critical mechanism for collective response to crises.

There is a risk that international interventions, whether based on humanitarian neutrality or driven by international peacemaking objectives,⁵⁹ can undermine the civicness⁶⁰ and civic politics that are inherent to concepts such as *nafeer*. Such impacts have longer-term consequences that can undermine the resilience of communities for many years to come.

59 Srinivasan S (2021), *When Peace Kills Politics: International Intervention and Unending Wars in the Sudans* (Hurst/Oxford University Press).

60 Makawi R and Benson-Strohmayer MS (2025) ‘Sudan’s Civic Future: Mapping Medania, Resistance, and Democratci Aspirations’, PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (<https://peacerep.org/publication/sudans-civic-future/&ved=2a-hUKewjEweqFw9KVAxWuRPEDHRVUH1AQFnoECBoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1m3NZOMyjGNYZLIYFZW3MX>)

56 Quote from: Moallin Z, Fouad L, Barter D (2025), ‘A humanitarian trap? Navigating neutrality, relief and rights in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Syria and Guatemala’, HPG Working Paper, ODI, January (<https://odi.org/en/publications/a-humanitarian-trap-navigating-neutrality-relief-and-rights-in-ethiopia-myanmar-syria-and-guatemala/>)

57 Radice H (2022), ‘Humanitarianism as civic practice? Humanity, politics and humanitarian activism’, *Journal of Civil Society* **18** (2), pp 142–160 (https://researchonline.lse.ac.uk/id/eprint/116608/1/Radice_humanitarianism_as_civic_practice_published.pdf)

58 CSF (2025), op. cit.

Box 4: The 'NGO-isation' of civil society

The aid system – its funding, structures, cultures and modalities – has had a profound impact on the civil society ecosystem in both Sudan and South Sudan. Resources and donor priorities have ebbed and flowed over many years, and each context has experienced different trends. One risk that is common across both countries is how the humanitarian system has contributed to the 'NGO-isation' and formalisation of grassroots initiatives and local organisations as they have adapted to fit the humanitarian system's norms and criteria.⁶¹

While the more recent focus on the critical role of mutual aid is welcome, the focus on 'formal', 'NGO-ised' entities has long obscured the continued role of traditional and informal groups and structures across both countries – working outside of, in complement to and despite the presence of the international humanitarian system. This focus has also imposed behaviours, cultures and language on national NGOs, many of which have had to become adept at codeswitching to accommodate both international expectations and community-led agendas.

There are concerns that preferences for entities that fit neatly within humanitarian models may undermine the unique and essential qualities of grassroots responses. The consequences of this could be extremely harmful. Any prospect of an alternative future to entrenched authoritarianism and violence depends on the ability of citizens to organise, coalesce and define their own political identities, to pursue rights and justice, or simply to remain adaptive and able to respond to changing and multi-faceted needs. The informal nature of such entities is also under pressure from authorities, who seek to control groups and networks operating outside of formal structures by imposing registration requirements or by simply attacking them directly.⁶² These dynamics erode the potency and agency of informal structures.

Some Sudanese and South Sudanese organisations and groups have adopted their own forms of neutrality for their protection, to ensure that their mandates remain clear for the communities they seek to support, and to enable them to work across the conflict divide. For example, many Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan have distinguished themselves from Resistance Committees by adopting a stance of neutrality and impartiality. While there are concerns that any imposed neutrality could undermine mutual aid responses, representatives also assert their own agency in making this choice. In South Sudan, the careful cultivation of a non-political identity, or 'soft voice' civility, has been a way of securing space to operate in a highly militarised, politically restricted environment, working across divisions created by conflict and opening up small spaces for change.⁶³ Other local organisations (for example, in the Nuba mountains) have foregone neutrality to deliberately link their response to resistance and justice. These are choices that Sudanese and South Sudanese organisations make on their own terms, rather than those imposed by a dominant system.

61 See, for example: Al-Karib H (2018), 'The dangers of NGO-isation of women's rights in Africa', *Al Jazeera*, 13 December (<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/12/13/the-dangers-of-ngo-isation-of-womens-rights-in-africa>); Moro L, Pendle N, Robinson A, Tanner L (2020), 'Localising humanitarian aid during armed conflict: Learning from the histories and creativity of South Sudanese NGOs', London School of Economics (<https://www.gov.uk/research-for-development-outputs/localising-humanitarian-aid-during-armed-conflict-learning-from-the-histories-and-creativity-of-south-sudanese-ngos>)

62 Ayin Network (2025), 'No safe haven: Sudan's war has endangered humanitarians and volunteers alike', 14 July (<https://3ayin.com/en/ngos-/>)

63 Robinson R (2023), 'Speaking with a "Soft Voice": Professional and Pragmatic Civilities Amongst South Sudanese NGO Leaders', *Peacebuilding* 11 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2023.2209400>)

Part 2: An aid system in crisis – conflict sensitivity risks

International interventions in the Sudans have given rise to a long arc of thought and discussion on the need for reform in the humanitarian system and modes of international engagement more broadly. This body of knowledge is essential for the institutional memory of the aid systems in the two countries and has also helped to shape policy and practice at the global level.⁶⁴ The following subsections draw on these experiences to shed light on the conflict sensitivity concerns that are emerging from the recent contraction of aid.

a) Sudan: Prioritisation and piloting

In Sudan, the immense scale of humanitarian suffering has led to multiple references to ‘worsts’ since April 2023 – the ‘world’s worst displacement crisis,’ the ‘worst hunger crisis in recent history,’ one of the ‘world’s worst humanitarian crises’ and the ‘worst protection crisis in recent times.’ The war has been framed as a ‘war against civilians,’ driving a sense of moral imperative that has elevated attention in global policy forums. Sudan is also a geopolitical priority. Its strategic positioning as a pivot point connecting the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, the Middle East and North Africa has many implications, including for regional stability, migration flows (particularly to Europe), Red Sea access, natural resources (including gold), export-oriented food production (particularly to the Middle East) and international rivalries.

These factors have made Sudan one of the few remaining priorities for international aid and diplomatic engagement in an otherwise shrinking global space for humanitarian action.⁶⁵ For example, when the extensive funding cuts were announced by the US Government in February 2025, Sudan saw much of its US funding

preserved, which gave rise to an initial sense that Sudan was more insulated than many other crises from the financial impact of aid cuts. Even with such prioritisation, a survey by the Sudan INGO Forum noted that the full scope of the aid cuts is yet to come, as agreements that had remained active will soon come to an end.⁶⁶ Furthermore, statements around the third-year anniversary of the war highlighted a worsening situation, with deepening needs and intensified violence.

Sudan’s complex and volatile context has severely tested the humanitarian system. This has resulted in critical lessons as the context has forced the humanitarian sector to respond with reactive changes. While not necessarily intentional, Sudan is also emerging as a pilot for experimentation and innovation in humanitarian responses (as it did during the time of OLS, one of the first large-scale, cross-border negotiated access programmes), particularly on issues such as mutual aid and cash programming. Other factors also contribute to this. The strength of the popular mobilisation that overthrew al-Bashir has afforded non-violent, civic forces with some level of influence and power that is not always present in other conflict situations (particularly in South Sudan, which does not have the same history of organised non-violent mobilisation at scale). Currently, there is also a sense of willingness among senior-level leadership in the international humanitarian response to recognise more innovative, locally led responses.

While the recent reduction in aid has been mitigated by Sudan’s position as a global priority, past events in Sudan provide important test cases for what happens when international actors suddenly exit from a conflict situation. As mentioned earlier, international humanitarian actors were forced to flee the country when fighting broke out between the SAF and the RSF in Khartoum in April 2023. The impacts of this abrupt withdrawal of international aid provide important lessons for how events unfold when

64 Rift Valley Institute (2025), ‘From Charity to Solidarity: Kampala Workshop Calls for a New Vision of Aid in Sudan and South Sudan,’ 1 December (<https://riftvalley.net/news/sudan-and-south-sudan/the-kampala-resolution/>)

65 Even if Sudan itself remains a priority, aid cuts in neighbouring countries such as South Sudan and Chad have impacted millions of Sudanese refugees living in those countries. Moreover, considering the way security dynamics span borders in the region, a deteriorating security situation in neighbouring countries has major implications for security conditions in Sudan itself.

66 Sudan INGO Forum (2026), ‘Impact of Legacy-BHA (U.S. Government) Program Closure in Sudan,’ 17 March (<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/impact-legacy-bha-us-government-program-closure-sudan>)

aid has been sharply decreased or phased out. Some of the lessons that this paper has already touched on include the importance of mutual aid and local responses in filling the service gap, and of recognising and acting in support of local capacities – so that when exits like these occur, the viable community-level institutions that remain have been strengthened rather than undermined.

b) South Sudan: Donor darling no more

Following independence in 2011, South Sudanese were riding high on the joy of finally having their own country and the abundance of goodwill that they were receiving from the international community. Since the end of the 22-year north-south civil war in 2005, donors had poured billions of dollars of humanitarian and development assistance into the country and provided significant diplomatic support for South Sudan's referendum on self-determination in 2011. South Sudan was portrayed as a 'clean slate' upon which to build a new state from the ground up, through national revenue from petroleum together with considerable international aid and development financing.

When civil war erupted in December 2013, just two and a half years after independence, it caused consternation among South Sudan's international partners; they couldn't understand how all their efforts had collapsed over a political dispute among a few individuals in the ruling party. What has followed has been a gradual erosion of donor confidence amid a series of failed peace agreements, persistent conflict between government and opposition forces and allied groups, egregious human rights violations against the civilian population, widespread corruption and economic mismanagement, and an ever-worsening humanitarian situation.

Aid cuts in South Sudan began to have an impact several years before the dramatic changes heralded by the Trump administration in 2025. South Sudanese had already been experiencing reductions in food rations and other forms of assistance for several years, and several diplomatic missions had been scaled down or

closed, including Sweden and the Netherlands.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, when the Trump administration issued its stop-work order in January 2025, presaging the dissolution of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), it came as a major shock for the humanitarian system. The US Government was by far the largest donor to the humanitarian response in South Sudan, and no other donor would be able to fill the void that it left.

The impacts of this abrupt withdrawal of lifesaving support are still being assessed, but among them is the worst cholera epidemic in South Sudan's history, which was triggered by interruptions to the health supply chain in parts of the country.⁶⁸ An interviewee also highlighted second-order effects including the loss of jobs in the aid sector, one of the main sources of employment in the country:

"In the next year, 30,000 to 50,000 skilled South Sudanese could lose their jobs because of aid cuts... Each of them supports extended families – 20 or more children or relatives. When those jobs disappear, families will go hungry, children will drop out of school, and healthcare will disappear."⁶⁹

In the absence of clear communication about the funding cuts from international partners or government counterparts, South Sudanese have been filtering the reductions in aid through national narratives. For example, one interviewee noted a perception among some South Sudanese that the cuts were a form of protest from donors

67 A report by ALNAP found that many South Sudanese 'described the reduction in aid as a gradual process rather than a single moment of interruption', in part because of the aid cuts that had been put in place up to that point. ALNAP (2025), 'Assessing the Impact of U.S. Funding Cuts on Communities and Humanitarian Response: Case Studies from South Sudan and Mali', November (<https://alnapp.org/help-library/resources/assessing-the-impact-of-us-funding-cuts-on-communities-and-humanitarian-response-e-report/>)

68 Barry-Jester AM, Murphy B (2025), 'Trump Officials Celebrated With Cake After Slashing Aid. Then People Died of Cholera', *ProPublica*, 15 December (<https://www.propublica.org/article/usaaid-cholera-deaths-trump-humanitarian-aid-cuts-south-sudan>)

69 Interview with humanitarian expert (3 March 2026). Alongside these larger-scale consequences, a peacebuilding expert (20 March 2026) also noted other mixed results, where some very skilled individuals who had worked for the UN had come back to work for national organisations.

against the government's failure to take care of its own people and its willingness to shift that responsibility to the international community: "People cannot comprehend what happened. This time, they [the US] talked about cutting aid, and then it actually happened. It caught everybody off guard."⁷⁰ Many South Sudanese also hold out hope that in the longer term, reductions in foreign assistance could help to better incentivise citizens to hold their government accountable for service delivery and to address problems associated with aid dependency.⁷¹

At the time of writing, the 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) for South Sudan is only 22 per cent funded (\$324 million out of an anticipated need of \$1.14 billion). Many international NGOs, particularly those reliant on US Government funding, have closed their offices, UNMISS has closed a field office in Torit with plans to close additional field offices in the near future, and many UN agencies are following suit. These changes are having major impacts on the responsiveness of the humanitarian system in the country.

⁷⁰ Interview with peacebuilding expert (7 April 2026).

⁷¹ Data from a national opinion poll carried out in South Sudan in 2025 found that respondents were divided between those who thought the suspension of food aid was positive because it would encourage South Sudanese to produce food for themselves (38 per cent) and those who thought the suspension of foreign assistance was negative because it would make food insecurity worse in their area (32 per cent). These sentiments are also being echoed by government officials in South Sudan. The SPLM Secretary General, for example, said while speaking at an event in Central Equatoria in early 2026: "Yesterday, an international official told me that because they are stopping funding, our village hospitals would close. I told him that in 1998, in Madubai, in Maridi, I survived a deadly case of malaria by chewing the bitter roots of a tree that an old woman showed me. I told that person: Let the hospitals close. We have survived without them before. The closure itself is an achievement because it reminds us of our resilience. We are going nowhere; we will be here."

Box 5: The impact of aid cuts on the humanitarian response in Upper Nile and northern Jonglei

Recent events in northern Jonglei illustrate how the contraction of aid has reduced the responsiveness of the humanitarian system in South Sudan. Since March 2025, clashes between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Op- position (SPLA-IO), and their respective or perceived allies intensified in Upper Nile and northern Jonglei. By February 2026, the fighting had displaced an estimated 280,000 people in northern Jonglei alone.⁷² Yet the response has been far more muted than in previous crises – in large part because funding cuts have left the aid system with fewer staff, less operational flexibility and reduced subnational presence.

Interviewees described a system that has become less able to absorb shocks, at a time when conflict dynamics demand more flexible and locally informed engagement. Downsizing, base closures and the loss of key staff have reduced the system's ability to understand and respond to local dynamics, amid a broader breakdown in relationships between donors, the UN and NGOs following the aid cuts. The initial shock has given way to reduced transparency, weaker communication and more defensive institutional behaviour, making it harder to build a shared picture of priorities and gaps. At the same time, efforts to obstruct and manipulate the aid that remains have continued unabated.⁷³ All of these dynamics have left the response more reactive and fragmented, and less able to adapt to a fast-moving conflict environment.

⁷² ACAPS (2026), 'South Sudan: Conflict and Displacement in Jonglei (Briefing Note 24 February 2026)'; February (<https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-conflict-and-displacement-jonglei-briefing-note-24-february-2026>)

⁷³ For example, no-fly orders in northern and central Jonglei have been framed as safety measures, but they were widely seen as a means of withholding humanitarian services from communities perceived to support the armed opposition.

c) Conflict sensitivity risks in the aid transition

The abruptness and scope of the aid cuts have brought many of the lessons from decades of humanitarian interventions in the Sudans into sharper relief. Programmes across sectors such as health, nutrition, water and protection have been halted or scaled down with little warning, disrupting continuity of care for highly vulnerable populations and leaving significant gaps in essential services. In many cases, facilities have been closed, supply chains have broken down, and trained staff have been laid off, reversing years of incremental progress in already fragile systems.

The effects have extended beyond immediate service disruption to the erosion of local institutional capacity, as national NGOs and community-based organisations, often operating with limited reserves, have struggled to sustain operations in the abrupt absence of external support. At the same time, the changes have also translated into increased burdens on local entities in terms of risk, information and delivery. Communities have attempted to absorb the shock through mutual aid and informal support networks, but these mechanisms are uneven and under immense pressure. These outcomes point to a system that has failed to plan for transition, treating programme closure as an abrupt endpoint rather than a managed process of withdrawal. The contraction of aid has thus exposed the fragility of humanitarian gains and the absence of durable systems capable of maintaining services once external support recedes.

The key conflict sensitivity concern is not only the gaps in service delivery, but the ways in which the contraction is reshaping power relations, perceptions of exclusion, patterns of dependency, and incentives for cooperation or violence. The withdrawal, downsizing and reprioritisation of aid flows are not neutral technical adjustments; they are interventions in and of themselves, with major implications for conflict dynamics in Sudan and South Sudan. Based on the experience of the Conflict Sensitivity Facilities and the interviews conducted for this paper, several risks stand out in particular:

- The wider repercussions of the aid cuts are poorly understood and are unfolding amid little strategic thinking on how to mitigate longer-term harm.
- Enhanced competition and self-preservation within the aid sector are reinforcing division and mistrust.
- Hard-won progress based on learning, contextual knowledge and more integrated ways of working is at risk of being reversed.
- Short-term fixes may actively reshape the response in more extractive, less accountable and less conflict-sensitive ways.

The wider repercussions of aid contraction are only just beginning to be felt, and there is a strong sense that much deeper impacts are still to come. In South Sudan, the government has been slow to grasp the scale and irreversibility of a shrinking aid system that for many years has filled roles that would normally fall to the state. This is compounded by the fragmented nature of governance, frequent reshuffling, and the ease with which political or military actors at various levels can undermine more constructive responses by other parts of the state. At the same time, there has been little clear communication with citizens and communities about what is happening and why, let alone consultation on decisions and future directions. In a fragile and politicised conflict setting, poor engagement around such consequential decisions carries serious conflict sensitivity risks. Aid cuts may be read not as the product of distant donor decisions, but as evidence of political discrimination, elite capture or international abandonment, eroding trust not only in aid actors but also in local authorities and intercommunal relations.

The reduction in aid is also reinforcing counterproductive tendencies within the humanitarian sector itself. As funding shrinks, organisations are having to compete ever more fiercely over the resources that remain, and

some new funding streams are being channelled almost exclusively through UN agencies and international NGOs, with little regard for good practice on localisation. Interviewees in both countries described widening divisions and criticised international organisations, particularly UN agencies, for a perceived lack of transparency and unwillingness to share information:

“Most international NGOs and UN agencies are more inward looking. They are trying to protect their place in the aid industry to get more funding. They are not willing, to a large extent, to better coordinate, or to use the opportunity of downsizing to go back to the core business.”

These dynamics centre aid more firmly on international actors, reinforce institutional siloes, and further undermine local agency. They also pose a direct conflict sensitivity risk. At a moment when coordinated, context-aware action is most needed, enhanced competition and institutional self-preservation can lead to uneven targeting, contradictory messaging, and fragmented engagement with local actors and authorities. This can deepen mistrust and create opportunities for political actors to exploit divisions between agencies, communities and response structures. The limited progress that has been made on localisation is especially vulnerable in such an environment, and national NGOs are likely to be among the first casualties of a system focused on its own survival.

There is also a risk that current shifts could undo the pockets of progress that have been made over many years through experience, reflection and learning from past mistakes. Despite its flaws, the international aid system has accumulated a considerable body of documented and experiential learning that has shaped more context-sensitive ways of working.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ In South Sudan, for example, the CSRF recently identified a number of areas of positive change over its ten years of engagement with the aid sector. See: Bottjen A et al., op. cit.

Yet, many of these gains are fragile and reversible. Aid contraction is eroding forms of knowledge and practice that are central to conflict sensitivity, including context-specific analysis, gender expertise, and more integrated approaches across humanitarian, development and peace efforts. In complex conflict environments, where what works in one location may be damaging in another, the loss of experienced national staff and context-specific knowledge risks more template-driven responses, less nuanced engagement and greater likelihood of harm.

At the same time, the dominant response to the crisis in aid financing has largely been framed in terms of humanitarian reset, hyper-prioritisation and how to work with fewer resources. While understandable, this has encouraged a scrambled approach that favours existing partners, short-term fixes, and what might be described as contraction without transformation. In a system under shock, there is a strong incentive to fall back on familiar relationships, transactional arrangements and established ‘big aid’ modalities. Such coping strategies may reduce immediate institutional pain, but they also deepen longer-term conflict sensitivity risks.

The reduction or closure of subnational infrastructure, such as field offices or aviation routes will have far-reaching consequences. In heavily aid-dependent areas, abrupt withdrawal can alter local protection arrangements, weaken deterrence, reduce monitoring, and increase the leverage of armed or political actors. Patterns of withdrawal can also generate new resentment, as illustrated by responses to UNMISS’s withdrawal from Torit. When UNMISS representatives justified the decision by pointing to the relative stability in Eastern Equatoria as compared to more conflict-affected parts of the country, residents reportedly responded by asking why they were being punished for their good behaviour.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Interview with donor representative (9 April 2026).

Where the state cannot fill the gap, other authorities, including armed actors, may step in to provide access, patronage or protection, thereby converting aid withdrawal into a shift in public authority. More broadly, short-term workarounds risk normalising forms of aid delivery that are fast but socially and politically corrosive, reshaping the response in more extractive, less accountable and less conflict-sensitive directions.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that the central conflict sensitivity challenge is not simply how to do less with less, but how to ensure that the contraction of aid does not intensify grievance, reinforce exclusion, weaken social cohesion or create new opportunities for coercive forms of authority. So far, there is little evidence that the humanitarian system is managing this transition in ways that are likely to push relationships in a more constructive direction. Indeed, many interviewees questioned whether the system is capable of reforming itself. As one interviewee put it, “Turkeys don’t vote for Christmas.”⁷⁶ However, there was also a strong sense that the scale of the current shock may create an opening for more fundamental change than has previously been possible.

⁷⁶ Interview with peacebuilding expert (3 March 2026).

Part 3: Pathways for transformative action

In many ways, the humanitarian system is well-resourced to facilitate systemic change: it has extensive resources and skills dedicated to monitoring, evaluation and learning; it has been through many previous reform and change processes; it has a vast global system with thousands of coordination and working group meetings to discuss how to navigate a huge diversity of contexts; and it is served by global gatherings, platforms and think tanks which carry immense institutional knowledge. It is, however, also often characterised by those within the system as insular, exceptionalist and rigid, often struggling to balance a commitment to applying norms and standards with the realities of the most volatile and intensely demanding crises and contexts.

This is far from the first period of reform; however, there is a strong sense that the shocks that the system is currently experiencing are unprecedented – this moment is existential and urgent. The system is being reshaped under pressure and something fundamental is changing irreversibly, due to both forced circumstances and the cumulative weight of necessity over a much longer period. The best traits of the humanitarian system can help to carry the hope and potential for more profound transformation. This requires seeing the system as much bigger than the faces that usually represent it in high-level global forums. Going back to basics is not just about narrowing mechanical approaches, but is instead focused on the initial concept of solidarity that the whole notion of humanitarian action grew from. Aid actors also need to value the processes, skills and approaches that lead to diverse, honest and accessible conversations – conversations that enable the system to look deeply within and outside of itself to understand what kind of system needs to emerge.

While the previous sections have focused on practical examples and context-based lessons, this section explores process and the steps towards changes in behaviour and culture at a systemic level. It moves beyond the pessimism that often pervades these discussions to provide a more positive and forward-looking vision centred on systems change, community-led response, alternative forms of legitimacy, and reframing or reimagining of prevailing value systems. A thread that runs throughout is a focus on drawing from peacebuilding approaches, including a focus on grassroots agency and mobilisation, the value of relationships and what knits communities and societies together, and intentionally addressing root causes and systemic change.

a) Systems thinking approaches to unstick long-term barriers

The changing aid landscape in South Sudan and Sudan is influenced by multiple forces that are having impacts at local, national and global levels simultaneously. Systems thinking is particularly relevant for such complexity (including that of the humanitarian system itself), and can help to identify entry points for change that may be possible at a time when things seem stuck in perpetuity.⁷⁷ The usefulness of tools and models such as those developed by systems analyst Donella Meadows⁷⁸ is demonstrated in CSRF analysis, which uses an adapted version of one of her frameworks to identify specific leverage points for changing the aid system in South Sudan.⁷⁹ ALNAP has also tracked the relevance of systems approaches to learning, including publishing a 'systems thinking handbook for humanitarians'.⁸⁰

77 The Start Network, for example, outlines how it bases its work and approach to applying these concepts in an online guide: Start Network (2024), 'Start Network Systems Change Guide' (<https://systemschange.startnetwork.org/>)

78 Meadows D (2008), *Thinking in systems* (Chelsea Green Publishing). See <https://donellameadows.org/> for more.

79 Bottjen A et al., op. cit.

80 Campbell L (2021), 'Systems thinking handbook for humanitarians', ALNAP (https://alnnap.cdn.ngo/media/documents/ALNAP_Systems_thinking_handbook.pdf)

The contribution of Indigenous cultures and knowledge to systems thinking is poorly acknowledged but is a critical intellectual heritage.⁸¹ Greater appreciation of more pluralistic ways of knowing and being can further unlock deeper understanding of relationality and awareness of how we enact our worlds.

The Box 6 provides an example of a systems change framework – in this case the Berkana Two Loops model⁸² – which can help guide strategic decision-making when a dominant system seems to be collapsing and a new system based on more transformative change has the chance to emerge. Rather than reinforce perceptions of a growing chasm between the old ways and an entirely new system, the Berkana model highlights how they may interconnect, but ultimately also acknowledges that there is a fundamental rupture between the previous assumed norms and status quo and what is now changing or needs to change. In that regard, thinking in this way can help to liberate the ideas and transformative thinking required to pave the way for the characteristics of an emergent system. While some elements of the ‘liberal humanitarian era’ will likely continue, many impactful responses will move beyond this – to embrace plurality, to view local and community-led responses as central rather than supplementary, and to move from delivery to accompaniment.

Taking process seriously is critical for such a living and social system, allowing networks and communities of practice to flourish rather than constraining them in rigid structures. The Berkana model also acknowledges the role of each individual in this process. Furthermore, looking beyond the parameters of the existing system can help to facilitate valuable interconnections and learning from other systems or sectors that often operate adjacent to or which already have some integration with the humanitarian system – for example, those focused on human rights and justice or on environmental protection.

81 Romm, N.R.A. ‘An Indigenous Relational Approach to Systemic Thinking and Being: Focus on Participatory Onto-Epistemology.’ *Syst Pract Action Res* 37, 811–842 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11213-024-09672-4>

82 The Berkana Two Loops model was developed by Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze, founders of the Berkana Institute. See: <https://berkana.org/resources/pioneering-a-new-paradigm/>

Box 6: Berkana Two Loops model

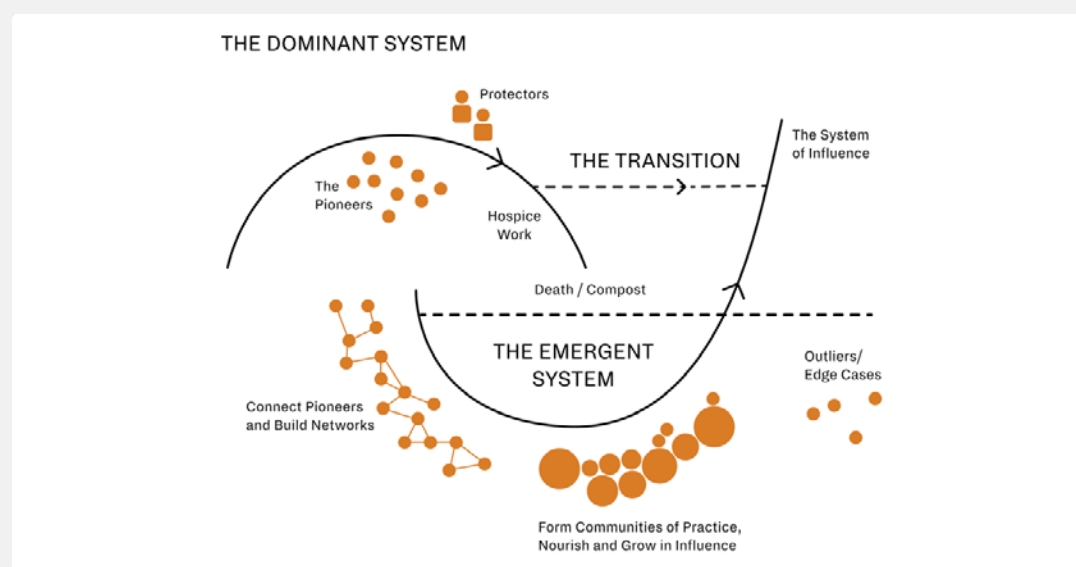


Figure 1: Berkana Two Loops model (source: [Commonland](#))

The Berkana Two Loops model is a model for creating change in living and social systems. It illustrates how, when an old dominant system is in decline, a new emergent system may rise to take its place.⁸³ It depicts the interplay between the old and new systems, while acknowledging the complexity of living across both and the bridging roles that are required. The model highlights the different roles that people might play across the two systems during such a transition, including:

- **Pioneers:** Individuals or organisations who develop and test new ideas and imagine new possibilities
- **Protectors:** Those who create crucial bridges between the old and new system.
- **Hospice workers:** Those who guide the graceful decline of the old system, including honouring the past with empathy and ensuring what is valuable is not lost.

The model places strong emphasis on community networks, which are central to driving systemic change.⁸⁴ Relationships and networks support the development of new knowledge, practices, courage and commitment, which strengthen into communities of practice and in turn may evolve and emerge into systems capable of global influence. Currently, these community networks are mostly absent from discussions about transitions away from the dominant aid system.

⁸³ A useful description of the Berkana Two Loops model can be found here: Commonland, 'How the Berkana Two Loops Model guides us through system change' (<https://commonland.com/how-the-berkana-two-loops-model-guides-us-through-system-change/>)

⁸⁴ See, for example: Nasir R, Carstensen N (2025), 'Support for mutual aid in three central states in Sudan: Game Changing and Saving lives', Local to Global Protection (<https://www.local2global.info/countries/sudan/>)

b) Reappraising who ‘we’ are: Embracing diversity and emerging collectives

By critically appraising who ‘we’ are – who are the most relevant actors to communities during emergency responses in the world’s most pressing crises, who are protecting the most vulnerable in societies and sustaining the social fabric, who is accessing the hardest to reach and most exposed, who is adapting to overcome barriers and address root causes – a huge diversity of actors emerge that are still not seriously acknowledged in the formal aid architecture. While there have been attempts to bridge this divide, many opportunities are still missed. Most importantly, ‘first and last’ responders and the intended recipients of aid themselves continue to be excluded.⁸⁵ In other examples, recent work by the CSRF with conservation actors in South Sudan has illuminated the often-overlooked roles and insights that those involved in conservation work – particularly at the community level – could offer to deepen understanding of response during protracted crises. The changing roles of actors such as Gulf donors and the private sector⁸⁶ have also become more prominent in a shifting aid landscape.

Some of these efforts to tap into new and innovative sources of humanitarian action may require more time and persistence to bear fruit. For example, in the early weeks of the war in Sudan in April 2023, there were many calls to rapidly reorient international aid to support Sudanese responders who were playing an integral role in providing life-saving assistance. These efforts had little effect in shifting how decisions were being made or understanding what constitutes access, and there was a sense of disillusionment and abandonment among many Sudanese due to perceived international neglect and inaction.

⁸⁵ Some examples of efforts to push for community co-funding and co-design were also mentioned – for example, when the project planning process engages heavily with communities from the outset and includes discussion on what they would bring as a community. Interview with peacebuilding experts (20 March 2026).

⁸⁶ Bottjen A, Imatong Employment Solutions Team, CSRF (2025), ‘Towards Integrated Development – Building positive and conflict sensitive partnerships between the aid and private sector in South Sudan’, July (<https://csrf-southsudan.org/repository/csrfs-analysis-towards-integrated-development-building-positive-and-conflict-sensitive-partnerships-between-the-aid-and-private-sector-in-south-sudan/>)

Three years later, signs of deeper shifts are beginning to emerge.⁸⁷ The SHF demonstrated some adaptation and innovative responses (including a microgrant system for mutual aid groups);⁸⁸ though, as noted earlier, it has also been criticised for being poor on localisation metrics compared to other pooled funds. Some in leadership positions have demonstrated dedicated commitment to localising humanitarian response, and the UN system now appears to allow wider latitude for experimentation under global country-based pooled fund guidelines. Donors have signalled their readiness to support a more inclusive, locally led pooled fund and are also piloting newer approaches of their own. However, a severe note of caution must also be heeded (see Box 3) to mitigate the risk of overlooking nuance or damaging unique qualities – embedding a strong commitment to conflict sensitivity can help with this. Meanwhile, as explained in Box 7, actors outside of the formal aid system have found alternative ways to overcome some of the barriers that seem to hold the formal system back.

⁸⁷ Noe N (2025), ‘Accelerating Localization: A Roadmap for the Sudan Humanitarian Fund’, Refugees International, September (<https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/accelerating-localization-a-roadmap-for-the-sudan-humanitarian-fund/>)

⁸⁸ OCHA (2025), ‘Sudan Humanitarian Fund 2024 Annual Report’ (<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-fund-annual-report-2024>)

Box 7: Diverse funding mechanisms for Sudan

Amid the outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023, access to cash became increasingly constrained. Crowdfunding and remittances became a critical lifeline for many, supported by personal networks, *hawala* systems,⁸⁹ and other money transfer and mobile money services such as Bankak, a Sudanese banking app. Such mechanisms enabled funds to quickly reach volunteers and mutual aid groups who were providing essential support within their communities and neighbourhoods. Groups of Sudanese diaspora organised to fundraise larger amounts of money to support lifesaving work, and in some cases international NGOs and national NGOs joined together to adapt pre-existing microgrant models to connect funds to volunteer networks and mutual aid groups.⁹⁰ Support mechanisms from diaspora also extended beyond financial assistance. For example, Sudanese doctors across the globe mobilised to provide remote clinical guidance and training in emergency medicine, and to help bridge critical healthcare gaps caused by conflict and displacement, drawing on experiences of similar initiatives during COVID-19.

Frustrated with the lack of flexible funding mechanisms to support mutual aid initiatives, networks for funders have come together to better support local humanitarian responses in Sudan. For example, in 2024, a coalition of over 15 philanthropic organisations, funders and local groups announced a commitment to action to support, fund and strengthen local mutual aid responders, initially pledging to generate a minimum of \$6.5 million in direct and flexible emergency grants (later increased to \$16 million by October 2026).⁹¹ The collective is committed to the quality of funding and support, and to the conduct of the funders themselves, valuing solidarity-based engagement, deep listening, and prioritising the agency of local organisations and groups. Emphasis has also been placed on the value of varied funding mechanisms, which can be better contextualised to suit diverse recipients and a volatile context.

The most striking critical gap is how, within discussions on the future of aid, there is an absence of actors who deliver aid on the frontline – those who are most affected and who exert their own agency in self-help and collective survival. As one representative of a South Sudanese national NGO noted:

“I have not been involved in any discussions on the future of aid. I have not been in any room where they talk about the future of aid. Unless you look for something, it cannot reach you. But you cannot look for something that you haven’t heard about.”⁹²

The same interviewee noted the importance of lived experience in making decisions on the future of humanitarian action:

“It brings you closer to your emotions when you see a mother that is dying or suffering, when there is flooding so you have to swim or sit on a rooftop: it brings the reality to the project. For me it’s about involving those people that really experience those things in those rooms and giving them a voice to speak, and listening to their thoughts on decisions that are made about them.”

⁸⁹ The *hawala* system is a longstanding, trust-based method of transferring money without the physical movement of currency across borders used in parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. It relies on networks of brokers who settle debts with one another through reciprocal transactions rather than formal wire transfers.

⁹⁰ Carstensen N and Sebit L, op. cit.

⁹¹ See Funders for Mutual Aid in Sudan, available via the Center for Disaster Philanthropy: <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/cdp-resource/funders-for-mutual-aid-in-sudan/>

⁹² Interview with national NGO representative (25 March 2026).

c) Do more good: Contributions to wider positive outcomes

As the Conflict Sensitivity Facilities have evolved in South Sudan and Sudan, they have sought to adapt conflict sensitivity principles and tools in ways that are tailored to aid communities in both countries. A tension throughout has been the need to work with the system in very practical ways without being absorbed as just another box-ticking exercise or technical tool. The facilities build trust, relationships and credibility to accompany aid actors through difficult discussions and collective problem solving, while also providing a valued critical friend to position the consequences of actions in complex bigger pictures.

The facilities interpret conflict sensitivity on a minimalist to maximalist spectrum, which helps to avert the risk of narrow and mechanical approaches. Deliberately working at the more ambitious end of the spectrum of conflict sensitivity – directly contributing to peace and stability and deliberately addressing drivers of conflict – offers opportunity to advance the framework further, from ‘do no harm’ to ‘do more good’, and to activate more transformative objectives. However, this also requires strong commitment and willingness from the institutions and individuals the facilities work with to go further.⁹³

93 Midgley T, El Taraboulsi-McCarthy S, Ahmed R, Carr A (2023), ‘Beyond box-ticking: how conflict sensitivity can help bring about a more equitable aid system’, *Development in Practice* 33 (5), pp 633–638 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2022.2081315>)

Box 8: Conflict sensitivity: Ticking boxes or a useful pathway to unlocking changes to behaviours, cultures and systems

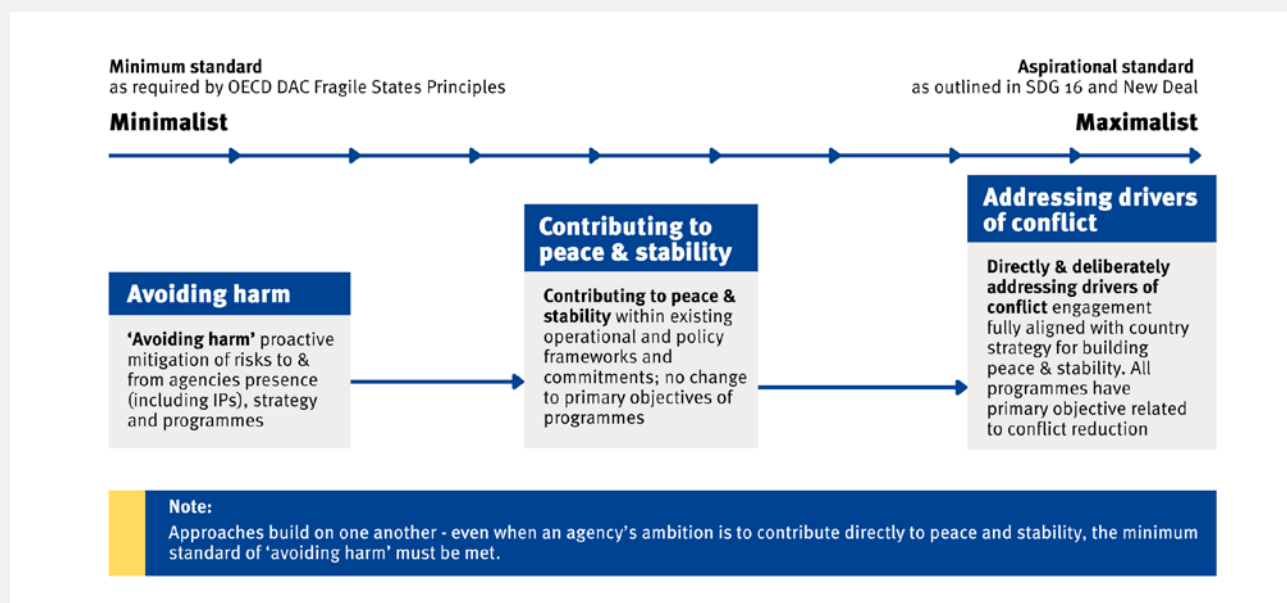


Figure 2: What is conflict sensitivity? Source: [CSRF⁹⁴](#)

At a minimum, conflict sensitivity can provide tools and approaches that offer practical guidance on how to mitigate the risk of causing harm. In the context of a complex emergency, uninformed decisions or mistakes may cause the failure of a specific project; they can also result in more severe consequences, such as contribution to conflict, accelerating environmental degradation, aggravating power imbalances and exclusion, or inadvertently supporting misaligned agendas. Conflict sensitivity tools and criteria can provide a reference point to help assess whether change is happening and whether actions are being taken to mitigate an identified risk.

Beyond technical tools and boxes, conflict sensitivity is at its best when it unlocks critical and creative thinking and enables space for dynamic problem solving; when it positions immediate pressing issues in long-term trends to facilitate deeper learning; and when it provides a means to overcome fundamental obstacles and structural imbalances to address root causes. The Conflict Sensitivity Facilities in Sudan and South Sudan have sought to apply conflict sensitivity in more transformative ways, for example through:

- **Building and applying understanding:** Conflict analysis, research and conflict sensitivity assessments can provide critical insights into issues, context and how interventions interact with a context. The facilities help to ensure that these messages reach key stakeholders and audiences and translate into practical action.

- **Linking change across different levels:** In addition to changes in projects and activities, long-term change requires changes to behaviours, cultures and structures at individual, institutional and systems levels.
- **Centring local agency and capacities:** Sudanese and South Sudanese ownership of key approaches and decision-making within the aid sector is fundamental to conflict sensitivity, and is also key to unlocking positive progress towards a transformative and sustainable aid sector. The facilities work to address exclusionary agendas, misunderstandings, and cultural and systemic barriers.
- **Integrating gender:** Unless negative gender norms are recognised, challenged and transformed, they will continue to be a driver of conflict, exclusion and violence. To that end, the facilities integrate gender sensitivity and more transformative framings throughout their approach to conflict sensitivity.

The facilities have developed very practical and tailored approaches, including meeting people where they are and engaging in proactive network and relationship building across siloes; tailoring support to different audiences; situating guidance in real-world practice and scenarios; building on existing capacities, knowledge and objectives; and ensuring that change is sustainable and long term by seeking to design resources and processes to be adaptable and future-proofed. However, the facilities themselves are part of the aid system – they grapple with the same problems as their audiences and struggle to not be consumed by the system themselves. In view of this, a strong emphasis is placed on learning and adaptive management to constantly assess and reorient, to try to mitigate against the facilities' own pitfalls.

94 CSRF (2017), 'Contextualised conflict sensitivity guidance for South Sudan', September (<https://csrf-southsudan.org/repository/contextualised-conflict-sensitivity-guidance-south-sudan/>)

d) Fundamentally reframing what counts

Within the humanitarian system, existing hierarchies and dominant systems are preserved according to the value they ascribe to certain types of knowledge, experience, language and status. However, when such professionalised or bureaucratic norms are sustained at the expense of the priorities and perspectives of the people that the system purports to be serving, then the system contradicts itself. Furthermore, if the system is not adapting in response to volatility and fundamental shifts in context then it entrenches barriers to effective change. Rather than forcing local realities into the categories and requirements of an existing model and measuring what counts according to these terms, the issues covered in Part 1 and Part 2 beg the question: what priorities should shape any redesigned or emergent system?

To unlock more transformative pathways, it is essential to fundamentally shift the focus from the system's outputs towards the outcomes experienced by affected communities. While criticisms of output-driven approaches and calls for more outcome-oriented thinking are not new, there remains a prevailing sense that such efforts need to go a lot further. And, while it is hard to argue with the outcome of 'saving lives', such a framing risks over-simplification by ignoring the root causes of crises and stripping away political agency – reducing complex, rights-bearing individuals to passive victims in need of charity. Such approaches, sometimes referred to as 'emergency exceptionalism',⁹⁵ have been criticised for allowing aid actors to sidestep responsibilities to address the structural and systemic factors that cause and perpetuate crises. These approaches also turn a blind eye to the many 'non-urgent needs' that people at the frontlines view as priorities.

Frameworks such as Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) have sought to improve engagement with communities, but such commitments have tended to formalise the issue without changing the level of influence

communities have over aid decisions.⁹⁶ Previous research by the CSRF explored the disconnect between South Sudanese conceptions of accountability and the international AAP framework.⁹⁷ Whereas South Sudanese interpretations of accountability were based on notions of reciprocity in which an individual or group provides support to another, aid accountability mechanisms tended to focus on power exercised through hierarchies. These contradictions reflect how Indigenous knowledge and long-term expertise are often overlooked in favour of approaches that are more technically familiar to Western aid actors.

Fundamentally different processes are required to genuinely put communities at the centre of articulating what the most important outcomes are. Some approaches have already demonstrated immense value in crisis response, such as supporting community-led responses (sclr) (see Box 9); this highly adaptable framework enables humanitarian actors to revisit existing practices and empower people affected by crisis to lead responses according to what matters to them. Such approaches can help to redefine the outcomes that a pluralistic system may coalesce around and open the kinds of flexible and context-specific pathways that are required to enable change. The Everyday Peace Indicators (EPI) provide another approach from the research and monitoring field. EPI aims to centre communities in how peace is measured, by working directly with them to develop people-centred indicators that reflect lived realities defined on their own terms.⁹⁸ Other insights might be drawn from efforts to recalibrate the relationship between humanitarianism and civicism.⁹⁹

96 ALNAP (2025), 'Explain: Essential briefings for humanitarian decision-makers. Accountability to Affected Populations', July (<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/explain-essential-briefings-humanitarian-decision-makers-accountability-affected-populations>)

97 CSRF (2025), 'Lost in Translation: The Interaction Between International Humanitarian Aid and South Sudanese Accountability Systems', September (<https://csrf-southsudan.org/repository/lost-in-translation-the-interaction-between-international-humanitarian-aid-and-south-sudanese-accountability-systems/>)

98 Firchow P, Mac Ginty R (2017), 'Measuring peace: Comparability, commensurability, and complementarity using bottom-up indicators', *International Studies Review* 19.

99 Radice, op. cit.

95 Kamal A, Dubois M (2026), 'Humanitarian aid at the crossroads of legitimacy', ODI Global, March (<https://odi.org/en/insights/humanitarian-aid-at-the-crossroads-of-legitimacy/>)

Box 9: sclr: Letting go of power

Supporting community-led response (sclr) is based on a fundamental recognition that people affected by crisis are the first and last responders to any disaster. This approach has grown over many years and continues to evolve based on extensive experience across diverse crises. At its heart, it seeks to empower and enable communities to lead their own responses to crises and to rebalance the relationship between locally driven response and external support.

sclr is a common thread that runs through several of the examples in this paper. Such approaches have been quietly applied for many years across Sudan and South Sudan – including historically in the Nuba Mountains,¹⁰⁰ and more recently to facilitate effective support for mutual aid (where it has become known as ‘rushash’).¹⁰¹ By its very nature, sclr operates across siloes, including the HDP nexus, and across the interlinked environmental and climate change dimensions of crises. It is typically facilitated by local teams of national NGOs or entities, with support from international organisations and donors when needed.

sclr has helped to enable those within and adjacent to the aid system to do things differently, by unlocking creative thinking and ‘brave spaces’ in a ‘safe to fail’ approach. It can also fit with existing goals and approaches, acting as a bridge between autonomous, collective local action and the formal aid system. Some elements of sclr that can help to facilitate a deeper reimagining of aid include the following:

- Appreciative inquiry tools support people to identify and build on their existing solutions, initiatives, knowledge and capacities and provide opportunities for improving well-being.
- Guiding principles that have emerged from practice also help to facilitate the changes to broader behaviours and organisational cultures that are required to let go of control and transfer responsibility, decision-making and funding to informal groups. This includes an awareness of ingrained ‘perverse incentives’, and ‘unlearning’ old ways that have also permeated local and national organisations.¹⁰²

100 See examples via Local to Global Protection: <https://www.local2global.info/countries/sudan/>

101 An Arabic word meaning ‘the gentle sprinkling of water or light rain that nourishes germinating seedlings.’

102 Corbett et al., op. cit.

Conclusion and recommendations

The limited capacity for reform in the humanitarian sector has produced a false choice between two options: dismantling the existing system entirely or continuing with business as usual. On one side, critics of the status quo argue that meaningful change requires tearing the system down and starting afresh. According to this viewpoint, humanitarians should not be expected to implement reforms that would decentre and potentially disempower them in the process. Yet, some visions of a 'fresh start' risk situating the system even more firmly around the interests of wealthy donor states, through a more transactional and interest-based approach to aid that serves the interests of bilateral donors as the primary justification for engagement. At its extreme, this approach resembles a return to a quasi-colonial order in which decisions are concentrated in a small number of countries and humanitarian aid is something that is 'done' to affected populations, not something that comes alongside and is enacted in solidarity with them.¹⁰³

The humanitarian system has proven very resistant to change, however. Even as the aid system confronts unprecedented funding cuts, its response – as seen in experiences in the two Sudans – has largely been to continue operating as before, but with fewer staff, smaller geographic footprints, and a narrower focus on the most basic life-saving services. This is a missed opportunity and serves to further replicate models of intervention that are somewhat effective in treating symptoms but unable to address the causes of humanitarian crises. It also leaves humanitarian aid vulnerable to attack by sceptical political forces in donor countries.

Resolving this false choice requires understanding a basic dynamic. In Sudan and South Sudan, a deterioration in the political and security context often occurs quickly and dramatically, frequently triggered by decisions taken by a small number of powerful actors. By contrast, positive change tends to be incremental, emerging from structural forces beyond the control of any single actor. Systems must anticipate rapid shocks triggered by elite decisions, while strategies for positive change should leverage slower-moving trends associated with technology, demographics, education, markets, evolving sociocultural norms and, above all, the agency of individuals and the collective endeavour that binds them together. Several recommendations flow from this analysis:

Recommendation 1:

A first priority is to **ensure that voices from conflict-affected countries**, including Sudan and South Sudan, **feature more prominently and substantively in discussions on humanitarian reform**, both at national and global levels. Too often, these debates are shaped by actors embedded within the international system, with limited grounding in the lived realities of those navigating crisis on a daily basis. This underscores the importance of creating platforms where local actors are not merely consulted but are actively shaping both the diagnosis of problems and the design of solutions. Embedding such voices more systematically in humanitarian reform processes would not only improve relevance but also help to surface blind spots that continue to undermine reform efforts. This requires rethinking process itself and embracing diverse and fluid approaches that can help to facilitate a more pluralistic understanding of humanitarianism.

¹⁰³ Carver F, Oringa C (2022), 'The Aid Generation: South Sudanese Perspectives on Aid', Rift Valley Institute, South Sudan Studies Association, July, unpublished report.

Recommendation 2:

A second area for rethinking lies in **drawing more deliberately on insights from movement-building and peacebuilding practice**. Successful movements are not defined primarily by their compliance systems or organisational form, but by their ability to mobilise constituencies (at subnational, national and transnational levels), build trust, and sustain collective action over time. Similarly, peacebuilding initiatives often originate in and work with the very community structures that also respond to conflict shocks, strengthening the relationships, norms and institutions that underpin resilience. These fields offer important lessons for humanitarian reform, particularly in terms of the skills, perspectives and relational approaches required to support locally driven systems without subsuming them. If humanitarian reform is, at its core, a political challenge, then reform efforts must also grapple with how to shift political incentives within donor governments, multilateral institutions and host states to favour approaches that are more effective, efficient and locally owned, rather than those that primarily serve institutional imperatives.

Recommendation 3:

A third implication is the need to more **explicitly confront the normative assumptions embedded within foreign aid**. Humanitarian assistance is often presented as value-neutral, yet in practice it reflects worldviews about authority, accountability and social organisation that are largely shaped by external actors. Unlocking local agency requires moving beyond this implicit hierarchy of values and creating space for local actors to situate aid within their own normative frameworks. This does not imply uncritical acceptance of all local practices, but rather a more grounded engagement with the purposes those practices serve, and a collaborative approach to reforming them where necessary. By tapping into the cultural intelligence of communities in crisis, including their systems of mutual support, understandings of obligation and reciprocity, and mechanisms for managing risk, the humanitarian system can move closer to models of response that are both more legitimate and more sustainable.

Recommendation 4:

A fourth priority concerns the need for **trusted conveners that can bring diverse stakeholders together in 'brave spaces'** for frank and politically honest discussion. One of the recurring obstacles to reform is that the actors best placed to diagnose the system's failures often lack the space, incentives or protection to speak openly about them, particularly when those failures implicate donor priorities, UN hierarchies, organisational self-preservation or difficult relationships with public authorities. The Conflict Sensitivity Facilities in Sudan and South Sudan have sought to provide a partial solution to this by creating space for collective reflection, supporting difficult conversations across institutional siloes, and applying conflict sensitivity not simply as a technical checklist but as a means of unlocking more critical and creative thinking about how aid interacts with power, exclusion and violence.

Ultimately, the lessons from Sudan and South Sudan point to the limits of incremental reform within an unchanged system. The persistence of familiar challenges around power, sustainability and legitimacy suggests that what is required is not simply better implementation of existing ideas, but a deeper rethinking of the underlying architecture of aid. While the contraction of international assistance forces difficult choices about what to prioritise, it also creates an opportunity to re-anchor humanitarian action in the capacities, relationships and institutions that endure beyond external intervention. Whether this moment leads to meaningful transformation will depend on the extent to which reform efforts are willing to confront the political nature of aid, redistribute power in practice rather than rhetoric, and reimagine the system in ways that are grounded in the realities of those it is intended to serve.



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Cover: Satellite image of Sudan, South Sudan and neighbouring countries. Credit: Planet Observer, Universal Images Group North America LLC / Alamy