

SUDAN CRISIS ANALYSIS

Conflict and Food Insecurity in Sudan: Key Risks and Locally Led Responses

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This paper is the first in a series of crisis analysis briefing papers by Mercy Corps in the wake of Sudan's conflict. It aims to briefly summarise lessons from previous Sudanese conflicts and draws upon the wider literature on aid in conflict affected societies. The paper identifies critical risks that may significantly worsen food security outcomes over the next months and outlines potential approaches to these challenges that centre the role of local actors.

Conflict in Sudan has already increased the scale and severity of food insecurity across the country, and there is risk of further drastic deterioration in the next few months. Even prior to the ongoing conflict that commenced in April 2023, 13 million people, or nearly 30% of the country's population, required food assistance. This number is estimated to rise by one million people per week that the war continues as food prices and shortages increase.¹ Within the next 3-6 months, an estimated 19 million people or nearly half of Sudan's pre-conflict population will potentially be food insecure. Food insecurity is expected to be highest in Blue Nile, North Darfur, Red Sea, West Darfur, and West Kordofan.²

This crisis is not taking place in isolation and is situated within the broader risk of Sudan's political, economic, and social fragmentation as the country's centre, Khartoum, is an active conflict zone. Though the world has recently pledged USD \$1.5 billion in humanitarian assistance, this falls short of the USD \$2.6 billion needed for the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan. Further, there is a risk that in-country capacity to distribute assistance may be overwhelmed, with disastrous delays to the provision of humanitarian services.³ Lessons from Sudan's previous conflicts and other conflict-affected parts of the world underscore how food aid and other types of humanitarian assistance are valuable resources for warring parties.⁴ Parties to the conflict have already been reported to be manipulating food and other humanitarian assistance.⁵ There is a risk in any conflict that armed actors will: tax or loot humanitarian assistance and consequently use it to fuel the war economy; control access to humanitarian aid and use starvation as a weapon of war; or otherwise derive political legitimacy from the ability to manipulate or control aid.

The present moment – before more households are driven to increased hunger and impoverishment – presents a unique opportunity to centre Sudan's civic actors' food security agenda. This briefing paper

¹ de Waal, A. (2023) 'Sudan is Bleeding to Death and Current Triage is Useless', Responsible Statecraft. 6 June 2023.

(<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/06/06/without-bold-new-diplomatic-approaches-sudans-state-will-collapse/>)

² World Food Programme (2023) Conflict in Sudan: Food Security Analysis and Forecast. World Food Programme Research Assessment and Monitoring. May 2023. (<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/conflict-sudan-food-security-analysis-and-forecast-may-2023>)

³ Boyce, J. and Forman, S. (2010) Financing Peace: International and National Resources for Postconflict Countries and Fragile States, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

⁴ Jaspers, S. (2018) *Food Aid in Sudan: A History of Power, Politics and Profit*. London: Zed Books.; Craze, J. (2018) Displacement, Access, and Conflict in South Sudan: A Longitudinal Perspective. Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility South Sudan. Juba.; Maxwell, D., Santshi, M. and 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, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University, Working Paper 24.

⁵ Insecurity Insight (2023) The Sudan Crisis, Conflict and Food Insecurity. July 2023. (<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-crisis-conflict-and-food-insecurity-july-2023>); Al Jazeera (2023) As Sudan War Rages, Rival Sides Accused of Looting, Diverting Aid. June 2023.

(<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/16/as-sudan-war-rages-rival-sides-accused-of-looting-diverting-aid>)



identifies three critical risks that donors and humanitarian responders should focus on to mitigate food insecurity in Sudan: deteriorating agricultural livelihoods, erosion of state and customary institutions to mitigate community disputes, and institutional confusion for humanitarian actors over which public authorities to collaborate with. It then considers how the international community can support locally led approaches to overcoming these challenges.

Risk 1: Deteriorating agricultural livelihoods

In addition to the ongoing live conflict, the literature on food insecurity in Sudan and other conflict-affected countries suggests that internal displacement is likely to exacerbate local tensions and increase conflict risks across the wider country.⁶ Agricultural livelihoods for communities in Blue Nile, White Nile, and South Kordofan were already stressed prior to the conflict and are likely to deteriorate further with the ongoing displacement of millions of Sudanese into less violent areas. Competition over land is likely to rise under these circumstances, which is a concern in a country where land rights were a source of conflict prior to the current crisis. Conflict also pushes communities into alternative livelihoods that rely upon Sudan's already stressed natural resources, such as timber felling and production, as communities resort to coping strategies.⁷ These conflict-related stressors may be exacerbated by upcoming climate shocks: between June and September 2023, ICPAC predict above-normal rainfall in most of Blue Nile, Sennar and White Nile states and elsewhere potentially leading to increased risk of flooding in these areas, as well as high probability of above-normal temperature combined with below-normal rainfall in Darfur and North and West Kordofan increasing the risk of localized drought.⁸

Given the ongoing mobilisation of soldiers drawn from the civilian population, there is a strong likelihood that parties to the conflict will increasingly pay attention to feeding them, and the agricultural sector may assume a military significance. In sum, there is a risk the sector is or soon will experience capture akin to the artisanal gold industry, which has persisted even during the conflict given its importance financing networks associated with both Lt. General Fattah al-Burhan's Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Gen. Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, or Hemedti.

Humanitarian intervention to support local markets must always be conducted with caution to potential distortionary effects; in this instance, it must also be cognizant of the risks of co-option by political entrepreneurs connected to warring parties.⁹ As the state is weakened by conflict, there is an opportunity for humanitarian actors to support rather than sideline a network of over 600 agro dealers within Sudan who collectively sustain the country's agricultural sector.¹⁰ Further, interventions must also pay particular attention

⁶ Young, H. *et al* (2005) *Darfur - Livelihoods Under Siege*. Feinstein International Center. Medford: Tufts University. (<https://fic.tufts.edu/assets/Young-Darfur-Livelihoods-Under-Seige.pdf>).

⁷ Maxwell, D. *et al*. (2017) *Conflict and Resilience: A Synthesis of Feinstein International Center Work on Building Resilience and Protecting Livelihoods in Conflict-Related Crises*. Feinstein International Center. Medford: Tufts University. (<https://docs.southsudanngoforum.org/sites/default/files/2018-06/2017%20Conflict%20and%20Resilience%20Feinstein%20Center%20December.pdf>)

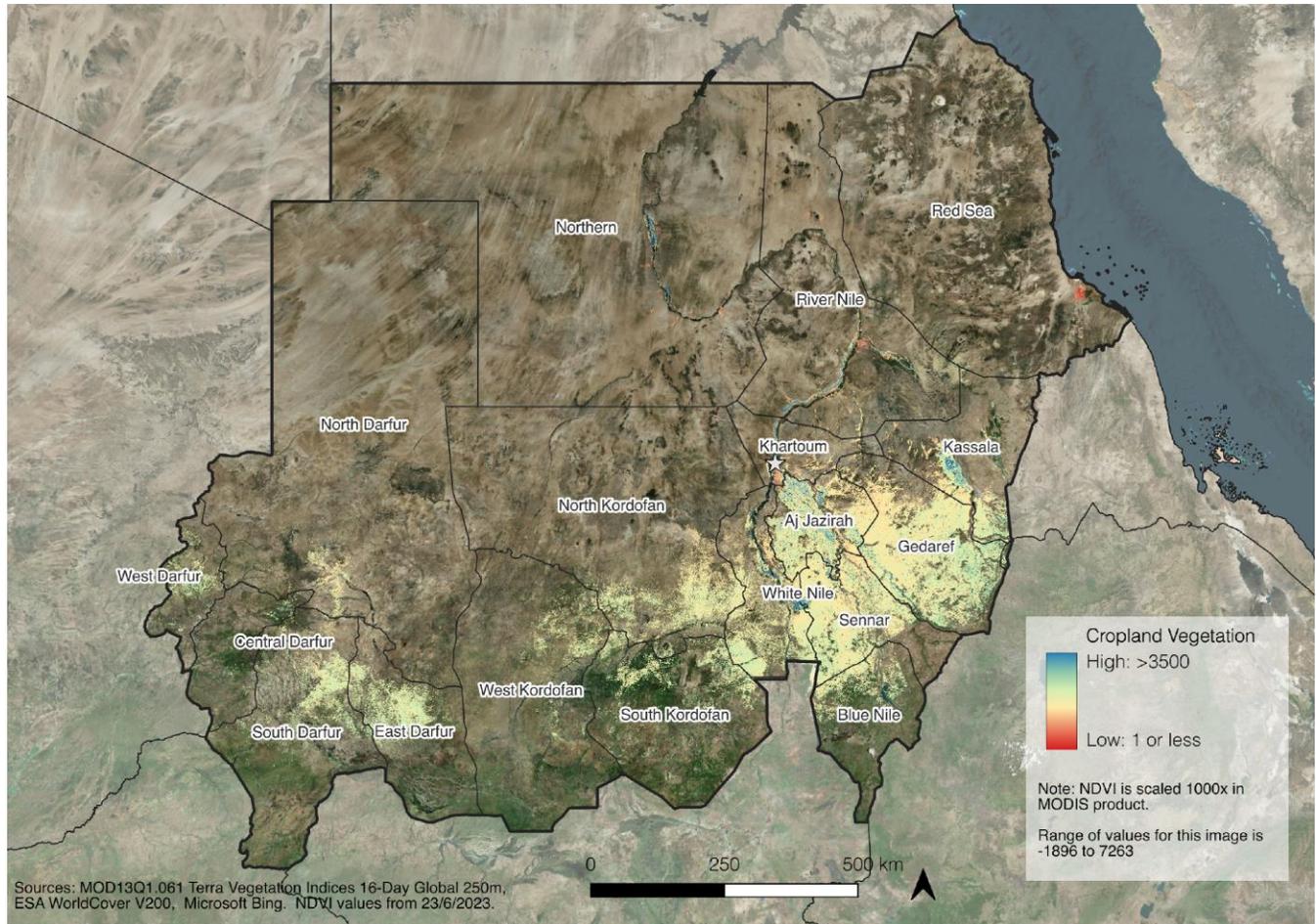
⁸ ICPAC (2023) *Seasonal Forecast June to September 2023*. IGAD. (<https://www.icpac.net/publications/summary-for-decision-makers-june-to-september-2023-season/>)

⁹ Levine, S. (2017) *Markets in Crises: The Implications for Humanitarian Action*. Humanitarian Policy Group. London: Overseas Development Institute. (<https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/11722.pdf>)

¹⁰ D'Silva, B. *et al* (2023) *Political Constraints and Opportunities for Agricultural Investment in Sudan*. International Food Policy Research Institute. Khartoum: IFPRI Sudan.

to potential impact on women and girls, given that many women in East and South Darfur and South Kordofan rely solely on agriculture for their income.¹¹

Map 1: Cropland vegetation in Sudan (approximation of agricultural areas as of June 2023)



Risk 2: Contested subnational institutions

Sudan’s subnational state institutions, particularly the justice system, were highly contested even prior to the conflict. This includes the manipulation of local courts by elites in Khartoum and contestation over state and customary justice mechanisms at the subnational or state level. Ongoing displacement will stress these institutions further, which is a concern if communities are to consistently find peaceful ways to mitigate conflict. Likewise, the arrival of individuals into areas such as Blue Nile, White Nile, and South Kordofan from Sudan’s larger urban cores are likely to challenge the boundaries of community belonging and affiliation, increasing the risk of deteriorating social cohesion, even if new arrivals have family ties in the areas where they have settled after fleeing conflict.

Humanitarian assistance to subsistence farmers has traditionally represented a key component of efforts to maintain social cohesion. The agricultural sector, even at the subsistence level, employs vulnerable

¹¹ CARE Sudan (2023) Gender Analysis in Sudan (<https://careevaluations.org/evaluation/gender-analysis-in-sudan-exploring-gender-dimensions-of-humanitarian-action-and-womens-voice-and-leadership-in-east-darfur-gadarif-kassala-south-darfur-and-south-kordofan/>)

communities who are at risk of military recruitment or otherwise becoming ensnared within warring parties' business networks similar to Sudan's artisanal gold mining industry. Rather than attempting to reinvent the wheel and risk disrupting desperately needed subsistence farming, humanitarian actors should respond by supporting existing subsistence farming efforts. There is an opportunity for humanitarian actors to promote civilian employment in the agricultural sector even as the spatial geography of subsistence agriculture shifts in Sudan given the displacement of millions of people in the country. For instance, prior to the conflict much of Khartoum was an active site of subsistence farming; however, many displaced from Khartoum remain within the Greater Khartoum area and have relocated to neighbouring states.¹²

Risk 3: National institutional confusion and competition

As in Sudan's previous conflicts and conflicts in other parts of the world, local organisations within Sudan play central roles delivering humanitarian assistance, but the national humanitarian architecture in Sudan is violently contested. State-level institutions that humanitarian actors previously relied upon prior to the outbreak of violence have been impacted to varying degrees, but in all places may be somewhat influenced by the political shifts, and in some locations, are at risk of being weaponised by armed actors to the conflict.

The conflict is also likely to catalyse other barriers to the provision of humanitarian assistance, such as armed checkpoints manned by parties affiliated with either the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) or the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Checkpoints are both a money-making scheme that drive up the cost of delivering lifesaving aid and enable parties to the conflict to restrict the delivery of humanitarian assistance. For instance, in South Sudan, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Chad checkpoints have been key components in warring parties' struggle to control territory.¹³

The most meaningful way to overcome these challenges and the likelihood that SAF and RSF-affiliated political actors at the local level continue to try and control state-bureaucracies, is to support civic actors' humanitarian and agricultural efforts. This crucially means reconsidering how to engage with non-traditional partners in Sudan, notably including civic coalitions and groups such as neighbourhood resistance committees. The rest of this briefing paper presents a series of related recommendations.

Supporting locally-led civicness humanitarian efforts

At this crucial moment, donors and humanitarian actors should work together to address the central objective of reducing risk of deteriorating food security. Further, this meaningfully aligns with Sudan's civic movement's priorities, which should be central to the response, rather than side-lined. While the present conflict is distinct from the country's contemporary wars because of the loss or absence of the state, a strong lesson emerging from the Sudan-studies and wider conflict studies literature is the need for the international humanitarian system to work with local organisations. This is even more crucial given the deeply complex humanitarian space at the current moment, in which the full range of humanitarian agencies struggle to support conflict affected populations.

In the absence of a centralised civilian-led government and given the plethora of organisations in country and the diversity of voices in the civic space, international humanitarian actors should work closely with local initiatives rooted in civicness or *medania*. Civicness is a logic of public authority based in consent that is

¹² DTM (2023) Sudan Situation Report 11. IOM (<https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-situation-report-11>)

¹³ Schouten, P. (2022) Roadblock Politics in Central Africa: The Origins of Violence in Central Africa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

voluntarily generated through shared deliberative processes based on norms and rules that respect persons.¹⁴ There are many examples from other crises to build on, such as Syria's Civil Society Support Room, which was critical in dispersing international humanitarian assistance in a challenging environment.¹⁵ This section explores the diversity of civiness or *medania* oriented actors in Sudan and draws from the literature on humanitarianism in conflict to suggest ways forward.

Neighbourhood resistance committees are one of the largest remaining *medania* or civiness-minded civic organisations in the country. While many are in urban areas, they are also present in rural areas alongside other civic actors including unions, business groups, and customary authorities such as sheikhs in nazirs in different parts of the country.¹⁶ Despite resistance committees' salience within Sudan for at least the past decade, the international humanitarian community has limited experience working with them. The humanitarian sector's unfamiliarity is partly because some resistance committees refused to collaborate with the international community. Conversely, working with resistance committees, which are akin to a decentralised protest movement, is also unfamiliar to the international humanitarian sector.

International and national humanitarian actors must reimagine their collaboration with all civic actors in Sudan, which includes but is not limited to resistance committees that have been delivering humanitarian assistance. The Sudanese experience from 2012 onwards and other international best practice provide examples for ways forward:

- **Towards participatory humanitarianism in Sudan**

Sudanese civil society organisations provided much needed assistance during floods that have regularly afflicted the country; this includes national NGOs and resistance committees. Given the nature of Sudan's resistance committees, participation or collaboration with the international humanitarian system will need to be voluntary. Some resistance committees and other civic actors may decide it is not in their best interest to become more visible and work with the international community. However, many other civic groups are likely to voluntarily collaborate with the international humanitarian system.

In line with this briefing paper's findings, support towards Sudanese civil society organisations could be oriented towards supporting displaced subsistence farmers as a priority to both reduce food insecurity. Separately, a network of an estimated 600 agrodealers is already in place and must be supported by the humanitarian sector. Nor is this kind of support simply about reducing food insecurity, it also reduces the risk of co-optation by warring parties as the RSF and SAF have successfully achieved in Sudan's gold sector.

- **Bottom-up humanitarianism**

Additionally, civic groups' previous experience with remittance-driven assistance suggests that a 'crowd sourcing' approach to collaborative humanitarian action is a potential way forward. This essentially calls for a bottom-up approach whereby local resistance committees and other local civic organisations and institutions declare their needs, which are subsequently responded to by international humanitarian organisations. International humanitarian organisations can work within existing rich transnational support networks, including financial – such as fundraising modalities developed by resistance committees to access diaspora

¹⁴ 'Civiness', Conflict Research Programme at the London School of Economics. (<https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/projects/conflict-research-programme/civiness>)

¹⁵ Turkmani, R. and Theros, M. (2019) A Process in its Own Right: The Syrian Civil Society Support Room. Conflict Research Programme. London: London School of Economics and Political Science (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101034/5/A_process_in_its_own_right.pdf)

¹⁶ Berridge, W. et al. (2022) *Sudan's Unfinished Democracy: The Promise and Betrayal of a People's Revolution*. London: Hurst.

remittances – as well as institutional – for example, the Sudan Doctors’ Union for healthcare, or the existing network of agro-dealers for agriculture. This type of flexible approach creates synergies with and ensures integration into existing local frameworks, and also allows humanitarian actors to better ‘match’ their funding with communities in need.

- **Towards national forums**

While Sudan’s resistance committees have devised innovative modes of deliberative action, there is still need for a platform or interface between resistance committees and the international humanitarian system. Syria’s Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) provides a powerful example from international best practice. The CSSR was the first formal mechanism to engage with Syrian civil society, which initially began as an unstructured meeting sponsored by the then UN envoy that evolved into a forum for over 500 members of Syrian civil society. The CSSR provided a mechanism for Syrian civil society to engage in the participatory design of collective problem solving and consensus building to generate a shared vision forward.¹⁷

International NGOs can work with Sudan’s existing NGO architecture and the UN system to collaboratively devise a Sudanese Medania Support Room, modelled on the Syrian example. Establishing deliberative and coordinated processes to provide humanitarian assistance would likely be the proposed forum’s first priority. This mechanism is essential to prevent ‘crowding out’ international humanitarian assistance as communities delay as they deliberate over how to deliver assistance.¹⁸ A Sudanese Medania Support Room, or something similar, is essential in the fight against hunger and increasing the level of support to locally led responses. Similar to Syria, a forum such as a Sudanese Medania Support Room is vital for coordinating Sudan’s diverse civic ecosystem and would provide a much needed modality for civic groups, including but not limited to resistance committees, to inclusively and deliberatively reach consensus on humanitarian assistance provision.

¹⁷ Turkmani, R. and Theros, M. (2019) A Process in its Own Right: The Syrian Civil Society Support Room. Conflict Research Programme. London: London School of Economics and Political Science (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101034/5/A_process_in_its_own_right.pdf)

¹⁸ Boyce, J. and Forman, S. (2010) Financing Peace: International and National Resources for Postconflict Countries and Fragile States, Political Economy Research Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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