

COUNTRY REPORT

December 2022

Conflict-Sensitive Social Protection: Sudan Country Report

Izzy Birch

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Summary

This is one of three country case studies (the others being of Kenya and Somalia) that explore the interaction between social protection and conflict in the Horn of Africa. It summarises the principal elements of social protection in Sudan, with a particular focus on social safety nets and humanitarian social assistance, and discusses these from a conflict-sensitivity perspective. Interest in conflict sensitivity has grown, particularly since the 2021 coup, and social assistance programmes do demonstrate some awareness of conflict risks and dynamics. However, conflict-sensitive approaches are not yet being applied in any sustained or comprehensive way. Efforts to strengthen conflict-sensitive practice should ensure a dominant role for Sudanese actors given the depth and nuance of local understanding required.

Keywords

Conflict; political instability; social protection; shock-responsiveness; humanitarian assistance; Sudan.

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Contents

Acknowledgements and acronyms	6
1. Introduction	7
2. Country context	9
3. Social protection in Sudan	10
3.1 Government programmes	10
3.2 Humanitarian social assistance	12
3.3 Informal social safety nets	13
4. Conflict-sensitivity initiatives in Sudan	14
4.1 Conflict Sensitivity Facility	14
4.2 UN Peacebuilding Fund	16
4.3 IOM Sudan	16
5. Conflict sensitivity of social protection in Sudan	18
5.1 Social protection and inequality under the previous regime	18
5.2 Social protection and conflict under the transitional government	19
5.2.1 Sudan Family Support Programme	19
5.2.2 Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus programme	21
5.2.3 Humanitarian social assistance	22
6. Shock-responsive social protection and conflict	24
7. Conclusions	25
8. Recommendations to Irish Aid	27
References	29

Boxes

Box 4.1: Four ways that aid can either help or hinder Sudan's transition 15

Figures

Figure 4.1: The social protection conflict-sensitivity continuum 14

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Acronyms

CSF	Conflict Sensitivity Facility
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IDP	internally displaced person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
KII	key informant interview
MCCT+	Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus
MDTF	Multi-Donor Trust Fund
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NHIF	National Health Insurance Fund
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PBF	Peacebuilding Fund
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
RoS	Republic of Sudan
SESN	Sudan Emergency Safety Nets
SFSP	Sudan Family Support Programme
SIP	Social Initiative Programme
SRSP	Shock-Responsive Social Protection
SSN	Social Safety Net
SSNP	Social Safety Net Project
STARS	Sudan Transition and Recovery Support Trust Fund
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	water, sanitation, and hygiene
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme

1. Introduction

This report is part of a multi-country study exploring the interaction between social protection and conflict in the Horn of Africa (the other countries of focus are Somalia and Kenya). Irish Aid commissioned the study to inform its work on social protection, particularly in fragile contexts, as a key policy instrument to reach those furthest behind, to reduce extreme poverty, and respond to shocks and emergencies (Government of Ireland 2019; Irish Aid 2017).

Conflict and fragility challenge the design and delivery of social protection while simultaneously heightening the vulnerabilities it seeks to address. This study considers both these aspects, that is, how social protection programmes function in situations of conflict and instability as well as the extent to which they respond to conflict and conflict-related shocks. The three research questions are:

1. To what extent and in which ways do social protection programmes and policies consider conflict-related risks?
2. What features enable the effective delivery of social protection during conflict and in response to displacement? What features mitigate against this?
3. What can development partners do to make social protection programmes and systems more conflict sensitive and conflict responsive?

These questions illustrate how social protection and conflict intersect in the following dimensions:¹

1. **Sensitivity:** understanding the realities of operating in areas affected by or at risk of conflict in order to adapt programmes and interventions in ways that minimise harm and, where possible, have a positive impact on conflict dynamics.²
2. **System resilience:** maintaining the systems and structures necessary for the delivery of social protection during and after conflict.
3. **Response:** mobilising social protection to respond to the additional needs created by conflict.
4. **Transformation:** designing and delivering social protection to facilitate and promote peacebuilding and social justice.

¹ The first three dimensions are informed by analysis undertaken by Slater and Longhurst on the delivery of social assistance systems in protracted crises (summarised in Slater and Longhurst 2022).

² Besser (2021); Directorate-General for International Partnership, European Commission (2021).

Social protection is understood as,

all public and private initiatives that provide income or consumption transfers to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised; with the overall objective of reducing the economic and social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalised groups. (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler 2004: iii)

It includes non-contributory social assistance and social care, contributory social insurance, and labour market policies and interventions (*ibid.*: 13).

This report focuses on two aspects of social protection which are particularly prominent in the literature and programming in Sudan: (i) social safety nets; and (ii) humanitarian social assistance, both food aid and cash. It also briefly discusses informal social safety nets. This was a light-touch review which did not allow for in-depth exploration of other mechanisms such as subsidies and strategic reserves. The methodology involved a rapid but rigorous review of available literature supplemented by seven online interviews with a cross-section of stakeholders in Sudan.³ The literature is thin: a recent mapping of social protection in Sudan notes that documentation is scarce and sometimes conflicting (Bilo *et al.* 2020: 9). It was also not possible to secure interviews with some key agencies in the time available, notably the World Bank and the World Food Programme (WFP).

The next section provides a brief introduction to the country context. Section 3 summarises the principal elements of social protection in Sudan and section 4 introduces some conflict-sensitivity initiatives that have emerged since the revolution. Section 5 discusses social protection from a conflict-sensitive perspective and section 6 looks briefly at shock-responsive social protection and conflict. The report concludes with recommendations to Irish Aid.

³ The contributions of all informants and reviewers are gratefully acknowledged.

2. Country context

Sudan's political situation continues to be highly volatile. The unity of purpose that saw the Al-Bashir regime toppled in April 2019 has been lost as factions jostle for position (El Gizouli 2020; XCEPT 2021). After taking control of the government in the October 2021 coup, the military and security forces have continued their brutal repression of protests (UNSC 2022). Since the coup, there has been an escalation of violence in Darfur, South Kordofan and, most recently, Blue Nile.⁴ Efforts to resolve the situation are made more complex by the involvement of external parties: Western governments appear to have lost credibility among both the pro-democracy movement and the military regime (Hoffmann 2022), while the latter is supported by countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates and is forging closer ties with Russia.⁵

The political crisis is compounding the economic and climate shocks affecting the country. There are now 15.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in Sudan, of whom 2.5 million are internally displaced (OCHA 2022: 5). Sudan also hosts 1.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers, the majority of them from South Sudan. Of those currently in need of humanitarian assistance, 50 per cent are concentrated in areas affected by conflict (*ibid.*: 6). The 2022 humanitarian response plan requires a total of US\$1.9bn, of which US\$1.1bn is still unfunded.⁶

Sudan's vulnerability to shocks is in part a product of the prolonged marginalisation of its peripheral regions which have been systematically exploited to generate wealth by a politically well-connected elite in central Sudan (Sida *et al.* 2018: 4, 22; Thomas and El Gizouli 2020: 6). The resulting inter-regional inequalities are a source of persistent political instability and conflict (Republic of Sudan 2019: 5; Tebaldi 2019: 56). Furthermore, the resources that might otherwise be available to address these inequalities are controlled by Sudan's military-security apparatus. For example, it is estimated that the transitional government in 2019 had control over only 18 per cent of public funds due to the former regime's practice of allowing state-owned enterprises connected with the military and security services to keep their revenues off the books (Baldo 2021: 2).

⁴ See **Statement on the recent violence in the Blue Nile Region** (accessed 27 October 2022).

⁵ See **Sudan offers more oil blocks to Russian company** (accessed 28 October 2022).

⁶ See **UNOCHA – Sudan** (accessed 1 December 2022).

3. Social protection in Sudan

This section provides some background to social protection in Sudan. The first part summarises the main elements of the government social protection system and how these have evolved, with particular emphasis on social safety nets. The second and third look at humanitarian social assistance, in both food and cash, and informal social safety nets.

3.1 Government programmes

The government's social protection system has multiple components, including social safety nets, contributory social insurance programmes (pensions, social security, and health insurance), microfinance, a strategic grain reserve, and a range of subsidised commodities (fuel, wheat, sugar).

The first state-administered cash transfer programme began in 2011, funded by the Ministry of Finance and implemented by the then Ministry of Welfare and Social Security. The purpose of the Social Initiative Programme (SIP) was to mitigate the impact of economic reforms introduced in response to the secession of South Sudan, particularly the loss of oil revenue which accounted for half of government income and 95 per cent of exports (World Bank 2016: 2). The SIP provided unconditional and conditional cash transfers alongside health insurance and microfinance support (World Bank 2014: 156). However, a review of Sudan's social safety net (SSN) programming found problems with the SIP's targeting and distribution and weaknesses in the coverage, predictability, and coordination of SSN programmes (Kjellgren 2014).

A second multisectoral programme followed in 2016, as did World Bank funding to the social protection sector through the Sudan Social Safety Net Project (SSNP). This sought to address some of the perceived weaknesses and inefficiencies in the government system (World Bank 2016). The SSNP also piloted a productive safety net in Kordofan, modelled on Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (World Bank 2016: 4–5).

Health insurance has expanded rapidly in recent years. The 2016 Health Insurance Act states that every citizen should be covered by health insurance or have access to health-care services without facing financial risk. By 2019, the National Health Insurance Fund (NHIF) covered 68 per cent of the population, up from 35 per cent in 2014. The increase in coverage of poor households was even greater, from 39 per cent in 2014 to 89 per cent in 2018. The premiums of poor households are paid by the *Zakat* Fund, the Ministry of Finance, and some state governments (Bilo *et al.* 2020: 16, 20, 41–2). Research in West Darfur confirms the substantial increase in enrolment but notes that, while payment of

the insurance premium is welcome, there are other more substantial costs associated with ill health, such as lost income and travel and accommodation, that families still have to meet (Sida *et al.* 2018: 27–8). Furthermore, without an equivalent expansion of health services, health insurance will have little impact (ILO 2021a: 193).

After the 2019 revolution, the transitional government embarked on some new policy directions and initiatives with social welfare and development one of its ten stated priorities (RoS 2019: 26–8). It began developing both a social protection strategy and a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, allocating nearly one-quarter of total expenditure to social support programmes (Wiggins *et al.* 2021: 20).⁷ It launched some large-scale programmes, including the Sudan Family Support Programme (SFSP), branded *Thamarat*, which secured substantial funding from development partners,⁸ and the Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus (MCCT+) programme, funded by the German and Swiss governments, in partnership with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The conflict sensitivity of these programmes is discussed in section 5.

The SFSP was domestically driven, in this case by the first Finance Minister in the transitional government who saw it, amongst other things, as an opportunity to advance Sudan’s digital transformation. The government committed to meet 15 per cent of the budget, principally for salaries and operating costs.⁹ WFP was given a prominent role in its implementation, tasked with developing the payments and delivery system and the complaints and feedback mechanism.¹⁰

The government and UN agencies also took a number of social protection measures in response to Covid-19, including cash and in-kind transfers; water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services for migrant communities; the removal of conditionality and labour requirements; and a campaign called ‘My Commodity’ to provide 11 basic commodities at prices 30–40 per cent below market rates through cooperative societies and service committees (UN 2020). Covid-19 programmes were open to both refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as well as the general population (OECD 2022: 37). Despite this, a rapid assessment of the socioeconomic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in Khartoum, West Kordofan, and East Darfur found that only 10 per cent of respondents felt supported during the lockdown (ILO 2021b: 43).

⁷ It is not clear from the source how ‘social support programmes’ are defined.

⁸ US\$200m IDA grant and US\$200m from the multi-donor Sudan Transition and Recovery Support Trust Fund (STARS) for phase one, with a similar amount anticipated for phase two. See **Friends of Sudan hail ‘courage and commitment’ two years after Al Bashir regime deposed** (accessed 7 October 2022).

⁹ Key informant interview (KII) with Sudanese expert, online, 2 August 2022.

¹⁰ See **Sudan government and WFP sign agreement on Sudan family support programme** (accessed 7 October 2022).

The current political impasse in Sudan has left the direction of social protection, like all other policy areas, in a state of profound uncertainty. Development funding to the government has ceased or been redirected as donors seek to balance the maintenance of assistance to populations in need with their desire to avoid legitimising the military regime.

3.2 Humanitarian social assistance

Food aid in Sudan is largely from international sources and has been dominated by WFP since the start of the Darfur conflict in 2003.¹¹ WFP's role has expanded further since the revolution – initially more evident as the power of the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) declined¹² – not only in the provision of food aid and cash but also in supporting the SFSP (Jaspars and El Tayeb 2021: 17).

Cash transfers are growing in prominence and WFP again plays a major role. A 2006 evaluation of its assistance in Darfur explored whether a mix of cash and food could have been used and concluded otherwise on the grounds that local markets would have been unable to satisfy needs and that WFP had insufficient operational capacity (WFP 2006: 65–8). WFP piloted paper vouchers in 2009, introducing them in Darfur, Kassala, and North Kordofan from 2011. It first used electronic vouchers and its biometric platform SCOPE in 2015 (WFP 2017). In 2021, WFP provided unconditional transfers to 4.8 million beneficiaries, 83 per cent of these receiving food and 17 per cent cash. The number of people receiving unconditional cash transfers has risen by 75 per cent since 2019. Meanwhile, transfers provided through food assistance for assets interventions are split fairly equally between food and cash (WFP 2022: 12). From a conflict-sensitivity perspective, it is interesting to note that in Darfur, cash and vouchers are mostly used for IDPs and in-kind food aid for rural populations.

However, food aid is still the largest part of humanitarian social assistance. The comparatively modest size of cash-based programming is illustrated by the 2022 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) which allocates US\$239m to cash and voucher projects out of its total US\$1.9bn budget (OCHA 2021a: 30). In 2021, ten UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) reached 118,363 beneficiaries with multipurpose cash (OCHA 2021a: 29). The UN had anticipated closer links with government social protection systems and a more 'enabling ecosystem' for large-scale cash assistance with the scale-up of the Family Support Programme (OCHA 2021a: 29). Some of the constraints on using cash are the limited number and capacity of financial service providers, cultural

¹¹ Prior to this, a number of international agencies took responsibility for different regions: Save the Children in Darfur, CARE in Kordofan, Oxfam in Red Sea State, and WFP in Southern Sudan.

¹² The Humanitarian Aid Commission regulates humanitarian activities in Sudan.

barriers to e-payments, and donor concerns about transparency and accountability (OCHA 2021a: 29).

3.3 Informal social safety nets

Community-based systems of social support – the burial groups, disaster response networks, and customary norms of communal labour and investment – are the first line of defence against shocks.¹³ Research in Darfur has shown how these informal safety nets may also foster reconciliation and prevent tensions escalating into conflict through the regular interaction they involve and the joint benefits derived. They can be a way to normalise and repair damaged relationships after conflict. However, the same study cautions that some community-based systems may also reinforce exclusion or exacerbate inter-group tensions (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2022).

Zakat is a major source of social protection in Sudan (Hassanain and Saaid 2016). Contributions are compulsory, collected and distributed through the state (Machado *et al.* 2018). For some, a state-dominated system represents a deviation from the principle that *zakat* is an individual responsibility,¹⁴ while others have concerns about the politicisation of the system by the former regime. Consequently, some Sudanese do not regard these payments as true *zakat* and may pay twice.¹⁵

Remittances are another important source of support estimated to be US\$2.9bn annually, although their value is difficult to calculate and their benefit to public finance partial since a significant proportion is channelled through black market routes (Baldo 2021: 2; Turkawi 2015: 68–9).

¹³ KII with local NGO representative and researcher, online, 30 August and 6 September 2022.

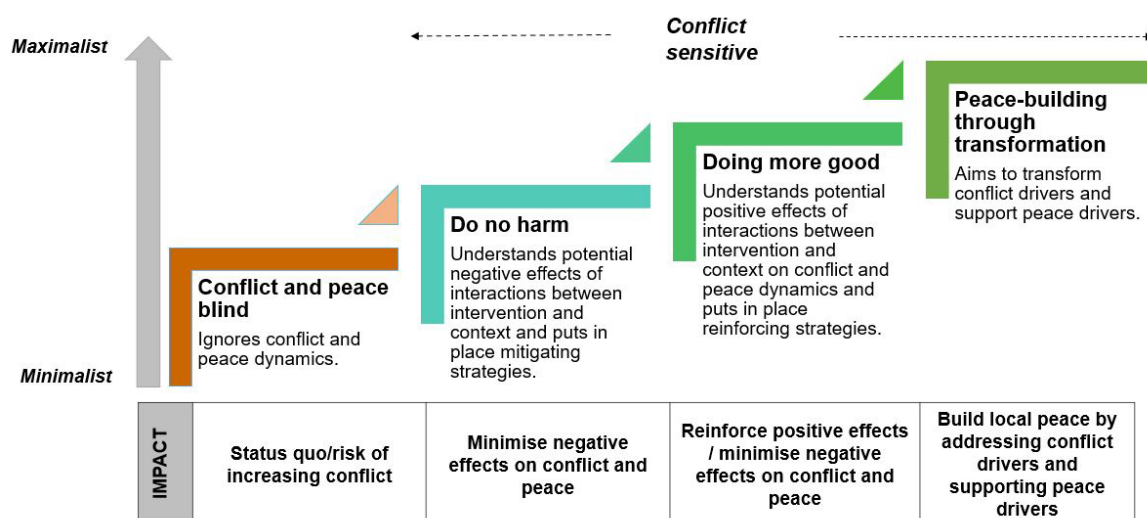
¹⁴ In 'a significant number of countries', the state exercises some form of decision-making power or supervision over the administration of *zakat* (Machado *et al.* 2018: 5). For experience in Libya see Caravani *et al.* (2022).

¹⁵ KII with local NGO representative and researcher, online, 30 August and 6 September 2022.

4. Conflict-sensitivity initiatives in Sudan

Conflict sensitivity is often presented as a continuum (Figure 4.1): at one end, the minimalist goal of ensuring that an activity at least does not worsen social tensions, and at the other, findings ways in which it might also reduce them and contribute to peacebuilding.

Figure 4.1: The social protection conflict-sensitivity continuum



Source: Adapted from FAO (2019) and Besser (2021).

Before considering the conflict sensitivity of social protection (discussed in section 5), this section provides a brief introduction to three initiatives that are illustrative of the general attention being given to conflict sensitivity in Sudan at present. The current political crisis appears to have increased the salience of the issue as agencies search for guidance on how to navigate Sudan's political complexities.¹⁶ All three initiatives share an approach that is focused on encouraging culture and behaviour change within organisations rather than top-down compliance.

4.1 Conflict Sensitivity Facility

Saferworld established the Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF) in Sudan in 2021, building on a parallel initiative in South Sudan. The CSF provides analysis,

¹⁶ KII with conflict sensitivity expert and IOM official, online, 7 August and 15 September 2022.

convenes discussion, shares learning, and supports capacity within the aid sector to help it avoid doing harm and maximise its contribution to lasting peace.¹⁷ It sees itself as a demand-led facility and works with a variety of organisations, from supporting donor strategy development to piloting a national mentorship programme with Sudanese NGOs.¹⁸ One of its early initiatives was to analyse changes in the political economy of food aid since the revolution (Jaspars and El Tayeb 2021). It has also published guidance on how aid can either help or hinder Sudan's transition (Box 4.1). The CSF has successfully completed its first pilot year with UK funding and is now embarking on a new phase of work with the support of a larger group of donors.¹⁹

Box 4.1: Four ways that aid can either help or hinder Sudan's transition

- **Localising aid in a conflict-sensitive way.**²⁰ The CSF notes that greater local ownership over aid improves its contextualisation, adaptability, and appropriateness, builds local capacity and systems, and promotes and enables local ownership and innovation over Sudan-specific challenges.
- **Land, livelihoods, and conflict**, recognising how work around returns and livelihoods intersects with land use, land claims, and natural resource management, and the implications of this for the transition.
- **Aid, politics, and power**, recognising how control over resources, including aid, can be used by political and military leaders across Sudan to boost their negotiating position in the transition.
- **Working with the marginalised – peripheries, women, and youth:** looking beyond elite circles and considering how the spaces opened up by the revolution could be protected and enhanced.

Source: CSF (2021)²¹

¹⁷ **CSF Sudan – About Us.**

¹⁸ KIIs with conflict sensitivity expert, online, 7 August and 21 September 2022.

¹⁹ KII with conflict sensitivity expert, online, 21 September 2022.

²⁰ The phrase 'in a conflict-sensitive way' is critical here. 'Localisation' could also be a state initiative, as was seen under the former regime.

²¹ See **Windows of Opportunity: 4 Ways that Aid can either Help or Hinder Sudan's Transition** (accessed 8 October 2022). These recommendations are also consistent with those proposed by Satti *et al.* (2022) in their discussion of climate change and conflict sensitivity, another piece of CSF research.

4.2 UN Peacebuilding Fund²²

Sudan has been the largest recipient of finance from the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) since the start of its 2020–24 Strategic Plan (UN Peacebuilding 2022). A global review of the PBF recommended that it give more prominence to conflict sensitivity in its guidance and requirements (Ernstorfer 2021). The PBF Secretariat in Sudan, established in 2019, is responding to that challenge in several ways.²³

1. **Conflict-sensitivity frameworks.** These are now a requirement for potential grantees. The approach is not prescriptive: the Secretariat shares examples of tools and frameworks and lets grantees develop what suits their needs and the specific conflict situation.
2. **Conflict-sensitivity training.** The PBF is partnering with the UN System Staff College to develop an online self-learning course in Arabic and English on conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding. Access to the five-module course, which is due to launch in November 2022, will be free for peace actors in Sudan.
3. **Capacity support.** The PBF has organised a series of presentations on conflict sensitivity for the peacebuilding working group in Sudan. It also facilitates structured reflection with its grantees during field missions, an exercise which it finds helps to capture the unpredictability of conflict and the unintended consequences of agencies' actions.

4.3 IOM Sudan²⁴

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) is piloting a country focal point system in Sudan and Iraq that aims to mainstream conflict sensitivity across all departments and functions. The approach is field-driven: focal points in each of IOM's ten field offices work with their colleagues to complete a simple self-assessment exercise every quarter, using a template developed with the support of the CSF. Findings and recommendations are shared within each region and discussed with an oversight committee every six months.

The aim is for something simple and instinctive, as far as possible integrating moments of reflection within existing processes. Meetings are short and documentation slim (a two-page form after each exercise). Every IOM project now has a modest budget line that allows teams to act on the recommendations agreed. Importantly, the process is helping to surface issues that affect social cohesion: for example, the exclusion from community planning processes of

²² Irish Aid is a donor to the PBF.

²³ KII with PBF official, online, 4 September 2022.

²⁴ KII with IOM official, online, 15 September 2022.

groups who are only seasonally present, such as nomadic pastoralists, or the impact of different shelter materials on the demand for forest products and consequently on relations with host communities. Workshops bringing together host communities and refugees in Kassala to reduce local-level tensions are perhaps an example of working closer to the right-hand side of the continuum in Figure 4.1.

5. Conflict sensitivity of social protection in Sudan

This section first discusses, briefly, how social protection under the previous regime fed into inequalities, and thus conflict. It then looks in more detail at programmes introduced by the transitional regime: at the continuities and differences with what went before, and at the challenges they have faced, including since the 2021 coup.

5.1 Social protection and inequality under the previous regime

The previous government's social protection programmes, particularly food and agricultural subsidies and cash transfers, largely benefited those closely aligned to it in central Sudan and marginalised the peripheries. The resulting inequalities have been a key driver of conflict. The exception was humanitarian assistance which went mostly to the peripheries.

The cash transfer programme (the SIP) achieved limited coverage, reaching 19 per cent of poor households. It was also poorly targeted, favouring the centre relative to the least developed states (Ndip *et al.* 2020: 5, 22). For example, the eight poorest localities, all in Darfur, where poverty ranged between 65 and 77 per cent, comprised only 3 per cent of total beneficiaries (*ibid.*: 18). This reinforced regional inequalities. Safety nets in conflict-affected areas in the peripheries were largely left to international agencies to provide through humanitarian assistance (Kjellgren *et al.* 2014: 73).²⁵ Government safety nets relied on beneficiary data held by the *Zakat* Chamber (World Bank 2016: 2), a semi-autonomous agency that is estimated to fund approximately 87 per cent of government social safety net interventions, excluding subsidies (Machado *et al.* 2018: 7). Several of the informants to this study commented on the wealth and power of the *Zakat* Chamber and its use by the former regime as a source of patronage and political leverage.

Humanitarian assistance has historically been subject to intense scrutiny and control by HAC (Sida *et al.* 2018: 4–5). This has hindered aid reaching those most in need – in particular in conflict or rebel-controlled areas. There is a long history of food aid being used to buy political loyalty and feed inequalities through diversion and taxation, the exclusion of vulnerable groups, and the

²⁵ Sudan received no development aid for much of Bashir's regime, particularly in the 1990s and 2000–10.

awarding of contracts to those close to government, including transport and trading companies linked to the military (Jaspars and El Tayeb 2021).

5.2 Social protection and conflict under the transitional government

The transitional government's commitment to social spending (mentioned earlier in section 3.1) suggested a different set of values and a commitment to the principle of universality, 'foster[ing] the belief that a life lived in Darfur is worth the same as one lived in Khartoum' (Thomas and El Gizouli 2020: 6). Two programmes launched after the revolution were the SFSP and the MCCT+. The two are connected in that the MCCT+ was envisaged as part of the exit strategy for the SFSP: families still in need of support after their 12 months of entitlement under the SFSP would be referred to other programmes depending on their needs, including the MCCT+ (UNICEF 2020: 10).

5.2.1 Sudan Family Support Programme²⁶

The SFSP has some continuities and differences with the past. Like the SIP, it sought to mitigate the impact of economic reforms, particularly the removal of subsidies, which in 2020 accounted for 10 per cent of gross domestic product (World Bank 2020: 8). It also made use of political structures, although not those favoured by the former regime: the SFSP reached out to the structures that had emerged during the revolution, particularly the neighbourhood Resistance Committees;²⁷ in contrast, the former regime relied on clientelist networks such as the Popular Committees and the *Zakat* Chamber.

In other respects, the SFSP signalled a new departure. A key difference is that it covered all Sudan's populations, including those in the peripheries. It was a near-universal programme, excluding only public sector employees and the wealthy: assistance would be provided to 80 per cent of the population for a 12-month period (World Bank 2020: 7). Technically, it targeted households rather than individuals, accommodating variations in household size. The SFSP's designers hoped that the programme would renew trust in government and strengthen its legitimacy, particularly in remote and conflict-affected areas. Beyond this general positioning, conflict sensitivity was reportedly not considered in any depth during its early design.²⁸

²⁶ This section is based on the literature and the observations of informants. It was not possible to meet with those directly responsible for the programme, despite their positive response to the initial approach.

²⁷ These first emerged during protests in 2013 (El Gizouli 2020). This strategy worked less well outside Khartoum where the presence of Resistance Committees was variable (KII with Sudanese expert, online, 2 August 2022).

²⁸ KII with Sudanese expert, online, 2 August 2022.

However, World Bank documentation suggests that a number of conflict-related risks were considered and conflict-sensitive measures integrated in the SFSP, such as flexible modalities to accommodate the particular challenges in different areas, a national advocacy group to work with states scheduled for phases two and three in order to manage any tensions caused by that delay, and measures to mitigate social risk, including gender-based violence (World Bank 2020: 24, 15, 49). The aim was also to move rapidly to meet the high public expectations placed on the new government (World Bank 2020: 26).

The SFSP's intention was to deliver payments direct to beneficiary bank or mobile money accounts, and where digital payments were not possible, to provide cash through Sudapost or temporary cash-out facilities; households could choose their preferred payment method at enrolment.²⁹ The introduction of mobile payments would be gradual, given limited technical and institutional capacities. Payment systems established by humanitarian agencies could be used in remote areas where the government had less reach, but in close coordination with the SFSP, and with a view to moving to the government's payment system as soon as possible (World Bank 2020: 16, 26).

The use of digital technologies for social assistance has political consequences, and therefore implications for conflict sensitivity. Network shutdowns after the coup led to the postponement of some assistance as communication systems and banks ceased to function, thus affecting the use of mobile money and debit cards (Jaspars *et al.* 2022: 10). A study of digital access and barriers among displaced populations in White Nile found that digital literacy is low, particularly among women, older people, people with disabilities, and non-Arabic speakers, and that 'sizeable minorities', especially among refugees, have no SIM card registered in their name. Other barriers are weak network coverage, expensive charging, and the lack of a mobile money service available through the dominant provider (Caswell and Downer 2022). The risks and benefits of digital technologies are discussed further in the section on humanitarian assistance below (5.2.3).

Sudanese informants to this study were critical of the SFSP for several reasons, principally that it glosses over the fundamental problems facing Sudan's economy and society, such as corruption, smuggling, and the war economy. They also observe that it is part of a wider trend towards the individualisation of development that treats citizens as consumers but without addressing the structural constraints on their livelihoods, and that runs counter to their belief that social networks are key to building trust and social cohesion; a fundamental part of rebuilding society and the social contract, particularly in neglected peripheral regions, will be serious investment in public services such as health and

²⁹ KII with Sudanese expert, online, 2 August 2022.

education that reverses decades of centralised control and spatial inequalities.³⁰ Furthermore, although implementation of the SFSP was designed to be staggered, starting with Khartoum, Red Sea, South Darfur, and Kassala and then scaling up to all states in subsequent phases (World Bank 2020: 105), there was a perception that it was starting in urban areas, particularly Khartoum, and thus reinforcing familiar centre–periphery inequalities (Jaspars and El Tayeb 2021: 9–10).

After the coup in October 2021, the World Bank and other donors suspended development assistance to the government. By May 2022, US\$100m in the multi-donor fund originally intended for the SFSP, but not yet committed, was redirected to WFP for more conventional humanitarian response: the Sudan Emergency Safety Nets (SESN) project was developed to provide unconditional cash and food transfers for four months to two million people in 11 states, selected on the basis of IPC projections.³¹

While the documentation for the SFSP discusses conflict and conflict-related risks, the term ‘conflict sensitivity’ is only explicitly used in the documentation for the SESN (World Bank 2020 and 2022). The latter describes additional measures such as conflict assessments in each target state, and state- and locality-level advisory committees to build consensus and strengthen social cohesion, inclusion, and participatory planning (World Bank 2022: 33). It is possible that this strengthening of intent reflects the changed context, post-coup, in which the SESN is being implemented. Given the limitations of this study and the SFSP’s suspension, it is not clear whether any of these measures were, or are being, implemented, or the effects of doing so.

5.2.2 Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus programme

UNICEF’s principal partner in the social protection sector is the Ministry of Social Development. After the revolution it began working with the ministry on Sudan’s first social protection strategy. UNICEF regards this work as a conflict-sensitive intervention (without using the term) in the sense that it reflected a major shift in direction: the former regime’s exploitation of social divisions for political gain would be replaced by a commitment to inclusion and equity, with social protection available to all when they need it during their lives.³²

The MCCT+ programme is one of the first in Sudan to reach women at scale. Launched by the ministry in 2021, it targets pregnant women and those with children under two with a combination of regular cash payments, social and behaviour change communication, and complementary support services targeted

³⁰ KII with Sudanese researchers, online, 2 August and 6 September 2022.

³¹ The **Integrated Food Security Phase Classification** indicates the severity and magnitude of acute and chronic food insecurity and acute malnutrition (accessed 7 October 2022).

³² KII with UNICEF official, online, 23 September 2022.

at the first 1,000 days of life, as well as a component to strengthen social protection systems (UNICEF 2022: 9, 19).³³ Like the SFSP, the primary responsibility is arguably thus placed on the individual to change their behaviour, rather than addressing the structural causes of malnutrition.

There was some attention given to social cohesion during the targeting process. This operated at three levels. Nationally, Red Sea and Kassala states were selected for the first phase based on their high rates of malnutrition. Within each state, localities were again selected based on data. Within each locality the principal of universality was applied: any pregnant woman, including conflict-affected IDPs and refugees,³⁴ was entitled to benefit. The process of selecting localities was the most sensitive given some inter-group tensions between those who had enjoyed political advantage under the previous government and those who had not. It required senior staff in the region with a finely tuned understanding of those dynamics and the personal relationships with stakeholders to navigate them successfully, as well as careful evidence-based engagement and discussion in each locality. According to a key informant, the 'evidence', in this case, was not just data but also the personal experience of people's wives and mothers which male decision makers were invited to consider. There is no published evidence available on the impact of these targeting decisions; for example, whether the tensions often found when targeting households within a defined area have simply been reproduced on a larger scale, in this case between localities.

After the coup, UNICEF's funding to the national ministry was paused and its funding to state ministries reduced. It is now exploring whether health workers' expenses can be paid through a financial service provider, as beneficiary transfers are, rather than through the state ministries. Registration had been completed prior to the coup, but once the teams returned, only about half of the women were still where they had been registered. The MCCT+ continues to operate but now as a UNICEF programme rather than one led by the ministry.

5.2.3 Humanitarian social assistance

Humanitarian assistance remains a major component of social protection in Sudan, as it was during much of the former regime. Access improved under the transitional government. For a short period, HAC appeared to have less control but this has risen again since the coup.³⁵ In 2020, aid reached previously inaccessible parts of South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Central Darfur for the first

³³ UNICEF has supported the ministry to develop a national social registry that links beneficiary databases from the programmes it administers, including the cash transfer programme, the NHIF, and the *Zakat* Fund (UNICEF 2020: 10).

³⁴ A study of social protection for the forcibly displaced in low- and middle-income countries confirms that some refugees have been registered (OECD 2022: 37).

³⁵ KII with local NGO representative, online, 30 August 2022.

time since 2011 (WFP 2022: 12). In 2021, the restrictions that regulate humanitarian action were further eased although the overall regulatory framework remains in place. Furthermore, a lack of clear government guidance is leading to inconsistencies across the country, with some states requiring multiple approvals for travel requests over and above HAC. The deterioration in the country's physical infrastructure in the wake of its economic challenges is a further impediment to access (OCHA 2021b: 21–22).

The Sudanese informants interviewed for this study did not associate humanitarian practice, either under the previous regime or now, with conflict sensitivity. On the contrary, they pointed to examples of how short-term assistance, provided under HAC oversight and with consequent restrictions on access and open information-gathering, has undermined existing mechanisms of solidarity and social support.³⁶ While international agencies may have procedures in place to manage risk and avoid harm, their Sudanese partners see these as tokenistic: the commitments they sign during the contracting process, such as those concerning 'do no harm' or a project's impact on community dynamics, are not systematically followed up, nor are there opportunities to discuss how these commitments are being operationalised and the challenges in doing so.³⁷

There have been no recent studies on the manipulation of humanitarian assistance. Despite the change of regime, many of the same contractors are involved in procurement and transportation and thus the interests of the same political group are being reinforced (Jaspars and El Tayeb 2021). While control and manipulation by traders and transporters close to the regime is reduced with cash transfers, the introduction of cash transfers and digital technologies brings in a new range of actors and institutions. They include data management, financial services, and telecommunications companies, each of which is likely to have particular political affiliations and economic priorities (Jaspars *et al.* 2022). For example, the security services in Sudan are major shareholders in Zain and MTN, and digital registration provides both commercial and surveillance opportunities (Jaspars and El Tayeb 2021: 14). Issues of exclusion, particularly for refugees and displaced populations, have already been mentioned (page 9). On the other hand, if registration is carried out before a conflict event, mobile money has the potential to provide assistance to mobile people, including in their place of displacement and remotely if access is limited. The risks and benefits of cash and digital technologies need to be balanced carefully, just as for food aid before.

³⁶ KII with Sudanese researcher, online, 6 September 2022.

³⁷ KII with local NGO representative, online, 30 August 2022.

6. Shock-responsive social protection and conflict

A recent assessment of the potential for shock-responsive social protection in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region discusses the challenges associated with conflict. It notes that conflict can be defined in different ways and covers a broad range of phenomena. Its physical manifestations, such as violence and displacement, represent only part of its effects which may also include less visible impacts on mobility, markets, and livelihoods. Furthermore, the range of instruments available to respond may be limited by the conflict: for example, social protection databases may quickly become outdated in situations of large-scale displacement, and government authorities may themselves be parties to the conflict (Tebaldi 2019: 12).

Of the eight countries studied by the review, Sudan was categorised as being in the early stages of establishing and institutionalising its social protection system (Tebaldi 2019: 34). The wider literature contains very little information on shock-responsive mechanisms in Sudan, perhaps for this reason. The design of the MCCT+ includes a commitment to build the capacity and systems that would facilitate its scale up 'in a manner that is flexible and adaptive within the conflict and disaster-prone context of Sudan' (MoSD *et al.* 2021: 4). UNICEF remains committed to this objective, including in response to conflict-related shocks, but for the time being is focused on drawing together the lessons from its first phase and mobilising the resources to expand.³⁸ WFP's strategic plan for 2019–23 talks of 'developing models for scalable productive safety nets' as part of its partnership with the World Bank and government on social protection but provides no further detail (WFP 2018: 22).

³⁸ KII with UNICEF official, online, 23 September 2022.

7. Conclusions

Over several decades, Sudan developed an extensive and indigenous social protection system, largely nationally owned and financed, but one that in many ways reinforced and manipulated existing inequalities and vulnerabilities. The revolution and subsequent coup, and the current absence of a functioning government, has left this system in suspension. The transitional government and international agencies took advantage of the space offered by the revolution to introduce approaches and models that in some respects signalled a new departure but in others demonstrated continuities with the past. These models were based on familiar templates used elsewhere that arguably failed to connect with the depth of the Sudanese desire for change.

Conflict sensitivity is clearly on the agenda of aid agencies in Sudan, but it has only been applied to a limited extent to social protection; as section 5 has shown, programmes demonstrate an awareness of conflict risks and dynamics but there is no clear evidence yet, within the limitations of this study, of them moving further along the continuum in Figure 4.1 to consider how they might influence those dynamics in a more constructive way. More generally, there appears to be greater awareness of the importance of conflict sensitivity and some dedicated initiatives underway, although largely driven by interested individuals. The CSF reports growing demand for training and some ‘good conversations’ about how to apply conflict-sensitive principles.³⁹ Agencies make commitments to conflict sensitivity in policy and strategy documents but without necessarily elaborating, at least publicly, how that will be done and the likely challenges involved (for example, OCHA 2021: 44; WFP 2018: 14–16).

One could speculate as to why this did not happen sooner, given that conflict has been such a defining feature of Sudan’s recent history. It may be, as some informants commented, that the revolution opened up the space to discuss these issues more freely.⁴⁰ It may also be that conflict sensitivity has been practised for long – perhaps under another name (‘principled approaches’, ‘do no harm’) – and perhaps particularly by Sudanese organisations; those working in environments such as Darfur can only survive and function effectively if they are attuned to the changes around them and think carefully about the implications of their every action on conflict dynamics.⁴¹

This is one reason why a dominant role for Sudanese actors in debates around conflict sensitivity is so critical. Conflict-sensitive practice requires a depth and nuance of local understanding. There are particular challenges to localisation in

³⁹ KII with conflict sensitivity expert, online, 7 August 2022.

⁴⁰ KII with conflict sensitivity expert and PBF official, online, 7 August and 4 September 2022.

⁴¹ KII with local NGO representative, online, 30 August 2022.

Sudan given the history of state manipulation of the NGO sector, but from the perspective of Sudanese NGOs, the debate on localisation has not moved far. Despite some signs of positive change in the attitudes and actions of some agencies, the humanitarian sector as a whole is perceived as elitist, exclusive, and predominantly Khartoum-based.⁴² Nor has it set aside the overtone of condescension that can colour discussions of 'capacity'.⁴³

When asked what helps or hinders the delivery of social protection in conflict, the most common responses by informants were:

1. **The quality of staff**, specifically the care given to their selection and training, the experience and skills they develop over time, and the extent to which their personal values are aligned with those of the organisation and its work.
2. **A thorough understanding of the local context**, and a clear framework for analysing conflict-sensitive social protection in particular, rather than conflict sensitivity in general.
3. **Clarity of purpose and programme design**, and the transparent application of evidence-based decisions.
4. **Effective and sustained communication** with all those involved, using trusted interlocutors.
5. **A realistic assessment of organisational capacity**, recognising the resources required to deliver quality work and the practical mechanisms needed to put principles such as inclusivity into practice.
6. **The flexibility in decision-making and financing** to respond to changing contexts quickly and effectively.

⁴² KII with conflict sensitivity expert, online, 7 August 2022.

⁴³ KII with local NGO representative, online, 30 August 2022.

8. Recommendations to Irish Aid

The recommendations that follow were suggested by interviewees familiar with social protection and humanitarian programming in Sudan. They are directed at the donor community in general, rather than Irish Aid in particular.

The most common recommendation, particularly from Sudanese informants, is to **listen to a broader range of opinions and experience and facilitate platforms where those views can be aired and discussed**. There are two related elements to this: the first concerns the space for dialogue within Sudanese civil society while the second is about the voices donors choose to hear. The forums that exist are largely operational, with little space for reflection and learning. Furthermore, high levels of turnover within the aid system mean that old thinking is constantly being recycled and lessons having to be re-learned (for example, about the dynamics of a particular conflict).⁴⁴ There is a perception that donors turn to the same limited circle of experts and advisers, largely Khartoum-based, who reinforce rather than challenge their thinking. The practical constraints on access in Sudan are recognised, such as travel passes outside Khartoum, but some donors appear to navigate these constraints more effectively than others. Moreover, since the centre–periphery relationship is one of the structural factors underpinning conflict in Sudan, it is important to address this bias. Practical measures suggested include:

1. Closer internal dialogue, for example between development teams and protection advisers, or, if they exist, with agencies' political departments which are felt to be more in touch with what's happening around the country.
2. Insist on meeting with Sudanese staff and partners during missions, either in-person or remotely, if travel is not possible, and resource the costs involved.
3. Commission a small advisory group of researchers and practitioners who have demonstrated their willingness to engage with the complexity of the situation in Sudan to consider how spaces for critical thinking and reflection might be developed.⁴⁵
4. Support Sudanese research institutions and researchers wherever possible.

The second recommendation is to **give more critical attention to the political economy of conflict and aid in Sudan**. Informants recognise that Western donors' policy leverage is limited. Nevertheless, more could be done through

⁴⁴ The example was given of Darfur, and of the repeated misconceptions about the nature of that conflict.

⁴⁵ It was emphasised that these individuals could be either national or international, the key qualification being their commitment to the idea behind such a group.

evidence-gathering and research. Specific areas of collective advocacy could be identified, such as challenging the behaviour of HAC.

A third recommendation concerns the need for **more thorough investigation of conflict sensitivity and social protection in Sudan**, including through in-depth field-based research. Part of this agenda could include how **informal safety nets and social structures** connect with conflict and peace dynamics and processes, building on existing research in Darfur.

Fourth, **a more coordinated response to the current political crisis** would help partners and grantees. Even if development funding is suspended, there may be ways to apply developmental principles at a local level.

Finally, to consider how the international community **could support ways to lessen the control of military-security actors over the economy in general and social assistance in particular**. A first step, building on the first recommendation, would be to ask Sudanese civil society, and those involved in social protection, what they need from the international community in this regard.

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