

WORKING PAPER

February 2024

Effective Social Protection in Conflict: Findings from Sudan

Izzy Birch, Becky Carter and Hassan-Alattar Satti

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Summary

This paper explores the conflict sensitivity of social protection in Sudan in its various forms since the present war started in April 2023, from locally led mutual aid to the social assistance programming of international agencies. It considers how these various interventions are both responding to, and being changed by, the conflict and associated humanitarian crisis, as well as how they interrelate. Provision of social assistance leans heavily on humanitarian actors for now, and lessons from their practice may inform and enrich a future state-led social protection system when this is rebuilt. Conflict sensitivity principles can be introduced through a number of entry points, then woven through the project cycle and the social protection delivery chain; they include systems of analysis, monitoring, and accountability to affected people, as well as capacity for adaptive management. Donors can reinforce this through their partnership, financing, and risk management strategies. Above all, external actors should recognise the fundamental importance of community-led crisis response and deepen their understanding of how it functions, and of the concerns and priorities of those involved.

Keywords

Sudan; conflict; conflict sensitivity; social protection; social assistance; informal social safety nets; mutual aid; localisation; donors; crisis; humanitarian.

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Executive Summary

This paper explores the conflict sensitivity of social protection in Sudan in its various forms, from community-based systems of mutual aid and solidarity to the more formal programming of international aid agencies. Within the broader rubric of social protection, our focus is on social assistance – specifically, food and cash-based transfers, which dominate the social protection portfolios of governments in low-income countries, but which are also delivered through the humanitarian system.

Given the severity of the current crisis in Sudan, with government services barely functioning and development aid significantly reduced, a state-led social protection system remains an aspiration for now. We take stock of what is happening to highlight lessons or practices that may be of wider interest and have broader application, including when the time is right to begin rebuilding that system. We undertook our research between June 2023 and February 2024, using a mix of literature review and stakeholder interviews.

Conflict sensitivity concerns the interaction between an intervention and its context. It demands, at minimum, that activities avoid causing additional harm, but goes further in recognising that how an intervention is designed and delivered can shape conflict and peace dynamics in a positive direction, where conditions for this allow. While conflict dynamics in Sudan vary by location, the current situation presents overarching conflict sensitivity dilemmas:

- First, the history of international policy engagement has prioritised short-term stabilisation and power-sharing above long-term reform, and in the process rewarded, rather than neutralised, those with a vested interest in sustaining violence.
 - Second, the Sudanese state is party to the conflict but also controls the response, creating conditions for aid diversion and manipulation.
 - Third, the parties to the conflict control key parts of Sudan’s economy on which the aid system depends, such as transportation, financial services, and telecommunications, increasing the risk that aid will feed conflict.
 - Fourth, high levels of violence and other operational constraints are impeding not only needs assessments but also an understanding of how aid and conflict interact.
 - Finally, the diverse and fragmentary nature of displacement makes it harder to reach people on the move and to mitigate social tensions, which may be highly context specific.
-

We draw on a combination of literature review and stakeholder interviews to answer the following four questions:

1. What lessons can be learned from community-based social support mechanisms in Sudan to inform the conflict sensitivity of externally led and supported social protection?
2. To what extent, and in which ways, is conflict sensitivity being considered and applied operationally in social assistance programming in Sudan, including in response to displacement?
3. To what extent, and in which ways, is conflict sensitivity informing donor approaches to social protection in Sudan at a policy/system level?
4. How can donors ensure that social protection systems and programmes are conflict sensitive during rapidly evolving and protracted crises?

The first research question explores the experience of those at the grass roots in Sudan who are providing assistance and protection in their communities largely independently of the mainstream aid system. We situate these examples of mutual aid in the context of debates on localisation, which have so far been framed primarily in terms of the relationships between formally constituted bodies, and we consider the ways in which localisation may either strengthen or undermine conflict sensitivity.

Informal social safety nets are deeply rooted in Sudanese cultural norms. The grass-roots structures that facilitate them have shown significant capacity to assist those affected by conflict, helped by the trust they enjoy at local level, their flexibility, and their intimate understanding of conflict dynamics. However, they also have their own limitations and, in some areas, have been overwhelmed by the scale of the ongoing emergency. This is another reason external assistance should include host communities as well as displaced people and help them rebuild their assets, from which informal safety nets customarily draw.

The second research question looks at how social assistance programmes implemented by national and international agencies are applying conflict-sensitive principles across both the project cycle and the social protection delivery chain. We highlight the importance of preparedness, accountability to affected people, and adaptive programme management in conflict, as well as challenges associated with funding, capacity, and coordination constraints. Among United Nations (UN) agencies there are still concerns that conflict sensitivity may compromise humanitarian principles or delay response. International informants interviewed for this study noted how support to local structures such as emergency response rooms (ERRs) could also have benefits for inclusion and peace, as well as their intention to develop higher-quality partnerships with local actors.

There are promising examples of support to ERRs from some UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and an awareness of the risks and challenges involved. However, the crisis in Sudan has thrown into sharp relief the differing impacts of conflict on national and international actors. The national actors may have the contextual understanding that is fundamental to conflict-sensitive practice, but they occupy a subsidiary position in an aid system that subcontracts them rather than investing in their core capacities, including their financial capacity to mitigate the loss and damage organisations suffer as a result of the insecurity associated with conflict and disorder.

The third and fourth research questions look more broadly at how donors' strategic choices shape the conflict sensitivity of programming in general. We draw on literature from other conflict-affected countries that underlines the importance of a clear and coherent country engagement strategy, and a balanced approach to risk; and funding policies and systems suitable for unpredictable environments where flexibility and continuity are key. The latter is illustrated by two of the pooled funds in Sudan that have adjusted their fund management systems in ways likely to enhance conflict sensitivity. Some donors are clearly signalling the growing importance they attach to conflict sensitivity, even if there is still a disconnect between what they are trying to do and what their grantees actually experience.

The evidence base for this study is limited by the time and resources available, but with that proviso the report concludes with recommendations that respond to three broad questions raised in the course of the research. The first is how official aid can link with and support grass-roots assistance in a conflict-sensitive way. The starting point should be an in-depth appreciation of how community-led crisis response actually functions. Trusted national NGOs, which act as a bridge between the formal aid system and grass-roots structures, have the long-term presence and capacity to strengthen grass-roots leadership over time. Aid agencies should press local authorities in Sudan, as the closest form of state power to these structures, to facilitate the work of informal social safety nets and allow them direct access to grass-roots institutions.

The second area of recommendation responds to the question of what more than 'do no harm' might look like in challenging environments. Here, rather than introduce new systems, we suggest improving the quality of, or adjusting, existing processes that in themselves will reinforce conflict sensitivity, such as accountability, analysis, and monitoring. There may also be benefits in pooling resources and capacities rather than building these up in every agency, and in learning from the practice of local organisations, which tend to approach conflict and peace as integral to their programming, and therefore work in a more holistic way.

The final set of recommendations answers our last research question (i.e. how donors can ensure conflict-sensitive social protection in crises). In Sudan, this could include a review of the lessons learned about crisis preparedness, as well as measures to ensure that grantees know their partners (and, specifically, whether their partners have links with conflict and security actors).

Improving information and communications technology infrastructure will have multiple benefits, including for civil society networking, real-time monitoring, the functioning of financial systems, and Sudanese participation in policy dialogue and coordination. More broadly, donors should ensure that their financial management systems give as much latitude as possible to their grantees. Dual-mandate donors, which fund both humanitarian and development programmes, have a particular responsibility to facilitate the collation of lessons from ongoing humanitarian social assistance programmes that could inform and enrich a future social protection system.

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Acronyms

| | |
|---------|---|
| AAP | accountability to affected people |
| CORE | Community Organized Relief Effort |
| CSF | Conflict Sensitivity Facility |
| DAF | Department of Foreign Affairs |
| DG-ECHO | Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations |
| ERR | emergency response room |
| IDP | internally displaced person |
| LFS | livelihoods and food security |
| MCCT+ | Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus |
| NIDAA | Sudanese Development Call Organization |
| NRC | Norwegian Refugee Council |
| OCHA | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |
| PBF | Peacebuilding Fund |
| RSF | Rapid Support Forces |
| SAF | Sudanese Armed Forces |
| SHF | Sudan Humanitarian Fund |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| US | United States |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |
| WFP | World Food Programme |

1. Introduction

This paper builds on previous research into the conflict sensitivity of social protection in the Horn of Africa by providing a more detailed case study of Sudan.¹ Irish Aid commissioned both studies to support its international development policy (Government of Ireland 2019). Within the broader rubric of social protection, our focus is on social assistance – specifically, food and cash-based transfers, which feature prominently in the social protection portfolios of governments in low-income countries, but which are also delivered through the humanitarian system.

Given the severity of the crisis in Sudan, with state-led social protection barely functioning and development aid significantly reduced, humanitarian social assistance is now the principal form of support for those affected by the conflict or experiencing other vulnerabilities. We take stock of what is happening to highlight lessons or practices that may have wider application, including for the rebuilding of the state social protection system.

Most societies have forms of mutual aid and solidarity based on familial, neighbourhood, or other social ties that can be critical lifelines in times of crisis (Kim *et al.* 2022). These networks are a prominent feature of the contemporary landscape of social assistance in Sudan, where volunteer groups across the country are providing assistance and protection in their communities, particularly those beyond the reach of external actors. Some of these initiatives evolved out of the network of resistance committees that were instrumental in securing the downfall of former president Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and which continue to press for peaceful reform. We give particular attention to these community-based forms of social assistance and their relationship with the mainstream aid system, situating this within the context of debates on localisation.

Conflict sensitivity occupies a continuum from a minimalist ‘do no harm’ stance to one that engages more purposefully with peace and conflict dynamics where the conditions to do so allow. A conflict-sensitive social protection intervention is one that understands how it interacts with the context in which it is implemented and then applies that knowledge to its design, targeting, and delivery systems to minimise harm, ensure that conflict-affected populations can access the programme as intended, and (where possible and appropriate) promote peace and social justice. Throughout this paper we highlight some of the conflict sensitivity challenges presented by the very difficult situation that has developed in Sudan and refer to the conflict sensitivity continuum in our discussion of different approaches.

¹ The previous research can be found at: *Ensuring an Effective Social Protection Response in Conflict-Affected Settings: Findings from the Horn of Africa* (Birch *et al.* 2023).

Our previous regional study noted that the social protection sector tends to approach conflict as a discrete shock, rather than as the chronic condition that characterises many countries in the Horn of Africa, including Sudan. It concluded that the interplay of conflict and social protection should be more clearly articulated in the policy and programmatic frameworks that guide social protection (Birch *et al.* 2023). With that and the preceding points in mind, our study seeks to answer the following four questions:

1. What lessons can be learned from community-based social support mechanisms in Sudan to inform the conflict sensitivity of externally led and supported social protection?
2. To what extent, and in which ways, is conflict sensitivity being considered and applied operationally in social assistance programming in Sudan, including in response to displacement?
3. To what extent, and in which ways, is conflict sensitivity informing donor approaches to social protection in Sudan at a policy/system level?
4. How can donors ensure that social protection systems and programmes are conflict-sensitive during rapidly evolving and protracted crises?

We explored the research questions through a mix of literature review and stakeholder interviews between June 2023 and February 2024. The literature review was thorough but, in the time available, not comprehensive and covered only material written in English. Moreover, the fast-moving situation in Sudan demanded a more continuous but light process of tracking the latest publications and online content.

The literature search also included relevant experience from other conflict situations (Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen). This was supplemented by 23 interviews with individuals purposively selected from different stakeholder groups, including emergency response rooms (ERRs) and other grass-roots initiatives, national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Sudanese academics, international NGOs, United Nations (UN) agencies, and donors. Most interviews were carried out remotely, which had its limitations, particularly where communications infrastructure was weak.

Our report begins with an overview of the conflict context in Sudan, and the political and programmatic response to this. The subsequent three sections answer the first three research questions, starting with the findings at community level and working out from there to explore the conflict sensitivity of social protection at both operational and strategic levels. The report concludes with recommendations to donors (the fourth research question).

2. Context

On 15 April 2023, fighting broke out in the capital Khartoum between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). By January 2024, as the conflict spread, over 13,000 people had been killed (a likely underestimate) (ACLED 2024), and more than 7 million people had been forcibly displaced either within the country's borders (6 million) or across them (1.4 million) (OCHA 2024b). Even before April 2023, 3.8 million people had already been forced from their homes, predominantly from conflict-affected areas of Blue Nile, South Kordofan, and Darfur (OCHA 2023a) – a reminder that conflict has been part of the lives of many Sudanese for decades, particularly in regions far from Khartoum.

The impacts of the current crisis are extensive and severe. The scale of civilian death and injury, and the weaponisation of rape and sexual violence, point to a disregard for international humanitarian law (Amnesty International 2023). The rapid escalation and ruthlessness of violence in Darfur is particularly shocking (Sudan Conflict Observatory 2023; ACLED 2024). Economically, the war has led to rising inflation, falling liquidity, and disruption to financial and marketing systems (ACAPS 2023a).

Provision of essential services in some states collapsed as staff were displaced or left unpaid, and public infrastructure was repurposed or destroyed (Sudan Education Sector 2023; UNICEF 2023b). As of January 2024, nearly 25 million people – around half Sudan's population – were in need of humanitarian assistance, amid fears of catastrophic hunger conditions this year (OCHA 2024a, 2024b).

2.1 Origins of the crisis

The roots of the crisis lie in the nature of governance in Sudan, particularly the concentration of power and resources among a network of military, private sector, and political actors to the exclusion of others (Jaspars and Oette 2023; Hoffmann and Lanfranchi 2023; Cartier, Kahan and Zukin 2022), as well as the extent of impunity for previous human rights violations (REDRESS 2023). One of the tactics this elite has used to maintain its dominance has been the deployment of militias; successive governments granted these a significant level of autonomy in Sudan's peripheral regions and recently Khartoum. This weakened the army's monopoly on violence and heightened institutional rivalries between different parts of the security apparatus (Verhoeven 2023). Further, it positioned the RSF to benefit from Darfur's rich seams of gold, as well as the lucrative smuggling operation across the Sahara (De Waal 2019; Abbas 2023).

Political power in Sudan is for the most part transferred through force, as the numerous coups in its post-independence history attest, although some of these ended brief periods of democratic rule (Ayferam 2023). The 2018–19 popular revolution led to the ousting of al-Bashir but the promise of reform was ultimately dashed: the relationship between civilian and military leaders under the power-sharing constitutional declaration was always uneasy. It allowed the leaders of the SAF and RSF to pursue their interests even when contrary to those of the uprising, culminating in a military coup in October 2021.

Yet the spirit of the revolution persists in new forms of political organisation and civic action that have taken root over the past decade and in which young women and men, from different classes, have found their voice (El Gizouli and Thomas 2023; Abbashar 2023; Abbas and Al Karib 2023). As Berridge *et al.* (2022: 15) write: ‘a new generation came of age politically, idealistic and unbowed by repression and repeated disappointment, determined to reinvent their nation’.

Examples of this civic action in its early stages were the mobilisation of voters for the 2010 elections, protests against the reduction of subsidies in 2013, and help for those affected by disasters (Abbashar 2023; Marovic and Hayder 2022). Over time, neighbourhood groups coalesced into loose coalitions called resistance committees, which honed their skills in the organisation of non-violent protest (Abbashar 2023). A mapping of youth groups in 2021 identified 5,289 resistance committees across Sudan, present in all its states (The Carter Center 2021). They continue to offer an alternative model of self-governing local democracy that is both visionary (e.g. through the drafting of political charters) (Khalafallah 2022); and material (e.g. through the practice of public service and mutual aid as a form of resistance in itself) (Bishai 2023; Slim 2022).

A further factor that has shaped the current crisis was the decision of national and international actors to continue dealing with the military after the 2021 coup (Abbashar 2023), in effect legitimising its position and sidelining the views and priorities of the street.² International actors, unable to find common ground, and fearful of the risks and disruption associated with democratisation, align behind the ‘lowest common denominator of stabilisation’ (Pospisil 2023: 14).

Consequently, Western governments have lost credibility among the pro-democracy movement (*ibid.*). As the signatories of a joint letter to the United States (US) secretary of state and United Kingdom (UK) foreign secretary wrote concerning atrocities in Sudan: ‘The pursuit of peace that relies upon the good faith of proven bad actors will assuredly fail to end the violence in Darfur or the overall conflict.’ (Act for Sudan *et al.* 2023b)

² See also Ismat (2023).

Models of liberal peace-building are also losing purchase (Pospisil 2023). Externally supported peace initiatives have prioritised short-term stabilisation above long-term reform, rewarding rather than neutralising those with a vested interest in sustaining violence (Srinivasan 2021; Kapila 2023). The Juba Peace Agreement in 2020, which brought more (armed and unarmed) opposition groups into the transitional government, is one example. Rather than addressing Sudan's fundamental challenges, such as regional inequality, the Juba process prioritised political stability and power-sharing in Khartoum, and in so doing buttressed rather than contained military power (Watson 2020; Rift Valley Institute 2022).

2.2 Political and humanitarian response to the crisis

In terms of the **political response**, none of the multiple uncoordinated initiatives to end the war has secured sufficient traction to do so. Both of Sudan's principal belligerents have ties with states and actors across the wider Sahel and Middle East regions (Burke 2023), further weakening the prospect of international consensus on Sudan (Kapila 2023). The imposition of Western government sanctions has had only limited effect (Baldo 2023). Meanwhile, grass-roots democratic civilian actors in Sudan hold fast to their three-point political agenda of freedom, peace, and justice; civilian rule (with the military returning to its barracks and the RSF being dismantled); and holding to account those who have committed atrocities.³

The **humanitarian response** faces major access and capacity challenges. By the end of 2023, the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan for Sudan was less than 40 per cent funded (Financial Tracking Service 2024). Cross-border assistance to Darfur from Chad began in August 2023, but for the most part the international response remains centralised in Port Sudan on the coast. Agencies are grappling with serious operational and security challenges (NRC 2023c), including the particular risks associated with urban warfare (Insecurity Insight 2023). There is clear evidence of humanitarian aid being appropriated and access to those in need in many parts of the country being withheld.⁴

Many Sudanese staff have been displaced, while others were laid off when programmes were suspended (Goldberg and Ibrahim 2023). National NGOs have been hit especially hard, their assets looted and staff forced to flee (Bradbury *et al.* 2023). The number of organisations providing humanitarian assistance in Sudan has declined markedly from before the war (Harvey *et al.*

³ See, for example, Dabanga (2022).

⁴ For example, NRC (2023c); ACAPS (2023b); Harvey *et al.* (2023a); and Médecins Sans Frontières (2023).

2023a). Compared with other access-constrained crises in the Central African Republic, Haiti, Myanmar and Yemen, Sudan has the largest number of people in need but the smallest percentage in receipt of assistance (*ibid.*).

At the same time, a prominent feature of this crisis is the relief assistance that community-based groups lead and deliver. The Food Security Cluster, which is jointly led by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Food Programme (WFP), estimated at the end of August 2023 that approximately 61 per cent of those displaced since the war started were in urban areas and 39 per cent in rural areas, and that only around 7 percent were in formal camp settings (FSL Sector 2023). Many were living with extended family, beyond the attention of aid agencies,⁵ or in informal sheltering centres. These grass-roots initiatives are primarily reliant on resources from within their community (and in some cases the diaspora), although some collaboration with national and international NGOs and UN agencies is now taking place (Abbas and Abdalhadi 2023).

With the exception of some limited efforts by the Zakat Chamber, **social protection** provision through the government remains largely suspended. The transitional government launched its flagship Sudan Family Support Programme in early 2021 to cushion the population from the impact of economic reforms, but this failed to match the demand for bolder social policy ideas and transformational change (Ali and Mann 2023). The programme attracted substantial multi-donor support through a World Bank trust fund, which was redirected to the WFP for food and cash transfers after the October 2021 coup.

This pivot has become entrenched, with the primary form of support during this crisis taking the form of humanitarian social assistance through UN agencies and NGOs. An exception is the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)'s Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus (MCCT+) programme in Red Sea and Kassala states. Other than a change in leadership from the government to UNICEF, the programme has continued to operate broadly as designed, working through the state primary healthcare structures in nine localities of Red Sea and Kassala, and considering an expansion to other eastern states.⁶

From a conflict sensitivity perspective, all actors in Sudan face five particular challenges:

1. As noted above, international policy engagement has prioritised short-term stabilisation above long-term reform, and in so doing has buttressed the position of those with a vested interest in sustaining violence.

⁵ Interview with executive director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

⁶ Interview with United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) staffer (24 August 2023).

2. The Sudanese state is party to the conflict but also controls the response, principally through its Humanitarian Aid Commission, creating the conditions for aid diversion and manipulation.
3. The parties to the conflict control major parts of Sudan's economy, including sectors such as transportation, financial services, and telecommunications on which the aid system depends, thus increasing the risk that aid will feed conflict.
4. High levels of violence and other operational constraints are impeding not only needs assessments, but also an understanding of how aid and conflict interact.
5. The very high levels of displacement and its diverse and fragmentary nature create particular operational challenges for agencies in reaching people on the move and mitigating social tensions, which may be highly context specific.⁷

The next three sections discuss the conflict sensitivity of the response to Sudan's crisis at different levels of intervention.

⁷ Internal displacement is both protracted and recent, and affects both Sudanese citizens and other nationals who are sheltering in a variety of settings. By the end of 2023, there were an estimated 6,159 different locations of internal displacement across Sudan's 18 states (OCHA 2023b).

3. Locally led social protection in Sudan

3.1 Introduction

This section of the report discusses conflict-sensitive social assistance from the perspective of those at the grass roots in Sudan who are practising forms of ‘autonomous collective self-help’ (Corbett, Carstensen and di Vicenz 2021: 7), largely independently of the mainstream aid system. In response to our first research question,⁸ we highlight a number of issues for agencies to consider if they wish to offer conflict-sensitive support to these forms of mutual support and social solidarity. First, we situate the discussion within the context of the literature on localisation.

Despite the attention given to localisation in recent years, there is no consistent definition of the term or consensus on what it means in practice (Robillard *et al.* 2021; Barbelet *et al.* 2021). We follow Baguios *et al.* (2021) in considering localisation as a means to an end: ‘the journey towards locally led practice’. Wall and Hedlund (2016) reserve the term ‘locally led’ for work that **originates** with local actors or is designed to support it (as distinct from that which local actors implement on behalf of others through a form of subcontracting).

The Issue is not simply where funding is directed but where power lies. This is illustrated by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)’s twin targets: first, that one-quarter of its funding will be provided directly to local partners by 2025; but, in addition, that by 2030 at least half of its programmes will demonstrate leadership by local actors (USAID 2023). USAID has identified four categories of approaches and 14 good practices to strengthen local leadership. Programmes must demonstrate the use of two or more of these practices, in at least two of the four categories, to contribute towards the second target (*ibid.*).

‘Local actors’ are a large and diverse group (Baguios *et al.* 2021: 2; Robillard *et al.* 2021: 16), but thus far localisation has primarily been framed in terms of the relationships between formally constituted bodies, such as national and international NGOs (Kim *et al.* 2022). This ignores the less visible sources of assistance on which crisis-affected populations depend, particularly in violent conflict (Harvey *et al.* 2023b on Myanmar; Kim *et al.* 2022 on Yemen; Wall and Hedlund 2016 on Syria). These systems of societal support operate ‘in the “background” of nearly all humanitarian responses’ (Robillard *et al.* 2021: 34).

⁸ ‘What lessons can be learned from community-based social support mechanisms in Sudan to inform the conflict sensitivity of externally led and supported social protection?’

They draw on resources from within their social group, which may be geographically extensive, particularly if it reaches the diaspora (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2022). Factors such as kinship, gender, location, or livelihood, and the power dynamics of their societies shape informal social safety nets (Kim *et al.* 2020; Maxwell *et al.* 2016), underlining the importance of understanding risk and vulnerability in relational, not just individual, terms (Stites, Humphrey and Krystalli 2021).

The literature makes one further distinction within the category of locally led response, which is to differentiate activities that are led and managed by survivors and crisis-affected populations themselves, ‘where localisation is taken all the way down to those experiencing the disaster’ (Corbett *et al.* 2021: 7). This is what we see being practised by ERRs and others during the current crisis in Sudan and by communities in the Nuba Mountains in previous conflicts (Corbett 2015).

The term ‘localisation’ is not central to debates on social protection, perhaps because of its association with the humanitarian sector, but there are points at which the two agendas converge. The goal of a state-led social protection system and, beyond that, the aspiration to localise the UN Sustainable Development Goals, including social protection, are consistent with the localisation agenda. There is also a body of research on informal social protection; but this is not framed in terms of localisation, and these mechanisms operate on the margins of, and in parallel to, mainstream social protection approaches.

Localising aid in conflict raises some particular concerns. One is the concept of **‘forced’ localisation**, where growing violence or political repression rather than purpose or values drive the increased responsibilities of local actors. A rapid shift in modality (for example, towards remote management) does not allow for the careful reform of organisational culture and systems that ‘high-quality’ localisation requires (Haines and Buchanan 2023).⁹ A second concern, particularly under remote management, is that **inequalities between national and international actors** may widen still further as national actors are exposed to greater levels of risk in settings where compliance is harder to demonstrate, potentially reinforcing perceptions of low capacity (Barter and Sumlut 2022). A third consideration is the **high cost** of operating responsibly in violent conflict to cope with sudden inflation, access additional expertise, and ensure the security of all involved (Stephen *et al.* 2017). The issue of equitable overheads for local and national actors is a subject of ongoing discussion (Development Initiatives 2023; IASC 2022).

⁹ ‘High-quality’ localisation is motivated by solidarity (Barter and Sumlut 2022) and concerned with ‘ethical partnership’ (Haines and Buchanan 2023), particularly the distribution of power between partners (Stephen *et al.* 2017). ‘Low-quality’ localisation is essentially sub-contracting (Barter and Sumlut 2022).

Localisation may either strengthen or undermine the conflict sensitivity of assistance depending largely on how it is approached and designed (Table 3.1). Conversely, since the bedrock of conflict sensitivity is a thorough understanding of conflict dynamics and how an intervention is likely to interact with these, a conflict-sensitive approach can inform localisation of aid by guiding things such as partner assessment and selection.

Table 3.1: Localisation and conflict sensitivity

| Circumstances under which localisation may strengthen conflict-sensitive assistance | Circumstances under which localisation may undermine conflict-sensitive assistance |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Where the particular strength of local actors in responding holistically within their community and thus working across the humanitarian–development–peace-building nexus is recognised and valued. – Where there are deliberate efforts to involve a diversity of actors who may not ‘look like’ NGOs but may have greater reach into remote and volatile areas and be well placed to strengthen social cohesion. – Where local actors strive for inclusive, accountable assistance that is built on relationships of trust with communities and considers their perspectives. – Where donors are willing to review their normative frameworks to give local actors as much flexibility and autonomy as possible. – Where funding processes support core capacities and long-term partnerships between local actors, aid agencies, and donors. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Where power and decision-making are retained by distant actors who may be less well placed to analyse and assess conflict risks. – Where the analysis and consultation that inform programming are cursory, and quality of monitoring and intelligence are poor. – Where external partners consider only their relationship with a particular organisation and not the impact of their decisions on the broader civil society ecosystem. – Where local actors are forced to adapt in ways that weaken what makes them effective in conflict, such as their contextual knowledge, networks, and holistic adaptive practice. |

Source: Authors’ own, drawing on Haines and Buchanan (2023); Harvey *et al.* (2023b); Tschunkert *et al.* (2023); Gidron and Carver (2022); Robinson (2021); Wilkinson, de Wolf and Alier (2019); Al-Abdeh and Patel (2019); Thomas, Gworo and Wani (2018); D’Agoot *et al.* (2018); Stephen *et al.* (2017); CALP Network (2023).

3.2 Informal social safety nets in Sudan

Informal social safety nets in Sudan are diverse. They vary in their objectives, resources, operation, and organisation. They emerge out of a variety of contexts, shaped by different needs, where different opportunities and capacities for social protection are in place. Some of these mechanisms are organised on a regular basis, such as the practice of *darra* when households share food together in a common place, or during the farming season when community members work collectively on the land of those who are severely ill. Others are *ad hoc*; for example, when displaced people arrive from other villages or towns as a result of drought or conflict.

All these locally led support mechanisms are deeply rooted in the culture of people across Sudan and are governed by social norms that have evolved over years. They enjoy a high level of public support and participation in both rural and urban settings. Urban support mechanisms have their roots in rural Sudan but have adapted in response to the opportunities available and needs of urban dwellers. Participation is voluntary and higher in rural areas, where social norms are stronger and where non-participation is sanctioned by temporary exclusions (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2022). Similar sanctions exist in urban areas, but the risk of non-participation is lower, given better economic conditions and a greater diversity of professional and personal support groups.

Technology facilitates the functioning of these safety nets across the rural/urban divide, but plays a major role in urban contexts where access to telecommunications and internet services is higher.¹⁰ Our urban-based interviewees describe how they benefited from social media in many ways: mobilising communities, securing resources for their work, and strengthening accountability and transparency. Mobile banking services are increasingly used to receive and send individual and group donations.¹¹

Grass-roots organisations in Sudan demonstrate enormous capacity to lead social protection at local level. Village-level safety nets support poor, sick, or bereaved people, and those affected by disasters. Collective action builds community assets such as classrooms and mosques, and pays the fees of university students.¹² However, conflicts and other structural factors can severely affect the performance of these informal safety nets (*ibid.*).

While the members of local-level structures we interviewed have not been exposed to the term 'conflict sensitivity', they are not conflict or peace blind. Their

¹⁰ Interview with member of an emergency response room (ERR) in eastern Sudan (23 August 2023).

¹¹ Interview with member of an ERR in eastern Sudan (30 August 2023).

¹² Interview with member of a Services and Change Committee in eastern Sudan (9 July 2023). These committees replaced the Popular Committees after the 2019 revolution but have not been constitutionally endorsed.

practice broadly matches that of the ‘do no harm’ approach along the continuum of conflict sensitivity. They endeavour to deliver their services based on humanitarian principles and without discrimination or bias. Moreover, they recognise the skills required for project management and are aware of the gaps in their experience, reaching out to national and international NGOs to help fill them.

The participation of women and young people is another limitation, particularly in areas where older men still dominate grass-roots structures. Outside efforts to address this are met with only superficial engagement of women and young people to fulfil external partners’ requirements.¹³ Genuine change has been achieved where Sudanese NGOs have used a gradual approach that recognises the structures in place and gradually opens a debate about the importance of inclusivity.¹⁴

Table 3.2 shows examples of informal social safety nets in Sudan and factors likely to enhance or undermine their conflict sensitivity. These may point to issues that external actors should consider if contemplating offering support.

Table 3.2: Examples of informal social safety nets and conflict sensitivity considerations

| Name | Description | Organisers | Factors likely to enhance or undermine conflict sensitivity |
|--------------|---|---|--|
| <i>Itaam</i> | A community-funded feeding programme established in different neighbourhoods of Khartoum. | Resistance committee activists and other active community members | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="1070 1375 1471 1704">– Leadership by local activists who understand the conflict dynamics in their area and how to manage them, and who are committed to applying humanitarian principles. <li data-bbox="1070 1738 1471 1939">– Attempts by belligerents to control initiatives, thus increasing the risk that aid will be diverted or manipulated. |

¹³ Interview with a Sudanese academic (8 August 2023).

¹⁴ Interview with executive director of a national non-governmental organisation (NGO) (10 August 2023).

| Name | Description | Organisers | Factors likely to enhance or undermine conflict sensitivity |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Locally led emergency response | A community-led internally displaced person support response established in different towns to provide relief services to those displaced as a result of the current crisis. | Emergency response rooms | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The diversity of actors involved and their greater combined reach, including into remote areas, which enhances the capacity to maintain or even strengthen social cohesion. – Aid agencies that respect the leadership and autonomy of local groups to decide on interventions that are relevant and appropriate to the conflict context. – Government interference and attempts to control external assistance, thus increasing the risk that aid will be diverted or manipulated. |
| <i>Darra</i> | In rural parts of Gadarif (as in other parts of rural Sudan), every four or five households share two meals in a common area. Bringing food to this area is not obligatory, allowing everyone to have access to food even if they have none at home. | Every four or five neighbouring households | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Operates on its own terms, with limited potential for external support. |

| Name | Description | Organisers | Factors likely to enhance or undermine conflict sensitivity |
|----------------------|--|-------------------|--|
| Reconstruction funds | In rural parts of Gadarif, communities organise funding mechanisms to reconstruct houses in the event of fire. | Community leaders | – Leadership by trusted community leaders who understand the social dynamics in their area and how to manage them. |

Source: Authors' own, drawn from interviews with key informants.

3.3 Impact of conflict on informal social safety nets and their responses

The impact of conflict on informal social safety nets in Sudan is context specific and determined by the scale and intensity of the violence in different regions. Conflicts often cause long-term disruption to these mechanisms as a result of the destruction of community assets, displacement of communities and associated uprooting of their structures from their settlement areas, and disturbance to relationships and customary institutions on a local or regional scale (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2022). This is further intensified by the impact on services essential to the delivery of social protection, such as banking and telecommunications.

Grass-roots organisations have significant capacity to mobilise resources through community fundraising, and from government departments and external partners, and to assist those affected by conflict. Rural communities in Darfur have been receiving internally displaced people (IDPs) who have fled their homes since the eruption of conflict in the state two decades ago, providing them with food, shelter, access to employment, and access to land. While such mutual support mechanisms are known for their positive impact in terms of resilience and development, they have their own limitations. They might provide rapid support in a crisis, but the available resources may not be sufficient to cover the needs of all those affected, leaving many people still in severe need (Dercon 2002).

This is one of the challenges that the organisers of informal social safety nets face in Sudan. The scale of the current crisis is overwhelming.¹⁵ The larger the crisis, the more exhausted the capacity of informal social safety nets is likely to be (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2022). National NGOs were paralysed by the war and have lost contact with the communities they work with.¹⁶ Some ERRs have

¹⁵ Interview with member of an ERR in eastern Sudan (23 August 2023).

¹⁶ Interview with executive director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

accumulated debt in their efforts to respond – described as a ‘neglected dynamic’ of ERR operations – while others have closed down (Abbas and Abdalhadi 2023: 9). Communities within conflict zones, such as Khartoum and Darfur, have had to rely on their own resources as there is no link to local government departments and only minimal contact with aid agencies.¹⁷ One volunteer from Khartoum indicated that many initiatives have had to stop altogether because of lack of funding.¹⁸

Another limitation of these mechanisms is their potential to reinforce existing inequalities. The most vulnerable people in society are often the least connected, and hence their sources of support are likely to be more limited than those of better-connected segments of the community. Moreover, where the social norm to participate in informal social safety nets is strong, households may exhaust most of their surplus in contributions, which could then weaken their own capacity to manage the shocks they face (Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2022; Kim *et al.* 2020).

Locally led response mechanisms such as ERRs have been formed across Sudan. Box 3.1 introduces the ERRs and Box 3.2 describes the work of one ERR in eastern Sudan, which resonates with experience elsewhere.¹⁹

¹⁷ Interview with member of a community-funded feeding programme in Khartoum (5 August 2023).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Abbas and Abdalhadi (2023) provide a similar account from the Kosti ERR in White Nile.

Box 3.1: ERRs in Sudan

ERRs are hubs around which a variety of local actors and institutions, such as resistance committees, youth and women's associations, faith groups, businesses, professional networks, and other civil society organisations come together to provide services to a population. Most are unregistered. Social protection is an important part of their service provision and includes individual and group cash transfers, community kitchens, and food baskets. In some places, women's emergency rooms have been set up either within or alongside an ERR to assist pregnant and lactating women, and those affected by sexual violence.

Each ERR is unique in its origins, capacities, and operational arrangements, and understanding this diversity is important for conflict sensitivity. Many emerged after the outbreak of the current conflict in April 2023, but others are older. For example, an ERR was formed in Al-Damazin (Blue Nile) in 2022 in response to conflict-related displacement, but challenges and tensions with the authorities led to its closure; local actors in Blue Nile are responding to the current crisis, but without using the ERR model. Since many ERRs grew out of the resistance committees, or work closely with them, authorities view them with suspicion, sometimes obstructing and harassing them (Nasir, Rhodes and Kleinfeld 2023).

The international humanitarian system has not systematically tracked the work of ERRs and other local groups, but there have been isolated attempts to assess their coverage. Abbas and Abdalhadi (2023) mapped 28 ERRs in seven states between June and November 2023, as well as other forms of local response in six other states. UN Women Sudan carried out a similar exercise in five states in May 2023. One of its findings was the relative isolation of these initiatives, which is likely to limit their access to financial and other resources; nearly two-thirds of those consulted either did not collaborate with anyone, or only did so at local level.

There are some attempts to enhance coordination. The Khartoum ERRs have a central coordinating body and charter, though not all ERRs are represented; similar steps are being considered in Northern state. On the whole, ERR coordination and communication within and between states is weak. The Sudan Humanitarian Crisis Conference held in Cairo in November 2023 recommended establishing a platform for local responders to coordinate with one another and with the international community.²⁰

Sources: Abbas and Abdalhadi (2023); Carstensen and Sebit (2023); UN Women Sudan (2023); Fikra for Studies and Development *et al.* (2023); **Khartoum State ERR**.

²⁰ This conference had strong Sudanese involvement in both its planning and participation. Of the 420 delegates, 120 were from Sudan, 54 of these representing ERRs and other local initiatives across the 18 states.

Box 3.2: The work of an ERR in eastern Sudan

We started on the first day of the war with five volunteers. The official work began on 20 April 2023 when we received one family from Khartoum. A day later, the first day of Eid, we received foreigners from different countries (Ethiopia, Somalia, Mali, and Eritrea); some of them were students displaced from Khartoum. We were keen to make all the IDPs feel at home, although we don't use that term; we call them our guests.

We established 45 sheltering centres in total: 42 for women and children under 13 and the rest for men. Each accommodated on average 165 families. We turned the youth centre into a central kitchen and provided meals for 70 days with donations from the community. Special meals were prepared for pregnant and lactating women. One of the butchers collected 25kg of meat from the other butchers each day. The greengrocers organised something similar. Our guiding principle was 'little and little becomes a lot'. We also organised a campaign on social media called 'the bid of good' to donate milk for children. We would share the number of children targeted and indicate that we needed one pound of milk for every child. We started with 13 pounds for 13 children, which increased to 300 pounds for 300 children. Over the whole period, we secured 6,800 pounds of milk.

Women contributed a lot to the sheltering centres in their neighbourhoods. They organised themselves into groups, with each group preparing food on a specific day. On one occasion, a local person was caught stealing after a series of thefts in a neighbourhood that hosts a sheltering centre. Many people mistakenly thought it was IDPs who were doing that. So, protection is one of our priorities as well. To gain the community's trust, we enter into each neighbourhood through local activists. We draw a lot on their experience and knowledge of people in their areas.

Social media is a great benefit for us. We use it to communicate what we need and to share financial and administrative reports to ensure transparency. This strengthens trust between the community and the emergency room. The tradition of *nafeer* [collective work that supports individuals, households, or the public good] has been a mobilising force for human resources. Many of the medical staff volunteered to provide services to the IDPs. We also had a psychosocial support committee that supported families who had lost their loved ones in the conflict.

We have different departments with different responsibilities: (1) a contact office for coordinating between and contacting donors (both members of the public and international donors); (2) a finance office for fund and stores management; (3) a health office for health services, laboratories, and medicines; (4) a services office to provide meals; (5) a communications office for media and communication with

the public; (6) a housing department to receive and shelter IDPs; (7) a recreation department to organise events and cultural days to reduce stress among the IDPs (child-friendly spaces, musical parties, awareness lectures); and (8) a secretariat that manages all the other offices and the emergency room in general, including monitoring and evaluation. We have a format for everything and can trace our expenditure and resources.

There are no military battles in our area, but the conflict has affected us in other ways. In the early weeks, the banks were shut down and mobile banking services were not working. This limited our capacity to receive donations. Communication with IDPs was also disrupted. We shared contact numbers over social media, asking IDPs to contact us, but they could not because of network issues. They would arrive and no one would be there to receive them.

Some criticised us and said that we had no business doing this, but the wider community rebutted those claims through their continuous presence in the sheltering centres with the IDPs. They defended us. The community opened their hearts before opening doors.

Source: Based on interviews with key informants.

3.4 Complementarity between informal social safety nets and formal social protection

A common feature of more recent locally led responses are their limited experience of working with the official aid system. As noted earlier, the global focus of localisation has been on formal bodies (Kim *et al.* 2022), but in Sudan we find increasing recognition among national and international actors of the role of informal social safety nets in responding to local shocks as well as interest in facilitating the delivery of social protection through them.

The prominence of grass-roots groups in the current crisis may have contributed to this. However, the experience of interaction between formal and informal social protection mechanisms is mixed. It depends a great deal on the understanding and motivation of external actors, and on the purpose of the mechanism. Many informal safety nets are exclusively organised by people within their communities and without the need for external support.

The official government department responsible for social protection in Sudan is the Zakat Chamber. It manages the resources raised from almsgiving (*zakat*) in accordance with Islamic Sharia teachings. Our findings show that while the Zakat Chamber does support informal social safety nets, this assistance is provided on an *ad hoc* basis and is often very limited.²¹ The Zakat Chamber has occasionally

²¹ Interview with member of an ERR in eastern Sudan (30 August 2023).

supported the ERRs with food and health services (see also Abbas and Abdalhadi 2023). Various state governments have done likewise, by allowing public schools to be used as sheltering centres managed by local groups, and providing the centres with food and non-food items and health services. However, instead of building on these structures and initiatives, the Zakat Chamber systemically works with committees that it establishes through mini-conferences organised at community level.²²

For *zakat* to become complementary to grass-roots structures, the Zakat Chamber would need to reorient its operations towards working with such groups. More broadly, the whole experience of the Zakat Chamber needs to be evaluated and lessons drawn to guide its institutional development (Machado, Bilo and Helmy 2018), including strengthening accountability towards *zakat* payers and beneficiaries.

Indeed, the representatives of Sudanese NGOs we interviewed recognise grass-roots organisations as manifestations of existing capacity in each community. These NGOs have supported informal social safety nets such as reconstruction funds since the 1990s, filling financial gaps and building on their capacities, structures, and experience. During the current crisis, they have again tried to avoid creating parallel structures, and rather to work in ways that complement the activities of the ERRs.²³

International aid agencies, on the other hand, express their desire to work with community-based organisations, but this is largely to ensure participation in delivering their own projects. Little attention is given to existing social protection capacities at the local level or how to support them, though it is worth mentioning that community mobilisation for this kind of participation often builds on the Sudanese tradition of collective work (*nafeer*). However, the current crisis has seen promising examples of support to the ERRs from UN agencies and international NGOs (Box 3.3).

This kind of engagement not only fills funding and resource gaps, but also promotes the localisation of effective, conflict-sensitive aid in Sudan. It facilitates the valuable exchange of knowledge and experience between grass-roots organisations and the international aid system. As evidence from Syria suggests, more equitable and inclusive partnerships ('high-quality localisation') can also have better outcomes, including projects that meet a fuller range of felt needs, greater satisfaction among national actors with the capacity support that their international partners provide, and greater confidence among the international partners that interventions are being appropriately targeted (Dixon *et al.* 2016).

²² Interview with Zakat Chamber staff member (7 September 2023).

²³ Two interviews with senior staff of Sudanese NGOs (10 August 2023).

Box 3.3: International support to an ERR

As an emergency response room, we have a relationship with aid agencies including international NGOs and UN agencies. We coordinate with them through our volunteers. They have met with us on several occasions and we have shared our views with them about the ongoing crisis. Some of them have had teams of volunteers working closely with us to deliver aid services and needs assessments. They have provided a lot of the crucial needs of the IDPs in collaboration with us, including medical equipment, food, and sanitation. Some NGOs have even provided training to our volunteers on humanitarian principles, voluntary work law, and how to interact with the IDPs and refugees. We are expecting them to build our capacity with regards to conflict sensitivity. Despite the current difficult situation and government interference in our work, we would like to build a relationship with donors and the aid system to fill the current gaps in the IDP response.

Source: Based on an interview with a member of an ERR in eastern Sudan (30 August 2023)

While the current crisis in Sudan has shown possible pathways to advance locally led aid, it has also revealed challenges. One is that, while government departments might support local initiatives with different needs, they have at times also played a disruptive role by introducing bureaucratic measures that grass-roots organisations are not equipped to meet.

For example, after weeks of cooperation between one ERR and the local government, the government then decided to form an emergency committee that would eventually take over from the ERR because the volunteers did not register it as a voluntary organisation.²⁴ The aim of authorities is often to control the aid that passes through these structures, which presents a major risk to conflict sensitivity.

A second challenge is the risk that external agencies may compromise the independence of local initiatives by co-opting them to serve their agenda, and in so doing undermine their capacity to manage conflict dynamics in the way they think best. This forms part of the discussion in the next section of this report.

²⁴ Interview with member of an ERR in eastern Sudan (23 August 2023).

4. Conflict sensitivity of social assistance programming in Sudan

4.1 Introduction

This section addresses our second research question²⁵ and investigates how conflict sensitivity is operationalised in social assistance interventions in Sudan. It focuses on programmes funded by international donors and implemented by UN agencies, international NGOs and/or national actors, which were providing food or cash support to households and individuals in mid-2023 (Table 4.1 shows examples). These programmes may have primarily humanitarian or development objectives, or sometimes a combination. We investigate how they have operationalised conflict sensitivity across both the project cycle (from design to implementation and monitoring and evaluation) and the social assistance delivery chain (from assessing beneficiaries to enrolment, providing transfers, and caseload management and accountability).

There is some literature on conflict-sensitive social assistance programming but little on conflict-affected settings. The literature notes that the effective operationalisation of conflict sensitivity requires time during the design phase to understand: (1) how the intervention may affect relations both between state and society, and within society (at national, regional, and local levels); and (2) how a conflict-sensitive approach intersects with and can help achieve commitments to inclusive development ‘by focusing on intersecting inequalities, discrimination, and vulnerable people’s right to protection’ (Birch *et al.* 2023: 50).

The broader research also shows how each point of the social assistance delivery model involves an interaction between intervention and context, with the potential for positive and negative effects on conflict and peace dynamics. A flashpoint is targeting – choosing who gets support – which is an ‘inherently conflictual’ exercise (*ibid.*: 19) that is susceptible to capture (WFP 2021; Harvey *et al.* 2022). A conflict-sensitive approach to targeting responds to local perceptions of vulnerability and fairness (Humphrey, Krishnan, and Krystalli 2019), with community-based processes to confirm beneficiary selection decisions, monitor exclusion, and uphold programme accountability (Birch *et al.* 2023). Lastly, there is limited evidence on how to support transformative linkages between social assistance programming and peace efforts, especially in places experiencing active violent conflict.

²⁵ ‘To what extent, and in which ways, is conflict sensitivity being considered and applied operationally in social assistance programming in Sudan, including in response to displacement?’

Drawing on our previous research (Birch *et al.* 2023) and other literature, the following considerations are critical for conflict-sensitive programming:

- **Analysis:** How will the programme be informed by conflict and political economy analysis (not to be conflated with security analysis (Beijer and Baltaduonyte 2021)) during the design phase and throughout implementation?
 - **Communications:** How will the programme ensure ‘clear and consistent communication with stakeholders, properly resourced at all operational levels, and referencing agreed policy parameters, programme rules and procedures’ (Birch and Carter 2023: 31)?
 - **Capacities:** How will abstract concepts of equity or inclusivity be turned into practice through investment in (1) organisational capacities (structures and systems) and (2) staff selection, training, and incentives ‘as well as paying attention to (depending on the context) clan, ethnic and other identities, and impacts on political dynamics and personal safety’ (Birch *et al.* 2023: 44; Slater, Haruna and Baur 2022)?
 - **Programme crisis preparedness:** How will the programme incorporate or link to early warning systems? What plans and structures will be put in place in advance to ensure resilient systems that can pivot in response to crises, including conflict?
 - **Learning and adaptation:** How will the programme support staff to reflect, learn, and adapt during implementation? How can an adaptive management approach – characterised by flexibility, responsiveness, purposive learning, and an enabling culture (Lonsdale *et al.* 2023) – support conflict sensitivity?
-

Table 4.1: Examples of internationally supported social assistance programmes in Sudan (August 2023)

| | Objectives | Activities | Coverage, beneficiaries | Donors, finance |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| WFP crisis response – Emergency food assistance, nutrition support, prevention and treatment of malnutrition <small>26</small> Country Strategic Plan 2019–23 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ‘Strategic outcome 1: People affected by shocks in targeted areas have access to food, nutrition and livelihoods during and after crises’ (WFP 2018: 17) – ‘[S]trategic outcome 1 focuses on responding to emergencies, both new and protracted, and ensuring that humanitarian, development and peace actions are strategic and interlinked’ (<i>ibid.</i>: 16) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In new and protracted crises, unconditional and conditional food, cash, voucher transfers (where appropriate households participate in asset-creation activities) (WFP 2018) – School feeding in primary schools in conflict- and disaster-affected areas (<i>ibid.</i>) – ‘[F]ollowing a shock... emergency blanket supplementary feeding for all PLWG [pregnant and lactating women and girls], and children aged 6–59 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – National: conflict areas and where vulnerable residents host IDPs (OCHA 2023a) – ‘[S]ome or all of WFP’s pre-existing 4.9 million beneficiaries under relief assistance and 440,000 beneficiaries under nutrition interventions; up to 1 million new internally displaced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The ten largest donors to the humanitarian response as of 14 September 2023 were the United States (US), European Commission, Central Emergency Response Fund, Germany, Canada, United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, Netherlands, |

²⁶ In 2023, the World Food Programme implemented other social assistance programmes under the Country Strategic Plan (2019–2023), which focus on the root causes of malnutrition (Strategic Outcome 2) and building the resilience of households, communities and national systems, including food systems (Strategic Outcome 3) (WFP 2018).

| | Objectives | Activities | Coverage, beneficiaries | Donors, finance |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| | | <p>months in affected populations' (<i>ibid.</i>: 18)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In protracted crises, targeted supplementary feeding and food-based prevention of acute and chronic malnutrition (targeting at-risk pregnant and lactating women and girls and children under five for rations and women and men for context-specific nutrition-sensitive interventions on training/cooking demonstrations/gardens, etc.) (<i>ibid.</i>) | <p>persons' (WFP 2023: 1)</p> | <p>Saudi Arabia and Norway (OCHA 2023c). The US was by far the largest donor, providing 1.5 times more than the nine other donors combined</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategic outcome 1 costs (revised Country Strategic Plan 31 May 2023): US\$2.39bn (including direct and indirect support costs) (WFP 2023) |
| World Bank Sudan Emergency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 'The objective of the project is to provide cash transfers and food support to food insecure households in | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Implemented through WFP as direct recipient of the grant (World Bank 2022b) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 'Eleven states that have been targeted based on IPC [Integrated Phase Classification] | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sudan Transition and Recovery Support Trust Fund funded by the European |

| | Objectives | Activities | Coverage, beneficiaries | Donors, finance |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| <p>Safety Net Project²⁷</p> <p>July 2022– (extended) September 2023</p> | <p>selected Project Areas of Sudan’ (World Bank 2022b: 1)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ‘[T]his emergency project aims to mitigate the short-term effects of the food insecurity crisis on Sudanese households and communities’ (<i>ibid.</i>: 12) – ‘The project will not only address urgent needs, but also enhance local-level capacity building and community-based approaches for short- and medium-term crisis response... This will expand the knowledge base of how to deliver support to high-risk conflict-affected areas and groups, which can be used to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ‘Unconditional cash transfers... to the most vulnerable households facing food insecurity to smooth consumption needs’ (<i>ibid.</i>: 28) – ‘Unconditional food transfers... in localities with poor functioning food markets and where there is no operational solution for safe cash transfers’ (<i>ibid.</i>: 28) – Primarily cash transfers, pivoting primarily to food after April 2023 (Namara 2023) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – projection figures’ (World Bank 2022b: 15) – Reached over 1.9 million people by April 2023 (Namara 2023) – Targeting approx. 340,000 April–September 2023 (<i>ibid.</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Union (EU), UK, France, Germany, Sweden, Saudi Arabia, Netherlands, Norway, Canada, Italy, Finland, Spain, Ireland, and the State and Peacebuilding Fund (World Bank 2022a) – Operations July 2022–September 2023: US\$100m (82% spent by April 2023) (Namara 2023) |

²⁷ International donors suspended development assistance after the military coup in October 2021. In mid-2022, Sudan Transition and Recovery Support Trust Fund donors re-directed US\$100m to the Sudan Emergency Safety Net Project.

| | Objectives | Activities | Coverage, beneficiaries | Donors, finance |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| | scale up safety net assistance when Sudan starts on a path to recovery' (<i>ibid.</i> : 21) | | | |
| UNICEF Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus(MCCT+) programme 2021–ongoing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – '[P]rovide vulnerable women and mothers with additional purchasing power as well as awareness, knowledge, skills and linkages with basic services in order to improve infant and young child feeding practices, sanitation and hygiene practices and address health and nutrition deprivations' (Ministry of Social Development <i>et al.</i> 2021: 2) – 'Strengthen social protection systems and capacities; strengthen social welfare workforce' (<i>ibid.</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Regular cash payments (US\$45 per child) (UNICEF 2023b) 'combined with social and behavioural change communication and complementary support and services for the first 1,000 days of life' (UNICEF 2023c: 53) – Including antenatal and postnatal care (<i>ibid.</i>); '[d]ietary intake and diversity/nutrition, health, WASH [water, sanitation, and hygiene], child care, child protection and livelihood programmes' (Ministry of | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Kassala and Red Sea states – 52,000 pregnant and lactating women (and benefiting their 260,000 household members) (UNICEF 2023a) – Incentives paid to 256 frontline workers in Kassala and Red Sea (UNICEF 2023b) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Germany, Sweden: €70m funding (UNICEF 2023c) |

| | Objectives | Activities | Coverage, beneficiaries | Donors, finance |
|--|--|---|--|---|
| | | <p>Social Development <i>et al.</i> 2021: 2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Incentives paid to frontline workers (UNICEF 2023b) | | |
| <p>Norwegian Refugee Committee (NRC) Sudan</p> <p>Emergency cash transfer programme</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – NRC Sudan’s livelihoods and food security (LFS) programming: ‘supports refugees, displacement-affected communities and vulnerable host communities to meet basic food needs in areas of high levels of food insecurity’ (NRC 2023a) – Linked objective of NRC Sudan’s LFS programming: ‘increase access to income-earning opportunities through small-scale off-farm income-generating projects, on-farm food production and smallholders’ access to input, | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ‘[S]upport vulnerable, food-insecure IDPs and refugees to have access to healthy and balanced food through cash-based interventions’ (NRC 2023a) – Complementary activity under NRC Sudan’s LFS programming: ‘provide refugee and vulnerable host community youth, men and women with the soft and technical skills and cash grants for demand-driven small business projects, thus fostering self-reliance and promoting economic inclusion’ (<i>ibid.</i>) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In September 2023, ‘will surpass assisting 100,000 displaced people in White Nile, Al-Jezira, and Gedaref [Gadarif], through multipurpose cash, education-in-emergencies, sanitation, and shelter’ (Carter 2023c) – In September, started NRC’s ‘first multipurpose cash distributions for conflict-displaced | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – NRC’s main donors: Norway, EU, US, Sweden, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, OCHA (NRC 2023b) – Costs for this activity not found |

| | Objectives | Activities | Coverage, beneficiaries | Donors, finance |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| | output and financial markets' (<i>ibid.</i>) | | <p>people in South Kordofan' (Carter 2023d)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – By 2 August, emergency cash programme delivered to over 10,000 displaced people across three states (Carter 2023a) | |
| <p>Community Organized Relief Effort (CORE) and Sudanese Development Call Organization (NIDAA)</p> <p>Pilot of multi-purpose cash</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CORE and NIDAA 'engaged RedRose (RR) and their partner Cashi, an omni-payments platform that has a 10k+ merchant network across Sudan, to ascertain whether multi-purpose cash assistance was feasible in Khartoum as a means of complementing [ERR] activities' (CORE <i>et al.</i> 2023: 1) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Initial pilot of one-off cash payment to targeted households in Khartoum to complement ERR activities as a feasibility learning exercise (CORE <i>et al.</i> 2023) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Initial pilot in 2023 served 143 recipient households, with intent to scale up to 600 households in two of Khartoum's most conflict-affected neighbourhoods, chosen to learn from one context with a largely static | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – CORE's website provides a list of its organisational partners (CORE <i>et al.</i> 2023) – Costs for this activity not found |

| | Objectives | Activities | Coverage, beneficiaries | Donors, finance |
|------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--|------------------------|
| assistance in Khartoum | | | population (Burri), and one with a displaced population (Aljiriaf) (CORE <i>et al.</i> 2023) | |

Note: These are selected examples and not a comprehensive mapping. The examples were identified in August 2023, with the exception of the CORE and NIDAA pilot which was added to the table in January 2024. Other key social assistance programmes in Sudan in 2023 were delivered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and international NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps, and others.

4.2 Focus of conflict-sensitive approaches in social assistance programming

Our UN and international NGO interviewees understand conflict sensitivity primarily as an approach to manage risks and ensure their programmes do no harm. One international NGO also sees it as a means to enable ‘meaningful access’ to programmes for those facing discrimination and other barriers, but notes that knowledge of how to overcome conflict’s negative impacts on longer-term programming is limited.²⁸ Only a couple of informants mentioned linkages between social assistance and peace-building in the context of integrated programming across the humanitarian–development–peace-building nexus.²⁹

With regard to risks to conflict sensitivity, our informants suggest that the following require attention during design and implementation:

- Ensuring that targeting criteria and transfer values do not inflame or incite social tensions within or between communities.³⁰ A particular concern is that tensions could arise from bypassing vulnerable host communities when providing support to displaced people.³¹
- Ensuring that social assistance includes vulnerable, marginalised people (in particular women) and that interventions meet (and do not increase) their protection needs.³²
- Avoiding aid capture or diversion due to national political and conflict dynamics³³ and/or local leaders and interests.³⁴
- Avoiding risks to national partners engendered by support from and association with international actors, particularly when international geopolitics affect conflict dynamics.³⁵

These risks are not unique to social assistance: for example, there is no evidence that giving people cash support is inherently more susceptible to diversion and fraud (Bumbacher 2019). However, one informant noted that cash assistance tends to come under more scrutiny than other modalities: ‘When we

²⁸ Interview with aid worker (29 August 2023).

²⁹ *Ibid.* and interview with executive director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

³⁰ Interviews with country director (5 September 2023), United Nations (UN) agency country staff (19 August 2023), UN expert (25 July 2023), UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023), and aid worker (29 August 2023).

³¹ Interviews with country director (5 September 2023), UN agency country staff (19 August 2023), and director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

³² Interviews with aid worker (29 August 2023) and UN agency country staff (19 August 2023).

³³ Interview with conflict sensitivity expert (6 July 2023).

³⁴ Interviews with protection expert (21 August 2023) and former Ministry of Labour and Social Development employee (24 August 2023).

³⁵ Interviews with UN expert (26 July 2023) and former Ministry of Labour and Social Development employee (24 August 2023).

distribute two million bed nets, no one asks how many children, what are their names, where do they live. Cash has a different standard.³⁶

Moreover, social assistance can involve particularly challenging decisions and risks over its allocation given that transfers are provided on a household or individual basis, whereas needs are broader, often community wide.³⁷ One national NGO interviewee stressed the need for honesty about conflict sensitivity risks and mitigating strategies, noting that it is easy to include a ‘do no harm’ clause in contracts with donors, but much more complex to ensure that principles such as data protection are upheld in practice.³⁸

4.3 Conflict-sensitive measures operationalised in social assistance design and implementation

Our research identified a number of conflict-sensitive measures operationalised in internationally supported social assistance programmes in Sudan in 2023, summarised here into four areas: (1) preparedness and capacity; (2) informed, accountable operations; (3) adaptive programming; and (4) working with local actors (from community to national level).

4.3.1 Preparedness and capacity

In advance of the current conflict, some international agencies had started developing their organisational processes and capacities for a conflict-sensitive approach, including by mainstreaming conflict-sensitive indicators into results frameworks;³⁹ translating global policy on conflict sensitivity to the country context and training staff on how to apply this to programmes in practice;⁴⁰ and investing in country office conflict sensitivity expertise⁴¹ and specialist conflict analysts and advisors to inform project design.⁴²

Attention has also been given to organisational and individual capacities that enable an effective response when conflict breaks out. A key social assistance intervention, the UNICEF MCCT+ programme, has established a Capacity Implementation Unit with dedicated in-house capacity in all operational aspects of cash assistance, including a cash management information system, which UNICEF has used to provide direct support to teachers and health and social

³⁶ Interview with UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023).

³⁷ Interviews with country director (05 September 2023) and director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

³⁸ Interview with director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

³⁹ Interview with UN expert (25 July 2023).

⁴⁰ Interview with UN peace-building coordinator (28 August 2023).

⁴¹ Interview with UN expert (25 July 2023).

⁴² Interviews with protection expert (21 August 2023), UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023), UN peace-building coordinator (28 August 2023), and aid worker (29 August 2023).

workers during the conflict (UNICEF 2023c).⁴³ Others, such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), were able to move quickly to respond to conflict impacts through their staff and experience on the ground, providing cash assistance to newly displaced people (Carter 2023a–d).

4.3.2 Informed, accountable programmes

Other conflict-sensitive measures focus on ensuring that social assistance programmes are informed and accountable. Our two national NGO interviewees operationalise conflict sensitivity in their programmes by building trust with communities through long-term engagement, involving them in programme design and being transparent about their operations.⁴⁴ Long-term relationships are harder for international agencies to develop, particularly those which prioritise assisting the newly displaced. UNICEF's MCCT+ programme adapted mid-rollout to deepen its engagement with tribal chiefs to overcome communities' lack of trust in government and partners; it also uses the RapidPro mobile technology platform to facilitate communication and feedback with beneficiaries (UNICEF 2023a, 2023c). Several interviewees emphasised that conflict sensitivity requires effective community accountability structures and processes, including grievance redress mechanisms (such as hotlines and complaints boxes).⁴⁵ At macro level, Mercy Corps has undertaken political economy analysis on Sudan's changing governance dynamics and implications for humanitarian response. This will inform efforts to mitigate the risks conflict parties' control over business networks and financial institutions pose (Mercy Corps 2023b).

Moving beyond a predominantly 'do no harm' focus to enabling transformative outcomes, and complementing its social assistance interventions, one international NGO (NRC) supports community empowerment by providing rights-based information, counselling, and legal assistance (NRC 2023a). Multiple data points and research tools (post-distribution monitoring, household surveys, baseline tracking, independent review and evaluation) help to strengthen the quality of monitoring and learning.⁴⁶

4.3.3 Adaptive programming

At organisational level, UN agencies and international NGOs adapted to the new conflict context after April 2023 by relocating staff and opening new offices in key locales. One international NGO (Mercy Corps) mobilised quickly to provide duty

⁴³ Interview with UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023).

⁴⁴ Two interviews with senior staff of Sudanese NGOs (10 August 2023).

⁴⁵ Interviews with a UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023), UN agency country staff (19 August 2023), and director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

⁴⁶ Interview with UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023).

of care payments to staff in the early weeks of the crisis (Sadiq 2023). International organisations pivoted to focus on core emergency priorities, informed by conflict analysis, supported in some cases by a rapid response mechanism that produced data from conflict-affected areas.⁴⁷

Various informants noted how adaptive programme management helps implementers flex interventions to fast-evolving contexts, noting the tension between this approach and traditional results-based planning frameworks. Box 4.1 contains an example from Mercy Corps; another example is the adaptive learning approach to piloting cash assistance in Khartoum that CORE and partners have undertaken (CORE *et al.* 2023).⁴⁸ Effective coordination of policies and processes to negotiate operational access is also critical.

Box 4.1: Mercy Corps cash assistance: adapting to active conflict

With support from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, Mercy Corps has been delivering cash support to IDPs and vulnerable households in South Darfur, Gadarif, and South Kordofan states under its Building Resilience in Communities Affected by Conflict and Crisis (BRIDGE) Program. After April 2023, insecurity, a shortfall in cash liquidity, and destruction of mobile network data centres in Khartoum meant that Mercy Corps' existing financial service providers (one of Sudan's largest banks and two mobile network operators) suddenly stopped functioning.

Mercy Corps approached microfinance institution Ebdaa Bank to pilot delivery of the cash transfers in Gadarif. Ebdaa had no previous experience of cash assistance but it had a strong last-mile network in rural areas, and Mercy Corps had partnered with it before. During the pilot, Ebdaa delivered cash assistance to 1,517 households across 13 villages in the three target localities.

The lessons learned from this experience include: (1) the partnership between Mercy Corps and Ebdaa Bank bridged the expertise gap and fostered a shared learning environment; (2) comprehensive training and support empowered the bank to take on its new responsibilities; and (3) the pilot needed an adaptive management approach, with perseverance and flexibility to overcome challenges and enable less conventional partners to support the humanitarian response. Two valuable over-arching insights for Mercy Corps were: 'Firstly, the importance of building robust and flexible distribution networks to ensure timely and secure

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, and interviews with aid worker (29 August 2023), and country director (5 September 2023).

⁴⁸ Interview with protection expert (21 August 2023).

aid delivery. Secondly, maintaining collaboration with local authorities and community leaders is vital for smooth operations and enhanced safety. Their insights and cooperation can help address potential security risks, especially for vulnerable participants.’

Source: Mercy Corps (2023a)

4.3.4 Working with local actors

Both national and international actors noted the need to strengthen how social assistance programming works with local NGOs and community-based mechanisms as a critical strategy for putting conflict sensitivity into practice, often focusing on how this is key to ‘doing no harm’. There is also awareness that supporting these local structures could have positive outcomes for inclusion and peace. International informants expressed interest in supporting ERRs in a conflict-sensitive way that is aware of and responds to the risks involved;⁴⁹ for example, in 2023 NRC provided cash-based transfers to locally managed shelters for displaced people (Carter 2023b). The pilot of cash assistance to households in Khartoum by CORE and its partners concluded that ERRs’ leadership would be essential to implementation at scale, given their local knowledge and expertise in the rapidly evolving conflict (CORE *et al.* 2023). However, international funding of ERRs thus far has tended to be in the form of small, one-off grants, whose disbursement criteria are unclear (Abbas and Abdalhadi 2023).

Interviewees also discussed their intention to move away from transactional subcontractor relationships with national NGOs towards more meaningful, longer-term partnerships, sharing overheads fairly and with a lighter implementation footprint.⁵⁰ Positive developments include the involvement of national NGOs in some international NGO decision-making mechanisms and early stages of programme design.⁵¹

4.4 Challenges to conflict-sensitive social assistance programming

Our interviewees from national and international aid agencies identified various challenges to operationalising conflict sensitivity in social assistance programmes in Sudan:

⁴⁹ Interviews with UN experts (25 and 26 July 2023) and UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023).

⁵⁰ Interviews with UN expert (25 July 2023), aid worker (29 August 2023), and country director (5 September 2023).

⁵¹ Interview with executive director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

- **Funding, capacity, and coordination constraints:** The shortage of funds in the face of large-scale need makes it hard to select who should receive support, heightening the risk of fuelling tensions between those who benefit and those who do not.⁵² Meanwhile, aid agencies grapple continuously with staff shortages and capacity limitations (WFP 2022), impeded by short-term donor funding that feeds a constant cycle of recruitment.⁵³ Aid coordination remains challenging, with limited coordination among international actors and very few Sudanese people or organisations participating.⁵⁴ This limits the opportunities to share learning from experience, including on how to operationalise conflict sensitivity.
- **Factors impeding the role of national organisations:** Factors include remote working during the crisis, which widened the gap between international and local actors and the Sudanese population;⁵⁵ national NGOs' lack of a financial 'cushion' to manage the impacts of conflict in ways that are easier for international NGOs (e.g. to cover relocation of staff or make duty of care payments, replace lost equipment, or provide surge capacity); lack of trust in national NGOs; complicated grant application processes; and a failure to invest adequately in the organisational capacities of national NGOs, including for conflict sensitivity.⁵⁶
- **The programming mentality of large UN operations:** The pressures of a large-scale, fast-paced, and logistics-led operation, such as that in Sudan, make it an achievement even to deliver a minimalist approach to analysis and mitigation of risk.⁵⁷ As one interviewee observed, 'I would say that emergency interventions do not allow enough room for conflict sensitivity at the design stage and that organisations need to adapt as they implement.'⁵⁸ Relatedly, thinking and working politically is still unfamiliar and uncomfortable terrain for some humanitarians.⁵⁹ There are concerns that conflict sensitivity may compromise humanitarian principles or delay response, when in fact 'politically informed impartiality' (Stephen *et al.* 2017: 42) is vital in situations where both national and international actors may politicise humanitarian assistance.

⁵² Interviews with UN expert (26 July 2023) and executive director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

⁵³ Interview with UN agency country staff (19 August 2023).

⁵⁴ Interviews with conflict sensitivity expert (6 July 2023/6 July 2023), UNICEF staffer (24 August 2023) and country director (5 September 2023).

⁵⁵ Mirroring experience in Afghanistan (Weigand and Andersson 2019), Yemen (Harvey *et al.* 2022), and Myanmar (Haines and Buchanan 2023).

⁵⁶ Interviews with UN expert (26 July 2023), director of a national NGO (10 August 2023), and UN agency country staff (19 August 2023).

⁵⁷ Interviews with UN expert (25 July 2023) and UN agency country staff (19 August 2023).

⁵⁸ Interview with UN agency country staff (19 August 2023).

⁵⁹ Interview with UN expert (25 July 2023).

5. Donor policies and approaches to conflict-sensitive social protection in Sudan

5.1 Introduction

This section of the report moves from the operational level to consider the conflict sensitivity of donor approaches to social protection in Sudan.⁶⁰ Its scope is not limited to social protection since a donor's broader policy choices, such as its overall positioning on Sudan or the nature of its funding and risk management systems, shape all interventions. We also broaden the evidence base by drawing on research in other countries that present conflict sensitivity dilemmas, which may be relevant to Sudan;⁶¹ in all these cases, the state is party to the conflict, as it is in Sudan.

While Sudan has frequently been among the top global recipients of humanitarian aid, its level of development assistance has fluctuated in line with the country's standing with Western governments (Development Initiatives 2011). International development cooperation was very limited during the al-Bashir regime, rose after the 2019 revolution, and fell again after the 2021 coup (Sida 2023). Donor attention also shifted southwards after the independence of South Sudan in 2011.⁶²

As a result, the international community has provided little sustained programmatic support in recent decades,⁶³ and conventional sector coordination structures were never well developed.⁶⁴ International NGOs also note the relative weakness of Sudan's Cash Working Group, linking this with the country's periodic isolation from development debates.⁶⁵

Donor informants describe the challenges of setting strategy in such an unpredictable environment, as well as the practical and psychological impact of rapid evacuations across Sudan in April 2023.⁶⁶ Donor cooperation meetings moved online, though rarely with the same participants from month to month. Agency offices reopened in supposedly safer areas of Sudan, only to close again a few months later. One lesson learned is the need for aid organisations to

⁶⁰ Our third research question: 'To what extent, and in which ways, is conflict sensitivity informing donor approaches to social protection in Sudan at a policy/system level?'

⁶¹ Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

⁶² Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁶³ Interview with conflict advisor (5 February 2024).

⁶⁴ Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁶⁵ Interviews with aid worker (29 August 2023) and country director (05 September 2023).

⁶⁶ Interview with social development advisor (5 February 2024).

develop better scenario-based contingency planning in countries prone to conflict.⁶⁷

As might be expected in such a fast-moving situation, our literature search in September 2023 found little published evidence of donors' current strategies towards Sudan and therefore their stated commitments to conflict sensitivity.⁶⁸ An exception was the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO),⁶⁹ whose regional Humanitarian Implementation Plan for 2024 is explicit about requiring that all interventions 'build on a [*sic.*] thorough conflict and protection risk analyses – that are gender-informed and aimed at developing a conflict-sensitive response' (DG-ECHO 2023: 19). Conflict sensitivity is also among the list of country-specific priorities for Sudan (*ibid.*: 22).

As the preceding chapter noted, ensuring accountability to affected people (AAP) is key to conflict sensitivity and integral to the 24 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship conceived by the Good Humanitarian Donorship initiative, an informal donor forum and network.⁷⁰ AAP is one of three conflict-related issues that all ECHO-funded programmes will systematically address (the others being the centrality of protection and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse) (*ibid.*: 19). Sweden also emphasises the need to strengthen the conditions for accountability in Sudan (Sida 2018). The Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF), a multi-donor country-based pooled fund that the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) Sudan manages, carried out a survey of its partners' best practices in AAP as a step to building consensus on minimum standards. These are yet to be developed because the survey results arrived just before the war started in April 2023.⁷¹

NGO informants in this study perceived differences in donor approaches to conflict sensitivity: in their opinion, some were concerned with the evolution of conflict and its impact on needs, for example, and others with mitigating the risks to delivery from poor context analysis.⁷² Donors such as the UK and the Netherlands have been at the forefront of promoting conflict-sensitive practice in Sudan, principally through their support to the Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF), which is hosted by Saferworld.⁷³ Others are aware that they need to give it more attention.⁷⁴ The next section discusses conflict sensitivity and donor decision-making in four areas – information and analysis, partnerships, funding policies

⁶⁷ Interview with donor representative (31 January 2024).

⁶⁸ We could not search material in languages other than English.

⁶⁹ Sweden's development cooperation strategy for 2018–22 also contains clear commitments to conflict-sensitive programming (Sida 2018).

⁷⁰ See **24 Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship**.

⁷¹ Interview with expert (26 July 2023).

⁷² Interview with aid worker (29 August 2023).

⁷³ **The Conflict Sensitivity Facility**.

⁷⁴ Interview with humanitarian desk officer (31 January 2024).

and systems, and risk management – and concludes with some reflections on country strategy.

5.2 Conflict sensitivity of donor funding to Sudan

5.2.1 Information and analysis

Most donors are now operating either from their home countries or from bases elsewhere in the region, or a mix of the two. All rely to a great extent on third parties to understand what is happening on the ground. This distance poses a risk to the quality of context analysis, stakeholder communication, and monitoring, all of which underpin conflict-sensitive practice. Furthermore, in a country as large and diverse as Sudan, where conflict patterns can rapidly change, conflict analysis must be highly localised if it is to be useful. This in turn creates a further challenge of how to coordinate multiple information-gathering processes and draw findings together. There is some informal effort to share open source data, but this could be more systematic.⁷⁵

The customary tension within donors between the need to understand a conflict context and think through the likely implications of action, and the pressure to act quickly and to disburse funds, particularly in a crisis, is still acute.⁷⁶ As donors and agencies recruit large numbers of new international staff who are unfamiliar with Sudan, access to conflict sensitivity training and resources, such as those provided by the CSF, is critical.⁷⁷ Other donors draw on their partnerships to stay informed: one has been quietly strengthening the capacity of a wide variety of grass-roots civil society organisations for several years and has found that this pre-existing channel to community activism deepens its understanding of the context and views of people on the ground.⁷⁸

5.2.2 Partnerships

Remote operations change the nature of partnership. They prevent direct in-depth discussion with local actors on mutual expectations and priorities.⁷⁹ They also reduce the likelihood of new partners coming on stream: donors rely on known and trusted organisations, with an established presence in their operational areas, to deliver in a high-risk environment.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Interview with conflict advisor (5 February 2024).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

⁷⁸ Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁷⁹ Interview with donor representative (31 January 2024).

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* and interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

The extent to which a partner is known and trusted shapes donors' attitude to risk, particularly if they are working together on sensitive issues.⁸¹ Donors may be more willing to respond positively to partners' requests to make operational changes in their programming – for example to adapt to changing conflict dynamics – if they have worked with them for some time and have confidence in their judgment.⁸² Donors also differ in their willingness to fund unknown and unregistered groups, in part due to domestic regulatory requirements.⁸³

Consequently, there is no unanimity on the principle of expanding support to ERRs and similar grass-roots mechanisms: several donors are keen, and some funding is now being channelled through international NGOs, but others are more cautious.⁸⁴ Pooled funds are seen as a useful mechanism to provide this assistance given the potential harm uncoordinated funding to small-scale informal initiatives could cause.⁸⁵

5.2.3 Funding policies and systems

No donors we interviewed said that they applied an explicit conflict sensitivity policy or framework, but all cited relevant internal guidance (e.g. on violence prevention, risk management, and the interaction between peace, security, and development), or mentioned their involvement with networks that encourage conflict-sensitive development cooperation, or their discussions with the CSF on their programming in Sudan.⁸⁶ For some, conflict sensitivity is now 'increasingly important' and 'front and centre' in programme design.⁸⁷ For others, it is not yet central to their funding decisions.⁸⁸

We asked donors what they look for when appraising proposals or prospective partners from a conflict sensitivity perspective. Along with the quality of context analysis, most mentioned adaptability (i.e. the capacity of the partner and their programme to adjust to a fluid situation).

For one donor, this conversation starts at the concept stage and is central to its approach; operational flexibility is helped by minimising the number of pre-set templates or formats that a partner must follow. Both the donor and grantees focus on the end goals of a programme, allowing implementation to adjust as

⁸¹ Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁸² Interview with donor representative (31 January 2024).

⁸³ Interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁸⁶ Interview with donor representative (31 January 2024) and Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁸⁷ Interview with donor (1 February 2024); interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

⁸⁸ Interview with humanitarian desk officer (31 January 2024).

circumstances change; this approach may also increase the likelihood that provision can be maintained over time.⁸⁹

Another donor looks for a high degree of adaptability in its partners because it enables its partners to address changing needs as conflicts evolve. The donor also expects its grantees to approach the selection of target groups and areas tentatively, with an awareness of the implications these choices could have for social cohesion.⁹⁰

A third donor is considering how to strengthen anticipatory humanitarian action and the role of crisis modifiers within that, within the constraints of its domestic legal frameworks.⁹¹

A fourth now expects more thorough consideration of conflict sensitivity in funding applications than it did in the past.⁹²

On the whole, and given current circumstances in Sudan, the focus of donor-supported social assistance does not at present extend beyond the ‘do no harm’ stage on the conflict sensitivity continuum.

There are positive examples in Sudan of donors using fund management systems in ways that could enhance conflict sensitivity. Box 5.1 describes the experience of two pooled funds: the SHF, which OCHA manages, and the UN Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund.⁹³ The wider literature also suggests that flexible and sustained financing is key to operating effectively in conflict (Box 5.2).

Box 5.1: Changes to fund management systems that may enhance conflict sensitivity

Both the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF) and the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) include **conflict sensitivity prompts within their application processes**. The PBF requires a conflict sensitivity framework as part of the funding proposal. The format is not prescriptive, but examples of models are made available. The SHF has a box on conflict sensitivity in the concept note applicants to the fund are required to complete, which makes the applicants aware of the issue’s importance, though staff acknowledge that they do not necessarily have the expertise to evaluate these fully.

⁸⁹ Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁹⁰ Interview with donor representative (31 January 2024).

⁹¹ Interview with humanitarian desk officer (31 January 2024).

⁹² Interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

⁹³ The Peacebuilding Fund does not fund social protection in Sudan.

The PBF goes further, **requiring potential grantees to complete an online conflict sensitivity course**. The PBF in Sudan partnered with the UN System Staff College to develop a conflict sensitivity course tailored to the Sudanese context. It expects grantees to share their certificate of completion within 3–6 months of their project starting as a way of ensuring some basic understanding of conflict-sensitive principles and practice.

The SHF has made a number of **adjustments to its funding processes** that have the potential to reinforce conflict sensitivity:

- An **area-based approach** to the reserve allocation means decisions can be made by people closer to the ground. The OCHA suboffice facilitates discussions between SHF partners in each area on the priorities for each cluster and the organisations best-placed to implement them. This decentralised and collaborative approach generates a more nuanced understanding of the context and response priorities.
- An **emergency rapid response mechanism** within the reserve allocation makes it easier to respond quickly to emerging needs. This is a specific instrument for Sudan. The SHF approves concept notes from its partners, for the most part within 48 hours, which then allows them to draw on a contingency line in their budget.
- **Derogations that increase operational flexibility**, such as applying a donation/‘no regrets’ modality for subgrants to ERRs; accepting the re-programming of costs spent in the first weeks of the war that SHF grantees had not planned for; and allowing transfers through alternatives to the formal banking system, such as *hawalas* (informal trust-based money transfer systems). The SHF was reportedly quick to recognise the important role of first responders, and appointed an officer to link them to sources of potential support (Harvey *et al.* 2023a).

The PBF is finding ways to **channel funds to grass-roots groups** working on peace and social cohesion. The minimum proposed threshold for a grant would be US\$500, allowing very small groups to benefit. The mechanism, which was intended to be managed by an international NGO, was due to be launched in April 2023 but is on pause; the PBF is exploring alternative ways to apply the same approach.

Source: Interviews with experts (26 July 2023 and 28 August 2023) and government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024)

Despite these positive developments, national NGO informants believe that grant application processes are designed around the capacities of larger international agencies.⁹⁴ As for international NGOs in Sudan, they highlight three continuing concerns with funding:

1. **The short-term nature of funding**, which results in rapid staff turnover and prevents agencies from investing in staff skills or learning from projects that have just ended.⁹⁵
2. **The narrative of cost efficiency that has built up around cash programming**, which has raised donors' expectations that a very high percentage of any grant will reach the ultimate recipients. This reduces the funds available for management and delivery, including measures that are likely to enhance conflict sensitivity such as monitoring, accountability, and communication systems,⁹⁶ and exacerbates the budgetary pressures discussed in section 4.
3. **Designing projects without knowing the final budget.** Interventions that might otherwise have been well designed to deliver on conflict-sensitive objectives, and other aspects of programme quality, are pared back to fit the resources ultimately made available.⁹⁷

5.2.4 Localisation

Donors are guided by their commitments under the Grand Bargain and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee principles rather than their own policy positions on localisation.⁹⁸ Direct contact with local and national actors about funding is limited; contact tends to be through country offices or specific funding windows (Development Initiatives 2023). The structure of humanitarian financing has implications for both localisation and conflict sensitivity. The large regional programmes currently operating in the Horn of Africa may be less tied to specific geographical areas and therefore more flexible; a regional approach is in principle also appropriate for responding to cross-border conflict dynamics. However, as the programming lens moves further away from specific localities and those who work there, tension may develop with the commitment to localise.⁹⁹

Some donor informants view the capacity of local actors as a constraint on localisation, in that they lack the necessary systems and qualified staff to meet

⁹⁴ Interview with executive director of a national NGO (10 August 2023).

⁹⁵ Interview with aid worker (29 August 2023).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Interviews with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024) and Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

⁹⁹ Interview with humanitarian desk officer (31 January 2024).

the standards of accountability and due diligence which (as some acknowledge) they themselves have set, driven in part by the demands of their domestic legislatures and publics.¹⁰⁰ Others emphasise the importance of a differentiated approach to localisation, which takes account of the diversity of civil society, including grass-roots initiatives led by women.¹⁰¹

Recent global research does not find evidence to substantiate the assumption that the capacity of local actors is a barrier to localisation; rather, international actors' limited understanding of local capacity and where it exists may in fact be an impediment to further progress on localisation (Barbelet *et al.* 2021). International NGOs sense that donors are reluctant to cede control and relax their requirements; for example, about the minimum documentation required.¹⁰² National NGOs report that some donors are more inclined to listen than others, but also that an undifferentiated view of Sudanese civil society prevails, which feeds a lack of trust in their competence and experience.¹⁰³

5.2.5 Risk management

A common thread running through the three preceding sections is the question of how donors manage risk. Adopting a balanced approach to risk is another important finding from the literature on complex emergencies (Box 5.2). Donors' current preoccupation with risk and its consequences for implementing partners is illustrated by the following comment by an international aid worker: 'Twenty years ago, when I started work, [funding] proposals were all about logical frameworks. Today, three-quarters of a proposal to donors is about risk management – how to deal with counterterrorism, with fraud. All this translates into bottlenecks downstream.'¹⁰⁴

Donors are managing risk in different ways: by delegating its management to their partners, within set limits, and trusting in the systems those partners put in place;¹⁰⁵ by deepening their relationship with partners over time, building trust and confidence;¹⁰⁶ by close monitoring of partner performance;¹⁰⁷ by triangulating information with other contacts who are familiar with local dynamics;¹⁰⁸ and by reaching out to their peers (e.g. contacting colleagues in

¹⁰⁰ Interviews with donor representative (31 January 2024) and government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

¹⁰¹ Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

¹⁰² Interviews with aid worker (29 August 2023) and country director (5 September 2023).

¹⁰³ Two interviews with senior staff of Sudanese NGOs (10 August 2023).

¹⁰⁴ Interview with aid worker (29 August 2023).

¹⁰⁵ Interviews with donor representative (31 January 2024), government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024), and Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

¹⁰⁶ Interview with donor representative (31 January 2024) and Interview with donor (1 February 2024)

¹⁰⁷ Interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

¹⁰⁸ Interview with donor (1 February 2024).

Myanmar and Syria to discuss their experience of working with frontline responders).¹⁰⁹ Pooled funds can have major advantages for efficiency, but do not necessarily reduce the risk burden for individual donors, which remain accountable to their domestic constituencies.¹¹⁰

5.2.6 Clear, realistic, and coherent country engagement strategy

The third lesson from the literature that may help donors and their partners navigate complex conflict-affected situations is to have a coherent country engagement strategy (Box 5.2). As noted earlier, donors have struggled to regroup and re-strategise since the war in Sudan began. Their capacity to engage would not have been helped by cuts in funding for peace-building and conflict monitoring.¹¹¹ Peace-building and protection specialists hold the view that a combination of factors, including risk aversion and the national-level political stalemate, are leading donors to neglect opportunities to support local-level mediation and conflict prevention processes.¹¹²

International NGOs note a lack of internal coherence within some donors and its impact on the quality of dialogue; they find themselves adjusting their message to the priorities and positions of each department, which may not be consistent. They may also hesitate to share information about protection or access concerns with a political department in case it jeopardises their prospects of funding from another department. These informants would like to see greater consistency and coherence across the full range of a donor's portfolio, in line with nexus principles, whatever the prevailing circumstances in-country.¹¹³

The principal frustration of our two national NGO informants is that they understand the context far better than international NGOs and donors yet are relegated to a subsidiary position in the aid system. Since the basis of conflict sensitivity is an accurate analysis of conflict dynamics, they believe that local actors should guide debates on conflict sensitivity in Sudan to ensure appropriate contextualisation.¹¹⁴

Looking more broadly at how the international system as a whole is engaging with Sudan, it is charged with 'failing to meet the moment' (Act for Sudan *et al.* 2023a), and its response as 'woefully inadequate' (Harvey *et al.* 2023a: 17). The overriding demand of those inside and outside Sudan is for urgent and unified action on human rights violations, alongside an adequately funded relief

¹⁰⁹ Interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Interview with conflict sensitivity expert (6 July 2023); see also Merrick (2023).

¹¹² Interviews with conflict sensitivity expert (6 July 2023) and protection expert (21 August 2023).

¹¹³ Interviews with aid worker (29 August 2023) and country director (5 September 2023).

¹¹⁴ Two interviews with senior staff of Sudanese NGOs (10 August 2023).

response and an inclusive dialogue to deliver a just peace (Act for Sudan *et al.* 2023a, 2023b). As the anniversary of the start of the war approaches, these goals are still very far from being met.

Box 5.2: Lessons from other conflict-affected countries

Conflict-affected environments present complex moral dilemmas that often only present 'less bad' options (Bowden *et al.* 2023: 4). Syria and Yemen both illustrate the classic humanitarian dilemma: whether to stand up to demands that compromise humanitarian principles and risk reprisal, or whether to accept them to maintain access to those in need (Harvey *et al.* 2022; Haid 2019).

In Afghanistan, the Taliban's edicts restricting the rights of women and girls have generated intense discussion on the ethics of continuing to work under such conditions (Bowden *et al.* 2023). There are similar debates in Myanmar, where agencies are grappling with the tightening restrictions the military junta has imposed (Harvey *et al.* 2023b). The Syrian regime's use of bureaucratic restrictions and operational interference, grounded in its assertion of state sovereignty, mirrors tactics used in Sudan (Leenders and Mansour 2018).¹¹⁵

The literature suggests a number of ways that donors can help operational agencies navigate these dilemmas and improve the conflict sensitivity of their responses. We summarise these under three broad headings.

1. Ensure that funding policies and systems are appropriate to the context

Humanitarian actors in Yemen identified flexible funding as one of the key ingredients to effective programming in environments where access is constrained (Harvey *et al.* 2022). Flexible funding helped agencies in Syria which chose to push back against restrictions imposed by the regime because it alleviated the pressure of spending deadlines while negotiations with the government took their course (Haid 2019). Donors' willingness to use multiple funding streams (not just humanitarian) for cross-border operations also allowed greater diversity in the type of organisation funded, such as civil defence (Beals 2023).

One of the other ingredients humanitarian actors in Yemen identified is long-term presence (Harvey *et al.* 2022). This too can be fostered by funding policies and strategies. Key to the success of remote programming in both Syria and Myanmar were high levels of trust between national and international actors, built

¹¹⁵ Pospisil (2022) also discusses how Sudanese actors use sovereignty claims to push back against external mediation initiatives, especially multilateral ones.

up over time; Beals (2023) argues that it is unhelpful for agencies to attempt remote programming without such experience. In the early stages of the Tigray crisis, the most effective actors were those who had worked in the region before and already had networks and capacity in place (Stoddard *et al.* 2021). Longer-term and more predictable humanitarian financing would also facilitate more systematic engagement between humanitarian cash programming and social protection systems, where the conditions for this are conducive (Walch 2023).

2. Take a balanced approach to risk

Risk management has a number of dimensions. One is how donors' decisions affect their operational partners. For example, states often use civil society registration to exercise control over aid. National organisations that need to maintain a low profile, or have no wish to legitimise a regime, will avoid registering. Myanmar's 2022 Organisation Registration Law extended registration for the first time to national as well as international organisations (Harvey *et al.* 2023b), but even before then it was common for donors and intermediaries to require it of their national partners, despite the risks involved (Haines and Buchanan 2023). Some donors adjusted their position after the 2021 military coup, but not all (*ibid.*). Similar concerns are raised about procurement policies that require multiple quotations from suppliers (Décobert and Wells 2023).

A second area of risk management relates to operational effectiveness. Case studies from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Myanmar suggest that risk appetites, combined with other institutional incentives such as pressure to deliver short-term results and value for money, result in aid programmes being clustered in areas that are easier to access (Stephen *et al.* 2017; Lough, Barbelet and Njeri 2022).

In both Afghanistan and Yemen, an overly restrictive approach to security management led to a widening disconnect with local people, and undermined agencies' access and ability to negotiate with local authorities (Weigand and Andersson 2019; Harvey *et al.* 2022). The response to the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia is also regarded as risk averse: a lack of willingness to take measured risks was one factor behind the slow start to large-scale operations (Stoddard *et al.* 2021). However, acceptance of risk has been higher in other instances. In Syria, donors encouraged NGOs to take risks and pivot away from Damascus towards cross-border operations (Beals 2023).

In Myanmar, where the regime tightly controls the mainstream aid system, informal and locally organised assistance is now the dominant modality. It is facilitated by the use of cash, cooperation with local businesses, and cross-border diaspora support. Research suggests that support for this type of response could be expanded, but it would require donors to review their

expectations with regard to monitoring, reporting, and accountability to give local actors as much flexibility and autonomy as possible, and, in a context where any association with aid carries risk, to protect both aid providers and recipients (Harvey *et al.* 2023b).

3. Develop a clear, realistic, and coherent strategy for engaging with the state and other parties to the conflict

The case of Afghanistan illustrates the importance of such a strategy, where lack of diplomatic consensus regarding the Taliban in effect pushed the problem of how to deal with a ban on female aid workers down to individual agencies. Donors have been overly passive, leaving their grantees to grapple with political dilemmas for which they are neither responsible nor equipped (Bowden *et al.* 2023). Agencies struggle with a lack of clarity about the sort of engagement with ministries under sanctions donors will allow (*ibid.*), and with their differing positions on Taliban interference (Lang 2022).

Beals (2023) argues that donors' responses to complex conflicts must be internally coherent (across their diplomatic, political, stabilisation, and humanitarian functions) and draw on the range of policy and funding instruments at their disposal. A decision not to engage also has consequences, including for conflict sensitivity: Western donors' absence from Kabul has weakened both their understanding of the context (Bowden *et al.* 2023) and the degree of consensus they share with operational agencies (Lang 2022). Without political engagement at some level, there can be no dialogue about the state's responsibilities towards its own citizens (Bowden *et al.* 2023). There is also the risk of creating parallel delivery systems that ultimately disempower Afghan institutions (Lang 2022).

In their review of the global landscape for localisation, Robillard, Atim and Maxwell (2021) find a lack of research and guidance on the role of donors and international actors in protracted crises where governments are party to a conflict. Aid agencies in Afghanistan lack the necessary frameworks to help them think through the dilemmas they face, which in turn has inhibited a coherent interagency approach (Bowden *et al.* 2023). Negotiations with the Taliban authorities are atomised, as each agency makes its own choices (*ibid.*).

Yemen illustrates the importance of both effective monitoring and collective action. Here, aid actors accepted the conditions imposed by Houthi forces in return for access to populations under their control. Restrictions then gradually tightened, until agencies reached a point where they found themselves seriously blocked but without the leverage to push back; closer assessment of how the space was shrinking might have indicated when red lines had been crossed (Harvey *et al.* 2022). Where donors and aid agencies accepted the need to be transparent about the compromises they were making and respond jointly to

escalating restrictions, there was more effective negotiation with authorities, and some limited success in mitigating financial demands and operational interference (*ibid.*).

A number of studies argue that new strategies, frameworks, and tools are needed to help humanitarian actors deal with the manipulation and appropriation of aid by authoritarian states (Leenders and Mansour 2018; Haid 2019). Beals (2023) argues that in situations where the state – or *de facto* state – denies aid agencies access to populations in need, this is likely to require creative alternatives to the UN-dominated and state-centric model of humanitarian action.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

Donors to Sudan are clearly signalling the priority they attach to conflict sensitivity – understood as awareness of the interaction between intervention and context, and action that, at minimum, avoids further harm and, wherever possible, exercises a positive influence on conflict and peace dynamics. Donors are also investing in practical measures to strengthen this in Sudan, such as the CSF and the development of online training that is contextualised to the country context.

There is evidence of demand from practitioners, including Sudanese informants, for more of this kind of support, more widely distributed. However, it is less clear that the implications of what conflict-sensitive practice requires have begun to feed through into all donor operating processes and to the extent needed. In any event, there is a disconnect between what donors are trying to do and what their grantees actually experience.

Conflict sensitivity and adaptive management are closely entwined. In complex crises such as the crisis in Sudan, where access is constrained and decision makers are removed from operational realities, a donor's instinct may be to tighten systems and controls. Both the literature and our interviews suggest that the opposite is required: a willingness to trust frontline workers and give them as much autonomy as possible to adjust their work as the context changes. An overly restrictive approach to risk can widen the gap between aid agencies and the populations they serve (Weigand and Andersson 2019), or squeeze out smaller organisations that look less like Western NGOs but might be 'more in tune with community needs' (Stephen *et al.* 2017: 5).

One area of risk that demands particular attention in Sudan is the interaction between official aid and the political economy; in particular, ensuring that agencies understand who they are working with and the links these companies or individuals may have to security or political actors (Hoffmann 2022; Jaspars and Elkreem 2023). Managing this risk need not impose significant demands on any one organisation since information about company profiles and connections can be pooled and is already being gathered (Cartier *et al.* 2022).¹¹⁶

Alongside adaptive management, accountability to affected people is another priority that is already on the agenda of both humanitarian and development actors, and central to conflict-sensitive practice. Strategies such as participatory programme design and implementation, and building trust through long-term

¹¹⁶ See **C4ADS Response to Conflict in Sudan**.

community engagement, will help ensure that programmes are informed, inclusive, and accepted, and do not inflame or incite social tensions. Agencies in Sudan are using a wide range of AAP tools and approaches in their social assistance programming.

Many of the recommendations on conflict-sensitive programme design and delivery intersect with those required to strengthen the role of local actors in the aid system. Localisation in itself is not sufficient to ensure conflict sensitivity, but a conflict-sensitive approach to localisation will deepen contextual understanding and reinforce the capacities of those best-placed to mitigate the impact of conflict over the longer term (Robinson 2021; Haines and Buchanan 2023).

Grass-roots organisations in Sudan have proved their worth in appalling circumstances. The trust they enjoy at the local level, as well as their flexibility and understanding of conflict dynamics, qualify them to play a leading role in programming, including for social protection. Grasping the opportunity to help them do so will not only augment the response to Sudan's dire humanitarian situation, but also reinforce locally rooted models of social assistance. Members of ERRs interviewed for this study were open to such partnerships, and in some cases already actively seeking or benefiting from them; but they emphasised the importance of mutual trust, transparency, and accountability to making them work.

There are also risks involved. The relationship between community activists and Sudanese authorities is one of mistrust, which has the potential to disrupt and damage the work of the ERRs; frontline responders are calling for action to ensure their safety and protection (Fikra for Studies and Development *et al.* 2023; Abbas and Abdalhadi 2023). Informal social safety nets are vulnerable to being co-opted by the aid system, and to being moulded into a form that is legible to Western agencies when their power lies in what makes them different. Furthermore, the failed transition in Sudan has led many grass-roots groups to question the relevance of international intervention because they believe that it has led to more harm than good.

Coordination and decision-making structures that are brought closer to crisis-affected populations, as the SHF has introduced, are more likely to recognise locally specific conflict risks and the holistic needs of communities, including for peace and security. As well as breaking down sectoral barriers, decentralised coordination may enable a wider diversity of organisations to participate. It thus aligns well with the use of multi-purpose cash and with a locally led response (Corbett *et al.* 2021; Konyndyk, Saez and Worden 2020).

For the foreseeable future, a functioning social protection system in Sudan is an aspiration. When the time is right to begin rebuilding that system, it should incorporate many of the attributes highlighted above (i.e. programming that is

adaptive and accountable, decision-making that is brought as close to the operating context as possible, and partnership strategies that support Sudanese institutions to secure peace and justice on their terms). Therefore, while the provision of social assistance leans heavily on humanitarian actors for now, mechanisms must be in place to evaluate the innovations and experiences on which a future state-led social protection system could subsequently build. Dual-mandate donors have a particular opportunity and responsibility to facilitate this.

6.2 Recommendations

We set out a number of recommendations that respond to three broad questions that have arisen in the course of the research, and which map against our research questions; in many cases, they have relevance beyond social protection.

The first question, which is a particular area of interest for Irish Aid, is how official aid can link with and support grass-roots assistance in a conflict-sensitive way. The recommendations are directed at donors, UN agencies, and NGOs.

The second question, which operational agencies raised, relates to the conflict sensitivity continuum and asks what doing more than 'do no harm' might look like in fragile and conflict-affected settings, particularly for staff who are preoccupied with implementation.

The third question and final set of recommendations look at what donors can do to ensure the conflict sensitivity of social protection systems and programmes during rapidly evolving and protracted crises (our fourth initial research question).

1. How can official aid link with and support grass-roots assistance in a conflict-sensitive way?

- a. **Deepen understanding of community-led crisis response** (building on Corbett *et al.* 2021 globally, and Fitzpatrick *et al.* 2022 in Sudan). Ensure that host communities also benefit from assistance and can rebuild their assets, from which informal safety nets customarily draw.
- b. **Support the priorities of grass-roots organisations as they define them.** Our interviews and the wider literature suggest that priorities may include:¹¹⁷
 - i. protection support for local responders;
 - ii. stipends that allow volunteers to continue their work;
 - iii. psychosocial care;

¹¹⁷ For example, Fikra for Studies and Development *et al.* (2023); Abbas and Abdalhadi 2023; and personal communication with peace-building expert (15 January 2024).

- iv. training and learning; and
 - v. access to information and the means to network and coordinate with others.
- c. Build on the role of trusted national NGOs as intermediaries between the international aid system and grass-roots structures,** drawing on their knowledge of the context, capacity, and long-term presence.
- d. Press local authorities for direct access to, and independent partnership with, grass-roots bodies.** Encourage them to facilitate rather than impede the functioning of informal social safety nets.
- e. Bring decision-making and coordination closer to the conflict context;** for example, through area-based or decentralised arrangements. **Simplify grant application processes and administrative procedures,** and set minimum funding thresholds at levels that do not exclude smaller and less formally organised bodies.
- 2. What might ‘doing more than ‘do no harm’ look like in fragile and conflict-affected settings when staff are preoccupied with implementation?**
- a. Avoid introducing new tools and processes.** Many existing ones will reinforce conflict sensitivity; for example:
 - i. Strengthen community-based systems of accountability to conflict-affected populations, as well as political economy analysis of conflict and peace dynamics (Whaites *et al.* 2023).
 - ii. Integrate conflict sensitivity into procedures for analysing and monitoring security, gender, and inclusion at all operational levels and throughout the project cycle (Beijer and Baltaduonyte 2021).
 - iii. Adapt recruitment systems to improve staff continuity, so that skills and knowledge relevant to conflict-sensitive practice are retained.
 - iv. Consider the mix of skills and competencies when putting project teams together, to include those with an understanding of, and experience of applying, the principles of adaptive management.
 - b. Build on efforts to pool resources, capacity, and learning on how to operationalise conflict sensitivity.** This may reduce the demands
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placed on any one organisation and at the same time encourage interagency collaboration. Aid organisations could:

- i. share experience of adaptive management in active conflict; for example, through a standing item on the agenda of cluster meetings, and being transparent about access constraints; and
 - ii. make specialist expertise available for multiple agencies to draw on.
- c. Strengthen linkages between social assistance programming and peace-building.** This could involve learning from local organisations that tend to work from a holistic rather than a sectoral perspective, and exploring what decentralised, area-based approaches may offer.
- d. Consider how partnership policies and practices could support the core capacities of Sudanese civil society.** For example, can a range of local organisations access long-term funding, share overheads fairly, and enjoy genuine partnerships with international actors (Conflict Sensitivity Facility 2023)?

3. How can donors ensure that social protection systems and programmes are conflict-sensitive during rapidly evolving and protracted crises?

- a. Review the lessons for crisis preparedness from April 2023**, in terms of:
- i. duty of care to staff and partners;
 - ii. capacity of financial service providers;
 - iii. the need for alternative and tested social protection delivery mechanisms in conflicts;
 - iv. the readiness of structures such as the Cash Working Group;
 - v. the effectiveness of conflict monitoring and early warning systems; and
 - vi. the use of scenario-based contingency planning.
- b. Explore ways to strengthen the quality of conflict analysis**, particularly the specificity of analysis at the local level, efficiency of information-gathering processes, and mechanisms to share and reflect on findings.
- c. Ensure that implementing agencies know their partners**, including any potential links to conflict and security actors.
-

- d. Review grant approval, reporting, and accountability systems** to maximise the autonomy available to partners working in conflicts.
- e. Invest in capacity development where there is clear demand for this.** Four examples emerged from our interviews:
- i. training for UN country office staff in operationalising conflict sensitivity,¹¹⁸ particularly the tension between rapid response and analysis/planning;
 - ii. understanding within UN agencies of the intersection between conflict sensitivity and humanitarian principles (specifically, the issue of ‘politically informed impartiality’);¹¹⁹
 - iii. meeting the demand from national NGOs for greater access to conflict sensitivity resources.¹²⁰ Conflict sensitivity curricula must be based on participatory assessments that draw on practitioners’ own understanding and application of conflict sensitivity principles, even if they do not use such terminology; and
 - iv. ensuring that new international staff who are unfamiliar with a country are appropriately briefed on the local context.¹²¹
- f. Improve information communications and technology infrastructure in Sudan,** as a means of strengthening Sudanese inclusion in online aid systems (Harvey *et al.* 2023a),¹²² civil society interaction (Abbashar 2023), real-time monitoring of conflict and of human rights abuses,¹²³ and the platforms needed to deliver social protection and other financial services in conflict (FSD Africa 2023). Carefully assess both opportunities for and risks from technologies for conflict-affected populations (Faith, Roberts and Hernandez 2022).¹²⁴
- g. Learn lessons from humanitarian social assistance programming** that could inform and enrich a future social protection system. Dual-mandate donors have a particular responsibility here.

¹¹⁸ Interview with UN agency country staff (19 August 2023).

¹¹⁹ See recommendations by Steets *et al.* (2018).

¹²⁰ Two interviews with senior staff of Sudanese NGOs (10 August 2023).

¹²¹ Interview with government humanitarian representative (5 February 2024).

¹²² See ***Call for Action to the International Community: Support for Civil Society in Sudan is Urgent and Crucial***.

¹²³ Interview with country director (5 September 2023).

¹²⁴ The **Digitalising Food Assistance** research programme at the SOAS Food Studies Centre is also exploring these issues and includes a focus on Sudan:

- h. Learn lessons from past peace-building initiatives.** Ensure that, in future, demands of democratic civilian voices, women and men, are prioritised in any peace process.

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