

Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Sudan

Survey on the Coverage, Operational Reach,
and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid



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SCORE reports

Under the CORE research programme, supported by USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA), Humanitarian Outcomes studies how aid reaches people in hard-to-access emergency contexts. In partnership with GeoPoll, the project conducts remote telephone surveys of crisis-affected people on their perceptions of the effectiveness of the aid response and the access challenges in their areas. Combined with key informant interviews with humanitarian responders and other contextual research, the survey results help to identify the humanitarian providers and practices that have achieved the greatest presence and coverage in difficult environments.

This SCORE report presents findings from a mobile telephone survey of 838 people in Sudan conducted by GeoPoll for Humanitarian Outcomes in November 2023. The survey reached 443 men and 395 women across all 18 states. Humanitarian Outcomes researchers also conducted remote interviews with 28 key informants representing national and international humanitarian organisations working in Sudan, donor government representatives, and external experts.

Full survey results and additional information on the SCORE research methodology, including an interactive dashboard of response data, are available at www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core

ACRONYMS

AWG	access working group	NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
ERR	emergency response room	OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
FTS	Financial Tracking Service	RSF	Rapid Support Forces
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission	SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
INSO	International NGO Safety Organisation	SHF	Sudan Humanitarian Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration	WFP	World Food Programme
MSF	Médecins sans Frontières		



Summary

The current conflict in Sudan, with its rapid escalation and large-scale violence, stands out among recent crises for the severity of its humanitarian impact. Despite being overshadowed on the international stage by the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, Sudan is the scene of the world's fastest growing displacement crisis, mass atrocities, and dire humanitarian needs.

The longstanding humanitarian presence in the country was completely disrupted by the sudden escalation of violence in April 2023, with national aid workers displaced, offices and facilities looted, and international staff evacuated. The coordinated aid response has since struggled to scale up sufficiently due to ongoing insecurity, logistical obstacles, political interference, and stringent constraints imposed by parties to the conflict, including denial of visas for staff and restrictions on transporting aid supplies. Humanitarians' efforts to push back against the constraints have so far failed to gain traction, in part because of insufficient staff in coordination roles and their absence at state levels. Faced with these obstacles, compounded by insufficient funding and lack of political pressure on the warring parties to respect international humanitarian law to facilitate access, the humanitarian response has reached only a small fraction of people in need.

A highly localised, volunteer-driven response has emerged in the form of emergency response rooms (ERRs) and other community initiatives. These voluntary, grassroots efforts are overstretched, increasingly exhausted, and lack resources. While they cannot substitute for the large-scale and sustained levels of assistance that are needed, they are playing a vital complementary role in supporting people to meet basic needs, access services, and seek safety – and they need support to continue.

The mobile phone survey of affected people in Sudan undertaken for this study (838 people across all 18 states) found that:

- aid has only reached 16% of people who need it
- most of that aid has been in the form of food – very few respondents reported having received medical or other types of assistance, and more than half said the aid they received did not meet their priority needs
- UN agencies and the Sudanese Red Crescent are the predominant aid providers – international NGOs have been notably less present, according to survey respondents, who reported them as the aid source in only 12% of cases (exceptions were Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), Plan International, and Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC))
- people in Khartoum, South Kordofan and West and Central Darfur were most likely to report that aid was not getting to the places where it is needed most.
- rather than seeing a surge of assistance, a plurality of people reported that, since the current crisis began in April, the aid presence in their area had “reduced a lot”.

Changing the grim trajectory in Sudan will require directing more resources and international attention to the magnitude of the crisis. More than this, however, donor and neighbouring governments will need to make concerted efforts to pressure the warring parties to facilitate humanitarian access, as required under international humanitarian law.

For their part, aid agencies must be willing to depart from current approaches and seek new partners, modalities, and entry points to the country in order to expand the reach of assistance.

Civil war and humanitarian crisis

The conflict in Sudan, fought primarily between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF),¹ escalated suddenly in April 2023 and has created a profound humanitarian crisis with exceptional levels of violence, displacement, and suffering. Fighting has raged in urban centres, including the capital Khartoum, and has been characterised by targeting of civilians, widespread sexual violence, looting, and destruction of property. At eight months in, the violence is showing no signs of abating and new fighting in November and December in Darfur and Gezira has led to further displacement (with some already displaced people forced to flee for the second or third time), and mass killings of civilians.²

The most recent estimates are that 6.3 million people have fled their homes, taking refuge inside and outside the country.³ At least 24.7 million people, roughly half the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance in a country that was already facing high levels of acute food insecurity.⁴ Since the violence began, more than 10,400 people have died.⁵

People's ability to access services is highly constrained in areas currently facing the most active conflict, notably Khartoum, Darfur, and Kordofan states. It is estimated that 70%– 80% of hospitals in conflict-affected states are non-functional and unable to address new disease outbreaks as they face violence, shortages of medical supplies, and a lack of cash to meet operational costs and salaries.⁶

¹ Other (previously neutral) armed groups have recently joined the conflict, adding to the complexity of conflict actors and dynamics.

² UNHCR. (2023, 10 November). *Sudan: UNHCR warns of increasing violence and human rights violations against civilians in Darfur*. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/sudan-unhcr-warns-increasing-violence-and-human-rights-violations-against>; Human Rights Watch. (2023, 26 November). *Sudan: New mass ethnic killings, pillage in Darfur*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/27/sudan-new-mass-ethnic-killings-pillage-darfur>

³ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2023). OCHA. (2023, 4 December). *Sudan situation report*. Retrieved 4 December from <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>; IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). (2023). *Monthly displacement overview (03)*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/dtm-sudan-monthly-displacement-overview-november-2023>

⁴ IPC Phase 4 is being predicted in some of the most conflict-affected areas of the country, including Darfur and Kordofan regions and Khartoum State. FEWS NET. (2023). *High needs to persist amid continued conflict and below-average harvests. Sudan food security outlook, October 2023 - May 2024*. <https://fewsn.net/east-africa/sudan/food-security-outlook/october-2023>

⁵ The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). (2023, 3 November). *Sudan: The RSF expands its territorial control as ceasefire talks resume in Jeddah*. Situation update, November 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-rsf-expands-its-territorial-control-ceasefire-talks-resume-jeddah-situation-update-november-2023>

⁶ The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that there are already outbreaks of cholera, dengue, measles, and malaria: WHO. (2023, 21 September). *Now is the time to act for Sudan: a call for renewed commitment to saving lives*. <https://www.emro.who.int/sdn/sudan-news/now-is-the-time-to-act-for-sudan-a-call-for-renewed-commitment-to-save-the-people-of-sudan.html>

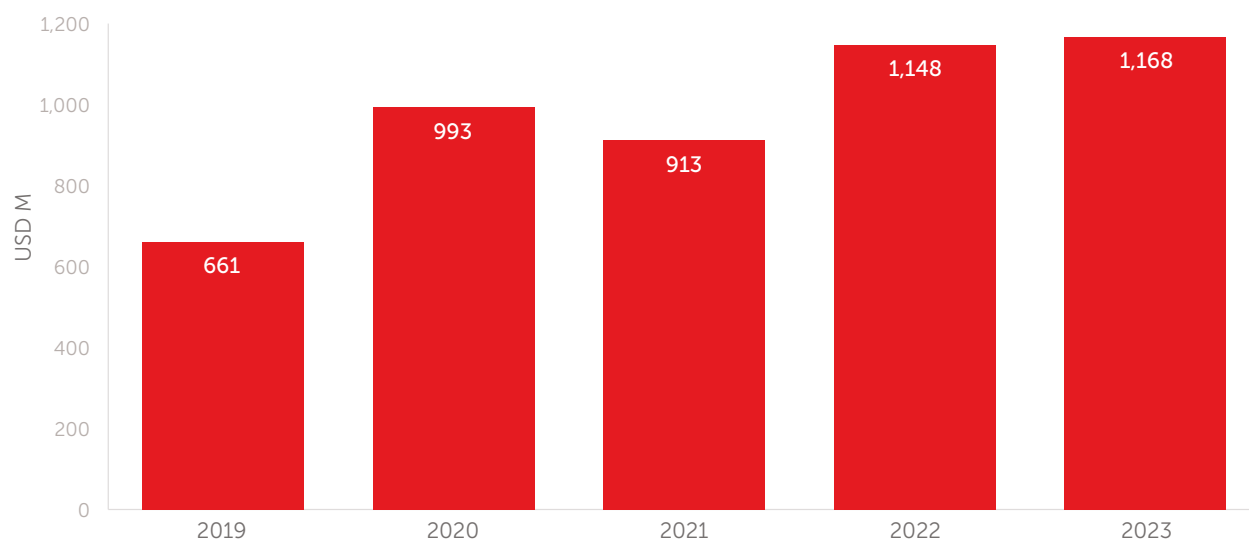
Disruption and debilitation of the prior humanitarian presence

The fighting erupted and initially centred in Khartoum, where most international aid organisations had their head offices. The humanitarian response was consequently delayed as these organisations initially focused on evacuating their international staff and locating and supporting national staff who had been displaced along with other civilians. Many had their offices looted or destroyed.

Reminiscent of the reaction to the Taliban’s sudden takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the rapidity of unfolding events and escalating insecurity in Sudan prompted a scramble among international aid agencies to make quick decisions, most choosing to suspend work and evacuate their international staff. The decision to evacuate, however justified – and indeed required by many organisations’ policies – had a major impact on the capacity to maintain aid programming and to quickly respond to new needs. In the following weeks and months, government limitations on granting visas and restrictions on the movement of supplies and staff effectively prevented the necessary surge response to the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. A few voices have been sharply critical of the decision to evacuate, which effectively knocked the humanitarian response several steps back. In the words of one practitioner, “The ‘stay and deliver’ philosophy was absent in Sudan. Those of us who stayed were considered reckless. I was kind of ashamed of the wider humanitarian community [for pulling out].”

Other humanitarian staff interviewed for this report point out that the aid response is also sorely underfunded by the international donor community, given the severity and scale of the crisis. Indeed, despite the crisis onset in early 2023, overall humanitarian contributions to Sudan seem to have barely risen since 2022 (Figure 1). However, in what has become a familiar chicken-and-egg question in humanitarian efforts, it is unclear to what degree insufficient funding is hampering the response capacity or whether donors are responding to the lack of capacity in the aid sector to deliver under current conditions.

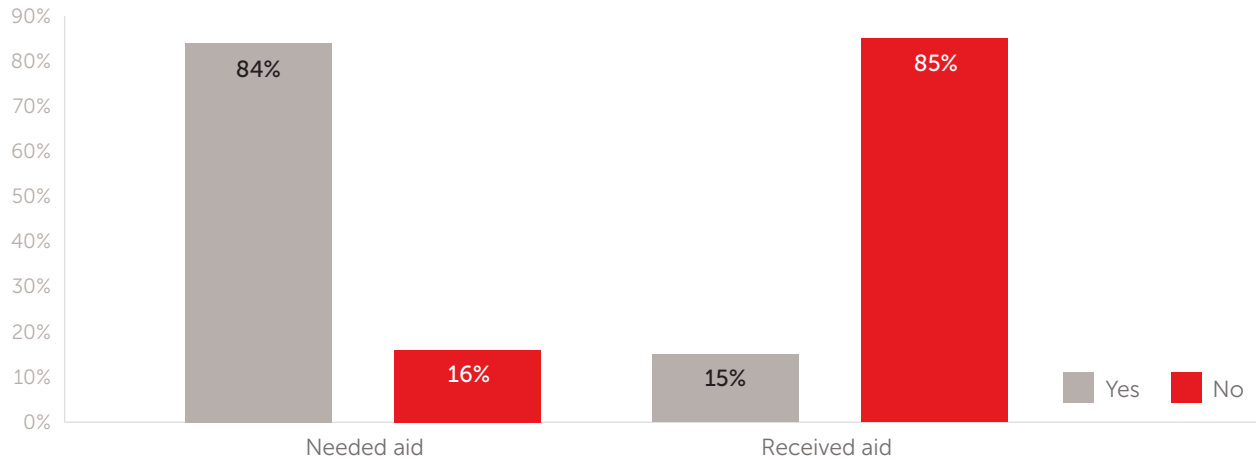
Figure 1: Total humanitarian funding for Sudan, 2019–2023



Data from UN Financial Tracking Service (FTS), retrieved 7 December 2023 from <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/212/summary/2023>

What is clear is that the aid response so far has barely scratched the surface of need. A survey of 90 households carried out by CARE International in three states as part of a rapid gender analysis in October 2023 found that only 16% of households have received any type of humanitarian assistance since the start of the conflict.⁷ While CARE’s finding is not necessarily representative of the whole of Sudan, it was mirrored in the country-wide telephone survey conducted for this report in November 2023. While 85% of respondents were in need, only 16% of those in need (15% of total respondents) reported receiving any aid (Figure 2).

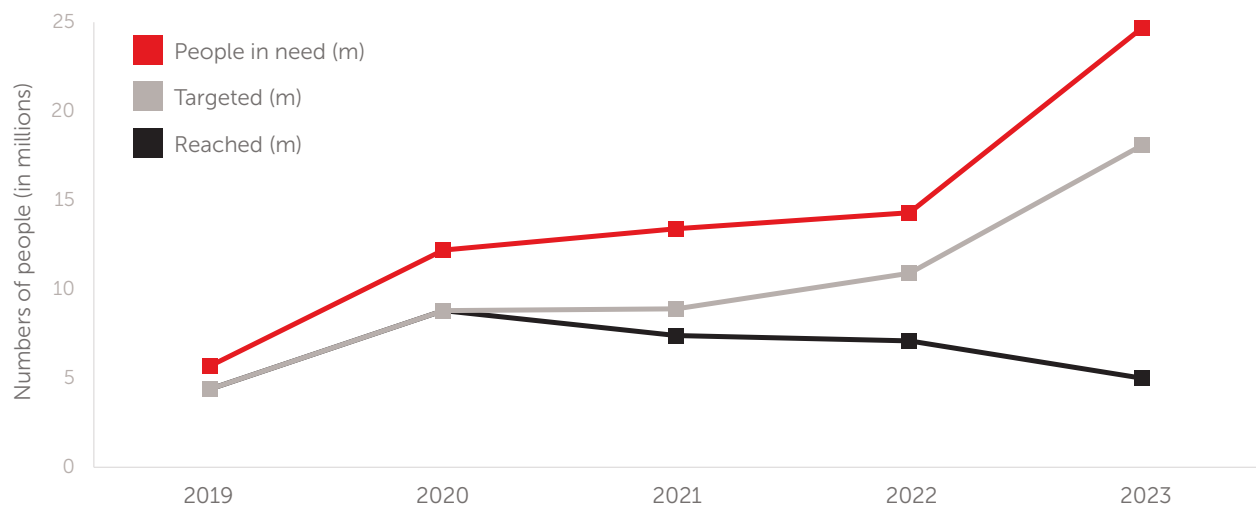
Figure 2: Need vs. receipt of aid among survey respondents in Sudan (N=838)



Data from Sudan survey on coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness, November 2023. www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core

However, the UN reports having reached a slightly higher percentage (20%) of people – 5 million out of an estimated 24.7 million people in need. Even so, this is a low proportion and puts Sudan in a unique position among other recent access-constrained conflict emergencies like Central African Republic (CAR), Haiti, Myanmar, and Yemen. It has the largest numbers of people in desperate need, with the smallest percentage receiving any assistance (Figure 3).

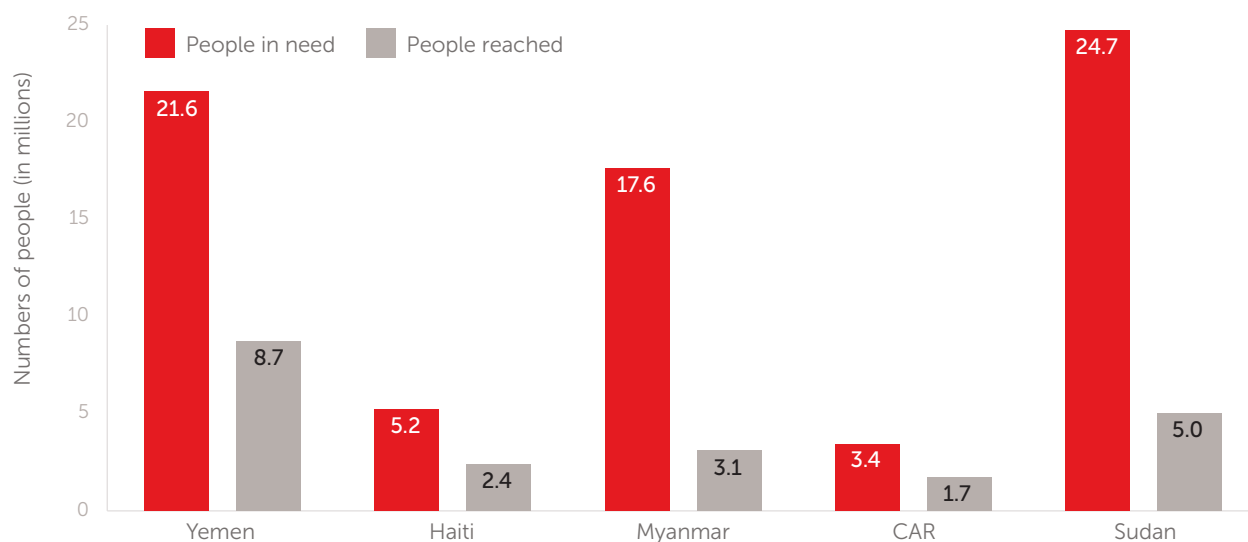
Figure 3 (a) Estimated people in need, targeted for aid, and estimated reached by aid in Sudan 2019-2023



Data from: OCHA. (2023). Global Humanitarian Overview 2024. <https://humanitarianaction.info>

⁷ Whipkey, K. (2023). Sudan – Khartoum, Al Gezira, East Darfur, South Darfur. Rapid gender analysis. CARE International. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-khartoum-al-gezira-east-darfur-south-darfur-rapid-gender-analysis-october-2023>

Figure 3 (b) Comparison of access-constrained humanitarian response contexts, 2023



Data from: OCHA. (2023). *Global Humanitarian Overview 2024*. <https://humanitarianaction.info>

Locally-led response efforts

In the near complete absence of any formal international humanitarian or state-led response to maintain basic services or to provide assistance, efforts to find safety, seek health care and meet other basic needs have, by necessity, been locally led.⁸

State provision of basic services (such as health, education, and water) has collapsed or been severely constrained in large parts of the country. There are, however, some areas in which services continue to function and some parts of the state are still operating. Small numbers of survey respondents (<2%) reported receiving aid from government authorities, including the Ministry of Health, or from their local Zakat office (the Zakat Chamber is still funding local initiatives in some places). The capacities of line ministries and state service providers are constrained by the fact that many civil servants have not been paid for months.

Notable among the locally-led humanitarian response efforts are the emergency response rooms (ERRs).⁹ These are community-level support efforts that emerged from the resistance committees that formed during the popular protests that started in 2019. Staffed by volunteers, including medical and other technical professionals, they have functioned as neighbourhood support hubs, providing

⁸ Bradbury et al. (2023, 16 August). *Call for action to the international community: support for civil society in Sudan is urgent and crucial*. Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI. <https://odihpn.org/publication/call-for-action-to-the-international-community-support-for-civil-society-in-sudan-is-urgent-and-crucial/>

⁹ Abbas, S. (2023). *Sudan's emergency response rooms overview and recommendations*. Sudan Crisis Coordination Unit. <https://sudancu.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20231205.-Sudans-ERRS-Overview-Recommendations.pdf>

information, advice, and aid services to local people, particularly in urban areas.¹⁰ Detailed information on the number and location of ERRs is limited. As a recent report critically notes, “To date, none of the traditional humanitarian coordination and tracking entities have taken it upon themselves to systematically track these efforts.”¹¹ The countrywide survey conducted for this report registers the presence of the ERRs, but also indicates the limited scope of their reach: 3% of respondents said they had received aid from an ERR or other Sudanese NGO.

Other community initiatives have sprung up with support from diaspora networks and the private sector. This ranges from individuals hosting displaced people to ad hoc groups, professional associations, and traditional leaders helping to support informal shelters and providing other forms of assistance. Social media, peer-to-peer networks, and other communication channels have been critical in enabling people to access and share information about how to meet basic needs, access services, and get to safety.

The diaspora response has been extensive (from the US, UK, and Gulf states in particular). It started in the first few weeks with information sharing (such as on safe roads and how to get out) and how to access local help from resistance committees. It has now morphed into small-scale fundraising. Diaspora initiatives have helped to share critical information on the conflict and provide resources to those looking to evacuate Sudan. However, these networks are exhausted and overstretched, and there has been limited coordination between diaspora groups and international organisations.

More established Sudanese NGOs have also responded and enabled links with community initiatives. These national NGOs, in common with international organisations, were also affected by looting and the displacement of staff but retained significant capacities and have sometimes been able to establish new operations in places that key staff had moved to, or in other parts of the country where they had offices and operations that were less disrupted.

International aid actors have made attempts to coordinate with and support the locally-led response efforts but have struggled to do so at scale. For example, the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF), managed by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), has provided grants of up to US\$5,000 to ERRs, based on an agreed action plan, and SHF partners are also sub-partnering with ERRs. The SHF also appointed a full-time staff member to work with ERRs and community groups, meeting with them on a daily basis, and linking them to agencies that can provide further support. Interviews suggested that there has been more discussion of how to support locally-led responses than concrete action, however, and to date, overall funding for them remains low. For example, out of US\$2 million pledged by international actors for ERRs in Greater Khartoum, less than US\$200,000 had materialised by late September, according to their spokesperson.¹²

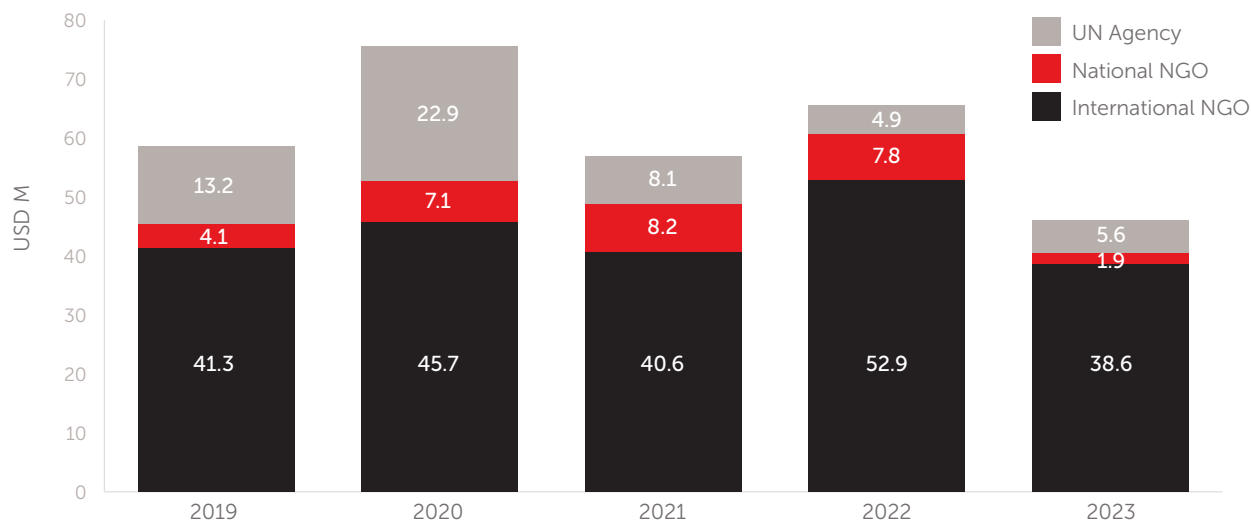
As of early December 2023, SHF allocations actually show a decrease relative to 2022 (Figure 4). And at just 4%, the proportion going directly to national NGOs remains quite low.

¹⁰ Nasir, R., Rhodes, T. and Kleinfeld, P. (2023, 2 August). *How mutual aid networks are powering Sudan's humanitarian response*. The New Humanitarian. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/08/02/how-mutual-aid-networks-are-powering-sudans-humanitarian-response>; D'Arcy, M. (2023, July). *Mutual aid & rethinking international humanitarian engagement in Sudan*. CHR Michelsen Institute. <https://www.cmi.no/publications/8866-mutual-aid-rethinking-international-humanitarian-engagement-in-sudan>

¹¹ Carstensen, N. and Sebit, L. (2023). *Mutual aid in Sudan: the future of aid?* Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI. <https://odihpn.org/publication/mutual-aid-in-sudan-the-future-of-aid/>

¹² Ibid.

Figure 4: Direct funding allocations from Sudan Humanitarian Fund, by type of recipient organisation



Data from UN Country Based Pooled Funds (CBPF) Data Hub, retrieved 7 December 2023 from https://cbpf.data.unocha.org/#netfunding_heading

When discussing funding, it is important to consider that Sudanese humanitarian actors need funding support not just for projects, but to re-establish their basic infrastructure and replace looted offices, vehicles, and equipment. As one interviewee noted, “We had 8 offices looted out of 10 and our vehicles and warehouses. That really set us back. And we don’t have funding to replenish and recover.”

Other critiques of the international aid sector underscore the lack of sufficient participation of local actors in design, planning, and coordination processes. Sudanese youth and civil society groups report that, “UN and INGO offices are like fortresses – you just can’t get in and if you try you are humiliated”. Other common practices, such as having forms in English rather than Arabic, and the emphasis on online meetings when many local organisations lack basic connectivity, make it hard for local organisations to get information about funding or partnership opportunities. One interviewee proposed having spaces in major hubs (regional capitals) where local and international actors can meet in person and where local actors can access the internet.

Interviewees point out that supporting local responses and Sudanese civil society can be complex and politically fraught, in that many Sudanese civil society organisations can be closely affiliated with parties to the conflict, owing to longstanding state efforts to co-opt and politicise civil society. In the 2000s, the government required part of the humanitarian response to be implemented through national partners, in practice directing international aid to work with pro-regime organisations. This policy of ‘Sudanisation’ coincided with the expulsion of 13 international NGOs from Sudan and government rhetoric around the need to build the capacity of national NGOs.¹³

Despite the very real political sensitivities and capacity challenges in cooperating with Sudanese civil society, national and international actors alike agree that much more concrete action is needed to better support local responders.

¹³ The Conflict Sensitivity Facility. (2023). *Making sense of ‘localisation’ in Sudan*. CSF working paper. <https://csf-sudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/making-sense-of-localisation-in-sudan-csf.pdf>; Pantuliano S., Jaspars, S., and Basu Ray, D. (2009). *Where to now? Agency expulsions in Sudan: consequences and next steps*. HPG and ALNAP working paper. <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/4190.pdf>

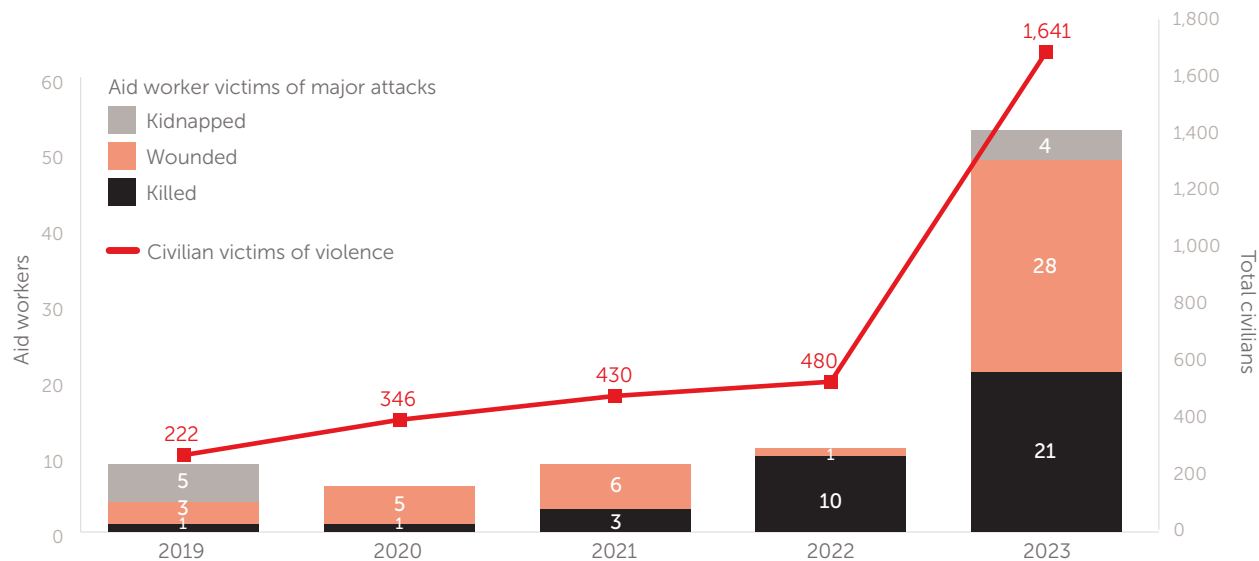
Constraints on the humanitarian response

Access for humanitarian organisations continues to be extremely challenging and unpredictable through a combination of security, bureaucratic, and physical/logistical impediments.

Insecurity

Before the Hamas-Israel conflict in Gaza in October, Sudan was showing one of the highest one-year spikes in violent incidents against aid workers in a country on record, according to the Aid Worker Security Database. Since the eruption of hostilities in April, 50 aid workers in Sudan have been victims of violent attacks, including 21 fatalities. In addition to aid workers killed, kidnapped, and wounded, at least 32 aid workers have been detained since mid-April.

Figure 5: Violence against aid workers in Sudan, 2019–2023



Data from Humanitarian Outcomes Aid Worker Security Database, retrieved 10 December 2023 from www.aidworkersecurity.org; and Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), retrieved 6 December 2023 from www.acleddata.com

Additionally, WHO has “verified 56 attacks on health care facilities, resulting in 11 deaths and 38 injuries since 15 April”.¹⁴ Since the beginning of the conflict, looting and destruction of hospitals and medical facilities, humanitarian equipment, offices, and aid materials has been significant and is continuing.¹⁵

Conflict dynamics are still fluid and security dynamics vary widely across the country. The lack of a security information coordination platform in the country, such as the International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO), means that NGOs lack updated and granular analysis of security conditions in different locations. Interviewees also cited the need for contingency planning around how the conflict may shift. Despite the ongoing violence, survey respondents did not see insecurity as presenting the biggest obstacle to aid reaching them (only 19% said the biggest obstacle was insecurity for aid workers). They were more likely to cite lack of prioritisation of the worst affected areas (21%), or poor roads (23%), and likelier still to report they could not point to any obstacle (30%).

¹⁴ OCHA. (2023, 30 October). *Sudan. Humanitarian access situation report. August - September 2023*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-access-situation-report-august-september-2023>

¹⁵ Amnesty International. (2023, 3 August). *Sudan: “Death came to our home”: War crimes and civilian suffering in Sudan*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr54/7037/2023/en/>

Bureaucratic obstacles and political interference

Rather than loosen regulations to facilitate the humanitarian response, the Sudanese government has maintained pre-conflict bureaucratic systems designed to exercise tight control over aid activities. The afore-mentioned difficulty in obtaining visas was the obstacle most often cited by interviewees as preventing their ability to scale up the response. As a result, the number of international humanitarian staff remains below pre-April 2023 levels. It has been particularly difficult for international NGO staff (the UN agencies have had more success) and when visas are issued, they are limited to three months, single-entry, which creates further difficulties in rotating staff and renewing visas.

The Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) requires permissions for all movements of people and goods, and these permissions have slowed, in part to exert control over aid actors but also because of the government's own capacity deficits. Since the conflict, HAC capacities at federal level have fractured, with the result that state-level HACs have become more powerful. Aid actors see this as foreboding still more restrictive measures by antagonistic and mistrustful state and local authorities, as well as opportunities for corruption.¹⁶ Interviewees highlighted the fragmentation of authorities, making access negotiations more difficult and said that, "All sides are weaponising permissions".

In a striking contravention of humanitarian norms, Sudanese authorities have been blocking lifesaving surgical supplies from reaching hospitals in areas of Khartoum that are under the control of the RSF. MSF noted that the ban has been in effect since early September and was formally communicated to MSF by Sudanese authorities on 2 October.¹⁷

The RSF has established similar structures to control and regulate aid in its arrears of control, but with limited operational impact so far. Aid agencies have struggled to reach people in RSF areas due to "the consolidation of administrative control and aid structures in Port Sudan [that] has allowed SAF to restrict access to RSF controlled areas".¹⁸ However, some cross-border aid from Chad is starting to get through. Interviewees reported that RSF commanders were continuing to use HAC processes to control this aid.

There have been reports of interference with aid by parties to the conflict at all levels, which has included refusal to allow needs assessments, demands to review beneficiary lists, unsolicited or unwanted provision of armed escorts, forced checks of humanitarian trucks before unloading or distributions, suspension of partner operations, and demanding new or increased 'fees' for all manner of administrative actions.¹⁹ At the state level, HAC demands for incentive payments to accompany field visits and for 'M&E' are growing and becoming more problematic. These demands are hard to push back on, as refusals can result in denial of permissions for project agreements or to travel.

When asked in an open-ended question about what they thought was impacting the aid presence, many survey respondents expressed a clear sense of alienation from the authorities and their perceived disregard for people's needs. As the examples below illustrate, complaints of corruption and partiality in aid delivery were also common.

- "Priority goes to other people."
- "It was distributed to certain people and they were not distributed in priority."
- "There is no official who checks people's situations or an executive officer. There is no one to ask about people's situations."
- "Aid does not reach the needy people."
- "Because the officials didn't care."
- "[The aid is] arriving through dishonest representatives."

¹⁶ iMMAP. (2023). *Sudan crisis. Situational analysis*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-crisis-situational-analysis-31-october-2023>; OCHA (2023, 30 October); Kleinfeld, P. and Amin, M. (2023, 29 June). *Obstacles to aid pile up as Sudan's conflict rages on*. The New Humanitarian. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2023/06/29/obstacles-aid-pile-sudans-conflict-rages>

¹⁷ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). (2023, 14 November). *Sudan: End the ban on lifesaving surgical supplies*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-end-ban-lifesaving-surgical-supplies>

¹⁸ iMMAP (2023).

¹⁹ OCHA (2023, 30 October).

- “They give to just some people. The distribution is not equal to a portion that they take for themselves. They distribute a few things to people.”
- “Lack of credibility from the responsible authorities.”
- “It was seized by the people in charge.”
- “Non-compliant officials.”
- “There is fraud in aid.”

Logistics and infrastructure issues

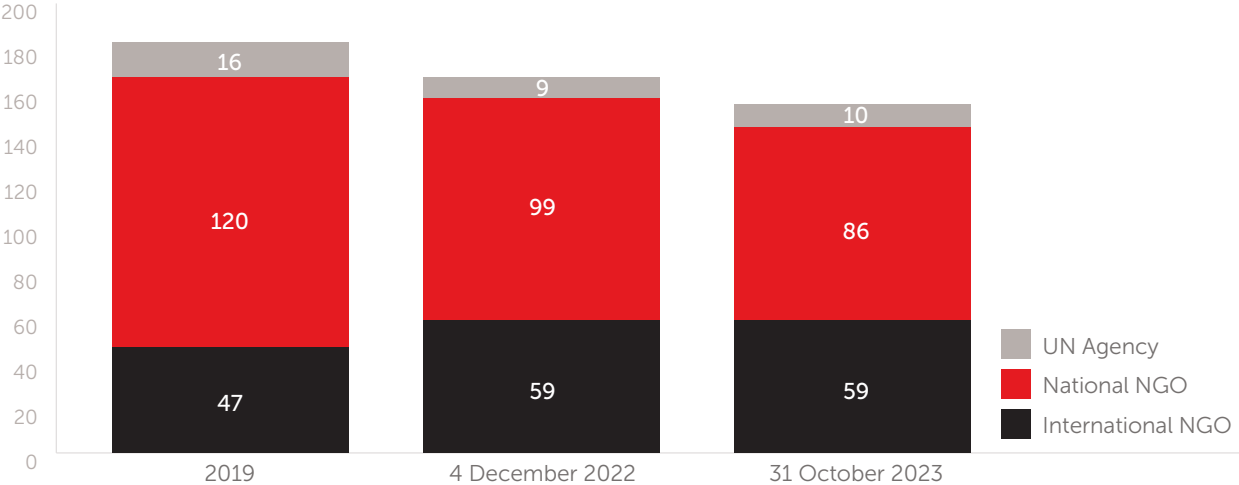
Even before the current conflict, Sudan’s road network was underdeveloped, with a significant portion of it unpaved, making travel and transport difficult, especially during the rainy season. Recent fuel shortages have further exacerbated logistical difficulties, and warring parties have destroyed airfields and airports across the country, which reduces air transport options for the humanitarian response.

Disruption of the banking system has made it hard for organisations to withdraw or transfer money, pay for services, and procure supplies. The conflict has also reduced the number and capacity of commercial transport companies, and raised transport costs, making it harder and costlier to move humanitarian supplies. A further complication is that parties to the conflict continue to have control over extensive business networks and financial institutions. This makes it difficult to undertake local procurement, contract transporters, hire offices, and undertake cash programming while adhering to a ‘do no harm’ approach and not fuelling a war economy.²⁰

The humanitarian presence

As of 30 August 2023, OCHA reported there were 156 humanitarian organisations providing assistance in Sudan.²¹ On the face of it, the numbers show a marked decline from the humanitarian presence prior to the current conflict (Figure 6). The reality is that even these figures overstate the current physical presence of humanitarian actors in Sudan, as they include both the lead agencies (‘project owners’) and implementing partners for activities and deliveries, regardless of physical presence.²²

Figure 6: Humanitarian organisations present in Sudan, 2019–2023



Data from Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX). (2023). Sudan Operational Presence. Retrieved from <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/sudan-operational-presence>

²⁰ Mercy Corps. (2023a). Sudan crisis analysis. Humanitarian action within a war economy. <https://dldocs.mercycorps.org/SudanHumanitarianActionInWarEconomy.pdf>

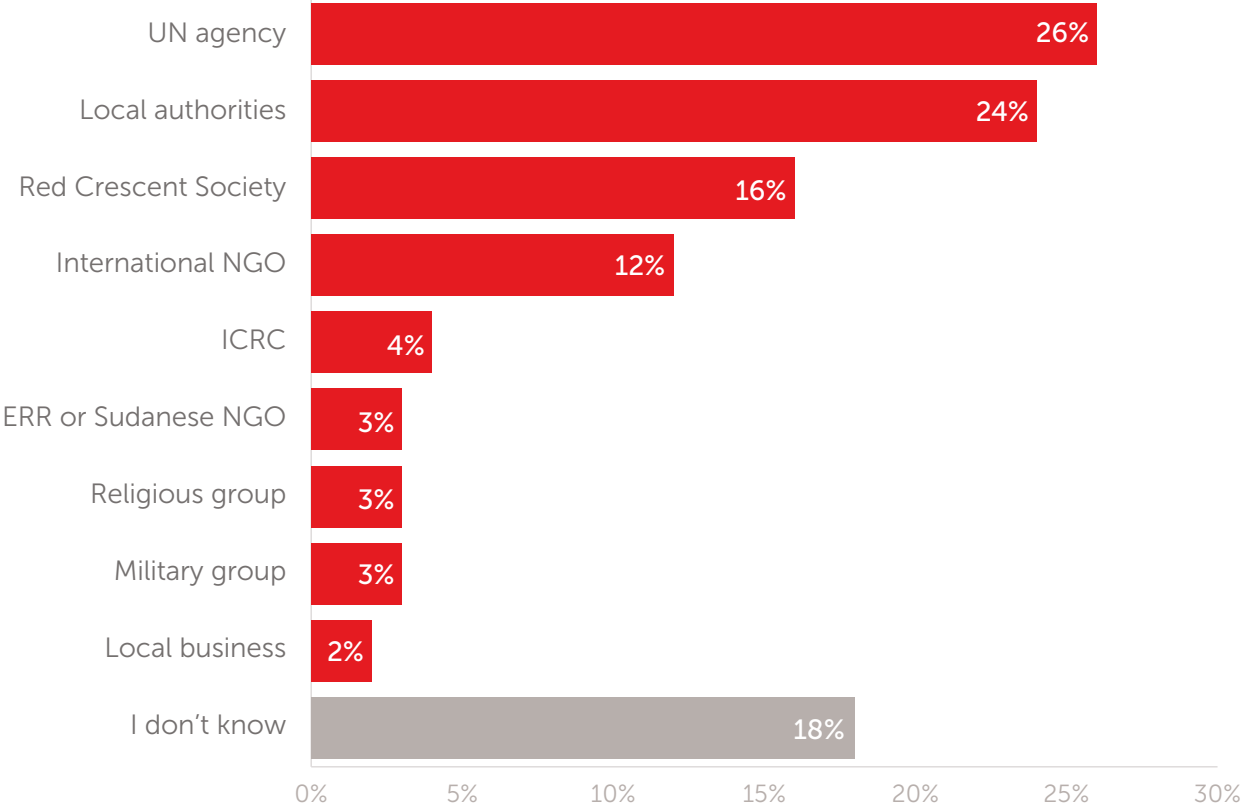
²¹ OCHA. (2023, 5 November). Sudan. Operational presence (3W) - post 15 April. As at 30 September. <https://reliefweb.int/map/sudan/sudan-operational-presence-3w-post-15-april-30-september-2023>

²² The term ‘operational presence’ used by OCHA 3Ws reporting is not the same as a physical presence. Operational presence is reported to OCHA by cluster leads multiple times throughout the year, and reflects project owners and implementers together on one map. Physical presence, that is, office and project locations, is done through internal mapping and not shared publicly. Because of the system used to collect data for ‘operational presence,’ these numbers are inflated and not indicative of actual physical presence.

Interviewees confirmed that the amounts of aid actually reaching people are still very low and noted a reluctance on the part of the international aid system to openly acknowledge the limits to reach. Statements tended to focus instead on metrics like truckloads and tonnages delivered, without details on how many people were being reached, with how much aid, and how regularly. The aid response remains primarily focused in the more accessible east of the country and SAF- controlled areas, and most agencies are still struggling to operate in much of the country, where needs are highest, and in RSF-controlled areas.

With the caveat that the survey found that aid reached only 16% of people in need, responses indicate that the aid actors able to reach the most people were the combined agencies of the UN (in particular World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, IOM) and the Sudanese Red Crescent (Figure 7). International NGOs – as a whole and individually – were less mentioned, but of those the respondents could name, MSF, Plan International, and NRC were the three that came up most often, which supported interview evidence on the operational reach of these entities.

Figure 7: Who provided the aid you received? (N=251)

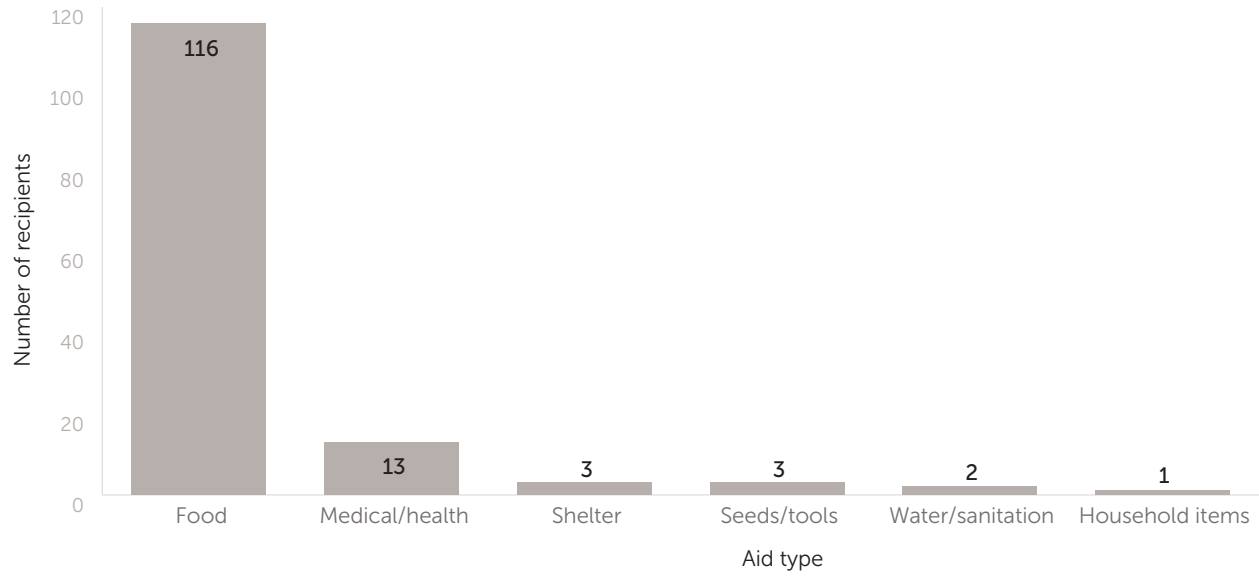


Data from Sudan survey on coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness, November 2023. www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core

The survey findings seem to support the wider operational reach of the UN organisations, likely aided by somewhat smoother relationships with the government authorities, allowing for an easier time bringing in people and materials. However, according to interviewees, some NGOs showed greater flexibility in terms of being able to switch locations and partners to respond to new areas of need.

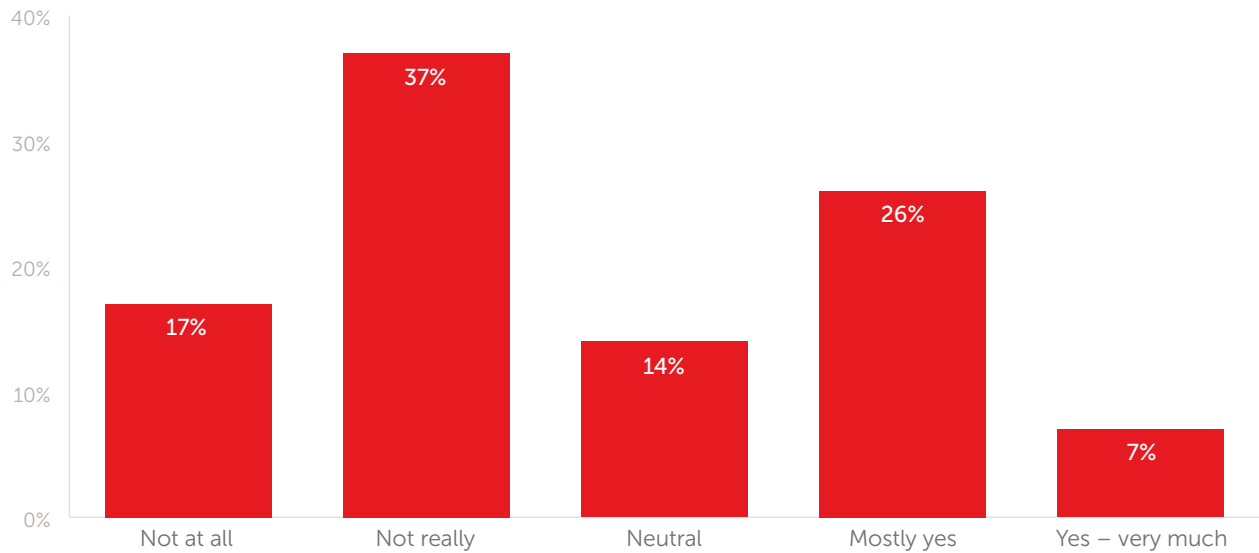
The vast majority of aid that people reported receiving was in the form of food. Medical assistance was a distant second, and even fewer people had seen other types of assistance such as shelter, water, or non-food items (Figure 8). For most, the aid received did not meet priority needs (Figure 9).

Figure 8: What type of aid was it? (N=138)



Data from Sudan survey on coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness, November 2023.
www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core

Figure 9: Did the aid meet your priority needs?



Data from Sudan survey on coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness, November 2023.
www.humanitarianoutcomes.org/projects/core

Coordination for access

Since the start of the conflict, high-level international efforts to negotiate with parties to the conflict on limiting violence and allowing unfettered humanitarian access have met with little success. At the operational humanitarian level, the OCHA-led coordination mechanisms around access have struggled to get up and running, faced with very high turnover for key positions. At the latest talks in Jeddah, ending 7 November 2023, “The parties indicated support for the establishment of Humanitarian Forum for Sudan led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) which plans to facilitate the implementation of commitments made in Jeddah, resolve humanitarian access impediments, and identify points of contact to assist with movements of humanitarian personnel and assistance.”²³ However, this has not yet led to any meaningful improvements at the operational level.

As in other constrained environments, the UN humanitarian country team established an access working group (AWG), coordinated by OCHA, which has developed joint operating principles as a framework for understanding and coordination between humanitarians, Sudanese authorities, and conflict parties.²⁴ According to participants these are well elaborated but remain aspirational, often ignored in practice, and were slow to be rolled out and communicated with parties to the conflict at state and local levels. Part of the problem seems to be that OCHA has been unable as yet to establish an on-the-ground, regular presence in key states in order to be able to lead state-level negotiations. In the meantime, some practitioners noted a tendency to “shut up and put up, and see what you can negotiate quietly on your own”.

Interviewees noted a lack of leadership from, and coordination among, donor governments on issues around access constraints. For their part, donor governments also struggled with the closure of embassies following evacuations in April and difficulties in maintaining high-level political focus on Sudan in the face of competing crises. Other than the US government (which was seen by some interviewees as the exception and much more engaged), donor governments were seen as having really failed to step up in terms of funding or diplomatic pressure on parties to the conflict on humanitarian access.²⁵

²³ USAID. (2023, 9 November). *Sudan – complex emergency*. Fact sheet #3. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-complex-emergency-fact-sheet-3-fiscal-year-fy-2024>

²⁴ OCHA. (2023, 18 July). Sudan – Humanitarian Country Team Joint Operating Principles (JOPs).

²⁵ In one such effort, on 30 November, 50 organisations called for the US government to issue an atrocity determination, which they argue could serve as “an important policy tool, which recognizes the scale and nature of abuses, puts current and would-be perpetrators on notice that the world is watching, and advances collective action from bilateral, regional, and multilateral policymakers”. Refugees International. (2023, 30 November). *50 organizations call on the Biden administration to make an atrocity determination in Sudan*. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/advocacy-letters/50-organizations-call-on-the-biden-administration-to-make-an-atrocity-determination-in-sudan/>

Promising developments/practices

Despite the extreme challenges and overall poor outcomes in Sudan thus far, the research found some areas of promising practice, including the following.

- **Localised, multisectoral aid and information:** While limited in reach, and difficult to scale commensurate to the needs across the country, the ERR model in urban areas has been justly commended for being an innovative way to share critical resources and information with local people, as well as to provide them with support safely and with dignity. Such grassroots efforts should not wait for resources, and the international community should find ways to make funding more easily available to these initiatives.
- **Rapid funding mechanisms:** The SHF pre-positioned grants for NGO consortia in nutrition, health, and water and sanitation (WASH). As Sudanese NGOs were part of these consortia and had already passed diligence checks, they could apply for small projects using simple procedures. This provided flexibility in terms of being able to respond to needs in hotspots and to adapt according to opportunities and shifting priorities. An IOM-managed rapid response fund mechanism also proved valuable in getting funds to pre-registered Sudanese NGOs rapidly and flexibly.²⁶
- **Cross-border operations:** Aid has been provided across borders from Chad and South Sudan, and agencies are exploring ways to expand the number of entry points. Organisations that were already registered in Chad, such as Solidarités International, were able to scale up cross-border aid into Darfur relatively quickly.
- **Reconstituting staff and operations in new locations after displacement:** Several organisations showed adaptiveness and flexibility by initiating new operations in places that their national staff had relocated to following displacement.
- **Maintaining presence amid evacuations:** Even as it evacuated some existing staff, MSF was able to maintain an international presence by moving new international staff at the same time, taking advantage of a narrow window when it was still possible to get visas.
- **Intensive, sustained negotiations:** MSF interviewees also noted that they had had success in negotiating access through “dogged persistence” and “going to visit key interlocutors 25 times a week”.
- **Private sector cooperation:** Sudanese and international NGOs reported working creatively with the private sector to find ways to deliver cash and essential supplies.²⁷ As one interviewee described, “Vendors have cash and external bank accounts (and some reliable internal banks like the Bank of Khartoum) that we can send to them and contract them to deliver supplies...into the hardest to reach areas.”

²⁶ OCHA. (2023, 14 November). *Sudan Humanitarian Fund dashboard 2023*. Quarterly update (January - August 2023). <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-fund-dashboard-2023-quarterly-update-january-august-2023>; International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2023, 28 November). *Regional Sudan response*. Situation update. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/regional-sudan-response-situation-update-28-november-2023>

²⁷ Mercy Corps. (2023b). *Alternative approaches to multi-purpose cash assistance delivery in active conflict contexts*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-conflict-response-cva-case-study-series-alternative-approaches-multi-purpose-cash-assistance-delivery-active-conflict-contexts-july-2023>; Community Organized Relief Effort (CORE). (2023). *Empowering communities, piloting multi-purpose cash distribution in Khartoum*. Learning brief. CORE, Sudanese Development Call Organization (NIDAA), RedRose, CASHI. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/learning-brief-empowering-communities-piloting-multi-purpose-cash-distribution-khartoum>

Conclusion

Sudan is in the grip of an extraordinary humanitarian crisis with exceptional levels of violence, war crimes and crimes against humanity, leading to widespread needs for lifesaving assistance and protection. The international response in the face of such an exceptional crisis is woefully inadequate in terms of the funding provided, the political and diplomatic engagement to pressure parties to the conflict to respect international humanitarian law and allow humanitarian access, and in terms of the effectiveness and reach of the humanitarian response. In previous large humanitarian crises, humanitarian aid has often served as a substitute for political action. In Sudan, it is not even doing that.

National and local responders are doing their utmost to support people's ability to meet basic needs, access services, and find relative safety. While these efforts cannot substitute for the large-scale and sustained levels of assistance that are needed, they could and should be better supported with more direct and larger-scale funding to enable them to continue playing a complementary role to a scaled-up international response. The support that has reached local actors has been piecemeal and insufficient.

Given the scale of the crisis, levels of violence, and urgency and severity of need, interviewees raised concerns that advocacy and communications around access challenges should use more precise language on what is happening. A focus on bureaucratic constraints risks making the barriers being faced sound too benign. There is a need for clearer and stronger advocacy that shines a light on war crimes, areas that are being besieged, aid being used as a weapon of war, and the breaches of international humanitarian and human rights law.²⁸

Part of the slowness and insufficiency of the international response stems from the need for mass evacuations at the onset of the fighting in April. Agencies should invest in horizon scanning and contingency planning that incorporates a wider set of scenarios, including unlikely but high impact events (like a major civil war erupting in the capital). This will potentially allow for more flexibility and alternatives to evacuation such as hibernation plans and in-country fall-back locations, but also planning around how programmes can pivot, adapt, and continue in the absence of international staff.

Finally, as the conflict develops, it is looking increasingly possible that the country will become more divided between areas held by RSF in western parts of the country and the SAF in the east. For this reason, there is a need to move away from a response that is centred on Port Sudan and a government-dominated architecture of control over aid. Efforts should be intensified to open up more crossing points for aid in both government and RSF-controlled areas from Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Chad. If the parties to the conflict are unwilling to protect people, and instead impede efforts to help them, humanitarians have a responsibility to find alternate routes of action.

²⁸ Howarth, C., Khoshnood, K, Raymond, N. et al. (2023) *Evidence of alleged widespread, systematic and targeted mass atrocities in Darfur, 15 April – 10 July 2023*, Sudan Conflict Observatory, <https://hub.conflictobservatory.org/portal/apps/sites/#/sudan/pages/darfur-1>

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