

Social Protection in Conflict-Affected Sudan: A Diagnostic Overview

Policy Paper

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August 2026



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Key Messages

- The war has reshaped Sudan's already fragmented social protection ecosystem rather than simply weakening it. Sudan's system had been dispersed across formal, humanitarian and informal bodies with uneven institutional capacity; the war has collapsed some formal functions entirely while pushing responsibility onto local, informal, community-based and humanitarian mechanisms.
- Centralisation created fragility. Because specialised capacity – from pensions to disability services – was concentrated in Khartoum rather than distributed nationally, the destruction of national-level infrastructure left states with no fallback, compounding the collapse rather than containing it, while also strengthening opportunities for local response.
- Delivery has adapted, but around humanitarian logics rather than systems. Cash transfers, community kitchens and decentralised service points have kept assistance moving under extreme constraints, but current efforts to build longer-term infrastructure remain fragmented, under-resourced and unclear in strategic intent.
- Targeting functions as much to ration scarce resources as to identify genuine vulnerability. Community-based and criteria-driven targeting approaches coexist with resource-dependent thresholds and institutional considerations about future transferability – meaning who is reached often reflects funding constraints and organisational networks as well as need.
- Exclusion begins before assistance is designed. Registration systems built for settled populations, digital and physical access barriers, and limited input from affected people combine to leave entire groups – including persons with disabilities, women and geographically or ethnically marginalised communities – underserved or invisible to the system, even as effective, community-led alternatives already demonstrate what more inclusive delivery could look like.
- Coordination remains fragmented across parallel, competing architectures. The formal system, humanitarian actors and grassroots response structures largely operate in silos, with limited trust and no shared definitions of social protection connecting them. This fragmentation is reinforced by funding structures that concentrate resources and decision-making among international actors.
- Short-term, reactive financing is the binding constraint on system adaptation. With government revenue having collapsed and humanitarian funding trapped in one-year cycles, neither formal institutions nor grassroots responders can plan or invest beyond the next funding cycle. This gap threatens to erode local adaptive capacity before more durable systems can take root.

1. Introduction and scope

This brief presents a high-level diagnostic of social protection in Sudan since the outbreak of war in April 2023, developed as part of a research initiative led by the Sudan Social Protection Alliance (SSPA).¹ It draws on key informant interviews conducted across six respondent categories: formal social protection institutions; United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on social protection and humanitarian relief; representative organisations of marginalised groups; community-level response initiatives; independent experts; and former officials of formal social protection institutions, alongside a review of existing literature on social protection in Sudan.² The aim is to examine how social protection policy frameworks relate to implementation in the current crisis context and to shed light on how different actors experience and shape the system in practice, in order to inform policy dialogue and support more inclusive and equitable social protection going forward. The analysis is organised around the system's pre-war fragmentation and its evolution since the outbreak of war; the models, infrastructure and targeting approaches used to deliver assistance; the barriers that shape who is reached and who is excluded; and the coordination architecture connecting the actors involved. Given the fluidity of the crisis and the constraints on data collection in an active

¹ The Sudan Social Protection Alliance (SSPA) is a network of Sudanese and Sudan-focused social protection specialists and practitioners, launched to conceptualise solutions and pathways towards a social protection system tailored to Sudan's context.

² For a full methodology, please see Annex 1.

conflict setting, the brief does not claim to offer a comprehensive or representative account of the entire social protection landscape; rather, it synthesises recurring patterns and tensions identified across interviews and documentation to identify where the system is functioning, where it has broken down and where opportunities for more effective and equitable engagement may lie.

2. The social protection system: A fragmented and uneven landscape

2.1 The pre-war baseline

Before the war, Sudan's social protection ecosystem consisted of interconnected but fragmented structures, spanning the humanitarian aid sector, local communities and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Welfare. Mandates were spread across roughly ten federal bodies, with fragmented services and varied beneficiary service points cutting across the sector.³

The ministry sat at the centre of this ecosystem and comprised numerous bodies, including the Zakat Chamber, Commission for Social Safety, Solidarity and Poverty Reduction (CSSSPR), National Pension and Social Insurance Fund, alongside internal departments and entities specialising in policy and services for children, women and people with disabilities.⁴ It is important, when looking at the period after the war, to understand that the ministry had already undergone significant changes that began during the transitional period; indeed, changes related to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries process were already underway. Nonetheless, much of what began under the first transitional government was halted or redirected under the second, followed by the suspension of much international funding after the coup on 25 October 2021.

Still, the transitional period represented an important juncture, when community mechanisms began taking on a more formal role alongside the ministry and larger aid structures within the social protection ecosystem. Traditionally, informal safety nets such as *nafeer* (collective work) are deeply rooted in Sudanese cultural norms and have long operated as vital components of social protection independent of the formal aid system. During the transitional period, neighbourhood resistance committees reached beneficiaries directly through services committees, organising fuel and bread lines in neighbourhood facilities during shortages coordinating more directly with the ministry through in-kind distribution during COVID-19.⁵ Notably, the formal system had already extended its reach through formalised community structures such as zakat and popular committees.

Turning to the larger aid sector, even before the transitional period, community and ministry structures worked closely with the development and humanitarian system, and this relationship carried into the transitional period as well. However, the legacies of this relationship are mixed, particularly when considering programmes such as the Sudan Family Support Program, in which donors were willing to fund individual and household-level cash transfers but had less appetite to invest in drivers and systems addressing structural inequality.^{6,7} The legacy is more positive when it comes to supporting institutional capacity, especially in relation to strategic thinking and programming for vulnerable groups – as seen

³ International Labour Organization (2022). *Extension of social protection coverage to workers in the informal economy in Sudan*. Geneva: International Labour Office

⁴ Key informant interview (KII) 6.27.06; KII 10.13.07

⁵ KII 10.13.07

⁶ Ali, M. and Mann, L. (2023). Misaligned social policy? Explaining the origins and limitations of cash transfers in Sudan. *Development and Change*, 54(4), 841–869; Birch, I., Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2024). *Effective social protection in conflict: Findings from Sudan* (Working Paper). Institute of Development Studies.

⁷ For instance, respondents discussed a reluctance to fund or take up already established individual and household support programmes which linked cash transfers with other services and included a more complex categorisation of poor households. Meanwhile, others noted that suggestions to tackle issues such as out-of-pocket health spending through public health programmes were not taken forward.

in national projects on targeting methodology, institutional capacity support and strategic alignment through efforts such as Sudan's first National Social Protection Strategy.⁸

2.2 How the war has reshaped the system

Following the war, there has been an overwhelming focus on social assistance, and most of the other components of a comprehensive social protection system have either weakened significantly or disappeared altogether. The current priority is understandably to deliver life-saving assistance, but there is very limited long-term vision beyond the immediate humanitarian response, largely because of the way funding is currently structured. This shift is evident even within state institutions, which have had to reorient their mandates away from chronic poverty reduction towards emergency coordination amid population displacement and service collapse.⁹

This has been compounded by a pull on the formal system itself, as cadres of the ministry have opted to work with NGOs instead – a pattern long visible in Darfur – while the government has been slow to reinstate its civil servants. Their work has also grown more complex as soaring operational and transport costs have pushed implementation towards local mechanisms.¹⁰ Despite greater diversification among international actors and somewhat improved coordination since the war's onset, including the resumption of programmes such as the Mother and Child Cash Transfer, the overall response remains extremely limited and unable to move much beyond emergency assistance to address longer-term issues such as unemployment or the reconstruction of institutional capacities and infrastructure.¹¹

Humanitarian and aid-sector actors have also largely avoided engaging with the federal government, whether out of reluctance or as a matter of institutional policy. However, this does not mean that no work is being done through government or in coordination with its bodies. The distinction is between the local and federal levels, and it is not always clear whether this distinction is consistently or deliberately accounted for in how actors position their engagement. In some places, this has reinvigorated the formal social protection system's implementation and community-based structures. Yet it has also increased reliance on informal community networks and national NGOs, without always acknowledging that these national NGOs operate within the umbrella of social protection through the Humanitarian Aid Commission.

Respondents note that international actors' complaints about "the government" often reflect negative experiences with specific regulatory agencies rather than the government as a whole. In fact, the scale of the displacement crisis and declining funding make it vital to strengthen national social protection institutions rather than bypass them. This includes supporting areas where displacement and market shifts have created new centres of revenue capable of funding independent social protection projects, but where capacity remains limited following years of dependence on international actors for technical direction.¹²

It is also important to note that the system has already moved beyond the first impact period; agencies and service providers are changing delivery systems and locations as more pockets of stability emerge and conditions evolve. This reassessment includes addressing drivers of conflict, such as unemployment and underdevelopment, and experimenting with engagement with the formal system. This shift is also evident within the state's own social protection bodies, which are actively redefining their mandates to move beyond chronic poverty reduction towards coordinating emergency response to the war, while

⁸ International Labour Organization (2022). *Extension of social protection coverage to workers in the informal economy in Sudan*. Geneva: International Labour Office; KII 12.16.07

⁹ KII 13.20.07; KII 6.27.06

¹⁰ KII 6.27.06; KII 5.26.06; KII 13.20.07

¹¹ KII 6.27.06

¹² KII 6.27.06; KII 13.20.07

responding to the government's mandate of return, in ways that differ between states.¹³ Bodies such as the CSSSPR are also actively working to reactivate productive safety net programmes, with a focus on more artisanal labour to match limited benefit packages. This shift is not always understood by donors; for instance, the Sanad programme, which builds on pre-war programming such as the Sudan Family Support Program, is currently moving to more reconstructive programming in response to rising numbers of returnees and encouraging results from agricultural interventions in areas such as Gezira and Sennar, despite ongoing constraints related to market and currency stability.¹⁴ At the same time, this reassessment means that structures relied on at the onset of the war, especially informal community response structures, are being set aside. This presents a challenge, since it is unclear whether the need for these structures has diminished. They have felt the effects of this reassessment sooner than other actors, especially as many have become dependent on international funding despite retaining significant community support.

2.3 Where the formal system has ceased to function

As the war took hold, entire components of the formal social protection system stopped functioning altogether, rather than simply weakening. Specialised services were suspended outright and targeting systems were set aside as the underlying targeting logic shifted to meet the demands of the emergency response. For instance, the collapse of Sudan's pre-war proxy means-testing mechanisms, which had relied on household data and administrative capacity, were rendered obsolete by the war.¹⁵ This was compounded by the physical destruction of the systems and infrastructure they depended on, with institutions such as the National Pension and Social Insurance Fund and the National Health Insurance Fund ceasing operations as the collapse of the centralised banking system prevented government funding or pension distribution altogether.¹⁶

In areas beyond the reach of federal social protection bodies, such as Darfur's states and parts of Kordofan, interviews for this study point to a weakening or halting of social protection structures, with federal bodies having limited ability to coordinate due to logistical challenges and contestation with emerging local governance structures. By contrast, other related sectors, such as health, which by its nature requires national coordination – particularly on disease prevention – show some indication of continued joint planning between federal and state levels; however, this research could not reach a conclusive assessment of whether such joint work, or the underlying state social protection infrastructure, remains intact. Even newly constructed bodies appear more oriented toward organising humanitarian response than social protection more broadly, though it is unclear whether these arrangements are strictly humanitarian or more strategically integrated. This ambiguity is not unique to these areas or to Sudan: international actors who entered through humanitarian assistance after the war began often work through community structures, implicitly positioning their work as social protection centred narrowly on “protection” rather than on the fuller transformative functions of production, reproduction and distribution that the term can encompass.

Some social protection services remain missing simply because the infrastructure to deliver them no longer exists. For instance, nutrition clinics in Khartoum revealed large numbers of malnourished children, reflecting the absence of basic services, including food, clean water and education – all components of a functioning protection system – which had stopped since the war began. Without access to basic maternal and reproductive support, women were forced to return to traditional home births, with or without a midwife present.^{17,18} Continuity of access to medication for chronic illnesses

¹³ KII 13.20.07

¹⁴ KII 11.14.07

¹⁵ KII 11.14.07

¹⁶ Medani, M. A. (2023). *Observations on the situation of social protection amidst the Sudanese war* (Social Protection Paper No. 6). Arab Reform Initiative.

¹⁷ KII 7.29.06

¹⁸ It is important to note that geographic disparities persist. While the lack of services is alarming, the fact that it is recorded points to a mechanism of basic data collection that may not exist in peripheral locations.

remains one of the weakest areas of delivery, since its distribution requires security clearance. Environmental sanitation support also remains widely requested by communities but cannot always be provided by organisations.¹⁹

Disability services illustrate this collapse well: prosthetics centres, visual and hearing disability services and direct cash support for people with disabilities were concentrated in Khartoum, and the destruction of national-level infrastructure there halted most state-level branches and services entirely. This left people without mobility aids, hearing aids or the modest cash support they had received before 2023.²⁰ A similar pattern held elsewhere: specialised institutional capacity had been centralised rather than distributed, leaving little redundancy once it was destroyed. This reflected a longer history of social policy favouring Khartoum and the riverine centre, which left other regions dependent on the capital.²¹ This disruption also affected the infrastructure needed for national strategic planning, as federal agencies were first spread across more than three states before stabilising in Port Sudan and, more recently, returning to Khartoum.

3. Delivery and access

3.1 Models of delivery

At the beginning of the war, the priority was physical protection and safety, so the core service was to evacuate people from affected areas; as the crisis shifted into a state of siege, protection and welfare services began to shift alongside evolving needs.²² In this first phase, access to services for people with chronic health needs – a core social protection concern – became a central problem, alongside a major crisis in access to water and public health infrastructure.

Much of the response has relied on unconditional cash transfers, following a humanitarian response logic that depends on actors agile enough to deliver quickly, even in contested areas or those controlled by non-state actors, while balancing this against the need to maintain neutrality and impartiality.²³ Some large-scale programmes implemented by international bodies represent a further step within this logic, layering unconditional cash transfers via the establishment of payment and information management systems – though these efforts remain insufficient given the limited engagement with formal bodies and the ongoing conflict.

At the same time, this humanitarian response has increasingly looked towards delivery structures that could support the establishment of longer-term systems, though it remains unclear whether this reflects active, strategic engagement with these systems or simply the natural maturing of delivery experience as the initial chaos of the response has settled. Current efforts focus on shared infrastructure – information systems and payment platforms – that could eventually be transferred to the formal social protection system, although humanitarian data must be handled cautiously given the risk that it could be misused to identify or harm individuals.²⁴ However, discussions about this shared infrastructure remain fragmented, often occurring in separate spaces in parallel.

Food security programming, particularly through community kitchens (*takaya*), illustrates a parallel, longer-established delivery model. The *takaya* began as a purely Sudanese, grassroots effort rooted in social solidarity, which later attracted organisational support – although this support was badly

¹⁹ KII 3.12.06

²⁰ KII 8.06.07

²¹ Ali, M. and Mann, L. (2023). Misaligned social policy? Explaining the origins and limitations of cash transfers in Sudan. *Development and Change*, 54(4), 841–869

²² KII 7.29.06

²³ KII 4.24.06

²⁴ KII 4.24.06; KII 9.07.07

disrupted by cuts to international aid.²⁵ Food security programmes have often served as a platform for additional services: community kitchens have been converted into safe spaces offering psychosocial support, women's health consultations, nutrition screening and legal aid sessions addressing violence, alimony and family disputes arising from economic pressure. This model of decentralised, localised and integrated social protection service delivery – reducing transport costs and building accessibility into a single community space – is increasingly framed as a broader recommendation for the future of service delivery in Sudan.

Nonetheless, there are striking differences in capacity among the community actors delivering protection on the ground, which inhibit the scale of delivery. Emergency room effectiveness varies significantly between localities; in certain areas, women's offices run leading initiatives supporting women's livelihoods, while in others, performance has declined and some struggle to maintain a consolidated structure. These differences in capacity and need are often not reflected in financial grants and budgeting, indicating a potential lag between real-time assessment and operational adjustments.²⁶

Barriers to delivering protection can also stem from the limitations of community groups' own networks, as well as from access barriers imposed by armed authorities. In one displacement camp, delivering humanitarian and evacuation assistance required paying an armed group controlling the area almost four million Sudanese pounds just to be permitted to operate.²⁷

Despite severe fiscal constraints and a heavy reliance on external humanitarian financing, authorities across various controlled territories are actively attempting to reconstruct social safety nets and administrative coordination. Multi-state initiatives underway include the Silati (My Commodity) programme providing subsidised consumer goods, the Shamel Program aimed at community livelihoods and joint microfinance and cash support projects. Ministries at state level are taking a more direct role in managing civilian welfare, stepping in to organise returnee assistance and rebuild beneficiary registries to anchor future aid.²⁸ Concurrently, while the Zakat Chamber continues to fund civilian welfare, its financial flows are increasingly shrouded in secrecy, with substantial resources being quietly redirected towards opaque objectives, a long-established critique further complicated by the current war. Meanwhile, regional Darfur de facto officials are moving to formally integrate grassroots Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) into their broader coordination structures, signalling a push to consolidate separate administrative control over independent needs identification and delivery. This is heightening fears that social protection will be separated along geographic lines, with implications for future peace settlements.²⁹

3.2 Delivery infrastructure and adaptation

The preservation of services in the post-war period has depended on adaptability, with codes of conduct guiding this process. Conflict-sensitive analysis is applied across the entire delivery chain – assessments, targeting, enrolment and payments – to identify risks and prepare frontline teams with mitigation measures when possible.³⁰

Rather than viewing adaptability as a transition from one mode to another, practitioners must continually adapt how they deliver services. Reliance on on-the-ground teams enables targeting and delivery to be adapted based on context. Intensive monitoring runs alongside community feedback mechanisms – hotlines, helpdesks and direct lines to community leaders and beneficiaries – allowing

²⁵ KII 7.29.06

²⁶ KII 3.12.06

²⁷ KII 8.06.07

²⁸ KII 13.20.07

²⁹ KII 2.12.06

³⁰ KII 4.24.06

distribution locations, targeting and dates to be adjusted in real time, and even trucks already en route to be redirected.³¹

Local responders served both as infrastructure and as a source of adaptability and were critical in offering specialised services such as gender-based violence documentation. First responders presented an adaptive model when both the formal and humanitarian systems were slow to respond.³² Embeddedness within the community allows for fast communication and response. This is not without risk, as official and security bodies in urban districts increasingly restrict and monitor this work – apparently out of concern that ERRs’ credibility makes them competitors.³³ Even so, the load on local responders still does not match the scale of need, and they cannot be depended on entirely.

The formal system’s adaptation is evident in the relocation of various federal government services. After the war broke out, some ministry work relocated to the city of Madani, where nine months of positive cooperation with organisations followed. UNICEF, the Sudanese Red Crescent and others funded a children’s home and a school-turned-shelter for displaced mothers, with coordination described as fully cooperative with the Madani government and its Ministry of Social Welfare. When the conflict reached Madani in December 2023, the work relocated again, first to Port Sudan and then elsewhere.³⁴

Cash transfer infrastructure has also solidified around the mechanism of digital cash. Transfers are made through bank channels or physical cash depending on the area, with simple reporting, and partners now negotiate jointly through a single tender process across more than 40 financial service providers to limit exploitation.³⁵ Recent discussions in the sector reflect concerns over the role of digitised cash, proxies and tenders as mediators for community welfare, and whether relying on market incentives and profit motives can further fragment and distort the logic of social protection.

3.3 The emergence of hybrid targeting

Across the response, community-delegated identification has emerged as a strong trend in both sophisticated programmes and local, responder-based programming. Communities identify beneficiaries against agreed vulnerability criteria and assess recipients’ capacity to absorb larger investments – a model framed around building ownership and reinforcing social cohesion as communities take responsibility for their own development.³⁶ In practice, this often takes the form of community-committee-mediated targeting, where quotas or broad categories are handed down or proposed by committees and then verified against criteria through a scoring approach; in areas where assistance has run for years, existing community lists are often accepted and cross-verified rather than rebuilt from scratch.³⁷ It is important to note that what is often labelled “community identification” may in fact involve self-selection, with community-based responders contributing to the design of distribution methods and services in ways that prompt self-selection. This was especially significant for community kitchens and in resource-constrained areas affected by active conflict.

Running alongside this is a context-adaptive, “scenario-based” approach to modality selection – distinct from who qualifies – in which registration and verification methods shift between paper, digital and phone-based systems depending on what is operationally feasible on the ground, even as predefined vulnerability and targeting criteria remain constant.³⁸ Substantively, need is still largely defined through

³¹ KII 4.24.06

³² KII 7.29.06

³³ KII 3.12.06

³⁴ KII 5.26.06

³⁵ KII 9.07.07

³⁶ KII 4.24.06

³⁷ KII 9.07.07; KII 3.12.06

³⁸ KII 4.24.06

category-based vulnerability criteria – fixed proxies such as female- or child-headed households, widows, disability, high dependency ratios or households with no income earner. Yet it is unclear if these groupings still hold, given that household structures have diversified and displacement continues to be a defining feature.

Layered onto these categories are resource-dependent severity thresholds, under which households classified as IPC4³⁹ and above are prioritised first, while IPC3 households are included only when additional funding becomes available.⁴⁰ This overlaps with institutional or transferability-driven targeting, where IPC5 areas are deliberately avoided not for lack of need but because systems there are too severely affected for any element to be realistically transferred to the formal social protection system. This has been seen in the Sanad programme, which prioritises IPC3 and IPC4. It reflects a broader dual mandate, in which humanitarian and social protection targeting operate simultaneously as separate, negotiated systems: one aimed at saving lives and preserving dignity, and the other at social protection programming.

Under acute time pressure, this entire architecture can collapse into crisis-driven simplification: criteria are reduced to fast, blunt proxies such as date of arrival and self-exclusion.⁴¹ As one respondent noted candidly, targeting is never done perfectly in Sudan; it is easier to define who to exclude than who to include, and who ends up least visible – whether by ethnicity or disability – remains an unanswered question.⁴²

4. Inclusion and differential barriers

4.1 Patterns and mechanisms of exclusion

Exclusion in Sudan's wartime social protection begins before any assistance is delivered, at the point where people are counted and registered. Registration was built around a settled population identified by a fixed address, but repeated displacement has made that assumption unworkable: recipients no longer live where they were recorded and those who keep moving fall out of view.⁴³ Targeting compounds the problem, because the dominant tools rank areas by food insecurity rather than seeing the specific vulnerabilities of the groups within them, and broad category labels obscure who is most at risk.⁴⁴ Some groups barely enter the data at all: persons with intellectual disabilities whose needs are hard to specify, people without phones or bank accounts who are invisible to digital systems, and communities that are least visible for reasons of geography or ethnicity.⁴⁵ Fragmentation runs deep, as each actor keeps its own register while government-led provision remains largely suspended in favour of a humanitarian-led response, so that people are known only to the organisation that enrolled them, and support delivered outside formal institutions leaves no one able to say who has been reached.⁴⁶

While many of the findings reflect common criticisms of the development and humanitarian sectors in conflict, this diagnostic still found instances where understood best practice was not always followed. Even where people are identified, provision reaches them unevenly, because standard modalities assume a recipient who is mobile, connected, documented and able-bodied. Coverage tends to follow

³⁹ The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) is a standardised scale used to classify the severity of food insecurity, ranging from Phase 1 (Minimal) to Phase 5 (Catastrophe/Famine). It is widely used by humanitarian and development actors, including in Sudan, to assess needs and inform response prioritisation.

⁴⁰ KII 4.24.06

⁴¹ KII 9.07.07

⁴² KII 9.07.07

⁴³ KII 13.20.07

⁴⁴ KII 6.27.06; KII 4.24.06

⁴⁵ KII 8.06.07; KII 9.07.07

⁴⁶ Birch, I. et al. (2024). *Effective Social Protection in Conflict: Findings from Sudan* (Working Paper). Institute of Development Studies; Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025). Supporting conflict-sensitive, locally-led humanitarianism in Sudan: rebalancing donors' approach to risk. *Disasters* (advance online publication); KII 10.13.07

the deliverer's established networks rather than the map of need, so an area is treated as inaccessible when it is merely beyond a given actor's reach, and seasonal conditions and insecurity narrow it further.⁴⁷ Delivery itself excludes: cash collected in person from a bank is out of reach for people with severe or visual disabilities, and food distributions that require standing in a queue for hours at collection points exclude older persons and persons with disabilities.⁴⁸ Cash is of little use, moreover, where markets have failed and the banking system barely functions.⁴⁹ Documentation and information act as further gatekeepers: displaced people are denied services for lack of a health insurance card, and functioning services go unused because people do not know they exist.⁵⁰ Protection risks compound access, as territorial control shifts between the parties to the conflict: women have faced sexual violence and, later, prosecution on collaboration charges, while persons with disabilities have faced violence, the confiscation of assistive devices and accusations of espionage.⁵¹

Exclusion is also a matter of who has a say. Persons with disabilities describe being treated as objects of charity rather than as rights-holders and left out of the decisions that concern them;⁵² rural women often lack the standing to speak;⁵³ representative organisations and community response structures are weakened, obstructed or unregistered;⁵⁴ and channels for grievance and redress are largely absent.⁵⁵ Underlying all of this, people remain dependent on relief with no route out: the assistance that exists is overwhelmingly relief-only by design and shaped by short, emergency-framed funding, so that informal workers, youth and those who have lost their livelihoods are left with consumption support and no way forward.⁵⁶ It is a pattern in which the absence of an economic pathway itself becomes a driver of the conflict.⁵⁷

4.2 Inclusion: alternative and positive responses

Where provision has managed to include people well, it has done so by seeing them more accurately, reaching them where they are and giving them a say. The most effective identification has been built from the community upward: local committees propose and verify recipients against transparent, community-set criteria, an approach that has proved both more accurate and more readily accepted than selection imposed from outside.⁵⁸ Registration has been adapted to displacement and lost documentation: community or tribal attestation has been used to issue identity numbers to people who fled without papers, and previously invisible groups – including persons with disabilities – have been enrolled through the localities using national identity numbers.⁵⁹ Alongside this, there are some early efforts and discussions to consolidate fragmented data into interoperable, nationally owned systems, from standardised collection tools to a unified social register able to disaggregate need down to the household.⁶⁰

On delivery, positive practice has consistently brought services closer to people and adapted them to their circumstances. Decentralised, community-level service points, such as health centres and

⁴⁷ KII 6.27.06; KII 2.12.06

⁴⁸ KII 8.06.07

⁴⁹ CMI (2023). *Mutual Aid and Rethinking International Humanitarian Engagement in Sudan*. Chr. Michelsen Institute.

⁵⁰ KII 8.06.07; KII 7.29.06

⁵¹ KII 8.06.07; KII 7.29.06

⁵² KII 8.06.07

⁵³ KII 2.12.06

⁵⁴ KII 8.06.07; KII 1.12.06

⁵⁵ KII 13.20.07; KII 4.24.06

⁵⁶ Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025). Supporting conflict-sensitive, locally-led humanitarianism in Sudan: rebalancing donors' approach to risk. *Disasters* (advance online publication).

⁵⁷ KII 6.27.06

⁵⁸ KII 4.24.06; KII 9.07.07

⁵⁹ KII 7.29.06; KII 8.06.07

⁶⁰ KII 11.14.07; KII 13.20.07

repurposed community kitchens that combine food, health, nutrition, psychosocial support and legal awareness with clear referral pathways, have cut the cost and risk of travel and made services reachable for women, older persons and people who are chronically ill.⁶¹ Where in-person bank collection excluded people with disabilities, some actors disbursed and delivered cash to recipients where they were.⁶² Digital and doorstep payments have spared women in particular from unsafe journeys to collection points.⁶³ Reach into remote and insecure areas has depended on trusted local intermediaries, and gathering dispersed groups into shared spaces has made them visible to providers who might otherwise overlook them.⁶⁴ A further strand layers health, nutrition and maternal care onto cash, as in the Mother and Child Cash Transfer Plus programme in the eastern states, so that assistance addresses more than immediate consumption.⁶⁵

The clearest inclusion has come from giving people a genuine say: asking communities what they need before designing assistance and placing women who best know their neighbours' circumstances at the centre of managing it.⁶⁶ It has also come from working through representative and community-led structures, from disability-led advocacy that obliges incoming organisations to include persons with disabilities to grassroots women's organisations that became the voice of besieged communities.⁶⁷ Transparency has been strengthened where recipient lists are opened to community objection and where hotlines and helpdesks let people raise complaints.⁶⁸ These community responses, the ERRs and mutual-aid networks rooted in Sudan's tradition of collective action, have reached people and places that international agencies could not, and much of the most sustained support has come from Sudanese people themselves.⁶⁹ A parallel strand treats assistance as more than relief, through the restoration of livelihoods and tools, cooperative projects that let women support themselves, and community structures beginning to turn towards local recovery.⁷⁰ Taken together, these examples demonstrate that more inclusive approaches are both feasible and effective. However, they remain largely localised and project-based, rather than constituting systematic or structural features of Sudan's social protection and humanitarian response.

5. Institutional coordination and conflict adaptation

5.1 Parallel coordination architectures

Fragmentation is the defining failure of the response. The international effort remains highly centralised in Port Sudan, with limited local participation, while telecommunication blackouts severely disrupt aid logistics.⁷¹ Organisations operate in silos, meaning beneficiaries become associated with individual partners rather than being treated holistically.⁷²

⁶¹ KII 7.29.06

⁶² KII 8.06.07

⁶³ KII 4.24.06

⁶⁴ KII 7.29.06

⁶⁵ KII 13.20.07; Birch, I. et al. (2024). *Effective Social Protection in Conflict: Findings from Sudan* (Working Paper). Institute of Development Studies.

⁶⁶ KII 7.29.06

⁶⁷ KII 8.06.07; KII 7.29.06

⁶⁸ KII 13.20.07; KII 4.24.06

⁶⁹ Olson, S. K., Dahab, M. and Parker, M. (2024). *Key Considerations: Mutual Aid Lessons and Experiences from Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan*.

Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform (SSHAP); Refugees International (2025). *Accelerating Localization: A Roadmap for the Sudan Humanitarian Fund*; KII 1.12.06; KII 10.13.07

⁷⁰ KII 13.20.07; KII 3.12.06; KII 1.12.06

⁷¹ Birch, I., Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2024). *Effective social protection in conflict: Findings from Sudan* (Working Paper). Institute of Development Studies.

⁷² KII 11.14.07; KII 6.27.06; KII 9.07.07

The war fractured central state providers, including the Zakat Chamber, scattering databases and severing centre–state communication.⁷³ Central official interventions have largely ceased, and the pre-war Social Protection Technical Working Group collapsed.⁷⁴ This leaves actors without a coordinating body or even a shared definition of social protection.

Funding heavily favours large international actors, reducing Sudanese organisations to implementers rather than designers.⁷⁵ With official service delivery halted, grassroots ERRs and neighbourhood committees stepped in to manage camps and communal kitchens. However, genuine humanitarian coordination has frequently been overrun by state surveillance. The Humanitarian Aid Commission, for example, has uniquely managed to retain its institutional capacity because it acts as the government-enforced gatekeeper for channelling in-kind support. While the Commission nominally assumes a coordination role, its functions remain heavily intertwined with security tasks and control. Consequently, formal authorities often treat local grassroots groups as competitors rather than partners – subjecting them to intense surveillance, questioning and operational restrictions rather than offering support.⁷⁶ This directly contradicts widespread recommendations that state and international institutions must collaborate with local committees, given the state’s inability to respond alone.

Furthermore, relying on the government for aid delivery faces a hard external barrier. Not only are central fiscal systems physically broken, but strict donor regulations explicitly prohibit channelling financial resources through government systems during active conflict or political transitions. Because international funds cannot flow through the state, and the state itself is paralysed, social protection often takes on forms that attempt to comply with these restrictions rather than upholding efficiency or transparency.

Despite these challenges, pathways for coordination exist. The CSSSPR is shifting to a decentralised, remote-work model and the Sudan Humanitarian Fund is encouraging area-based collaboration to connect isolated ERRs. Digital cash transfers are also helping overcome fragmentation by streamlining transparency. Post-2023 successor programmes have avoided building parallel silos by successfully leveraging pre-existing digital registries and payment infrastructure.

5.2 Shock-responsive and adaptive performance

Although three years have passed since the outbreak of the war in April 2023, active hostilities have ceased in some areas and increased in others, while the reverberations of multiple, compounded shocks continue to shape the social protection landscape. The ecosystem remains in a state of constant evolution. The operational environment is still shifting rapidly, meaning that adaptation cannot be viewed simply as a past-tense emergency measure – it remains a necessary, daily practice for all actors navigating this prolonged transition to recovery.

As state institutions recover, the defining tension centres on balancing central authority with the decentralised flexibility forced by the conflict.⁷⁷ The survival of pre-war digital registries and Central Bank mobile banking adaptations demonstrates how pre-existing infrastructure can support future social protection. Going forward, a critical dynamic to monitor is how formal institutions navigate relations

⁷³ Medani, M. A. (2024). *A critical study of the role of zakat in social protection in Sudan from 1980-2021*. Arab Reform Initiative; KII 13.20.07

⁷⁴ Medani, M. A. (2023). *Observations on the situation of social protection amidst the Sudanese war* (Social Protection Paper No. 6). Arab Reform Initiative; KII 4.24.06; KII 5.26.06.

⁷⁵ KII 6.27.06

⁷⁶ KII 1.12.06; KII 3.12.06

⁷⁷ KII 13.20.07

with local actors and whether they are able to strategically leverage their multi-channel networks to preserve system-wide shock-responsiveness.

In areas where pockets of stability are emerging, the trajectory of grassroots actors hinges on how they manage the transition from emergency relief into community reconstruction and rehabilitation.⁷⁸ While community-embedded groups offer unmatched real-time adaptability and rapid feedback loops, their total reliance on external funding and vulnerability to banking collapses present ongoing structural risks. A key consideration moving forward is whether grassroots groups can preserve their operational independence and local trust while securing sustainable resources amid ongoing political friction.

Future response models must reconcile the trade-offs between tech-driven agility and equitable access. While digital cash, vouchers and other flexible digital mechanisms can successfully bypass physical blockades, structural bottlenecks like the gender digital divide and questions about their utility and cost in cash-based markets remain unaddressed. Moving forward, the core focus centres on how international agencies can overcome internal institutional rigidities to align with local agility, ensuring crisis-built delivery systems can eventually transition to state ownership rather than embedding permanent, parallel dependencies.

5.3 The adaptation–funding gap

As Sudan transitions beyond three years post-conflict, the gap between required adaptation and available financing remains the defining bottleneck for social protection. Operating in a state of continuous adaptation requires predictable resources, yet funding mechanisms remain trapped in short-term emergency paradigms. Looking ahead, strategic analysis must focus on three core funding dimensions shaping system adaptation:

Domestically, government revenues fell to 4.7% of GDP in 2024, while traditional domestic pillars such as the Zakat Chamber face severely disrupted cash flows.⁷⁹ Going forward, adaptation depends on establishing prearranged contingency financing, advance disbursement mechanisms and prepositioned funds that can be deployed when central systems stall.

External funding streams remain trapped in reactive, one-year cycles, forcing institutional leaders into perpetual “firefighting” rather than multi-year system building. Unpredictable commitments, six-month disbursement lags and restrictive caps on operational overheads routinely impair delivery and staff retention. Furthermore, because fragmented donor funding directly reproduces siloed, parallel delivery on the ground, aligning these streams into multi-year commitments is critical to systemic adaptation.

Grassroots responders, such as the ERRs, face acute financial vulnerability, especially those relying on small, one-off grants with strict overhead limits that force many into debt. Crucially, as active combat shifts and the “active emergency” label is removed in stabilising areas, flexible monthly support for local volunteers and communal kitchens has dropped sharply.⁸⁰ A key strategic consideration going forward is preventing this funding cliff so local adaptive capacity does not collapse before formal systems can replace it. Alternatively, groups that rely on remittances might have more financial consistency.

⁷⁸ KII 3.12.06

⁷⁹ World Bank (2025). *Sudan economic update, May 2025: The economic and social consequences of the conflict - Charting a path to recovery*. World Bank Group.

⁸⁰ KII 3.12.06

Study limitations and gaps

Given its high-level and time-bound nature, the research did not allow for in-depth or observational data collection, nor for more niche exploration of specific dimensions of the formal system – such as its detailed financing structures, institutional capacity constraints, or internal administrative processes – which would require dedicated follow-up study. Access constraints also meant that certain geographies, including Kordofan and most of Darfur's states, were not represented in this round of interviews. While the brief aims for a national lens, we recognise that these areas carry their own distinct dynamics given the current conflict, and that their absence limits the extent to which findings can be generalised nationally.

Relatedly, this diagnostic – like most reports of this nature – is limited by an implicit assumption that the federal level is broadly reflective of the system as a whole, when in practice the state level constitutes its own distinct reality. State-level ministries are rarely independent bodies, are often subsumed within other sectors, and are typically relegated to a secondary or implementing role rather than a strategic one. This limitation is compounded by the reluctance discussed above to engage with government at the federal level; as a result, local and state-level actors may have undergone developments in capacity and function following the war that this research was not positioned to capture, even as some interviews suggest this may indeed be the case.

Finally, the research focused on the social protection system as mandated through the ministry and its associated bodies and did not extend to engaging formal institutions contributing to social protection outcomes from outside that mandate – including actors in health, education or key productive sectors – whose roles and adaptations during the crisis remain an important area for further inquiry and shape the wider conditions within which social protection functions.

6. From diagnostic to action

The findings point to a social protection system that was already fragmented and under-resourced before the war and has since been reshaped – rather than simply weakened – by conflict, with some components of the formal system ceasing to function in some areas while informal and community-based mechanisms have stepped in. Delivery has depended heavily on adaptive, decentralised and community-embedded models, but these coexist with a targeting architecture that functions as much as a mechanism for rationing scarce resources as one for identifying genuine vulnerability. Access is itself shaped more by organisational networks, security conditions and institutional trust than by a systematic mapping of need. As a result, exclusion in Sudan's wartime social protection landscape begins well before assistance is designed or delivered – in who gets counted, who is reachable and who has a say – even as examples of more inclusive, community-led and locally adapted practice demonstrate what more equitable delivery could look like. Institutional coordination remains fragmented across parallel architectures, and chronic underfunding continues to trap the system in short-term, reactive cycles rather than enabling the multi-year, adaptive planning the context demands.

Taken together, these findings point to a system shaped less by the absence of capacity or good practice than by the conditions under which that capacity and practice are allowed to operate: fragmented, underfunded and structured around short-term humanitarian logics and enclaves where longer-term, more equitable alternatives have already begun to emerge at a local level. Addressing these dynamics will require sustained attention not only to immediate humanitarian delivery but to the institutional, financing and coordination foundations needed to support a more coherent and inclusive social protection system as Sudan's crisis evolves.

The analysis presented here provides the evidence base for an accompanying second policy brief, which translates this diagnosis into a principle-based forward agenda, identifying practical priorities for advancing a more adaptive, conflict-sensitive, inclusive and nationally owned system through a set of mutually reinforcing principles and operational priorities.

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Annex

Methodology

The two briefs draw on a shared body of qualitative research undertaken to understand how social protection has functioned in Sudan during the current conflict, and what a more inclusive, conflict-sensitive and nationally owned system might require. The research combined primary evidence from key informant interviews (KIIs) with a structured review of the relevant literature, including academic studies, reports and commentary from United Nations agencies, NGOs and independent analysts. Interview findings and documentary sources were triangulated, so that patterns emerging from the interviews were read alongside, and tested against, the wider evidence base rather than taken in isolation.

Respondents were selected through purposive sampling designed to capture the range of actors who shape, deliver or experience social protection in wartime Sudan. Fourteen KIIs were conducted across six respondent categories: formal social protection institutions; United Nations agencies and NGOs working on social protection and humanitarian relief; representative organisations of marginalised groups; community-level response initiatives; independent experts; and former officials of formal social protection institutions. The final category was treated as distinct because these respondents combine first-hand experience of operating the formal system with the retrospective distance of speaking from outside it, offering a perspective on institutional memory and continuity that is directly relevant to a forward agenda. A separate interview guide was developed for each category, tailored to the mandate, experience and vantage point of the respondents concerned.

Interviews were conducted between June and July 2026, in English and in Arabic according to the preference of each respondent. With the informed consent of participants, interviews were recorded where it was safe to do so; where recording could have exposed a respondent to risk, or where a participant preferred it, the interviewer relied on written notes instead. All participants were informed of the purpose of the research and the use to which their contributions would be put, and all interviews were anonymised.

Because the research was carried out during an active armed conflict, a conflict-sensitive, do-no-harm approach was applied throughout. Interviewers avoided any line of questioning that could place respondents, their communities or third parties at political, security or reputational risk, and adapted the mode of engagement to the safety of each participant. Anonymity was preserved in the transcripts and in both briefs, and no respondent is identified by name or by any detail that could reasonably lead to identification.

Interviews were transcribed in full. Light editorial changes were made only to improve readability, without altering the meaning of what was said. Interviews conducted in Arabic were translated into English for analysis. The transcripts were then examined through thematic analysis, identifying recurring patterns across respondents and organising them into the cross-cutting themes that structure the findings of each brief. Where interview evidence spoke to a point also addressed in the literature, the two were triangulated to strengthen the conclusions drawn.

The findings should be read with the limitations of the approach in mind. The research is qualitative and based on a purposive, non-probabilistic sample; it is intended to surface the range and depth of stakeholder perspectives rather than to be statistically representative. Access during an active conflict constrained who could safely be reached, and the priority given to participant safety and anonymity necessarily limited the identifying detail that could be recorded. Triangulation of interview evidence with the wider literature is intended to mitigate these constraints.