

THE SUDAN-OXFORD WORKSHOP STATEMENT

The Foundations of Recovery: A New Vision for Social Assistance in Sudan

About this Statement

“As long as we are talking, we are not fighting.” This powerful reminder from Nelson Mandela underscores the transformative power of dialogue in reimagining systems for a better future. In this spirit, a diverse group of experts, researchers and practitioners, deeply engaged in and directly affected by the ongoing conflict in Sudan, came together to reimagine how social assistance can meet immediate relief needs and build a foundation for recovery and sustainable development. This note summarises some of the discussions coming out of the meeting.

We extend our deepest gratitude to all who contributed their time, insights, and expertise. A special thank you also goes to Nuffield College, Oxford, for graciously hosting this vital dialogue and the UKRI GCRF Accelerate Hub for funding it, providing a space where innovative ideas could flourish and hope for a better future could be renewed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is an urgent need for ground-up social protection models that can respond to both immediate and long-term needs in Sudan. This statement includes three overarching recommendations for humanitarian and development partners:

- 1. Increase support for mutual aid actors** in delivering emergency and long-term assistance. They are uniquely positioned to respond to both the immediate conflict and its root causes. Equitable partnerships must include flexible, predictable funding and protection of these groups.
- 2. Pilot integrated service delivery models** that address food insecurity, health illnesses, psychosocial trauma, and social cohesion to improve multiple areas of wellbeing and respond to multi-dimensional poverty.
- 3. Invest in more robust and harmonized data systems** for adaptive and conflict-sensitive programming. This should include early warning systems, needs assessments and monitoring of interventions that provide both age and sex-disaggregated data to inform the localization of social assistance.

THE HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Sudan is in the midst of an unprecedented humanitarian disaster. Humanitarian aid is critically underfunded, with only 16% of required funding received, and often obstructed by warring parties.

From April 2023 to June 2024:



+25 million
people have been driven
into extreme poverty.



+290%
increase in
food prices.



+10 million
people have been
forcefully displaced.

Social assistance, including conflict-sensitive cash and food assistance, can weaken the bidirectional links between conflict and economic shocks². This report details some emerging opportunities to spearhead new social assistance policies, delivery mechanisms and research to respond to this catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

Operationalising the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus in a Complex Crisis: What Can be Delivered?

Social assistance is defined as ‘non-contributory transfers in cash or kind targeted at the poor and vulnerable’. The primary aim of social assistance is usually to address immediate hunger and reduce negative coping strategies, but it can also have wider spillover outcomes, including violence prevention, child protection, livelihood strengthening and social inclusion.

Social assistance can also achieve broader governance objectives, building the state-citizen contract, empowering women and girls, and achieving social justice – which have the potential to address the root causes of armed conflict. Secondary objectives such as these can be reflected in both stand-alone cash transfers and, more so, in ‘cash plus’ programmes³.

There is global evidence that social assistance can play a pivotal role in operationalising the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, delivering key outcomes across the three realms⁴. There is evidence to suggest that equitable delivery models can determine whether social assistance has a detrimental or advantageous effect on social cohesion and conflict resolution^{5,6}. In addition, research in areas affected by armed conflict in Ukraine and Columbia suggests that humanitarian intervention, when delivered *in partnership*



with local communities, can contribute to increased local ownership, social cohesion and social inclusion— especially when combined with psychosocial interventions^{7,8}.

The literature suggests that social assistance may have a role in *both* responding to armed conflict and preventing its root drivers. In Sudan, social assistance has been primarily focused on life-saving assistance to end hunger and vulnerability. However, there are potentially missed opportunities to consider how it can also contribute to transformative goals such as social cohesion and cultivating local leadership.

Challenges in Delivering Conflict-Sensitive Social Assistance in Sudan

- **Compound shocks.** Since April 2023, Sudanese people have faced severe and worsening vulnerabilities as a result of armed conflict, devastating climate events (floods/drought), and widespread infectious disease outbreaks. These interconnected crises have created a critical, complex and convoluted humanitarian emergency that demands a comprehensive and transformative response.
- **Obstruction of aid delivery.** Service delivery, including social assistance, is frequently obstructed by warring parties, compromising cash and food supply chains and limiting access to formal banking systems. Marginalised populations will often rely on informal community support networks, which are themselves vulnerable to targeted violence, exploitation, and intimidation by armed groups.
- **Siloed financing structures.** Fragmented social assistance structures within and across agencies – coupled with unrealistic donor requirements and insufficient and unpredictable funding – hinder integrated community responses and limit meaningful local participation in intervention design. This can potentially fuel competition with/between community movements.
- **Limited evidence on conflict-sensitive implementation.** Fragile public institutions have complicated delivery of consistent and predictable cash and food assistance. As a result, innovative models of social assistance have emerged through informal and civic actors. As this can contribute to the development of new systems, it is crucial to consider the importance of building social protection systems that do not exacerbate the conflict. Documentation of best practices in such a context is critical.
- **Fragmented governance structures.** Compromised by the present conflict, political leadership has profoundly undermined effective aid and social assistance delivery. Political instability, weak institutions and a collapse in national government have hindered coordination efforts. While civic organisations are notable and growing relief actors, they can often be perceived as political movements, which complicates funding eligibility.

Innovative Policies and Practices. How Can Delivery Become More Effective?

Persistent fragility and breakdown of national governance in Sudan, combined with the international community's inadequate response, have notably strengthened Sudanese civil society leadership over the past decade. 'Nafeer', locally defined as the 'the call to mobilise', is a well-known social contract across Sudanese societies which has mobilised emergency responses and urgently financed crisis responses over the past three decades⁹. Between April and November 2023, for example, community-led initiatives have been foundational to the delivery of international relief responses, evacuations, outbreak and flood responses.

Sudanese civil society is well positioned to lead emergency relief, design informal social protection systems, and ensure their continuity after external providers cease operations. They have demonstrated high levels of adaptability in conflict

hotspots and an innate familiarity with the needs of their communities – mobilising culturally sensitive approaches.

Now, with a majority of the population experiencing emergency levels of food insecurity, it is important to prioritise ground-up approaches, recognise informal actors, and ensure a coordinated and comprehensive response that responds to immediate needs and beyond.

PROMISING POLICIES AND APPROACHES

'Mutual aid' is a form of community-based support where people work together to meet each other's needs through familial, societal and neighbourhood networks. In Sudan, these networks are a lifeline for thousands of people, with volunteer groups continuing to deliver aid and protection, especially in areas beyond the reach of international organisations¹⁰. The following are some promising approaches that have emerged in Sudan:

- **More, flexible and predictable funding for poverty reduction.** Successful delivery models in Sudan have prioritised flexible and timely financing mechanisms, which enable rapid responses to evolving crises. Diaspora financing mechanisms, for example, have demonstrated high levels of flexibility and a somewhat predictable pace of funding. However, financial flows from multilateral agencies to grassroots actors still experience considerable bureaucratic delays.
- **Recognise mutual aid groups as key to both conflict response and long-term recovery.** The additional capacity, knowledgeability and reach of mutual aid can improve the decentralisation of aid, development and peacebuilding efforts. Short-term approaches overlook the potential of mutual aid partnerships, which can foster social cohesion, strengthen community governance, and build local capacity. Over time, these efforts have the potential to contribute to the restoration of democratic principles, particularly accountability and social justice.
- **Social assistance programmes that respond to both acute and chronic needs.** While one-off payments can support evacuation efforts, predictable and sustained support is more effective for those displaced, facing compound crises and long-term challenges.
- **Equitable partnerships.** The term localisation has often been overused, focusing on pushing money down to community-based organisations. However, this approach doesn't address other important considerations, including the need to redress power dynamics within humanitarian systems. As well as ensuring adequate funding and realistic reporting requirements, there is the need to ensure mutual aid groups are represented in key decision-making spaces, including the humanitarian cluster system.
- **Risk sharing.** Considering the immense security risks local actors face in delivering international aid, it is important to ensure the humanitarian response addresses the protection of front-line workers, including negotiating safe access and implementing safeguarding measures that secure them and their families.
- **Leverage transnational capacity and finance.** Safe delivery of social assistance often starts outside Sudan's borders – leveraging support from neighbouring countries like Chad, Ethiopia and Egypt to deliver cash, food and necessities. Partnerships with agencies in neighbouring countries are well-positioned to support long-term food and cash supply chains. Further, there is room for transnational capacity sharing and partnerships. Sudanese professionals living outside the country have frequently supported local communities in delivering relief, including through remittances, fundraising, technical assistance, monitoring, translation, crisis advocacy, and media engagement.

PROMISING SOCIAL ASSISTANCE INTERVENTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

- **Financing frontline workers** to ensure the sustainability of decentralised responses and allow mutual aid groups to continue to respond and adapt to challenges of hunger, public health, education and ending violence. Innovative approaches to funding these groups and frontline workers are needed. A number of aid agencies are rethinking ways of financing mutual aid groups which respond to their role of the service provider as well as recognise the inherent vulnerability of providers themselves. For example, considering mutual groups as beneficiaries as opposed to contractual partners recognises both their role in relief and the vulnerability they inherently face in delivering it.
- **Integrated service delivery.** Building on the 'Development Accelerator' approach – developed by the UN Development Programme, the University of Oxford and the University of Cape Town – it is important to identify evidence-based approaches which can achieve multiple impacts cost-effectively. In conflict-affected contexts it may be possible to deliver interventions which address both economic and psychosocial deprivations. This may strategically address the multi-dimensional risks that face the Sudanese population – especially women and children.
- **Consider psychosocial peacebuilding.** There is currently widespread psychosocial trauma, increasing tribal tensions, and a weakening social contract. To address this, psychosocial interventions should be mainstreamed across social assistance programmes. This could be through a variety of entry points, e.g., integrated service packages, delivery platforms, recruitment strategies, and/or participatory research.
- **Identify community-based platforms for effective delivery.** There are emerging community-owned platforms that allow for combined economic and psychosocial programmes, including hospitals, community kitchens, religious institutions, women's safe spaces and schools (even during times of closure). These are ideal platforms to deliver integrated interventions, support community leadership and optimally strengthen security and protection.
- **Promote gender equality, social inclusion and prioritisation of vulnerable sub-groups.** It is important to identify creative ways to address compound crises with and through social assistance interventions – including responding to age and gender-specific needs. A few notable examples include cash-plus care programmes for pregnant and new mothers, cash assistance to youth and adolescent carers, food plus informal learning for children under 18, and food and health packages for under-five populations.

FOUNDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE: A LEARNING AGENDA

Documentation, research and learning collaborations on social assistance can expedite the implementation of effective conflict-sensitive social assistance. The following are some notable research priorities identified at our meeting:

- **Urgent, actionable research on mortality, health, and wellbeing.** There is minimal data available in Sudan on mortality, morbidity, health and well-being at a population level. However, there is an opportunity to reconstruct data retrospectively – e.g., by interviewing a representative sample of households about the number of their family members/and how many died. This data can help to unpack the causes of increased mortality and morbidity, including rising levels of hunger and vulnerability. This will also strengthen the advocacy case for increased investments in humanitarian assistance, including cash plus, in addressing immediate hunger and vulnerability as well as supporting longer-term human capital development (access to education, health and tackling violence against children).
- **Supporting more harmonised data collection.** Considering the diversity of social assistance interventions in Sudan, there is an opportunity to strengthen more coordinated and harmonised data collection, e.g., through standardised risk assessments, early warning systems and programme monitoring. To strengthen social inclusion, these data systems should integrate wider measures of multi-dimensional poverty, including violence exposure age- and gender-related vulnerabilities.
- **Collective learning.** By leveraging existing communities of practice, we can draw valuable lessons from conflict-affected contexts within Sudan and beyond, including identifying optimal cash, food, and integrated assistance approaches that work across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. Examples of these communities include the Cash Consortium of Sudan, CALP, and the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board (SPIAC-B).

In conclusion, the international community must act decisively to prevent a deepening catastrophe in Sudan. This includes unlocking flexible funding, supporting mutual aid groups and Sudanese civil society, and implementing culturally rooted social assistance that not only meets immediate needs but fosters long-term resilience. The world cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the suffering in Sudan—an equitable, coordinated, and inclusive response is urgently needed.

Remember those we serve

Born today in Sudan, a child enters a world marked by instability, violence, and uncertainty. Their first breaths are drawn in the shadow of war, where the sound of gunfire drowns out any lullaby, and safety is an illusion. Necessities like food, clean water, and healthcare are scarce – constant reminders of a world that has already failed them. Yet, there is hope still that the next child will inherit a Sudan where dreams of a better future are not just possible but within reach.



¹ World Food Programme (2024) 'Sudan is facing an unprecedented hunger catastrophe' Institute of Development Studies (2024) 'A new era for social protection?'

³ Cluver, L. D., Orkin, F. M., Campeau, L., Toska, E., Webb, D., Carlqvist, A., & Sherr, L. (2019). Improving lives by accelerating progress towards the UN Sustainable Development Goals for adolescents living with HIV: a prospective cohort study. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 3(4), 245-254.

⁴ CaLP Network (2024) 'The Humanitarian Development Nexus'

⁵ Burchi, F., Loewe, M., Malerba, D., & Leininger, J. (2022). Disentangling the relationship between social protection and social cohesion: Introduction to the special issue. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 34(3), 1195.

⁶ Lowe, C., Salomon, H., Hagen-Zanker, J., & Meral, A. G. (2022). Humanitarian assistance and social protection in contexts of forced displacement. ODI Working Paper.

⁷ Tucker, S., Baldonado, N., Ruina, O., Ratmann, O., Flaxman, S., Bryn, L., ... & Hillis, S. (2024). Hope Groups: a protocol for a cluster randomized controlled trial of psychosocial, mental health, and parenting support groups for Ukrainian caregivers during war and conflict. *Trials*, 25(1), 486.

⁸ Frasco, E., Sherr, L., & Burgess, R. A. (2024). Reconstructing theory in mental health and psychosocial support and peacebuilding: Towards an integrated model for psychosocial peacebuilding. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 34(4), e2848.

⁹ Ibrahim, M., Abdelmagid, N., AbuKoura, R., Khogali, A., Osama, T., Ahmed, A., ... & Dahab, M. (2023). Finding the fragments: community-based epidemic surveillance in Sudan. *Global health research and policy*, 8(1), 20.

¹⁰ Birch, I., Carter, B., & Satti, H. A. (2024). Effective Social Protection in Conflict: Findings from Sudan.