

# **Retrenchment as Policy Failure: Aid Cuts, the Post-UNITAMS Vacuum, and Sudan's Civilian Crisis**

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## Executive Summary

Sudan's war, which began in April 2023, has entered its fourth year at a time when the country faces the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with some 33.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2026, according to OCHA, and there is no coherent humanitarian and political framework in place to match this scale of need. This brief, which is based on practitioner experience, argues that two shifts now define the crisis more than most policy analysis admits: first, humanitarian aid cuts are not only reducing assistance but narrowing the response itself, forcing agencies into triage while pushing more of the burden onto underfunded and underprotected Sudanese community networks; second, the termination of UNITAMS has deepened an already fragmented diplomatic landscape by removing the main multilateral structures that linked political engagement, peacebuilding, and wider humanitarian coordination. The reality in Sudan is that civilians are not being affected only by the war, but by international retrenchment. This policy brief calls for a more realistic and politically informed response built around three priorities: protect and directly finance local response systems, rebuild a credible but lighter political-contact architecture that can support humanitarian access and civilian protection without waiting for a grand national settlement, and move from conference pledges to disbursements and accountable burden-sharing for Sudan and refugee-hosting neighbors.

## Introduction: Why Sudan requires a different policy conversation now

The April 15, 2023, Sudan civil war is now in its fourth year. The Sudan crisis has evolved from a regional problem into the world's largest displacement crisis, with humanitarian needs rising daily well beyond international response capacity.<sup>1</sup>

According to OCHA's 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, more than 33.7 million people in Sudan require humanitarian assistance.<sup>2</sup> This is the largest figure globally and represents an increase of 3.3 million from the previous year.<sup>3</sup>

The current civil war in Sudan is a result of the failed political transition following the removal of long-serving president Omar al-Bashir in 2019. Given the military's role in removing al-Bashir, it became a central part of a power-sharing agreement with civilians, supported by the international community and institutional partners such as UNITAMS. Unfortunately, disagreements and political tensions,

along with the October 2021 military takeover, weakened the transition process as SAF and RSF cemented their authority as the government of Sudan. However, disagreement between the RSF and the SAF led to the outbreak of war in April 2023, further accelerating the breakdown of state institutions and creating the world's largest humanitarian crisis, while international cooperation and diplomatic coherence were fragmented.<sup>4</sup>

This brief does not attempt to analyze the origins of the war in Sudan or the actors involved but rather focuses on two major areas affecting the population, namely the impact of humanitarian aid cuts and the consequences of the termination of UNITAMS and the broader weakening of sustained multilateral political engagement in Sudan.

Based on field experience and conversations with practitioners on the ground, these two areas are reshaping civilians' experiences during the war. This brief asks a different question from much of the existing analysis: what has international retrenchment done to

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<sup>1</sup> OCHA. Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026. Retrieved from:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-summary>

<sup>2</sup> OCHA. Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026. Retrieved from:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-summary>

<sup>3</sup> ECHO. Sudan – Release of the 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) (UNOCHA) (ECHO Daily Flash of 2 March 2026). Retrieved from:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-release-2026-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-hnrp-unocha-echo-daily-flash-2-march-2026>

<sup>4</sup> Perthes, V. (2024). Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices. German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP Research Paper No. 14). Available at: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP14/>; Voice of America (VOA). (2023). Timeline: Sudan Unrest Post-2021 Coup. Available at:

<https://www.voaafrica.com/a/timeline-sudan-unrest-post-2021/7051889.html>

civilians, humanitarian access, and the prospects for a viable political process in Sudan?

The just-concluded Berlin Conference resulted in pledges between 1.3 and 1.5 billion Euros for Sudan.<sup>5</sup> These figures vary by source and currency conversion, with some outlets reporting 1.8 billion.<sup>6</sup>

As in previous Sudan conferences in Paris 2024 and London 2025, it is clear that funding commitments should never substitute for sustained political and diplomatic leverage. Humanitarian agencies, including UN entities, continue to report major shortfalls in humanitarian assistance for Sudan despite the many pledges for the past three years.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, the UN Security Council's termination of UNITAMS in December 2023, in the middle of the war, worsened an already fragmented diplomatic landscape in Sudan.<sup>8</sup> Since its closure, Sudan has been managed through disjointed, less coordinated initiatives, none of which have resulted in a meaningful solution to the conflict.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Townsend. More than £1bn pledged for Sudan as humanitarian crisis deepens. Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/apr/15/more-than-1bn-pledged-for-sudan-as-humanitarian-crisis-deepens>; Al Jazeera. Countries pledge \$1.5bn for Sudan crisis as war enters fourth year. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/15/countries-pledge-1-5bn-for-sudan-crisis-as-war-enters-fourth-year>

<sup>6</sup> Reuters. Countries pledge nearly \$1.8 billion to ease Sudan hunger crisis. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/germany-provide-further-236-million-aid-sudan-this-year-2026-04-15/>

In this brief, we will examine the effects of the above-mentioned international retrenchment on civilians and humanitarian access in Sudan, and whether there are any prospects for a political process in the short or long term.

## 1. Humanitarian need is rising while response capacity shrinks in the fourth year of the war

The Sudan crisis is still deepening as the war enters its fourth year with no clear diplomatic or political solution in sight.

The war is now considered the largest displacement crisis in the world. The UN World Food Programme put the total number of those displaced at 11.5 million.<sup>9</sup>

Humanitarian agencies are forced to work within a system of increased needs and limited resources to meet the needs of populations. The Sudan crisis

<sup>7</sup> Reuters. Children at 'breaking point' in Darfur as they face extreme hunger and violence, UN says. Retrieved from:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/children-breaking-point-darfur-they-face-extreme-hunger-violence-un-says-2026-04-28/>

<sup>8</sup> UNITAMS. Security Council terminates mandate of UNITAMS, adopting Resolution 2715 (2023). Retrieved from:

<https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/news/security-council-terminates-mandate-unitams-adopting-resolution-2715-2023>

<sup>9</sup> WFP. Sudan. Retrieved from:

<https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/sudan>

currently requires \$2.9 billion,<sup>10</sup> and as of this brief, only 17 percent has been funded.<sup>11</sup> Though the Berlin Conference has generated new pledges for Sudan, the situation remains dire, as available resources do not meet the growing humanitarian needs on the ground.<sup>12</sup>

Realistically, the funding shortfalls are not just a budgeting problem; they are changing the whole landscape of humanitarian assistance in Sudan. These shortfalls are forcing humanitarian agencies to decide who qualifies to receive assistance and who does not. The World Food Programme says it needs \$610 million to sustain its operations from March to August 2026 only. Currently, these resources are not available.<sup>13</sup>

UNHCR reports that the 2026 regional refugee response appeal for people displaced by the Sudan crisis is urgently underfunded, forcing cuts to essential protection and basic services and limiting UNHCR's ability to register and

assist new arrivals. Severe shortfalls have already led UNHCR to close two of its three registration centers and reduce available funding per refugee to a fraction of previous levels, undermining access to shelter, health care, and protection services for the most vulnerable.<sup>14</sup> This has direct consequences for child protection, health, nutrition, education, and WASH services in Sudan.<sup>15</sup>

Humanitarian access has also been identified as a serious problem affecting the effectiveness of humanitarian agencies in Sudan. Aid agencies have reported challenges transporting lifesaving supplies from neighboring countries into Sudan. Due to route disruptions, fuel costs, insurance premiums, and broader logistical pressures, the cost of transporting goods into Sudan has doubled, diverting more resources from direct program costs to logistics.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> OCHA. Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-summary>

<sup>11</sup> United Nations. UN Geneva Press Briefing - 14 April 2026. Retrieved from: <https://www.unognewsroom.org/story/en/3086/un-geneva-press-briefing-14-april-2026/9246>

<sup>12</sup> United Nations. UN Geneva Press Briefing - 14 April 2026. Retrieved from: <https://www.unognewsroom.org/story/en/3086/un-geneva-press-briefing-14-april-2026/9246>

<sup>13</sup> Abubakar Garelnabei and Philippe Kropf. Sudan's war three years on: shattered dreams, soaring hunger, shrinking aid. Retrieved from: <https://www.wfp.org/stories/sudans-war-three-years-shattered-dreams-soaring-hunger-shrinking-aid>

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR. Sudan Situation: UNHCR Monthly External Update #115 - January 2026. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-situation-unhcr-monthly-external-update-115-january-2026>

<sup>15</sup> Reuters. Children at 'breaking point' in Darfur as they face extreme hunger and violence, UN says. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/children-breaking-point-darfur-they-face-extreme-hunger-violence-un-says-2026-04-28>

<sup>16</sup> Reuters. Iran crisis hampering aid to refugees as supply chain costs soar, UN warns. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-crisis-hampering-aid-refugees-supply-chain-costs-soar-un-warns-2026-05-01/>

## 2. The impact of humanitarian aid cuts on communities

The impact of humanitarian shortfalls in Sudan goes beyond financial to reshaping how humanitarian assistance is delivered, who is prioritized, where funds should go, and what should not be prioritized. Data from OECD show that in 2025, official development assistance fell sharply, with humanitarian assistance being the most affected among DAC donors.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.1 From underfunding to strategic contraction

Since the start of the war, aid cuts have continued even as humanitarian needs have grown. Cuts to humanitarian assistance by major agencies have forced aid agencies to narrow their interventions. As a result, humanitarian agencies are now doing only the bare minimum, leaving many people without aid.<sup>18</sup>

The funding shortfalls also mean prioritizing which sectors to fund. Life-saving services like food, nutrition, water, and healthcare are prioritized over all other services. The other services do not disappear from the communities;

they just don't get on the list.<sup>19</sup> UNICEF has warned that “low appeal coverage is already affecting child protection, health, nutrition, education, and WASH services in Sudan.”<sup>20</sup>

Field observations across Sudan show that areas such as local peacebuilding, protection, education, livelihoods, and community recovery are postponed or unfunded in favor of emergency needs. Though community peacebuilding and livelihoods are imperative for stability, access negotiation, and post-conflict reconstruction, they are often treated as secondary, even though they are the very systems that help communities absorb shocks and prevent deeper social breakdown.

### 2.2 The burden shifts to local actors

When the international community fails to meet its obligations, the burden falls on local communities, who are already struggling to survive. In Sudan, community structures such as Emergency Response Kitchens (ERKs), community volunteers, and other civil society groups have stepped in to fill the gap. Because these local responders are within communities, they play a crucial

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<sup>17</sup> OECD. A Historic Decline in Foreign Aid: Preliminary 2025 ODA Data. 9 April 2026. Retrieved from: <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/insights/data-explainers/2026/04/a-historic-decline-in-foreign-aid-preliminary-2025-oda-data.html>

<sup>18</sup> Abubakar Garelnabei and Philippe Kropf. Sudan's war three years on: shattered dreams, soaring hunger, shrinking aid. Retrieved from:

<https://www.wfp.org/stories/sudans-war-three-years-shattered-dreams-soaring-hunger-shrinking-aid>

<sup>19</sup> Reuters. Children at 'breaking point' in Darfur as they face extreme hunger and violence, UN says. Retrieved from:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/children-breaking-point-darfur-they-face-extreme-hunger-violence-un-says-2026-04-28>

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF Sudan Humanitarian Situation Report.

role in negotiating access, identifying the most at-risk groups, and remain a lifeline for communities as formal international aid systems fail.

Though local responders are at the forefront of emergency response in Sudan, they remain the least protected, even though they operate closest to insecurity. Despite being at the forefront of humanitarian response, these groups are often overlooked by mainstream donors, who still prioritize larger agencies and formal institutions.

This is a paradox not unique to Sudan but to many other conflict contexts on the continent, where communities are at the forefront of emergency response while funding, visibility, and institutional protection are contracted elsewhere.

These issues matter greatly on the ground and, in some cases, become a matter of life and death. Local actors are a central pillar of emergency response, not only delivering humanitarian assistance but also managing local interventions that support community resilience and recovery. Yet they often do this with limited resources, without duty of care, and are hardly considered central to emergency response planning. In Sudan, that imbalance is dangerous

and limits effective response to communities.

### **2.3 Aid cuts reshape conflict dynamics**

As communities lack the resources to meet their daily needs, desperation sets in, and people engage in activities that threaten community peace and stability, further exacerbating the already fragile context. Aid shortfalls are not neutral, as they can exacerbate local tensions by intensifying competition over limited resources.<sup>21</sup>

The situation is even more dire in borderlands and refugee camps, where tensions often arise between host communities and the displaced population. In Eastern Chad, for example, “growing pressure on water, food, and services has sharpened tensions in an area already under strain from the refugee influx.”<sup>22</sup>

### **2.4 Cross-border implications**

As resources for humanitarian assistance in Sudan dwindle, many people are forced to leave the country for neighboring countries, placing

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<sup>21</sup> Reuters. Over 1 million Sudanese refugees in Chad face drastic aid cuts, UN says. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/over-1-million-sudanese-refugees-chad-face-drastic-aid-cuts-un-says-2026-04-09/>

<sup>22</sup> Reuters. Over 1 million Sudanese refugees in Chad face drastic aid cuts, UN says. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/over-1-million-sudanese-refugees-chad-face-drastic-aid-cuts-un-says-2026-04-09/>

increasing pressure on those countries' limited resources.

This is more evident in Chad than in any of Sudan's neighbors. It has been reported that more than 1.3 million displaced Sudanese refugees in Chad are facing malnutrition, water, and shelter challenges because of funding shortfalls of \$428 million.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, only four in ten Sudanese refugees are receiving the assistance they need to survive, and in some parts of Eastern Chad, refugees are receiving less than the required amount of water for daily survival.<sup>24</sup>

The continued influx of refugees into Chad is not just a humanitarian disaster but has also become a stability issue for a country grappling with its own internal and regional security concerns in the Sahel. Conflicts over natural resources, including water, have been reported in Eastern Chad, worsening host community perceptions and acceptance of refugees.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. After UNITAMS: the consequences of a thinner UN political presence in Sudan

The United Nations Security Council terminated UNITAMS in December 2023, and by the end of February 2024<sup>26</sup> the mission had completed its withdrawal from Sudan, leaving behind a people who desperately needed its presence.

UNITAMS was the only UN political platform engaging with the transitional government and process in Sudan, supporting peacebuilding initiatives, and connecting diplomacy to political transition and the protection of civilians.

UNITAMS was mandated to support "Sudan's political transition, assistance to peace processes and peacebuilding, mobilizing economic and development assistance, and support on human rights, rule of law, and civilian protection".<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> UNHCR. Funding shortfalls put lifelines at risk for Sudanese refugees in Chad. Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/press-releases/funding-shortfalls-put-lifelines-risk-sudanese-refugees-chad>

<sup>24</sup> Reuters. Over 1 million Sudanese refugees in Chad face drastic aid cuts, UN says. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/over-1-million-sudanese-refugees-chad-face-drastic-aid-cuts-un-says-2026-04-09/>

<sup>25</sup> AP News. Clashes over water access kill at least 42 people in Chad. Retrieved from: <https://apnews.com/article/chad-water-clashes-42-killed-efe6bb5ce6512ae0a8c40e534bf68e67>

<sup>26</sup> UN Security Council. Security Council Terminates Mandate of UN Transition Mission in Sudan, Adopting Resolution 2715 (2023) in Vote of 14 in Favour to 1 Abstention. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/security-council-terminates-mandate-un-transition-mission-sudan-adopting-resolution-2715-2023-vote-14-favour-1-abstention>

<sup>27</sup> UNITAMS. Retrieved from: <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/unitams-mandate>; UN. UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) and African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID) - Security Council Open VTC. Retrieved from: <https://media.un.org/avlibrary/en/asset/d254/d25473>

### 3.1 What UNITAMS was meant to do

UNITAMS was established in 2020 with an initial 12-month timeframe to support Sudan's transition to democratic governance. This period was critical for Sudan after the ousting of long-serving president Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir in 2019. UNITAMS was established to support the transition to a civilian-led political process. This political role was central to its mission.<sup>28</sup>

The mandate of UNITAMS was broader than political, as it had a strong peacebuilding component. The mission was tasked with supporting and implementing peacebuilding commitments in Sudan. This was to ensure that the transitional process was inclusive and no groups were left behind because of their political affiliations or regions of origin.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, UNITAMS had a coordination function, bringing together Sudanese political actors, civil society groups, donors, regional organizations, and the wider UN system. This was meant to facilitate alignment. Though the institution encountered challenges in

fulfilling this role, it was important to its work in Sudan.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.2 What was lost when UNITAMS ended

The UNSC's termination of UNITAMS was the result of operational and political challenges caused by the war. The war significantly shrank the political space and UNITAMS's ability to effectively implement its mandate. Sudanese authorities often criticized UNITAMS's mandate and accused the entity of political interference, a criticism that intensified when the war began. This is why it came as no surprise that Sudan, under SAF leadership, formally requested the termination of UNITAMS on the grounds that the institution had failed to meet its mandate and had become obsolete in light of the new political realities. In response to Sudan's demand, the UN Security Council, under resolution 2715 of 2023, terminated UNITAMS's mission and began its withdrawal from Sudan.<sup>31</sup>

UNITAMS was established with the hope that the institution would ensure a smooth transition in Sudan.

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<sup>28</sup> UNITAMS. Retrieved from: <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/unitams-mandate>

<sup>29</sup> United Nations. UNITAMS Peacebuilding. Retrieved from: <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/unitams-peacebuilding>

<sup>30</sup> United Nations. SRSG statement on mediation efforts. Retrieved from: <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/news/srsg-statement-mediation-efforts>

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Security Council. (2023). Security Council Terminates Mandate of UN Transition Mission in Sudan, Adopting Resolution 2715 (2023). <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15532.doc.htm>; UNITAMS official statement and mandate information United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS). UNITAMS Mandate. <https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/unitams-mandate>

Unfortunately, it faced opposition from Sudanese authorities, which created a hostile political environment, making it hard for UNITAMS to achieve its mandate. As such, it was not able to prevent the Sudan war and had little leverage over both the military and the RSF. That said, our argument here is not to highlight UNITAMS's failures but to note that its closure left a real gap in Sudan.<sup>32</sup>

The closure of UNITAMS left no dedicated UN political platform to ensure sustained engagement with Sudanese authorities. The UN later had the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy, but this is not the same as a dedicated political entity that worked with both the government and civil society and coordinated the work of all other actors.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, the UN lost its ability to maintain international diplomatic coherence in Sudan. Though UNITAMS did not achieve unity of ideas among member states regarding Sudan and its future, it did provide a framework for diplomacy and political analysis. The closure of the mission led to further fragmented diplomatic engagement in

Sudan, further widening divisions among member states over the best way forward.<sup>34</sup>

Thirdly, UNITAMS provided an entry point for Sudanese civil society groups that were not part of either the SAF or the RSF to share their political views and agendas for the country.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.3 The fragmentation problem

There already existed fragmentation in Sudan's diplomacy before UNITAMS' departure. Multiple mediation efforts and political initiatives led by different actors, such as the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)<sup>36</sup>, and the Jeddah talks, which were led by Saudi Arabia and the United States, along with many other parallel efforts by different states, had different priorities and lacked any sort of coordination. While all these initiatives are important and are working toward ending the war in Sudan, there is no unified framework to bring them together. As a result, they create overlapping processes and competing approaches that are not suited to addressing the current crisis. Even

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<sup>32</sup> Volker Perthes. Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices. Retrieved from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP14/>

<sup>33</sup> Volker Perthes. Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices. Retrieved from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP14/>

<sup>34</sup> ISPI. Mediation Efforts on Sudan: Beware the Pitfalls of Diplomatic Coordination. Retrieved from: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/mediation-efforts-on-sudan-beware-the-pitfalls-of-diplomatic-coordination-205952>

<sup>35</sup> United Nations. SRSF statement on mediation efforts. Retrieved from:

<https://unitams.unmissions.org/en/news/srsg-statement-mediation-efforts>

<sup>36</sup> IGAD. (2025). IGAD Strengthens Coordination Among Special Envoys to Advance Sudan Peace Process. Available at: <https://igad.int/igad-strengthens-coordination-among-special-envoys-to-advance-sudan-peace-process/>

though UNITAMS did not eliminate these divisions among actors, it did provide a platform for coordination and dialogue among actors and initiatives.<sup>37</sup>

But its departure further worsened the situation, as many countries with an interest in Sudan started different initiatives independent of each other. This explains why, despite several mediation efforts and overlapping initiatives, none have resulted in any substantial gains. This is because no single process has sufficient credibility or weight to be enforced on the ground.<sup>38</sup>

The split in mediation efforts, stemming from diplomatic fragmentation, has given the warring parties room to disengage without incurring any political cost. It has also emerged that competition among mediators has allowed both RSF and SAF to avoid committing to ending the war, and in some instances, they have blatantly rejected the terms and walked out of talks without consequences.<sup>39</sup>

Unfortunately for Sudan, despite the return of UN agencies to Darfur and other RSF-controlled areas, there is currently no credible political umbrella to bring together the various actors

working on peacebuilding, humanitarian, protection, and ceasefire efforts. There is a growing appetite for humanitarian diplomacy among various actors, including INGOs, to allow access to those most affected by the war; however, these efforts are detached from any meaningful political process, which weakens both processes.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.4 Why this matters for civilians

Currently in Sudan, humanitarian agencies can negotiate access, move lifesaving supplies, and advocate with the international community, but they are not equipped or mandated to resolve political blockages. As such, their ability to protect civilians when attacked by armed groups is also limited.

In reality, the UN's limited presence in certain parts of the country has made access negotiations even more difficult, as it also weakens the diplomatic pressure that should be exerted on the conflict actors to facilitate humanitarian engagement. It also undermines protection of civilians and local ceasefire efforts, as there is no strong framework

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<sup>37</sup> World Peace Foundation. (2024). Sudan: The Architecture of Mediation. Available at: <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/blog/sudan-the-architecture-of-mediation/>

<sup>38</sup> Maram Mahdi and Gelila Enbaye. Fostering Coordination in Sudan's Mediation Processes. Retrieved from: <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/pages/1759923416834-adhoc-PB.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> ISPI. Mediation Efforts on Sudan: Beware the Pitfalls of Diplomatic Coordination. Retrieved from: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/mediation-efforts-on-sudan-beware-the-pitfalls-of-diplomatic-coordination-205952>

<sup>40</sup> ISPI. Mediation Efforts on Sudan: Beware the Pitfalls of Diplomatic Coordination. Retrieved from: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/mediation-efforts-on-sudan-beware-the-pitfalls-of-diplomatic-coordination-205952>

that brings together all the initiatives into a broader political process.<sup>41</sup>

As noted above, Sudan's diplomatic fragmentation was not caused by the termination of UNITAMS, but the absence of a coordinated UN presence has deepened it. This has greatly affected civilians, as the gap between political action and humanitarian needs in Sudan is widening.

## 4. Prospects and ways ahead: what is possible?

The war enters its fourth year with no clear diplomatic and political plan in place. In the short term, it will be important to ensure that all interventions do not focus solely on the national level but also consider local dynamics.

### 4.1 Protect and finance local response systems

To support Sudan's recovery, efforts must be directed toward supporting local systems that still work. This should include strengthening local governance mechanisms to support economic and political recovery. All initiatives must put localization at the center, also

recognizing the challenges that local responders continue to face, including arbitrary arrests and detention.<sup>42</sup>

For example, Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms and other mutual aid networks are indispensable to the humanitarian response landscape. Their proximity to communities and understanding of the context have enabled them to negotiate access to areas that many agencies cannot reach. Despite their efforts, they still receive very limited funding from the pooled funds for Sudan. For example, in 2024, only 1 percent of the pooled fund for Sudan was allocated to local organizations.<sup>43</sup>

Given the centrality of local responders, international response should ensure that resources are allocated to them by eliminating intermediaries and creating shorter, faster grant windows that can be easily adapted to changing dynamics on the ground. This should also go hand in hand with the provision of duty of care and protection for local responders. Without this, localization will only remain a slogan as formal agencies continue to hold the power, while the risk is transferred to local responders.

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<sup>41</sup> Volker Perthes. Sudan's Transition to War and the Limits of the UN's Good Offices. Retrieved from: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2024RP14/>

<sup>42</sup> Humanitarian Action. Global Humanitarian Overview 2026. Retrieved from: <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2026/article/sudan-4>

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Noe. Accelerating Localization: A Roadmap for The Sudan Humanitarian Fund. Retrieved from: <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/accelerating-localization-a-roadmap-for-the-sudan-humanitarian-fund/>

## **4.2 Rebuild a credible political-contact architecture without waiting for a grand peace process**

As the war enters its fourth year, what is needed is a peace framework that can easily be implemented, reduces fragmentation, and supports a practical solution to end hostilities and create space for dialogue.

The mediation process should not be seen as linear but as a layered engagement, not a winner-takes-all. At the moment, a fully inclusive national peace process is not viable. This does not mean there should be political stagnation. There is still room for diplomatic engagement focused on humanitarian access, the protection of civilians, and cross-border operations to ensure that aid reaches those most in need. This will help reduce harm to both civilians and responders in the short term while a political solution is sought.

This will require stronger cooperation among regional bodies such as the African Union<sup>44</sup> and IGAD, key state actors, and UN agencies. Given that we have identified diplomatic fragmentation above as a major challenge to addressing the conflict in Sudan, an architecture that brings these stakeholders together and unifies the initiatives under one umbrella might

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<sup>44</sup> Hubert Kinkoh. The AU summit is an opportunity for decisive action to end the war in Sudan. Retrieved from: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/02/au-summit-opportunity-decisive-action-end-war-sudan>

enable the conflict actors to be held to account if they fail to respect the terms of an agreement. A more coherent structure, even if limited in scope, would make it easier to negotiate humanitarian access and the protection of civilians.

From a practitioner's perspective, international policies get it wrong by often concentrating efforts at the Track One level, while local actors in Tracks Two and Three and their ability to reduce communal violence and restore peace at the local level are underestimated. In the current context, any political process that does not ensure the protection of civilians and enable humanitarian access in the short term will not build credibility for long-term political engagement.

## **4.3 Move from pledging moments to accountable burden-sharing**

Since the start of the war, various conferences have been organized to mobilize resources to support Sudan and to seek a solution to the conflict. At the recently concluded Berlin Conference, states and different institutions made pledges for Sudan.<sup>45</sup> While this is important, these pledges will only bring meaningful change on the ground if they are disbursed and if local

<sup>45</sup> Reuters. Countries pledge nearly \$1.8 billion to ease Sudan hunger crisis. Retrieved from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/germany-provide-further-236-million-aid-sudan-this-year-2026-04-15/>

responders receive the resources they need to continue their work.

Sudan is at a juncture where transparent financial accountability is essential. There is a need to track pledges to ensure that all available resources are used to address critical needs within communities. Underfunded sectors, such as peacebuilding and recovery, should receive resources rather than leftovers from food assistance. This is because the needs in Sudan span multiple sectors, including protection of civilians, community stability, and livelihoods.<sup>46</sup>

Given that neighboring countries like Chad and South Sudan also bear the burden of hosting large numbers of refugees, there is a need to reflect on burden-sharing so that these countries, already grappling with their own internal challenges, can be supported. Funding for host countries should be treated as part of the Sudan response.<sup>47</sup>

The way forward is not choosing between humanitarian assistance and political governance but rather blending the two. Sudan needs a political architecture that will support humanitarian access and the protection of civilians.

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<sup>46</sup> SIDA. Humanitarian Crisis Analysis 2026. Retrieved from: [https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2026/04/22144120/Sudan-HCA-2026\\_March-2026-Short.pdf](https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2026/04/22144120/Sudan-HCA-2026_March-2026-Short.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Reuters. Over 1 million Sudanese refugees in Chad face drastic aid cuts, UN says: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/over-1-million-sudanese-refugees-chad-face-drastic-aid-cuts-un-says-2026-04-09/>

## 5. Policy Recommendations

### 1. For Brussels

- a. The EU should ring-fence Sudan funding from broader ODA cuts and maintain predictable humanitarian support, given record aid declines and Sudan's exceptional scale of need.
- b. The EU should expand direct, flexible support to Sudanese civil society and local responders through pooled funds, fast, small-grant windows, and lighter compliance requirements, while covering protection and duty-of-care costs.
- c. The EU should use its diplomatic and financial weight to push the AU, UN, IGAD, and neighboring states toward a coordinated humanitarian-access agenda focused on corridors, obstruction, and civilian protection.

### 2. For New York

- a. Support a lighter but credible UN engagement structure that links political dialogue, humanitarian diplomacy, civilian protection, and regional mediation.
- b. The Security Council and Secretary-General reporting should give greater weight to attacks on civilians, blocked aid, and related violations, including where obstruction may amount to a war crime.
- c. Address displacement and pressure on host countries, especially Chad and South Sudan, as core elements of the Sudan crisis rather than as separate humanitarian burdens.

### 3. For Geneva

- a. Geneva should press pooled funds, UN agencies, and donors to expand direct funding to Sudanese responders and pair it with protection, duty of care, and accountability safeguards.

#### **Cross-cutting recommendation**

Sudan should not be approached as a short-term relief emergency alone; it requires a more coordinated response that links humanitarian action, protection, and political engagement.

## 6. Conclusion

What has remained constant in the past three years of the war is the suffering of civilians and the decline of the international system, which is meant to protect them. OCHA's 2026 predictions show that some 33.7 million people will need humanitarian assistance in Sudan, the highest figure globally. Yet the funding for Sudan does not meet half of the needs.

Funding cuts and the closure of UNITAMS are not just side issues in Sudan; they are critical to understanding the suffering of civilians and why efforts to address the crisis remain disjointed. Despite pledges from various international conferences on Sudan, diplomacy remains fragmented, and the burden has been left to local response groups, who lack the resources or protection needed to effectively deliver to communities.

Moving from rhetoric to practice will mean international engagement that protects the local systems that continue to sustain and keep people alive despite the war. Peacebuilding programs must be supported so they can create safe, conducive environments in communities, allowing people to return from IDP and refugee camps and begin rebuilding their lives.

Sudan needs programs that will enable communities to recover and support the rebuilding of the country. Without a proper coordinated humanitarian and political framework, this will not be possible, and Sudan will become an example of international withdrawal in the face of one of the worst cases of civilian suffering since the Rwanda Genocide.

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