



# What Sudanese Crisis Response Leaders Want the International Humanitarian System to Know

CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN  
LEADERSHIP POLICY BRIEF

This brief draws on insights from 20 local leaders providing crisis response through Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) — <sup>1</sup>مراكز الاستجابة الطارئة — civil society organisations and women’s associations across Sudan. Participants represent diverse regions including Darfur in the west, Greater Khartoum and Gezira in central Sudan, eastern states such as Kassala and Al-Qadarif, and the Kordofan and Nuba Mountains areas in the south-central region. Findings are based on semi-structured interviews conducted by the Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) in Arabic between December 2024 and December 2025, with transcripts translated into English for analysis. This brief responds to participants’ requests to amplify their voices and influence international humanitarian policy and practice. It is directed at international donors and humanitarian policy and decision-makers, identified by participants as key audiences to hear their challenges, priorities, and recommendations.

## Humanitarian needs are urgent, unmet and forgotten

Sudan is facing one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world (Global Humanitarian Overview).<sup>2</sup> Yet it remains significantly underfunded and underrepresented in global media. Local responders experience this asymmetry acutely, particularly following significant contractions in international humanitarian financing in 2025. One ERR volunteer described it as “clear discrimination when one crisis

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receives more attention and support than another — it means some people’s lives matter more than others,” while another observed, “In the end, we are all human, facing the same violations, and we deserve equal attention” (female ERR volunteer, 40; female, ERR volunteer, 25). As global humanitarian funding retracts further, funding decisions shaped by geopolitical priorities rather than assessed humanitarian need will produce severe consequences on the ground.

## Current reliance on local-level mutual aid is not sustainable

The humanitarian response in Sudan has been largely sustained by diaspora communities and mutual aid structures, driven by the affected communities themselves. Local responders and members of the diaspora describe a deeply felt sense of collective solidarity and responsibility, often expressed through *nafeer* (a traditional Sudanese community mutual aid practice of rising to support one another in times of crises).

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Volunteers are delivering assistance at great personal risk, which “put them in risk of killing, torture and other horrendous stuff” (female, volunteer, 28). Without recognition as official humanitarians, the humanitarian system is failing in its duty of care, leaving these volunteers without the protections of international law or the security frameworks of humanitarian organisations. Moreover, these volunteers are not

compensated, exhausting their own resources to provide for themselves and their families.

### **Risk management is predominantly directed upwards**

The humanitarian response system has largely developed organically, with ERRs and associated mutual aid networks widely divergent in how and where they operate. The imposed structuring of this system has primarily been for the benefit of the international humanitarian system and to accommodate fiduciary risk procedures. While some international organisations directly support local responders, many require ERRs to be registered with the national authorities, which may increase risks for responders and potentially reduce credibility and trust with communities. This has resulted in the engagement of intermediaries to provide a risk management function, and while some intermediaries support and build the capacity of these community groups, they also absorb funds that could have otherwise gone directly to affected communities or to operational costs for local responders, including compensation for volunteers.

### **International relief does not always align with prioritised needs**

Local responders report a persistent mismatch between humanitarian needs and the assistance supplied by the international humanitarian system. Because these volunteers are embedded within their communities, they have a detailed and up-to-date understanding of needs and priorities, which the humanitarian system could better utilise. Local leaders note a time lag between needs assessment, project planning, and implementation, and highlight that some externally prioritised interventions do not necessarily align with immediate local needs. As one ERR volunteer explained, when “our priority is saving lives first, it is problematic when donors dictate what we should focus on” (female, 40). Local actors call for more equitable partnerships, emphasising the importance of being “involved in designing, planning and executing projects and not be treated as people to implement only” (male, ERR volunteer, 30).

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### **Bureaucracy is hindering adaptive and flexible response efforts**

A key strength of ERRs is their embeddedness within communities, enabling them to “move faster and

more effectively on the ground than international organisations” (male, ERR volunteer, 34). However, current bureaucratic procedures within the humanitarian system are struggling to accommodate the evolving nature of the Sudanese crisis. Fiduciary risk management and highly earmarked funding are causing delays and less appropriate assistance. Local leaders report that international funding “is not flexible enough to give local entities the freedom to make independent decisions on how to use it” (male, ERR and youth group volunteer, 30), and that “funding procedures are extremely, extremely, extremely complicated and take an excessively long time,” with each donor providing different procedures and templates for program design and reporting (male, NGO personnel). Some international organisations are adapting, working directly with local groups and accepting that “since our operations are fast-paced, donors need to be flexible in their requirements. We submit necessary reports in a manner suited to each area” (female, ERR volunteer, 25).

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### **Beyond the crisis: Local leadership in building back better**

While the crisis response has nearly exhausted the resilience, bravery and resources of the Sudanese people, volunteers continue to provide assistance and plan for the future. With legitimacy and trust established within their communities through the crisis response, emergency rooms are well positioned to lead locally grounded recovery and reconstruction efforts. Many are already reporting plans focused on peacebuilding and reconstruction as well as community development projects including agriculture, livelihood and social cohesion. Such projects will surely greatly benefit from the support and capacities of international organisations and donors, if delivered through joint leadership and decision-making. As one local leader reflects, “We believe that emergency rooms have a major role to play after the war – in rebuilding war-affected communities. They are, of course, an integral part of civil society and its role in reconstruction and service development (male, ERR volunteer, 38).

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are grounded in the perspectives and priorities of Sudanese humanitarian responders, and identify practical steps donors and international organisations can take to better support and strengthen community-led response efforts:<sup>3</sup>

- **Protect and sustain community volunteers:** Establish mechanisms to recognise, protect and fairly compensate volunteers involved in humanitarian assistance delivery, supporting the sustainability and continuity of frontline operations.
- **Enable locally led response through flexible funding agreements:** Recognise and support systems of mutual aid by streamlining compliance requirements and developing framework agreements that enable faster and local prioritisation of aid. These frameworks should prioritise direct funding, acknowledge operational costs and extend beyond emergency response to support joint planning and leadership in recovery, reconstruction and development.
- **Ensure needs-based humanitarian funding:** Prioritise fair and transparent humanitarian funding to and within Sudan according to assessed needs, rather than geopolitical considerations.

These recommendations closely reflect commitments articulated during consultations leading to the World Humanitarian Summit,<sup>4</sup> as well as partially embedded in subsequent reform frameworks including the Grand Bargain,<sup>5</sup> the Grand Bargain Beyond 2023,<sup>6</sup> and the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative.<sup>7</sup> The persistence of these challenges does not reflect a lack of evidence or agreed principles, but a continuing structural misalignment between donor accountability frameworks and genuine power sharing with local actors.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The terms 'Emergency Response Rooms' and 'Emergency Rooms' both refer to *فراوطلا فريغ*, an Arabic word that recognises the internal diversity of these mutual aid practices.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2026). Global Humanitarian Overview 2026: Country Plans Interactive Dashboard. Available at: <https://humanitarianaction.info/document/global-humanitarian-overview-2026/article/gho-country-plans-interactive-dashboard>

<sup>3</sup> These recommendations were foregrounded by local Sudanese humanitarian crisis leaders as immediate and urgent actions for the international humanitarian system. They do not address all requirements for a fair, equitable, effective and efficient locally led crisis response.

<sup>4</sup> See Kelly, M., et al. (2024). "The sound of silence? Listening to localisation at the World Humanitarian Summit." *Disasters* 48(2): e12611.

<sup>5</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (n.d.). The Grand Bargain. Available at: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

<sup>6</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2023). Grand Bargain Beyond 2023: Framework. Available at: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2023-06/Grand%20Bargain%20beyond%202023%20-%20Framework.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative (n.d.). Principles and Good Practice of Humanitarian Donorship. Available at: <https://www.ghdinitiative.org/ghd/gns/principles-good-practice-of-ghd/principles-good-practice-ghd.html>

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