International Development

Prizewinning Dissertation 2025

No.25-LL

Mutual Aid vs. the Aid System in Sudan: The Politics of Humanitarianism and the Reconfiguration of Partnerships in Wartime

Love-Lis Liljestrom

Published: Feb 2026

Department of International Development

London School of Economics and Political Science

Houghton Street

London

WC2A 2AE UK

Tel: +44 (020) 7955 7425/6252

Fax: +44 (020) 7955-6844

Email: d.daley@lse.ac.uk

Website: http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalDevelopment/home.aspx

Abstract

This thesis examines mutual aid and evolving partnership dynamics within Sudan's aid system since the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023. Drawing on secondary literature and 20 interviews with practitioners and volunteers, it explores the foundations underpinning mutual aid groups and their collaboration with aid actors. Using the theoretical lens of civic and vernacular humanitarianism, the thesis highlights mutual aid as both a longstanding and newly adaptive practice at the frontline of crisis response in Sudan. The findings provide initial evidence of how new forms of collaboration between mutual aid groups and the professionalised humanitarian system have developed, the strategies and motivations underpinning them, and the bureaucratic and political barriers embedded in the process. The research further shows that while many collaborations have been driven by operational necessity following the disruption to Sudan's aid architecture and persisting access challenges since the conflict outbreak, they also signal a significant shift in humanitarian partnership dynamics in Sudan.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my mentor, Dr. Myfanwy James, for her guidance on the dissertation and throughout my master's degree, and to Dr. Thomas Kirk for guidance in the dissertation workshop and for reminding me not to succumb to impostor syndrome. Thank you to all the professors at the LSE International Development Department who advised and inspired my work, to my former colleagues for their advice and direction, and, as always, to my friends and family for their encouragement.

I am grateful to the mutual aid group representatives, and to the former and current humanitarian practitioners and volunteers in Sudan, who generously and courageously shared their experiences and perspectives. Thank you for your trust. This report is dedicated to you, and to all frontline responders in one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises today.

Table of Contents

Abbreviations

ERR	Emergency Response Rooms
GCT	Group Cash Transfers
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
LCC	Localisation Coordination Council
MAG	Mutual Aid Group
MA	Mutual Aid
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NNGO	National Non-Governmental Organisation
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SCLR	Survivor and Community-led Responses
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SHF	Sudan Humanitarian Fund
UN	United Nations

1. Introduction

In every crisis, whether natural or human-made, communities are often the first to respond (IFRC, 2013). One form of community-led response gaining increasing attention within humanitarian academia and practice is mutual aid (MA) (Brun & Horst, 2023; L2GP, 2024a). Broadly understood, MA refers to voluntary, reciprocal forms of support, where people facing shared challenges come together on an equal basis to exchange resources, knowledge, and care outside formal systems (Nelson et al., 1998:98). MA re-entered academic conversation following the diverse initiatives seen worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic (Littman et al., 2022). Since then, a growing body of work has examined MA in major crises and conflicts, reflecting not only increased recognition and interest in crisis-oriented MA, but also greater engagement from the humanitarian sector itself, which, through the prioritisation of localisation, increasingly seeks to collaborate with such responses (Vicenz & Hallinan, 2023; L2GP, 2024b).

MA has been a critical crisis response mechanism in Sudan, one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023 (Buchanan-Smith, 2024; OCHA, 2025a). Mutual aid groups (MAGs) have mobilised to assist people affected by displacement, violence and food insecurity, operating at scale throughout the conflict, and reaching areas inaccessible to the aid system in Sudan (Nasir et al., 2023). International relief efforts and professionalised humanitarian responses remain severely constrained by humanitarian access restrictions imposed by warring parties, and underfunding (ACAPS, 2024:3; OCHA, 2023). Although bureaucratic and political barriers predating the current conflict complicate collaboration between the aid system and MAGs (Carter & Satti, 2025:6) emerging evidence indicates efforts to navigate and bypass them (Fundira & Aly, 2023).

The scale and significance of MA in Sudan, and its evolving relationship with the aid system in a politically sensitive and operationally constrained environment, form the entry point for this research. Situated within literature and theory on MA, civic and vernacular humanitarianism, and localisation in conflict contexts, this study explores *how* and *why* collaborations between MAGs and the aid system have emerged in Sudan. Taking on a qualitative research approach, it combines primary data from 20 interviews and secondary data interpreted through thematic analysis to provide an in-depth case study. The findings contribute empirical evidence and new theoretical insights on the underpinnings of MA in Sudan and the dynamics of collaboration with the aid system since the outbreak of conflict in 2023.

1.1 Purpose and Research Question

This study aims to examine how mutual aid groups and national and international aid actors in Sudan collaborate in crisis response since the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023. It is interested in *how* and *why* such partnerships form despite institutional and political barriers in highly constrained operational contexts, and the strategies actors employ to navigate them. The research also seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the characteristics and foundations of mutual aid, using Sudan as a case study.

Research Question: *How* and *why* are mutual aid groups and aid actors in Sudan collaborating, or not, in crisis response following the April 2023 armed conflict?

1.2 Outline

The thesis first reviews literature on MA and humanitarian partnerships in conflict settings, conceptualising MA and anchoring the analysis in theory on civic and vernacular humanitarianism. The subsequent section outlines the qualitative research design, including a discussion on ethical considerations, researcher positionality and limitations. This is followed by a brief overview of the humanitarian context in Sudan, before presenting the findings and discussion. The thesis concludes with a synthesis of key findings and avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

The literature review is divided into two parts. The first reviews relevant literature on MA and develops a conceptualisation for this study. The second situates MA within the wider humanitarian ecosystem, contrasting it with the professionalised aid system through the lenses of civic and vernacular humanitarianism, and engages with debates on aid localisation in conflict settings.

2.1 Mutual Aid

Mutual aid refers to the forms of collective and reciprocal care formed by communities to respond to each other's needs outside of formal systems (Spade, 2020a). It can materialise in supporting basic needs, including food, (Giles, 2021; Gordon, 2024) shelter, (Caron, 2024) transportation, (Ford & Honan, 2019) medical aid, (Call et al., 2025) or other types of care including psychosocial support and healing (Seebohm et al., 2013). Far from a fixed concept,

MA has myriad lineages within academia, reflecting its diverse expressions and meanings in different contexts. Early usage of the term includes Kropotkin's anarchist philosophy '*Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*' (Kropotkin, 1902; Kinna, 1995). Other scholarly engagements examine MA in health and behavioural sciences (Baldacchino et al., 2008; Ullman et al., 2012) education (Shulman, 1986; Randolph & Krause, 2002), and social work (Steinberg, 2010; Izlar, 2019). A comprehensive interdisciplinary literature review of MA lies beyond the scope of this thesis, however, it will review recent empirical studies of crisis-oriented MAGs before conceptualising MA by contrasting it with charity in the next section.

Although MA is not new, the term and practice gained renewed attention[1] during the COVID-19 pandemic (Littman et al., 2022:90; Reese & Johnson, 2022:28). The pandemic saw a rapid emergence of diverse self-help groups, spurring a wave of scholarship documenting improvised, voluntary responses (Zamponi, 2021; Drury et al., 2021; Power & Benton, 2021; Littman et al., 2022; Rendall et al., 2022). Carstensen et al., (2021) provide a comprehensive overview of pandemic-MA, spotlighting initiatives in the Philippines, the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Sudan, South Africa and Nigeria. Responses included information sharing, grocery deliveries, and livelihood support for individuals disproportionately affected by both the pandemic and the response to the pandemic (*ibid*:150). Several in-depth case studies show how initiatives often emerged to fill gaps left by the state's formal response and to mitigate effects of the pandemic exacerbating pre-existing inequalities (Zamponi, 2021; Drury et al., 2021; Ryneveld et al., 2022; Littman et al., 2022).

Beyond the pandemic accounts, studies and anecdotal evidence increasingly document initiatives that have emerged in contexts of displacement, conflict and natural disasters (McLisky & Pittaway, 2025; Pidurkova & Grünewald, 2025; Petitdemange & Hubert, 2025). One strand focuses on efforts led by displaced people themselves, as well as solidarity networks supporting people on the move and within host communities (Alfadhli & Drury, 2018; Duuki et al., 2025). For example, Alfadhli and Drury (2018) showcase how Syrian refugees in Jordan engaged in improvised, needs-based mutual support in 2015-2016. Jordan (2024) examines comparable networks among Sudanese refugees in Jordan, while Asquith et al., (2024:14) highlights MA arising from both host communities and transnational Sudanese diaspora

[1] The week following the declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic saw the highest number of searches for the term on Google in the past half decade (McKane et al.,2023:582)

networks. Similarly, Duuki et al., (2025) document the emergence of informal support systems within two refugee settlements in Uganda.

Scholars find that MA in Ukraine has been a critical response mechanism faced with challenges in accessing and collaborating with aid actors (Vicenz & Hallinan, 2023; Pidkurkova & Grünewald, 2025). Pidkurkova and Grünewald (2025:45) find limited financial support and international organisations imposing their systems rather than valuing or building on the expertise of Ukrainian networks. Similar arguments have been made by authors spotlighting MAGs in Gaza, calling for greater leadership and inclusion of these actors within humanitarian coordination (L2GP, 2024a:1; Garbett & Assali, 2024:69).

Grey literature and media reports document the work of MAG in Sudan following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023 (Fundira & Aly, 2023; Olson et al., 2024; Buchanan-Smith, 2024; Birch et al., 2024; Khair, 2024; Carter & Satti, 2025). Together, these accounts offer early evidence of both the scale of MA in the current crisis and the political and institutional barriers limiting support from the professionalised aid system (Fundira & Aly, 2023). Several authors call for more systematic documentation and analysis of the experience in Sudan to strengthen the evidence-base for future engagement, but also as lessons for future localised responses in conflict-affected contexts (Olson et al., 2024:2).

In brief, while crisis-oriented MA is increasingly recognised and documented, most existing studies consist of grey literature and anecdotal accounts from news outlets and think tanks. Even less explored is what happens when MAGs receive direct support from the aid system (Posada & Ahimbisibwe, 2025). Nonetheless, there appears to be a consensus that more systematic academic engagement is needed.

2.1.1 Conceptualisation: Mutual aid vs Charity

To conceptualise MA within this thesis, it is helpful to draw a comparison with charity, not because MA is synonymous with it, but precisely because it is not. Although their outcomes may appear similar, as the basis of MA is reciprocal, decentralised and non-hierarchical, it separates itself in practice from approaches commonly seen in charitable models of giving provided by non-profit organisations, private corporations, philanthropists and others (Beito, 2000; Spade, 2020a; Caron, 2024:862). Charity typically creates a vertical relationship between

'the helpers' and those in need, reinforcing a hierarchy and sense of dependency. In contrast, MA is positioned horizontally, blurring the lines between 'helper' and 'beneficiary' emphasising *interdependence (*Littman, 2022:103). Thus, the intention and felt experience of MA, or *mutuality* (Reese & Johnson, 2022: 28) contrasts with that of charity (El Zerbi et al., 2022; Littman et al., 2022; Caron, 2024).

MAGs often consciously separate themselves from charity, as seen in a recurrent slogan '*solidarity not charity'* (Milan et al. 2020; Littman et al. 2022:92). The distinction stems from a critique of charity's tendency to respond to the symptoms of crisis without confronting the underlying structural inequalities, powers and systems that produce or sustain them (McKane et al., 2023). Some MAGs explicitly position themselves in opposition to neocolonial, extractive, and capitalist systems they claim are embedded within both state structures and the humanitarian sector itself (Reese & Johnson, 2022). As Hobart and Kneese (2020:10) note, charity often aligns with neo-liberal ideals of moral duty and individual virtue. In contrast, MA resists paternalistic tendencies by rejecting aid delivered from a place of authority or benevolence, treating care as a collective responsibility and act of solidarity (*ibid*).

While MA may not always overtly seek to dismantle dominant systems, it challenges them indirectly by creating alternative infrastructures of care and interdependence (Reese & Johnson, 2022). Historically, examples of MAGs mobilising in response to environmental, social and economic crises have occurred when formal systems have been ineffective or slow (Michael et al., 1985). Less visible and recognised, long-term MA among communities experiencing systemic marginalisation have been used as a way to enable self-help outside formal systems (Littman et al., 2022:89). Examples include the Black Panther Party's survival programmes in the 1960s, feminist movements running abortion clinics, LGBTQIA+ community clinics, indigenous MA networks, and working class community projects (Beito, 2000; Spade, 2020b:9-12; Kettunen, 2022).

Because it exposes systemic failure and enacts alternative modes of care, MA has been conceptualised as a *radical practice* and *political act* in certain activist and scholarly discourses (Brown, 2017; Littman et al., 2022:91). As Reese and Johnson (2022:38) state, MA can become a transformative or *prefigurative praxis*, a way of practicing, in the present, the kinds of futures communities seek to build.

In summary, current scholarship illustrates that while MA may superficially resemble charity, its underlying relational ethics, history, and political underpinnings sets it apart. Unlike charity-based models of giving, MA is relational and based on reciprocity. It can emerge as a short-term response to crisis or as a long-term survival strategy among communities that face systemic marginalisation. As it can challenge or expose failures of existing governance structures, it can be motivated or interpreted as political or radical, or as an act of resistance. It can also be transformative in its capacity to build alternative infrastructures of care grounded in interdependence and mutual support. This thesis is conceptually grounded in this understanding of MA as both a long-standing practice of survival and resistance, and as a reactive response to crisis.

2.2 Mutual Aid and the Aid System

The humanitarian ecosystem in conflict-affected contexts consists of a wide range of actors providing humanitarian aid or engaging in humanitarian acts, both professionalised and voluntary (Brun & Horst, 2023:63). This includes individual and community-based responses, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UN agencies, and donors. The coordination and delivery of humanitarian responses in conflict settings rely heavily on the partnerships, negotiations and brokerage that take place among these actors, as well as in their interactions with local authorities and warring parties (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010:1120; James, 2020).

Aloudat and Khan (2021) emphasise the importance of distinguishing the broader human belief or ethical commitment to alleviate suffering as humanitarian*ism*, from humanitarian *aid*, which refers to the institutionalised, professional delivery of assistance. While the definition of humanitarianism is not fixed (Edkins, 2003), humanitarian *aid* as a professionalised system has largely been formalised based on the Dunantist and classical principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence (Barnett, 2011; Gordon & Donini, 2016). The principles underpin not only operational standards but also *humanitarian space*: the concept used to describe both the physical space where aid can be delivered safely and the aspirational space for principled negotiation and access (Abild, 2010; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). These principles are now deeply embedded in the humanitarian system's *formal script* (Hilhorst, 2018), followed and upheld by international humanitarian actors including the UN, the ICRC, and signatories to the NGO Code of Conduct (Gil, 2019) shaping both institutional identity and operational legitimacy (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010:1120).

Alongside the humanitarian aid system, other actors, including MAGs, faith-based groups, and other civic or grassroots initiatives are frontline responders to crises (IFRC, 2013). These actors can differ not only in level of 'professionalisation', scale and structure, but also in principles and motivation (Kiewied et al., 2020). This thesis will turn to the literature and theories on civic and vernacular humanitarianism to further situate MA in the humanitarian ecosystem and in humanitarian academia.

2.2.1 Mutual Aid as Civic and Vernacular Humanitarianism

As MA operates as a community-based response situated outside the professionalised aid system, it can be examined within the body of literature in humanitarian scholarship that explores these practices, even if these do not always explicitly or exclusively refer to MA.

Civic humanitarianism has been one of the key conceptualisations broadly describing the nexus between civic and humanitarian practices, encapsulating both formal and informal responses including 'community involvement, collective action and political involvement' (Brun & Horst, 2023:64). Other conceptualisations include 'solidarity humanitarianism' (Rozakou, 2019) 'subversive humanitarianism' (Vandevoordt, 2019) 'citizen aid' (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019) and 'resistance humanitarianism' (Slim, 2022). This nexus, like the literature on MA, highlights the humanitarian acts taken by individuals outside of formal systems, although the link between humanitarian acts and activism, resistance and protest are made more explicit (Fechter & Schwittay, 2019).

Radice (2022) highlights civic humanitarianisms' importance in conflict settings, responding to objections to the risk of diluting the term 'humanitarian' if actors engaging *primarily* in civic action or activism are also conceptualised under the term (*ibid*:144). He argues that in situations where these are the only actors offering humanitarian assistance, recognising them as such is essential to ensure their eligibility for support from the aid system, which may otherwise exclude them for being perceived as 'political', in contradiction to the system's principles of neutrality and impartiality (*ibid*:7). At the same time, Radice cautions that applying the humanitarian label to civic actors can risk depoliticising their efforts, underscoring the importance of situating their work in its specific political and social context, rather than uncritically putting it into a depoliticised humanitarian framework.

Vernacular Humanitarianism is used by a different strand of literature to describe grassroot responses, where the emphasis is on humanitarianism rooted in social and cultural practice, or

'humanity from within' (Brković, 2017; Carruth, 2021). This captures not only humanitarian acts and care provided in communities, but also through familial ties and kinship based on long-term social relations, and cultural understandings of the responsibility to help (Bornstein, 2012; Brun & Horst, 2023). Vernacular humanitarianism extends beyond the immediate community to include remittances sent by diaspora (Horst et al., 2016; Norman, 2022), as well as care provided and shaped by religious beliefs and practices (Levitt, 2008).

> *"Vernacular humanitarianism understands life as embedded in shared realities, a politics of life without any clear-cut differentiation between people who need saving and people who save and with no set recipe of how to save."* (Brun & Horst, 2023:66).

Rather than framing such responses 'from below', vernacular humanitarianism frames humanitarianism as something 'from within' (Hilhorst et al., 2025). This positionality places those 'saving lives' and those 'being saved' as equals, sharing responsibility for the wellbeing and life of the other (Brun & Horst, 2023:66). This approach thus aligns with the identified values that underpin MA as conceptualised in Section 2.1.1, namely horizontal relationships of *interdependence*, *shared humanity* and *mutual support*.

In brief, the literature and theory on civic and vernacular humanitarianism share significant commonalities with that of MA. Drawing on civic and vernacular humanitarianism thus helps not only to situate MA within the humanitarian ecosystem and broader humanitarian discourse and debates, but also offers a lens through which the relational ethics and often-overlooked political underpinnings, as outlined in the conceptualisation (Section 2.1.1), can be understood.

2.2.2 Aid Localisation in Conflict Settings

Ways in which the aid system can better engage with civic and vernacular humanitarian responses, or the wider spectrum of 'locally-led' efforts in humanitarian action, have been a topic of debate both in academic scholarship and throughout the humanitarian sector (Roepstorff, 2019; Koch & Rooden, 2023). Localisation has been at the core of aid sector reform throughout the past decade, seeking to better engage and transfer power to local and national actors who have historically not been equal parts in the often global north-dominated, humanitarian system (Brun & Horst, 2023). As part of the Grand Bargain commitments from the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, donors and international agencies pledged to direct at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders (Frennesson et al., 2022). This agenda has recently been reasserted in the UN80 'humanitarian reset' aiming to provide 'as

much funding as possible to local and national actors' and other initiatives like the IASC guidelines on localisation (Niazi, 2025; OCHA, 2025c).

Despite these commitments, the implementation of localisation has been subject to much critique for being ineffective, slow, or for perpetuating top-down hierarchical and neocolonial power relationships, leaving little room for the leadership promised to national and local actors (Robillard et al., 2021; Barbelet et al., 2021; Mulder, 2023). When funding is directed to local actors on terms set by international organisations, risk of 'NGO-isation' of these responses increase, in which actors feel they need to adapt to fit with the bureaucratic arrangements made by aid actors, and in the process shift accountability away from the affected population they seek to assist (CSF, 2023; Honig, 2018; Khoury & Scott, 2024:4). Scholars have therefore critically examined how local and humanitarian legitimacy is constructed in conflict settings and challenged essentialist binaries of 'local' and 'international' (Sabaratnam, 2013; Hirblinger & Claudia, 2015; Roepstorff, 2019; Martin, 2020; James, 2022). This body of work has also examined the politics of 'who counts' as local (Sabaratnam, 2013; MacGinty, 2015) and critiques tendencies to romanticise or generalise local actors (Paffenholz, 2015; Peters, 2016; Hor, 2022).

In conflict settings, scholars have critically argued that localising responses can be used as a way to continue operating by partnering with local actors when their risk tolerance is low or access is restricted (L'Anson & Pfeifer, 2013; Fast 2014; Smirl, 2015; Khoury & Scott, 2018). This means that partnerships with local actors and the localisation language are often used as a stopgap measure, fundamentally contradicting the promise of 'true localisation' which requires genuine and durable transfer of power to local responders (Roepstorff, 2019). Research from the war in Syria found that aid actors constituted Syrians as gateways to access and tokenistic representatives of the crisis. While aid agencies depended heavily on their risk-taking and efforts, they maintained control over resources, leadership, and coordination. Consequently, power stayed with international actors, meaning localisation was not truly achieved, although the localisation frame was used to justify it (Khoury & Scott, 2018:10).

In brief, the literature suggests that critiques of the implementation of localisation take on heightened urgency in conflict settings. By examining partnership dynamics in a high-risk and access-constrained environment in Sudan, this thesis seeks to contribute to the evidence base on humanitarian partnerships between MAGs and the aid system in conflict contexts. This is particularly relevant as collaboration with local actors gain priority under both the 'localisation

agenda' and the goals of the ongoing 'humanitarian reset' (OCHA, 2025c), as well as in the context of operationally constrained environments in protracted conflicts and complex emergencies (LG2P, 2024b).

3. Methodology

This section presents and motivates the methodological framework used in this thesis. It includes a discussion of the research design, methods of data collection and analysis, as well as ethical considerations, researcher positionality and limitations.

3.1 Case Study

This thesis employed a qualitative case study approach to conduct an in-depth analysis of the nature of collaboration between the international humanitarian system and MAGs in Sudan following the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023. The strength of this approach lies in its exploratory and explanatory potential (Attride-Stirling, 2001:403). While alternative and comparative cases were initially considered, this study deliberately prioritises depth over breadth for several reasons. First, it seeks to foreground a humanitarian context that has received less popular attention compared to other humanitarian crises of significant scale, such as Gaza and Ukraine (Saleh et al., 2024). Although Sudan has been the subject of prior research, relatively less scholarly work exists on humanitarian partnership dynamics following the April 2023 conflict (Olson et al., 2024; Carter & Satti, 2025). Furthermore, as established in the literature review, MA and other forms of civic and vernacular responses in humanitarian crises remain less documented in scholarly research (Brković, 2017). Finally, collecting timely primary data was made feasible by my pre-existing network developed through work in Sudan during the period of interest. As a result, selecting Sudan and the humanitarian partnership context following April 2023 as the case and scope allows for a more focused and analytically rich inquiry and resulting analysis (Yin, 2014).

3.2 Data Collection

This thesis benefits from the combination and triangulation of primary and secondary data, improving the credibility of the findings (Bowen, 2009).

Secondary data includes scholarly literature, existing empirical evidence, and grey literature on MA and the humanitarian response in Sudan. Secondary data was identified by searching interdisciplinary scholarly databases including SAGE Research Methods, JSTOR and Taylor

& Francis Journals. Grey literature was identified in sector-specific databases including ReliefWeb and ALNAP and through specific searches on the topic. Unpublished organisational or research documents were also shared by two interviewees. All sources were carefully assessed for their credibility, accuracy and representativeness (Scott, 2006). During the data collection process it was evident that while there was a sufficient amount of scholarly and grey literature on the state of partnerships in Sudan prior to the armed conflict in 2023, there was comparatively less scholarly research covering the period after the outbreak of conflict, likely due to temporal proximity. Furthermore, there was more information available on the international humanitarian response than on local responses and MAGs which can reflect the tendency of exclusion and neglect of local actors in humanitarian discourse (Wall & Hedlund, 2016). The imbalance may also be influenced by my limited proficiency in Arabic. Although searches were conducted in Arabic and some Arabic sources were used, this collection was limited as online translation tools had to be relied upon. This limitation is further discussed in Section 3.4.

Primary data was collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with practitioners and volunteers/representatives currently or recently active in Sudan as well as one research expert on the topic of MA and humanitarian crisis with a focus on Sudan (See Appendix A and Table 1). The interviews were conducted online mainly via Microsoft Teams and ranged between 45 and 75 minutes, and in one instance 90 minutes.

The first two interviewees were identified via *seed sampling* from my professional network in Sudan, and the remaining through *snowball sampling*, meaning referrals from initial interviewees, as well as through *purposive sampling*, by contacting groups and organisations via publicly available contact information on their websites (Sharma, 2017). The effectiveness of these non-probability sampling methods depends on the researcher's knowledge and judgement and carries risks of subjectivity and bias in selection, which may reduce the credibility of the findings (Sharma, 2017:751). However, they were deemed appropriate for the qualitative nature of the research question posed in this thesis and represented the most viable option given the scope of the study and practical limitations being outside Sudan. Additionally, more control in navigating the selection process was necessary due to the sensitive political and operational environment in Sudan, in which case the researcher's prior knowledge and judgement was useful. To reduce selection bias, clear criteria were developed prior to sampling. A discussion on researcher positionality and ethics is provided in Section 3.5.

Table 1: Interview Participant Profiles

20 total Participants	
19 current or past practitioners and volunteers/representatives who have been involved in humanitarian crisis response efforts in Sudan since and before April 2023. 1 research expert with prior work-experience in Sudan	
Type of Actor/Group	
5 INGO 3 UN 1 Research expert	5 NNGO 6 MAG representatives/volunteers
National / International	
12 National	8 International
Participant Profiles	
Country Director Humanitarian Affairs/Localisation Focal Point Humanitarian Programme Coordinator Senior Advisor - Community Responses Volunteer Consultant Director Programme Manager Volunteer	Volunteer Research and Analysis Advisor Head of Outreach Research Specialist - Mutual Aid Community Volunteer Emergency Coordinator Head of Unit Area Programme Manager Volunteer Programme Officer Volunteer

3.3 Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to interpret and analyse data (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Secondary data sources were reviewed using a document-analysis technique, initially skimmed for familiarisation and then carefully examined to identify patterns and extract information (Bowen, 2009:33). Transcripts from the primary data, automatically generated by Microsoft Teams, were coded based on recurrent patterns, or ‘basic themes’ (Attride-Stirling, 2001:391). These codes provided the building blocks to group information into broader patterns and identify overarching themes (Clarke & Braun, 2017:297). Using these interpretive tools and following this systematic procedure created a structured way to present the findings and discussion.

3.4 Limitations

The thesis acknowledges several limitations. First, the relatively small sample size of interviewees, while complemented by secondary sources, means that the findings cannot be considered fully representative of humanitarian partnership dynamics in Sudan during the period studied. Rather, they should be understood as indicative and as an entry point for future research. Second, language barriers, connectivity challenges, and the timing of data collection influenced who was able to participate in the interviews and may have affected the responses. Third, the interview process carries inherent risks of bias, including the possibility that the interviewer's perspective may unintentionally shape participants' responses (Oltmann, 2016). Ethics and researcher positionality are discussed in the following section.

3.5 Ethics and Researcher Positionality

Ethical considerations must be considered and guide decisions in all stages of the research process (Mirza et al. 2023). As this thesis contains primary interview data, particular attention was given to ethical responsibility in the interview process (Mirza et al., 2023:443). In line with the LSE Guidance on Informed Consent, all interviewees were informed of the research purpose prior to the interview through a combined information sheet/consent paper (See Appendix B). Written consent was obtained prior to interviews, and verbal consent reaffirmed both before and after.

Having previously worked in Sudan with two different international organisations, the author acknowledges positionality and potential biases. While this experience facilitated dialogues in a sensitive and evolving conflict context that can be difficult to navigate without prior knowledge or contacts, it was necessary to critically reflect on power dynamics and perceived conflicts of interest. Mitigation measures included clearly communicating the aims and scope of the research, being transparent about my role as a researcher, and clarifying that the study is entirely independent from my former work in Sudan. Furthermore, as a non-Sudanese researcher, I recognise the risk of misinterpreting certain perspectives. As a mitigating measure, before commencing research, consultations with Sudanese former colleagues and activists, both in-country and in the diaspora were held. Throughout the interview and research process, I verified interpretations with interview participants to enhance accuracy of representation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Finally, as most of the interviewees are operating within a sensitive and constantly evolving political, security, and humanitarian context all data has been fully anonymised to ensure non-attribution. Questions that could pose a risk to participants' continuation of their work were avoided. Throughout the research process, I have remained attentive to the potentially complex power dynamics between international, national, and local actors, reflecting on how these dynamics may influence participants' responses, their perceptions of the research interaction, and my interpretation of the data.

4. Sudan's Humanitarian Context

Since conflict[2] erupted between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) in Sudan in April 2023, it has become the world's largest internal displacement crisis and most severe hunger crisis (OCHA, 2025a). As of July 2025, 11 million people have been forcibly displaced in Sudan, and an additional 2.7 million have fled to neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2025). Almost half the population, 24.6 million people, face acute food insecurity with famine confirmed in 10 areas (WFP, 2025). Limited global attention, a complex geopolitical environment, including the involvement of external actors and states funding and arming the warring parties, have hampered diplomatic engagement and contributed to the conflict's protraction (Keen, 2024:7; Salih, 2024).

Despite the scale of the crisis, international relief efforts have been constrained by severe access restrictions and underfunding[3] (ACAPS, 2024:3; OCHA, 2025b). Armed actors have reportedly used humanitarian aid as a bargaining tool, and deliberately obstructed assistance through targeted attacks, looting, and bureaucratic impediments, and targeted aid workers (ACAPS, 2024; Humanitarian Outcomes, 2025). USAID funding cuts in 2025 further impacted the response, as they had previously accounted for an estimated 44% of global humanitarian funding to Sudan (Boccia, 2025). In response, a reprioritisation exercise for the 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) was launched. As a result, while 30.4 million people in Sudan 'remain in need' of humanitarian assistance, the updated HRP now prioritises 18 million people, a reduction driven by 'financial constraints' rather than an updated needs-assessment (OCHA, 2025d). As of July 2025, the revised plan is only 23.2% funded (OCHA, 2025e).

[2] For analyses of historical, colonial, political, geopolitical, and socio-economic origins of the current crisis, see de Waal (2019, 2025), Hoffman (2022), Abbashar (2023), Verhoeven (2023) and (Keen, 2024).
[3] The 2023 HRP reached only 51.5% of required funding, and the 2024 HRP reached only 65.3% of required funding (OCHA, 2025c).

5. Findings and Discussion

This section presents findings from the 20 interviews and document analysis providing a discussion to answer the thesis research question: *How and why are mutual aid groups and aid actors in Sudan collaborating, or not, in crisis response following the April 2023 armed conflict?* In line with the research question, the first chapter focuses on the *how* and the second chapter provides a final discussion on the *why.*

5.1 Thematic Chapter 1: The How

5.1.1 A Shock to the Aid System

The outbreak of conflict severely disrupted Sudan's professionalised aid architecture, leading to a marked decline in the number of actors providing humanitarian assistance during the first year of the war (Birch et al., 2024:17). The violence resulted in severe damage to, and loss of, offices/assets and the evacuation from Khartoum, the "hub" for most international agencies (Birch et al., 2024:4). Many Sudanese aid workers were forcibly displaced, internally or across borders, and lost their jobs either when leaving the country or when programmes were suspended (*ibid*:17; Goldberg & Ibrahim, 2023). NNGOs faced looting and the destruction of offices and assets (Bradbury et al., 2023). These disruptions affected the INGOs and NNGOs capacity to maintain programming (Harvey et al., 2023:5). Since then, the UN and INGO presence has been concentrated primarily in Eastern Sudan where Port Sudan has gradually become the new 'hub' (OCHA, 2025f; Keen, 2024:9). This concentration has created what has been described as a 'mismatch between the geography of needs and the geography of the response' with aid delivered mainly to more accessible areas controlled by SAF leaving the most severely affected unreached (Keen, 2024:9).

5.1.2 Mutual aid as a Frontline Response

The contraction of Sudan's aid presence left many communities beyond the reach of any aid actor, without realistic prospects of timely help from state authorities (D'arcy, 2023; Shabaka, 2024a). In these spaces, more or less structured MA responses became the first, and have sometimes remained, the only line of response. These efforts come from neighbourhood initiatives in communities, women's groups, feminist networks, youth groups, activists, networks of kin and faith groups (Abbas & Al Karib, 2023; Shabaka, 2024b:10; Carstensen & Sebit, 2023; I11; Carter & Satti, 2025:6). Citizens and their networks have coordinated

evacuations, secured visas, and arranged food, housing, and medication for those fleeing violence (*ibid*). Diaspora networks have further contributed with fundraising, information sharing, and advocacy (Shabaka, 2024a; I8; I9).

Although precise figures of MA in Sudan are not available, media and personal accounts indicate the scale of the efforts. In 2024, when UN agencies and INGOs had largely withdrawn from the capital due to the intensity of violence, the MAG operating under the name 'Emergency Response Rooms' (ERR) supported more than 335 communal kitchens, over 40 health centres, and more than 75 women's cooperatives in the capital (Kuka, 2024). Later estimates suggest that approximately 360 ERRs have operated across nine states in Sudan, reaching more than four million people (Olson et al., 2024:3; UN News, 2024; Carter & Satti, 2025:9). In Darfur, another area where the conflict has been concentrated and difficult to access for international aid actors, 35 MAGs were recorded in 2024 (Shabaka, 2024b:11).

Interviewees shared experiences of partaking in, or being supported by, MA in diverse forms during the current crisis (I5; I8; I9; I11; I15; I16; I17: I18; I19; I20). In Gedaref, one interviewee described volunteering for a 'women's emergency room' organising support for displaced women by collecting money and clothes, cooking meals, and operating a health room for pregnant women (I15). She noted that IDPs in Gedaref initially were more than double the population of her city, as many people fleeing the capital Khartoum passed through on their way to the Ethiopian border. She stated, "*If these initiatives hadn't come from our own communities, it would have become an even bigger crisis, because at that time no government or organisation had intervened*" (I15).

Another interviewee volunteering to support people with disabilities when the conflict began, explained "*We are often invisible in crisis and ignored by the government and the international community*" (I16). She helped create a network to support people with disabilities by collecting medicine and essentials and finding neighbours willing to host them. Her group later worked to train other MAGs to make their services more accessible to people with disabilities, and received support from a national NGO, which in turn was receiving funds from an INGO (I16). In East Sudan, an interviewee found, after evacuating Khartoum, that his home village had formed a community kitchen or *Takaya* (Arabic: تكايا). They cook for people arriving as local authorities were unresponsive (I11), a common MA response seen across many states in Sudan (Shabaka, 2024b:10; Carstensen & Sebit, 2023; I11; Carter & Satti, 2025:6).

Across the accounts of MA, common themes emerged: a strong sense of collective responsibility and solidarity, the mobilisation of resources through community and kinship networks, and a sense that local authorities and aid actors were largely absent, both in physical presence and in the provision of funding or collaboration during the early months of the conflict (I5; I8; I9; I11; I15; I16; I17; I18; I19; I20). These experiences closely resemble the characteristics of MA conceptualised in Section 2.1.1, survival mechanisms rooted in solidarity and operating outside formal structures (Spade, 2020a; Reese & Johnson, 2022). Findings also indicate that MAGs build on both civic activism and political organising of the past decade, as well as on much older traditions of community solidarity, which also impact how they are perceived and engaged with by the professionalised aid system, themes explored in the next two sections.

5.1.3 Civic to Humanitarian Action

One of the larger MAGs that emerged during the conflict is the Emergency Response Rooms. While they vary across Sudan, the ERRs have roots in the pro-democracy and political resistance active in the 2018-2019 popular revolution (Birch et al., 2024). Before the April 2023 war outbreak, these civic movements were organised in local resistance committees that coordinated non-violent protests against the government and Sudan's economic and political elite (*ibid*). When conflict erupted, many resistance committee members, predominantly youth leaders, transferred their capacities and networks to form ERRs delivering humanitarian assistance. As one interviewee explained:

> "*With that legacy of activism, it was only natural that the committees could form into Emergency Response Rooms. That is super important because that's why they could work without a formed-up structure in the beginning. They had that trust element embedded in the movement and it had been tested in fire"* (I4)

These pre-existing networks also connected to Sudanese abroad and long-term international allies, enabling early outreach and support from the diaspora and other external private humanitarian philanthropists (I4). The ERRs quickly drew media and international attention, including nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize and receiving the first phone call by the then newly appointed UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Tom Fletcher (Olson et al., 2024; Shabaka, 2024c; Fletcher, 2024).

Delayed Engagement, Politicisation and De-politicisation

Despite this attention, it took months for the ERRs to receive more large-scale funding from aid actors, and pledged amounts were not always delivered in full (I4; I10). In the first year of conflict, the Khartoum ERR had received pledges of up to $2 million, yet by May 2024 had received only about half of that amount (Carter & Satti, 2025:6; Carstensen & Sebit, 2023). In April 2024, an ERR representative publicly called for 5% of the official humanitarian response funding to be allocated to the ERRs and for the international community to formally recognise ERR volunteers as 'humanitarian aid workers' (Kuka, 2024).

MA representatives, UN, INGOs and NNGO staff described how perceptions of the political and civic origins of the ERRs led aid actors to question their neutrality and impartiality, thereby delaying formal engagement and funding (I1; I2; I3; I4; I6; I7; I12; I13; I14). The accounts of eligibility for funding being influenced by perceptions of neutrality are in line with Radice's (2022) observations outlined in Section 2.2.1. The principles of neutrality and impartiality are embedded in the 'formal script' of aid actors, which thus influences decisions on humanitarian funding (Brun & Horst, 2023). One UN worker recalled:

> *"The first 8 to 10 months of my work, this was one of the agenda topics of every meeting that I had. With every single donor, with every single stakeholder, with every single UN agency the first question was, are they neutral?" (I2)*

Concerns raised in these inter-agency and INGO forums included their links to the resistance committees (I6) loose *rumours* of affiliation with one of the warring parties (I3) and unfamiliarity "*nobody* [in the international community] *really knew them very well*" (I2). The fact that ERR members had not registered with the de facto government-controlled Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) also made aid actors approach them with caution, especially since the aid community was operating primarily in areas controlled by SAF connected to the de facto government (I2).

At the same time, several interviewees stressed repeatedly making the point within these forums that political affiliation should not in itself be a barrier to humanitarian collaboration, provided that assistance was delivered impartially (I1; I2; I3; I6). Some argued that the ERRs' civic history enhanced their responsiveness to community needs, since "*You cannot be sensitive about the problems of your people if you don't have political critical thinking and are politically acute."* (I3) Others pointed out that politics and affiliations are unavoidable in Sudan, and that

the international aid system itself is far from apolitical, its recognition of one warring party as the government, for example, "*loses part of our neutrality, which really points the fingers back at us*" while the ERRs manage to operate in both SAF- and RSF-controlled areas (I3).

However, several interviewees observed that the ERRs increasingly emphasised their neutrality and humanitarian status in public statements, a move seen by some as strategic positioning to meet donor and aid actor expectations (I4;11) but also as a survival mechanism in the highly politicised and violent context of the conflict (I2; I10; I13; I16; I17). One ERR representative stated that neutrality is central to their work (I18). Another MA representative, not-ERR affiliated, stated that this neutrality is 'manufactured' to access funding, a form of survival mechanism that can risk 'depoliticisation'(I11).

The activist roots of the resistance committees and their transition into MA ERR crisis response resemble the nexus of civic and humanitarian practices described in the literature review. The construction of humanitarian legitimacy in the eyes of professionalised aid actors based on humanitarian principles also echo the challenges and politicising and depoliticising effect of the 'humanitarian label' outlined in previous research (Radice, 2022). In brief, these findings not only demonstrate the perceived political barriers to collaboration between international and national humanitarian actors and ERRS, but also the tendency to politicise and depoliticise civic actors engaged in humanitarian work (Radice, 2022).

5.1.4 Vernacular Underpinnings of Mutual Aid

Alongside the civic and activist underpinnings of certain MAGs in Sudan, interviewees also highlighted MA as something rooted in social traditions of community solidarity in Sudan (I5; I8; I9; I11; I13; I14; I15; I16; I17; I18; I19; I20), emphasising that this tradition seems only partially understood by international humanitarian actors (I9). To collaborate with current MA efforts in Sudan, one must understand its history and cultural underpinnings (Olson et al., 2024). One interviewee explained "*mutual aid has existed for a very long time in Sudan, it's based on a sort of voluntary exchange, it's not based on a kind of charity, but more so solidarity*" (I9), reflecting the distinction between charity and solidarity made in the conceptualisation of MA outlined in Section 2.1.1.

Interviewees further described this tradition as a consequence of a 'weak state' or 'low state trust' leaving people to rely on their immediate community for help (I11). An interviewee shared "*This is in Sudanese society, to help each other. We do not trust the government to help*

us" (I15). Similarly, one interviewee shared that he doesn't expect support from the state and therefore relies on neighbors and kin, adding that after the 'coup and chaos' of 2021, he committed to only working with community responses because he predicted "*we might not have a state*" in the near future (I11). These accounts align with scholarly arguments on MA arising as an alternative infrastructure of care where formal systems are weak or inadequate (Spade, 2020; Reese & Johnsson, 2022).

Language Barriers in Humanitarian Partnerships

Interviewees from MAGs emphasised that, despite a willingness to collaborate with humanitarian actors, they struggle to access official aid funding due to both language barriers and lack of connections (I11; I15; I16; I17; I18; I19) reflecting findings found in past crises in Sudan (CSF, 2023) and in other crises (Moser-Mercer et al., 2021). One interviewee explained, "*unless you have someone who can speak English, you wouldn't be able to access funds*" (I8). Another interviewee described 'gatekeepers' observing that "*the only thing that differentiates them from others is their ability to speak English*" (I9). Another interviewee added that without knowing the 'jargon of the INGOs' this automatically becomes a barrier to access funding (I8). A UN worker discussed:

> *"The emergency response rooms are only a fraction of all the mutual aid groups that currently exist in the country. And if you only go through the ERRs, you are also blind to the almost 1,000 other groups*" (I2).

Interviewees pointed out that while there were NNGOs benefitting from 'gatekeeping' or simply from the ignorance of INGOs, they also stressed that NNGOs played an important role in facilitating connections between MAGs and the wider humanitarian system in Sudan (I11;15;16;17;18;19) confirming findings from other reports (Harvey et al., 2023:8).

Nafeer as Vernacular Humanitarianism

All Sudanese interviewees and several internationals mentioned *Nafeer* (in Arabic: نفير), as a motivating factor and strong mobilising force in the current and past crises in Sudan (I1; I2; I3; I4; I5; I6; I7; I8; I9; I10; I11; I14; I15; I16; I17; I18; I19; I20). Nafeer is a longstanding Sudanese social tradition that comes from an Arabic word meaning 'a call to mobilise' (Khair, 2020; Wehr, 1976:984). When asked to explain Nafeer, interviewees said, *"It means that if people call you during a crisis, you have to help them immediately, without any hesitation*"

(I15). "*It means collaboration, helping each other, and coordination in emergency situations*" (I17). A MA volunteer from Darfur shared, "*Nafeer is very important for me. It means solidarity, it means saving a life. This is in my nature as Sudanese*" (I18). Interviewees described it as an immediate response mechanism and as a responsibility to the community, and said that in the recent April war, "*people have gone out nafeering*" (I11).

The accounts of *Nafeer* appear to align closely with the social traditions and practices described in the literature on *vernacular humanitarianism* (Brković, 2017; Carruth, 2022; Brun & Horst, 2023). The mobilisation of MA, extending from neighbourhood networks to diaspora contributions, also resonates with the ways vernacular humanitarianism encompasses both local and transnational forms of care (Horst et al., 2016; Norman, 2022). In this sense, MA mobilised through *Nafeer* can be understood as an expression of vernacular humanitarianism in Sudan's current crisis.

5.1.5 Overcoming Bureaucratic Barriers

A critical barrier to collaboration that pre-dates the current conflict is the authorities' bureaucratic control over aid activities, requiring all movement of people and goods to be authorised and all Sudanese aid actors to be registered with the state's Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) (Harvey et al., 2023; CSF, 2023). This system was partly shaped by the colonial legacy of 'Sudanisation', which later positioned the state as a gatekeeper to humanitarian action (CSF, 2023:8). During the current conflict, RSF established similar structures of control, creating a situation in which 'all sides are weaponizing permission' (Harvey et al., 2023:11).

In the current crisis, donors and aid actors have found ways to bypass these barriers: some have adopted flexible funding modalities to support the OCHA-managed pooled funding mechanism, the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF), to provide flexible group cash transfers (GCT) of US$5,000 to ERR groups (OCHA, 2023; Harvey et al., 2023:11). The SHF is reportedly the first example of an OCHA-managed country-based pooled fund developing country-specific risk absorption and flexibility guidelines to enable grants or 'donations' to community responses (Carter & Satti, 2025:20). GCT has also been used by the Cash Consortium of Sudan, a partnership of 18 international and national organisations, to support mutual aid groups (Carter & Satti, 2025:22).

A director of an INGO provided examples of direct transfers of GCTs of up to US$5,000 that their organisation would provide multiple times directly to MAGs (I1). Another stated, "*we made a deliberate decision in the beginning, to assist those not captured by the formal aid architecture with flexible grants*" (I3). The interviewee added, "*in-house we view them as a partner, but in our structured systems, they don't fit within our portfolio of how we actually treat and count partners, so this is how we could work around that*" (I3). Replacing needs assessments with an *appreciative inquiry* as part of the 'supporting community-led response' (SCLR) approach, distinct from GCT, was also reported (L2GP, 2024c).

Furthermore, sub-partnering, using both INGOs and NNGOs as intermediaries, was reported (I1; I2; I3; I4; I14). One interviewee shared awareness of at least 4 UN agencies doing this but asked for them not to be mentioned by agency name as it may be politically sensitive vis-à-vis authorities (I2). Sub-partnering has also been criticised for making the chain of funding longer, reducing the funding reaching the groups (Carter & Satti, 2025:29). It also transfers risk onto NNGOs that are at the end of the chain (I3). Nevertheless, interviewees noted how sometimes this modality is the only way their organisation could allow funding to flow to unregistered MAGs (I12).

Several interviewees noted strengthened coordination between the humanitarian cluster system and MAGs, facilitating funding and partnerships. ERRs have organised themselves into similar clusters as the humanitarian system. While an ERR said that this evolved 'organically' (Fundira & Aly, 2023), the increased visible structure of the ERRs also made it easier for aid agencies to engage (I1; I13). One example is the Localisation Coordination Council (LCC), established by ERRs in September 2023, connecting them with 9 national NGOs and 6 INGO observers (Emergency Rooms of the LCC, 2025). Two interviewees shared that the LCC mechanism is a structure that is more familiar to the UN. Central to the partnerships being established was trust. As one NNGO worker described:

> *"We're talking about hundreds of volunteers, and realistically none of us has 100% capacity for oversight … It's a relationship based on a lot of trust."* (I9)

As partnerships expanded, interviewees noted that varied funding and partnership modalities from different organisations and donors created confusion (I4; I5; I11). In response, ERRs developed their own reporting tool in Arabic and English to standardise information sharing (I4). At a 2024 Kampala conference bringing together MA representatives, NNGOs, INGOs,

and donors, the ERRs shared this tool, and many partners committed to using it in their engagements (I1; I2; I3; I6). A UN worker described this outcome as: "*a huge step forward, because we not only basically allow them to design the activities, but we are also absorbing their working modality into our system… something that was never done before, at least not in Sudan*" (I2)

5.2 Thematic Chapter 2: The Why

5.2.1 Motivations for Collaboration: Access or True Localisation?

While the thesis has outlined initial evidence of *how* new approaches are being used to bypass longstanding and emerging institutional barriers, a discussion on the implications and incentives for this collaboration, in other words, the *why* is necessary (Honig, 2018; Khoury & Scott, 2024). While a definitive answer to why collaboration has picked up now, despite longstanding localisation commitments in Sudan (CSF, 2023), would require further and more substantive investigation, interviewee accounts reveal several important perspectives.

Although MA in Sudan has historically received some aid sector support (CSF, 2023), several interviewees emphasised that the extent and scope of current collaboration with MAGs from the aid sector as a whole, and the changes in partnership modalities and funding mechanisms is unprecedented, and may even be unique to Sudan (I2). The current conflict severely disrupted the professional aid architecture, leaving it with 'no other option' (I6) but to engage with MAGS that were delivering at scale and at the frontline. As one UN worker explained:

> *"Because it [the conflict] happened so drastically and so rapidly, it forced the international community to think out of the box for the first time and to explore new partnership with local actors that were capable to respond with some form of aid in areas we could not access. I think that was the huge shift or the shock that really was needed, because without that, probably we would have continued to operate by simply engaging with the usual actors without necessarily questioning ourselves."* (I2)

Several interviewees mentioned lack of access as the initial factor pushing or 'forcing' the aid community to engage with MAGs (I1; I2; I3; I6; I8; I9; I10; I12; I13; I14). Two interviewees called this a 'fast-tracked localisation' (I2; I5). However, the shift was also in line with the direction that many shared they had wanted to see for a long time. Advocacy from diaspora networks and MAGs themselves also helped to advance this agenda (I4; I6). Some saw this

shift as a deeper transformation, a new "blueprint" (I6) moving toward a "*decentralised, decolonised way of doing aid"* in Sudan (I8).

5.2.2 Remaining Barriers to Collaboration

Interviewees pointed out that several flaws must be corrected if these new approaches to partnerships are to transition to 'true localisation'. One interviewee shared: *"I'm firmly convinced that if we don't detach this conversation from the access challenge, this type of collaboration has an inevitable deadline"* (I2). The following five obstacles and flaws were mentioned as barriers to 'true localisation':

First, onion-like layers of funding, whereby resources pass through multiple intermediaries before reaching the MAGs, cannot continue to be the mode of operation (I1; I3). An INGO worker had seen chains where "*The UN takes a cut, then the INGO take a cut, the national actors take a cut, and by the time the funds reach the people actually doing the work on the ground, there's very little left*" (I3). Second, although more funding is now reaching MAGs, it is still not to the level required (Kuka, 2024). Interviewees also reflected on global aid budget cuts and competition for already limited funds to Sudan. Third, while donors and aid actors have begun to adapt their funding models and compliance requirements to engage more effectively with the decentralised and less formalised structure of MAGs, a compliance mindset still limits engagement (Carter and Satti, 2025:3). Fourth, despite increased awareness and attempts at 'risk-sharing,' the transfer of the 'most' risk onto NNGOs, who make the final transfer to MAGs in long chains of sub-partnering persists a challenge (I8; I9; I5). Finally, MA representatives continue to call for stronger protection from the aid sector against the physical risks and threats to their lives (Keen, 2024; Khair, 2024).

5.2.3 Risk of Reversion and Co-option

The war continues, but SAF's recapture of the capital in February 2025 has allowed aid actors to slowly return to work there (I2; I6). Interviewees discussed that Khartoum may be a 'testing ground' to see if localisation commitments in the new collaborations persist and the obstacles can be overcome. One interviewee cautioned that aid organisations may go back to "*self-implementation mode*" as access improves (I4). There are also signs that de facto authorities are increasingly demanding that aid actors work only with registered actors as they regain control (I1). An order introduced in May effectively criminalises independent humanitarian work in Sudan unless cleared by the state, coinciding with the rise of 'dignity committees' (in Arabic:

لجان الكرامة) groups replicating ERR services but which may have ties to the former regime and the Islamist movement, representing potential co-option (Ayin Network, 2025a; Ayin Network, 2025b). Future collaboration will thus depend not only on how aid actors and groups nurture newfound relationships, but also on the evolution of the conflict and political power in Sudan.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has explored mutual aid and evolving partnership dynamics with the aid system in Sudan since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023. The thesis has asked '*How and why are mutual aid groups and aid actors in Sudan collaborating, or not, in crisis response following the April 2023 armed conflict?'* The findings from 20 interviews with practitioners and volunteers in Sudan, complemented with secondary data, provide empirical evidence and analysis of *how* and *why* new forms of collaboration have come about, and the strategies, motivations and remaining bureaucratic and political barriers in this process. Furthermore, by utilising and combining literature on MA and civic and vernacular humanitarianism, the thesis highlights MA as both a longstanding and newly adaptive practice at the frontline of the crisis response in the current conflict in Sudan. In doing so, it contributes to humanitarian theory by demonstrating the analytical value of viewing MA through civic and vernacular humanitarian lenses, showing how these frameworks help illuminate their social, political, and cultural dimensions and how these influence their interaction with aid actors.

6.1 Key Findings

The outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023 precipitated a disruption to Sudan's aid system, resulting in both geographical and operational gaps in the delivery of assistance. At the same time, MAGs provided frontline responses at scale, drawing on longstanding traditions of civic activism and solidarity such as *Nafeer.* To support these efforts, aid actors and MAGs jointly negotiated new forms of partnerships and funding modalities. This included flexing funding and reporting requirements, adopting reporting modalities and coordination mechanisms established by MAGs, and bypassing de facto authorities' registration requirements by providing grants or group cash-transfers, or by sub-partnering or following a SCLR partnership approach. These approaches were described as unprecedented in Sudan, representing a new turn towards decolonised and localised humanitarian response.

However, the findings also indicate how partnerships remain shaped by political and bureaucratic barriers, and by the conflict itself. Different MAGs with civic and activist roots were simultaneously politicised and depoliticised in different aid forums, influencing the perceived legitimacy of their humanitarian work. In some instances, the MAGs adapted to humanitarian principles and the humanitarian cluster system, facilitating partnerships. While this was not scrutinised by interviewees, it would be relevant to explore as a form of NGO-isation (Honig, 2018; Khoury & Scott). By contrast, other MAGs with primarily vernacular underpinnings described barriers to accessing funding and support from the aid system, citing a lack of connections, language barriers, and unfamiliarity with the 'INGO jargon'. NNGOs were mentioned as both valuable links to the aid system and as 'gatekeepers' reflecting findings from other crises (Piquard, 2021). Furthermore, layered funding chains continue to dilute resources, while insufficient and inconsistent funding and compliance-guided mindsets, and the transfer of risk onto NNGOs, remain barriers to achieving 'true localisation'. MAGs also stressed the need for stronger protection against physical risks and threats to their lives.

The discussion section indicates that the shifting humanitarian partnership landscape and increased collaboration with MAGs may initially have been catalysed by operational necessity for humanitarian access for aid actors, coupled with increasing priorities to localise responses. The findings further highlight the remaining risk of reverting to pre-conflict modalities if humanitarian access improves and new innovations are not backed by genuine localisation commitments, underscoring the need for deliberate reflection on the intent and quality of these partnerships and how durable and transformative change might be achieved (Roepstorff, 2019). More broadly, the Sudan case tentatively illustrates how systemic shocks such as conflict and shrinking humanitarian access can catalyse shifts in aid system partnership modalities, but also how sustaining these shifts requires intentional structural adaptation.

6.2 Avenues for Future Research

While this study initially focused on partnerships between Sudan's professionalised humanitarian architecture and MAGs, interviewee perspectives made clear that improving these partnerships requires first understanding the nature of MA itself in Sudan. While this thesis provides initial evidence of civic and vernacular underpinnings of MA in Sudan, future research should examine this further.

Exploring intersections with the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus will also be important, given the political and civic roots of some MAGs. This study intentionally did not engage with the nexus, partly due to scope, but also because interviewees expressed sensitivities around the topic. Several noted that in the current context, discussions linking their work to political/peace movements could put them at risk from warring parties, underscoring the need for conflict-sensitive approaches (Carter & Satti, 2025). When the environment allows, future research should examine how former civic leaders now engaged in MA navigate the humanitarian system, and how this positioning may influence or depoliticise future work. Such research should also explore how these intersections shape their role in future peace processes, and whether engagement with the aid system ultimately strengthens or weakens civic and political capacities. Furthermore, as the provision of basic public goods shapes how public authority is exercised and legitimised in conflict settings (Kirk & Hoffman, 2013) alternative infrastructures of care (Reese & Johnson, 2022) created by MAGs in Sudan should be studied alongside the co-option strategies of de facto authorities that may present implications for future governance systems and competing claims to legitimacy and political authority.

7. Bibliography

Abbas, R., Al Karib, H. (2023) 'Sudanese Feminist Sisterhood: At the Frontline of Radical Resistance and Solidarity.' Alliance. (online) 14 August. Available at: https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/sudanese-feminist-sisterhood-at-the-frontline-of-radical-resistance-and-solidarity/

Abbashar, A. (2023) Resistance Committees and Sudan's Political Future. Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform. (online) Available at: https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Abbashar-2023-Sudan-Resistance-Committees.pdf

Abild, E. (2010) Creating Humanitarian Space: A Case Study of Somalia. Refugee Survey Quarterly (UNHCR) 29 (3): 67-102.

ACAPS (2024) 'Sudan, Snapshot of Humanitarian Access' ACAPS. (online) June. Available at: https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20240619_ACAPS_Sudan_Analysis_Hub_Snapshot_of_humanitarian_access.pdf

Alfadhli, K. Drury, J. (2018) The Role of Shared Social Identity in Mutual Support Among Refugees of Conflict: An Ethnographic Study of Syrian Refugees in Jordan. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology. 28. 142-155.

Aloudat T, Khan T (2022) Decolonising humanitarianism or humanitarian aid? PLOS Glob Public Health 2(4).

Asquith, P., Ahmed, B., Mulugeta, D., Mohamuud Sheekh, N. Woldu, M., (2024) 'Shifting from crisis response to resilience-building in the Horn of Africa' CPAS Shabaka, (online) Available at: https://shabaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Horn-of-Africa-Policy-Brief.pdf

Attride-Stirling, J., (2001) Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. Qualitative Research. 1(3), pp.385–405.

Ayin Network (2025a) 'Hijacking Humanitarianism: How Khartoum's new authorities ar cracking down on grassroots relief efforts' (online) 19 June Available at: https://3ayin.com/en/errs-dignity/

Ayin Network (2025b) 'The army-RSF war: 'Dignity Committees'[in Arabic]. (online) Available at: https://3ayin.com/dignity-committees/

Baldacchino, A., Caan, W., Munn-Giddings, C. (2008) Mutual aid groups in psychiatry and substance misuse. Mental Health and Substance Use, 1(2), 104–117.

Barbelet, V. Davies, G. Flint, J, Davey. E. (2021) Interrogating the Evidence Base on Humanitarian Localisation: A Literature Study. London: HAG.

Barnett, M. (2011) Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism. London: Cornell University Press.

Beito, D. T. (2000) From mutual aid to the welfare state: fraternal societies and social services, 1890– 1967. University of North Carolina Press.

Birch, I. Carter, B. Satti, H-A. (2024) Effective Social Protection in Conflict: Findings from Sudan, Working Paper, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Boccia, C. (2025) 'Sudan has become a 'case study' for the impact of USAID cuts, aid worker says' ABC News. (online) Available at: https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/humanitarian-system-struggles-fill-us-void-sudan-worlds/story?id=123483196

Bornstein, E. (2012), Disquieting Gifts: Humanitarianism in New Delhi. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bowen, G.A. (2009) Document analysis as a qualitative research method. Qualitative research journal, 9(2), pp.27-40.

Bradbury, M. et al. (2023) Call for Action to the International Community: Support for Civil Society in Sudan is Urgent and Crucial, Humanitarian Practice Network (online) Available at: https://odihpn.org/en/publication/call-for-action-to-the-international-community-support-for-civil-society-in-sudan-is-urgent-and-crucial/.

Brkovic (2017) 'Introduction: Vernacular Humanitarianisms' Allegra Lab. (online) September. Available at: https://allegralaboratory.net/vernacular-humanitarianisms/

Brown, A M (2017) Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds. Chico, CA: AK Press.

Brun, C., Horst, C. (2023) Towards a Conceptualisation of Relational Humanitarianism. Journal of Humanitarian Affairs. 5(1):62-72.

Buchanan-Smith, M. (2024) 'The meeting of Humanitarian and Civic Space in Sudan' Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) August. (online) Available at:https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/HPN_Network-Paper_civic-space-Sudan-final0820.pdf

Call, J., Holloway, B. T., Mammadli, T., Doyle, M. (2025) Examining connections between healthcare access and mutual aid among transgender and nonbinary people. Sexual and Gender Diversity in Social Services, 37(3), 470–489.

Caron, C. (2024) Taking others in: conceptualising hosting with feminist ethics of care and mutual aid. Gender & Development, 32(3), 857–872. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2024.2406670.

Carruth, Lauren. 2021. Love and Liberation: humanitarian work in Ethiopia's Somali Region. Ithaca: Cornell University Press

Carstensen N., Mudhar M. Schurmann Munksgaard F. (2021) 'Let communities do their work': the role of mutual aid and self-help groups in the Covid-19 pandemic response' Local to Global Protection

Carstensen, N. Sebit, L. (2023) ‘Mutual aid in Sudan: the future of aid?’ (online) 11 October. Available at: https://odihpn.org/en/publication/mutual-aid-in-sudan-the-future-of-aid/

Carter, B. and Satti, H. A. (2025) Supporting Mutual Aid in Sudan: Conflict-Sensitive Approaches to Risk and Accountability, BASIC Research Working Paper 40, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Clarke, V., Braun, V. (2017) Thematic Analysis. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12(3),297–298.

CSF Conflict Sensitivity Facility (2023) Making sense of ‘localisation’ in Sudan. Conflict Sensitivity Facility, Khartoum. (online) Available at: https://csf-sudan.org/library/making-sense-of-localisation-in-sudan/

D’Arcy, M. (2023) ‘Mutual Aid Rethinking International Humanitarian Engagement in Sudan’ CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation , (online) Available at: https://www.cmi.no/publications/8866-mutual-aid-rethinking-international-humanitarian-engagement-in-sudan

de Waal, A. (2019) Sudan: A Political Marketplace Framework Analysis, Occasional Paper 19, World Peace Foundation Conflict Research Programme.

de Waal, A. (2025) Lineages of Genocide in Sudan. Journal of Genocide Research, 1–19.

Drury, J., Carter, H., Ntontis, E., & Guven, S. T. (2021) Public behaviour in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: Understanding the role of group processes. BJPsych Open, 7(1), 1–6.

Duuki, R., Edaku, C., Peter Ongodia, S. (2025) The Role of Informal Support System on Socio-Economic Rights of Refugees in Ugandan Refugee Settlements: Case of Rhinocamp and Imvepi. Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 1–19.

Edkins, J. (2003) ‘Humanitarianism, Humanity, Human’, Journal of Human Rights, 2:2, 253–8.

El Zerbi, C., Hartopp, N., Ramsay, A., Marlow, S. (2022) ‘More tangible and less theoretical’: Understandings and experiences of neighbourhood-led Mutual Aid groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journal of Civil Society, 18(4), 453–467.

Emergency Rooms of the LCC (2025) Echoes of Solidarity Issue 01. (online) Available at: https://lccsudan.org/newsletter/

Fast, L. (2014) Aid in danger: The perils and promise of humanitarianism. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fechter, A. M., & Schwittay, A. (2019). Citizen aid: grassroots interventions in development and humanitarianism. Third World Quarterly, 40(10), 1769–1780.

Fletcher, T. (2024) ‘Tom Fletcher's commitment to the humanitarian community, OCHA

News, 18 November 2024.' (online) Available at: https://www.unocha.org/news/tom-fletchers-commitment-humanitarian-community

Ford, M., Honan, V. (2019) The limits of mutual aid: Emerging forms of collectivity among app-based transport workers in Indonesia. Journal of Industrial Relations, 61(4), 528-548.

Frennesson, L., Kembro, J., de Vries, H., Jahre, M., Van Wassenhove, L. (2022) International humanitarian organizations' perspectives on localization efforts. International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction, 82, 103410.

Fundira, M., Aly, H. (2023) 'Rethinking Humanitarianism. How mutual aid in Sudan is getting international support' The New Humanitarian. (online) Available at: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/podcasts/2024/04/11/rethinking-humanitarianism-mutual-aid-sudan-groups-receive-international-support

Garbett, L. Assali, H. (2024) Maintaining the social fabric: Mutual aid in Gaza [Interview]. Jerusalem Quarterly, 100. Institute for Palestine Studies.

Gil, G. (2019) Humanitarian Negotiations & Humanitarian Principles: The interaction between humanitarian negotiations for access and organizations' ability to adhere to humanitarian principles. Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 3035. https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/3035

Giles, D. B. (2021). A mass conspiracy to feed people: Food Not Bombs and the world-class waste of global cities. Duke University Press.

Goldberg, J. Ibrahim, H.A. (2023) 'Exclusive: Sudanese Aid Workers Face Hundreds of Job Losses', The New Humanitarian and Ayin Media, (online) 1 August. Available at: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2023/08/01/exclusive-sudanese-aid-workers-face-hundreds-job-losses

Gordon, C. (2024) Learning mutual aid: food justice public pedagogy and community fridge organizing online. Journal of Applied Communication Research, 52(2), 158–178.

Gordon, S., Donini, A., (2016) 'Romancing principles and human rights: Are humanitarian principles salvageable?' International Review of the Red Cross (2016), 97 (897/898), 77–109.

Harvey, P., Stoddard, A., Czwarno, M., Breckenridge, M.-J., & Duque-Diez, M. (2023) Humanitarian Access SCORE Report: Sudan- Survey on the coverage, operational reach, and effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Humanitarian Outcomes. (online) Available at: https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/score_sudan_2023.pdf

Hilhorst, D. Jansen, B.J. (2010) Humanitarian Space as Arena: A Perspective on the Everyday Politics of Aid. Development and Change, 41: 1117-1139.

Hilhorst, D. Classical humanitarianism and resilience humanitarianism: making sense of two

brands of humanitarian action. Int J Humanitarian Action 3, 15 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-018-0043-6

Hilhorst, D., Alburo-Cañete K.Z. Aparicio, J.R. Kyamusugulwa, P.M, Woldetsadik, T.K. (2025) Humanitarian observatories: insights for reforming humanitarianism from below. J Int Humanit Action.10(1):10

Hirblinger, A. Claudia S. (2015) The good, the bad, and the powerful: Representations of the 'local' in peacebuilding. Security Dialogue 46(5): 422-439.

Hoffmann, A. (2022) 'The West's Struggle in Sudan: Standing with the People while being Stuck with the Coup Regime', Conflict Research Unit Policy Brief, Clingendael Institute

Honig, D. (2018) Navigation by judgment: Why and when top down management of foreign aid doesn't work. Oxford University Press.

Hor, A.J.Y. (2022) The everyday emotional lives of aid workers: how humanitarian anxiety gets in the way of meaningful local participation. International Theory. 14(2):358-387.

Horst, C., Lubkemann, S. and Pailey, R. (2016) The Invisibility of a Third Humanitarian Domain', in Sezgin, Z. and Dijkzeul, D. (eds), The New Humanitarians in International Practice: Emerging Actors and Contested Principles (Oxford: Routledge), pp. 213–31.

Humanitarian Outcomes, (2025) Aid Worker Security Incidents.[Excel] (online) Available at: https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/incidents/search?country=SD&detail=1&format=csv

International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) (2013) World Disaster Report 2013. In: Focus on technology and the future of humanitarian action. International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva.

Izlar, J. (2019) Radical social welfare and anti-authoritarian mutual aid. Critical and Radical Social Work, 7(3), 349–366.

James, M. (2020) Who can sing the song of MSF? The politics of 'proximity' and performing humanitarianism in Eastern DRC. Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, 2 (2). 31 - 39. ISSN 2515-6411.

James, M. (2022) Humanitarian fables: morals, meanings and consequences for humanitarian practice. Third World Quarterly, 43(2), 475–493. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.2023318.

Jordan, Z. (2024) Making Your Own Weather: Self-Reliance and Working for Resettlement Among Sudanese Refugee Men in Amman, Jordan. Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees. 39. 1-14.

Keen, D. (2024) Humanitarian Responses to Famine and War in Sudan. Social

Science in Humanitarian Action Platform, (online) Available at: https://www.socialscienceinaction.org/resources/key-considerations-humanitarian-responses-to-famine-and-war-in-sudan/

Kettunen, P. (2022) Book review: Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity during this Crisis (and the Next). European Journal of Women's Studies, 29(1).

Khair, K. (2024) 'Local aid groups are keeping Sudan alive' Chatham House. (online)' Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-12/local-aid-groups-are-keeping-sudan-alive

Khoury, R.B. Scott, E. (2024) Localisation doesn't shift power. It deepens international dominance. The New Humanitarian. (online) 23 July. Available at: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2024/07/23/localisation-doesnt-shift-power-it-deepens-international-dominance

Kiewied, T., Soremekun, O., Maut Jok, M. (2020) Towards Principles Humanitarian Action in Conflict Contexts. Understadning the Role of Partnerships. Voices from Nigeria and South Sudan. (online) Available at: https://dutchrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/DRA-localisation-Nigeria-SouthSudan-2021-Digitaal.pdf

Kinna, R. (1995). Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid in historical context. Internationa' Review of Social History, 40(2), 259–283.

Kirk, T. Hoffmann, K.(2013) Public Authority and the Provision of Public Goods in Conflict-Affected and Transitioning Regions.

Koch, D. J., Rooden, A. (2024) Understanding and addressing the unintended effects of aid localisation. Development in Practice, 34(3), 351–363.

Kropotkin, P. (1902) Mutual Aid, A Factor of Evolution. McClure & Philips. New York.

Kuka, H. (2024) 'A mutual aid volunteer reflects on a year of war in Sudan', The New Humanitarian, (online) 22 April. Available at: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/first-person/2024/04/22/mutual-aid-volunteer-reflects-year-war-sudan

Kvale, S., Brinkmann. S. (2009) Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing. SAGE Publications, Inc.

L'Anson, C., Pfeifer, G. (2013) A critique of humanitarian reason: agency, power, and privilege. Journal of Global Ethics, 9(1), 49–63.

Levitt, P. (2008) 'Religion as a Path to Civic Engagement', Ethnic and Racial Studies, 31:4, 766–91.

Littman, D. M., Boyett, M.,Bender, K., Dunbar, A.Z., Santarella, M., TrishBecker-Hafnor, Saavedra, K., Milligan, T. (2022) Values and beliefs underlying mutual aid: An exploration of collective care during the COVID-19 Pandemic, Journal of the Society forSocial Work and Research 13(1):89–115.

L2GP (2024a) Mutual aid and Community Responses Local to Global Protection. (online) Available at: https://www.local2global.info/mutual-aid-and-community-led-responses-1/

LG2P, (2024b) Research brief: Community led responses and mutual aid in Gaza https://usercontent.one/wp/www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/CLI_L2GP_24_Together-they-produced-one-daily-hot-meal-for-everyone.pdf?media=1733740806

LG2P (2024c) How can we distinguish a 'supporting community led response' from a group cash transfer? Local to Global Protection and the CALP Network. (online) Available at:https://www.calpnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Demystifying-sclr-and-gct.pdf

MacGinty, R. (2015) Where is the local? Critical localism and peacebuilding. Third World Quarterly, 36(5), 840–856.

Martin, L. (2020) Deconstructing the local in peacebuilding practice: representations and realities of Fambul Tok in Sierra Leone. Third World Quarterly 42(2):385-401.

McKane, R. G., Greiner, P. T., Pellow D. (2023) Mutual aid as a praxis for critical environmental justice: Lessons from W.E.B. Du Bois, critical theoretical perspectives, and mobi-lizing collective care in Disasters', Antipode 56(2):581–602.

McLisky C. Pittaway, E. (2025) 'Mutual aid in times of crisis' collection: case study Australia, April 2025' Groupe URD (online) Available at:https://www.urd.org/en/publication/mutual-aid-in-times-of-crisis-collection-case-study-australia-april-2025/

Michael, S., E. Lurie, N. Russell, and L. Unger. (1985) Rapid Response Mutual Aid Groups: A New Response to Social Crises and Natural Disasters. Social Work 30 (3)

Milan, C. Diesner, D. Faye, Cayuela, S. R. Mehnert, T. (2020) 'Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid in Europe' Green European Journal. .

Mirza, H. Bellalem, F. Mirza, C. (2023) Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research: Summary Guidelines for Novice Social Science Researchers. 11. 441-449.

Moser-Mercer, B., Qudah, S., Ali Malkawi, M. N., Mutiga, J., Al-Batineh, M. (2021). Beyond aid: Sustainable responses to meeting language communication needs in humanitarian contexts. Interpreting and Society, 1(1), 5-27.

Mulder, F. (2023) The paradox of externally driven localisation: a case study on how local actors manage the contradictory legitimacy requirements of top-down bottom-up aid. Int J Humanitarian Action 8:7.

Nasir, R., Rhodes, T., Kleinfeld, P., (2023) 'How mutual aid networks are powering Sudan's

humanitarian response' The New Humanitarian. (online) 2 August. Available at: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/08/02/how-mutual-aid-networks-are-powering-sudans-humanitarian-response

Nelson, G., Ochocka, J., Griffin, K., & Lord, J. (1998) Nothing about me, without me: Participatory action research with self-help/mutual aid organizations for psychiatric consumers/survivors. American Journal of Community Psychology, 26(6), 881–912.

Niazi, Z. (2025) 'Restructuring Relief: The Cost of a Global Humanitarian Reset' IDEA Pakistan. (online) Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/world/restructuring-relief-cost-global-humanitarian-reset

Norman, J. (2022) 'Kinshipping': Diasporic infrastructures of connectivity, circulation, and exchange. Geoforum, 135, 93-10.

OCHA, (2023) 'Sudan Humanitarian Fund dashboard 2023. Quarterly update (January - August 2023).' Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (online) Available at:https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-fund-dashboard-2023-quarterly-update-january-august-2023

OCHA (2025a) 'Key facts and figures for the Sudan crisis (21 May 2025)' United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (online) 21 May. Available at: https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/key-facts-and-figures-sudan-crisis-21-may-2025.

OCHA (2025b) 'Remove restrictions to allow aid to reach people in need in Sudan - Statement by the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan, Clementine Nkweta-Salami' Port Sudan, 10 February 2025 (online) Available at: https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/remove-restrictions-allow-aid-reach-people-need-sudan-statement-united-nations-resident-and-humanitarian-coordinator-sudan-clementine-nkweta-salami

OCHA, (2025c) 'The humanitarian reset (10 March 2025) Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (online) Available at: https://www.unocha.org/news/humanitarian-reset-10-march-2025

OCHA, (2025d) Re-prioritized Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (online) Available at: https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1220/document/sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025/article/re-prioritized-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-hnrp-3#page-title

OCHA, (2025e) Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (online) Available at: https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1220/summary

OCHA (2025f) 'Port Sudan drone attacks: A call to protect civilian infrastructure - Statement by the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan, Clementine Nkweta-Salami' Port Sudan, 10 February 2025 (online) Available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/port-sudan-drone-attacks-call-protect-civilian-

infrastructure-statement-united-nations-resident-and-humanitarian-coordinator-sudan-clementine-nkweta-salami

Olson, S., Dahab, M., Parker, M., (2024) 'Mutual aid lessons and experiences from Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan' Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform (SSHAP) (online) Available at: https://www.socialscienceinaction.org/resources/key-considerations-mutual-aid-lessons-and-experiences-from-emergency-response-rooms-in-sudan/

Oltmann, S. (2016) Qualitative interviews: A methodological discussion of the interviewer and respondent contexts. Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 17(2).

Paffenholz, T. (2015) Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research. Third World Quarterly 36(5):857-874.

Peters, R. (2016) 'Local in Practice: Professional Distinctions in Angolan Development Work.' American Anthropologist 118(3):495–507.

Petitdemange C. Hubert, A. (2025) 'Mutual aid in times of crisis' collection: case study Chad, March2025' Groupe URD (online) Available athttps://www.urd.org/en/publication/mutual-aid-in-times-of-crisis-collection-case-study-chad-march-2025/

Pidkurkova, I., Grünewald F. (2025) 'CASE STUDY: UKRAINE Survival in a war zone: mutual aid, local solidarity and beyond'Group URD (online) Available at: https://www.urd.org/en/publication/mutual-aid-in-times-of-crisis-collection-case-study-ukraine-april-2025/

Piquard, B. (2021) What knowledge counts? Local humanitarian knowledge production in protracted conflicts. A Central African Republic case study. Peacebuilding, 10(1), 85–100.

Posada, A., Ahimbisibwe L. (2025) 'Open evidence call: Impacts of supporting mutual aid through sclr and beyond' Local to Global Protection. ALNAP. (online) Available at: https://alnap.org/about/get-involved/surveys/impacts-of-supporting-mutual-aid-through-sclr-and-beyond/

Power, A., Benton, E. (2021) Community Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic: How mutual aid can help. https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/121521/1/casereport134.pdf

Radice, H. (2022) Humanitarianism as civic practice? Humanity, politics, and humanitarian activism. Journal of Civil Society, 18(2), 142-160.

Randolph, K. A., & Krause, D. J. (2002) Mutual Aid in the Classroom: An Instructional Technology Application. Journal of Social Work Education, 38(2), 259–271.

Reese, A. M., Johnson A.S (2022) We all we got: Urban black ecologies of care and mutual aid. Environment and Society: Advances in Research 13:27–42.

Rendall, J., Curtin, M., Roy, M. J., & Teasdale, S. (2022). Relationships between

community-led mutual aid groups and the state during the COVID-19 pandemic: complementary, supplementary, or adversarial? Public Management Review, 26(2), 313–333.

Robillard, S., Atim, T., Maxwell. D. (2021) Localization: A Landscape Report. Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. www.humanitarianlibrary.org/resource/localization-landscape-report.

Roepstorff, K. (2019) A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action. Third World Quarterly, 41(2), 284–301.

Rozakou, K. (2017) Solidarity #Humanitarianism: The Blurred Boundaries of Humanitarianism in Greece, Etnofoor, 29:2, 99–104.

Ryneveld M. Whyle, E. Brady, L. (2022) What Is COVID-19 Teaching Us About Communit Health Systems? A Reflection From a Rapid Community-Led Mutual Aid Response in Cape Town, South Africa. Int J Health Policy Manag. 2022 Jan 1;11(1):5-8.

Sabaratnam, M. (2013) Avatars of Eurocentrism in the Critique of the Liberal Peace. Security Dialogue 44, no. 3 (2013): 259–78.

Saleh, E., Dousa, K. M., Babiker, A., Rahma, N. E. A. A., Abdel Hadi, H., Elsayed, M., Elkhalifa, S. I., Momin, S. M. A., Abubaker, A., Nemery, O. M., Bashir, L. M., Bedri, S., Fadul, N., Hamad, Y., Babiker, Z. O. E. (2024) Health and humanitarian toll of Sudan's forgotten war. The Lancet, 404(10461), 1383–1385.

Salih, Z. M. (2024) 'Conflict in Sudan: A Map of Regional and International Actors' Wilson Center. (online) Available at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/conflict-sudan-map-regional-and-international-actors

Seebohm P. Chaudhary S., Boyce M, Elkan R., Avis M., Munn-Giddings C. (2013) The contribution of self-help/mutual aid groups to mental well-being. Health Soc Care Community. 2013 Jul;21(4):391-401.

Scott, J. P. (Ed.) (2006) Documentary research. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Shabaka (2024a) Solidarity Beyond Borders: Mutual Aid and Diaspora Alliances in Complex Emergencies. Shabaka Working Paper. Shabaka, United Kingdom.

Shabaka (2024b) Snapshot: Mutual Aid Groups in Darfur, Sudan. Shabaka. (online) Available at: https://shabaka.org/snapshot-mutual-aid-groups-in-darfur-sudan/

Shabaka (2024c) Supporting Local Resilience in Sudan and beyond. Shabaka (online) Available at: https://shabaka.org/supporting-local-resilience-in-sudan-and-beyond/

Sharma, G. (2017) Pros and cons of different sampling techniques, International journal of applied research, 3(7), pp.749-752.

Shulman, L. (1986). The dynamics of mutual aid.Social Work with Groups, 8(4 , 51-60.

Slim, H. (2022) Humanitarian Resistance: Its Ethical and Operational Importance. Network Paper Number 87, September (London: Humanitarian Practice Network, ODI). https://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Humanitarian-resistance_NP_web.pdf

Smirl, L. (2015) Spaces of Aid: How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism. Zed Books.

Spade, D. (2020a) Solidarity not charity: Mutual aid for mobilization and survival. Social Text, 38(1), 131–151.

Spade, D. (2020b) Mutual aid: Building solidarity during this crisis (and the next). Verso Books.114 Journal of the Society for Social Work & Research Spring 2022.

Steinberg, D. M. (2010) Mutual aid: A contribution to best-practice social work. Social Work With Groups, 33(1), 53–68.

Ullman, S. E., Najdowski, C. J., Adams, E. B. (2012) Women, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Related Mutual Aid Groups: Review and Recommendations for Research. Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly, 30(4), 443–486.

UNHCR (2025) 'Sudan'. Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. (online) Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/where-we-work/countries/sudan

UN News (2024) Youth-led 'emergency rooms' shine rays of hope in war-torn Sudan. (online) 3 February. Available at: https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/02/1146187

Vandevoordt, R. (2019) Subversive Humanitarianism: Rethinking Refugee Solidarity through Grass-Roots Initiatives', Refugee Survey Quarterly, 38:3, 245–65.

Verhoeven, H. (2023) Surviving Revolution and Democratisation: the Sudan Armed Forces, State Fragility and Security Competition, Journal of Modern African Studies 61.3: 413–37.

Vicenz S.D., Hallinan, E. (2023) Letting go of control Empowering locally led action in Ukraine (online) Available at: https://usercontent.one/wp/www.local2global.info/wp-content/uploads/Letting-Go_English-FINAL.pdf?media=1733740806

Wall, I., Hedlund, K. (2016). Localisation and Locally-led Crisis Response: A Literature Review. Local to Global Protection L2GP. (online) Available at: https://www.local 2global.info/wp-content/uploads/L2GP_SDC_Lit_Review_LocallyLed_June_2016_final.pdf

Wehr, H. (1976) Dictionary of modern written Arabic. Libraire de Liban. (online) Available at: https:// archive.org/details/dictionary-of-modern-written-arabic-hans

WFP (2025) 'Sudan' World Food Programme. (online) Available at: https://www.wfp.org/countries/sudan

Yin. R.K. (2014) Case study research design and methods (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Zamponi, L. (2023) Mutual aid and solidarity politics in times of emergency: direct social action and temporality in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social Movement Studies, 23(6), 756–776.

Appendices

Appendix A: Anonymised List of Interview Participants

Code: Interviewee Number	Participant Profile
I1	Country Director
I2	Humanitarian Affairs/Localisation Focal Point
I3	Humanitarian Programme Coordinator
I4	Senior Advisor - Community Responses
I5	Consultant
I6	Director
I7	Programme Manager
I8	Research and Analysis Advisor
I9	Head of Outreach
I10	Research Specialist - Mutual Aid
I11	Community Volunteer
I12	Emergency Coordinator
I13	Head of Unit
I14	Area Programme Manager
I15	Volunteer
I16	Volunteer
I17	Volunteer
I18	Volunteer
I19	Volunteer
I20	Programme Officer

Appendix B. Information Sheet + Consent Form for Participation in the Study

Information Sheet + Consent Form for Participation in the Study

My name is (removed for submission) and I am a student at the London School of Economics, conducting research as part of my dissertation for the Msc Programme in International Development and Humanitarian Emergencies. Thank you for your interest in this project. In this document, I will give you information about the project and ask for your consent to participate.

What is the study about?
The study aims to investigate how the aid system and mutual aid groups in Sudan are collaborating in crisis response following the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023. It focuses on understanding the underpinnings of mutual aid initiatives in Sudan, while also exploring the tensions and transformations that emerge when these groups interact, collaborate, and receive funding from the aid system in Sudan. In doing so, the research also aims to identify institutional and political barriers in this process.

What will my involvement be?
Part of the research includes semi-structured interviews with current or past practitioners or volunteers involved in crisis response efforts in Sudan since the conflict outbreak in April 2023. The interview will be approximately 45 minutes in length. Questions will ask participants to draw upon their experiences.

Do I have to take part?
Participation is voluntary. There are no negative consequences for you if you choose not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part but then later on change your mind and wish to withdraw your data, you can let me know by **30 July 2025** - you will not have to give any explanation why. It is also absolutely fine if you do not want to answer any specific questions, you can just let me know, and we will move on.

What will my information be used for?
The information gathered by the interviews will be used as qualitative data as part of my Masters' dissertation in International Development and Humanitarian Emergencies.

Will my information be anonymous?
Your participation will be anonymous, your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. If you agree to take part in the research, please complete the section below.

Please insert your name and read the three statements below. If you agree with them, put an X in the boxes below

Participant Name	[Please insert your first name and surname here]
I have read this message and had the opportunity to ask questions.	[ ]

I agree to participate in the interview.	[ ]
I understand that my responses will be kept as confidential as possible, that my name will not be included in any reports or publications, and that my personal information will be kept securely and destroyed at the end of the study.	[ ]

Once completed please email this back to me.

Thank you!

Researcher name: (removed for submission)
Email address: (removed for submission)

Any concerns or complaints about this study should be addressed to research.ethics@lse.ac.uk

The LSE Research Privacy Policy can be found here: https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/SecretarysDivision/Assets/Documents/Information-Records-Management/Privacy-Notice-for-Research-v1.2.pdf