
THE
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Voices Beyond the Battlefield: Future Civic Space and Recovery Prospects

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Terms and Abbreviations

CSO	Civil society organization
ERRs	Emergency response rooms
IDP	Internally displaced person
NCP	National Congress Party
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces

Executive Summary

Context

This report is the second in The Carter Center’s thematic series exploring the experiences and aspirations of Sudanese civic actors amid the country’s ongoing war and the complex journey toward recovery and transition. While the first report, “Voices Beyond the Battlefield: Sudanese Civic Actors in Wartime and Diaspora,” documented how civic actors adapted in the early stages of conflict, this study expands on that analysis, focusing on how Sudanese civic actors now see their roles as active participants in shaping peacebuilding and transitional governance processes.

Sudanese civic actors have been instrumental in responding to the conflict and are widely regarded as essential to Sudan’s future reconstruction and recovery. Operating under extremely challenging conditions, they face significant barriers imposed by entrenched political and military forces resistant to expanding civic space. Current centers of power in Sudan view the conflict and marginalization of civic voices as mechanisms to maintain control over Sudan’s political and economic systems.

The October 2021 coup by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) removed a nascent, civilian-led transitional government, reversing progress toward more participatory governance achieved since the 2019 revolution. This led to the return of military rule, remarginalization of civil society, and the dismantling of democratic institutions. The April 2023 outbreak of war between the SAF and RSF further deepened vacuums in governance and service delivery, as armed groups showed limited capacity and willingness to address essential governance functions ranging from humanitarian relief to public services. As a result, Sudan now faces a man-made famine, with hunger and aid denial being used as instruments of war.

In this context, civic actors stepped in as the primary service providers – delivering humanitarian aid, psychosocial support, protection, and public health services. Community-based initiatives such as emergency response rooms (ERRs), women’s rooms, and soup kitchens have provided critical, accountable support deeply rooted in their communities. Even before the war, resistance and neighborhood committees played critical roles in localized service delivery, underlining the longstanding role of civic-led governance alternatives.

As the crisis persists, the centrality of civic actors in Sudan’s conflict response and recovery continues to grow. Their wartime experiences – fulfilling responsibilities that would traditionally fall to the state – have only strengthened their legitimacy and operational capacity. In contrast, both armed groups and the international community have struggled to offer sustainable or coordinated support.

Despite significant challenges, Sudanese civic actors remain pragmatic and cautiously optimistic. While many are focused on responding to immediate community needs, they envision playing a long-term role in the country’s recovery. Their enduring presence in both times of peace and conflict reflects not only resilience, but also a deep commitment to building a more inclusive and accountable Sudan.

Objective and Scope of the Study

This and the preceding report, “Voices Beyond the Battlefield: Sudanese Civic Actors in Wartime and Diaspora,” draw on nearly 70 in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups conducted in April 2025 with Sudanese civic actors operating in Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Chad.

While the first report examined how civic actors adapted to the onset of conflict, this second report captures their reflections on a future shaped by violence, uncertainty, and cautious hope. It centers on the voices of those working under immense pressure yet motivated by a deep sense of community responsibility and a growing call to participate meaningfully in peace and political processes.

Based entirely on their firsthand reflections, this report aims to amplify Sudanese voices, highlight their contributions and aspirations, and provide actionable recommendations for how international actors, including donors, policymakers, and humanitarian agencies, can more effectively support and partner with them. It offers forward-looking insights into the Sudan’s evolving civic landscape and outlines frameworks to engage Sudanese civil society both during crisis and in a post-conflict future.

Key Findings

- **Civic actors hold varied views on the future role of civil society in Sudan**, from filling governance gaps to maintaining a distinct, nongovernmental role. Although they have varying perspectives, all respondents agree that civil society is essential for community survival and recovery, now and in the future. While some feel frustrated about being expected to lead recovery during the ongoing conflict, believing that armed groups responsible for much of the damage should take that responsibility, civic actors remain committed to their roles. Many respondents said that a lasting resolution feels distant, with Sudan’s complex political and military dynamics prolonging the conflict and delaying peace. However, there is cautious optimism about inclusive, civilian-led peace talks that could lay the groundwork for long-term recovery.
- **Restoring Sudan’s democratic transition remains a central aspiration**, though the level of optimism varies between those inside Sudan and those in the diaspora. Many civic actors anticipate their role will grow after the conflict, and they emphasize being able to shift from emergency aid toward recovery, development, economic empowerment, and social healing. Long-term success in sustainably ending the war and rebuilding Sudan rests on addressing the root causes of conflict and rebuilding social cohesion. Some organizations have started developing forward-looking, community-based initiatives, focused on peacebuilding, recovery, and reimagined governance, particularly in areas of relative stability, that go beyond short-term humanitarian responses – an emerging trend that will be explored further in a third thematic report of this series.
- **Civic actors call for inclusive, nonpartisan participation in peace and political processes.** They stress the importance of diverse representation in these important processes, especially among youth and women, and press for greater focus on restoring social cohesion damaged by conflict and divisive rhetoric. Civic actors consistently urge the international community to champion their participation in negotiation tables, emphasizing their current vulnerability amid the growing militarization of political life

and the shrinking of civic space by armed actors. Respondents also suggest that civic actors can play a credible monitoring role in any ceasefire or political agreement, holding new governance structures accountable to the public.

- **War is viewed as both a catastrophe and an opportunity to build a more inclusive civil society that fosters unity and holds power to account.** Many respondents see this moment as an opportunity to rebuild civil society in a more inclusive, decentralized, and community-rooted way. There is a widespread desire to move beyond the donor-driven, Khartoum-centered model of the past. Civic actors are increasingly focused on restoring social cohesion, often through cultural work, education initiatives, and efforts to counter hate speech and polarization.
- **Polarization within civil society reflects both organizational preferences and operational realities.** Polarization across civil society is common, reflecting either organization members' preferences about the war's outcome or the operational realities for such organizations as they work to maintain working relations with armed actors to continue program delivery.
- **Civic actors are operating under increasing pressure, threatening their long-term survival.** Direct threats such as targeted violence, detention, and displacement remain constant. Civic actors also face a growing funding crisis, especially after the near-total withdrawal of U.S. aid, which once made up nearly half of Sudan's humanitarian support. Paradoxically, many organizations are struggling to stay afloat, even as they gain community trust and relevance. The dissonance between rising expectations and shrinking resources raises urgent questions about whether civil society can sustain its vital role in the coming years.
- **Return and recovery are long-term, civic-led, and conditional.** Most displaced civic actors hope to return but stress that it depends on safety, political inclusion, infrastructure, and the retreat of armed actors, possibly taking a decade or more. Despite challenges, many are planning beyond the war by developing peacebuilding efforts, rebuilding trust, and preparing for social recovery, even without a ceasefire. This shift from survival to strategic planning reflects a realistic view of Sudan's complex future.
- **Civic actors anticipate their roles will expand.** Civic actors are tasked with community recovery but excluded from formal power, risking the dynamics that sparked the war. Despite this, they are committed to helping communities achieve sovereignty, focusing on localization, social cohesion, and accountability. Many see themselves not as government substitutes but as watchdogs, community builders, and political stakeholders.

Key Recommendations

Through dozens of interviews and focus groups across Sudan and the region, civic actors outlined practical, grounded recommendations for how international stakeholders can better support their efforts to protect civilians, respond to urgent humanitarian needs, and rebuild the country's civic infrastructure. Overall, they underscore the need for a fundamental reset in how international actors engage with Sudanese civil society – one that prioritizes local leadership, long-term partnership, and flexible, inclusive support.

Key recommendations are organized into three areas:

Resources and Capacity Support

- **Include civilians and civic actors in peace and political processes**, especially women, youth, and other marginalized populations, to avoid repeating exclusionary power-sharing deals. “We keep repeating the same mistake,” one respondent noted. “Only those with guns are invited to the table.” International actors should make inclusive participation a condition of engagement, elevate civilian voices, and reject the exclusionary logic of armed power-sharing.
- **Invest in organizational resilience**, moving beyond personality-driven models to build robust, community-anchored institutions.
- **Expand access to flexible, small-scale funding** that enables fast, grassroots response. Small, adaptable grants, often as little as \$5,000, can enable high-impact, community-led work. Civic actors underscored the need for faster, more accessible, and less bureaucratic funding: “We don’t need big money. We need money that moves,” one actor said.
- **Provide essential tools and equipment**, from laptops to solar chargers, to enable operations in conflict conditions.
- **Support leadership development and volunteer sustainability**, including stipends and mental health support.

Thematic Initiatives

- **Strengthen civilian-led documentation and justice efforts**, providing tools and training to safely collect evidence for future accountability.
- **Rebuild civic cohesion and reduce fragmentation**, especially among women’s groups, through shared agendas and protected spaces for dialogue.
- **Integrate protection and mental health in programming**, recognizing the trauma, burnout and persistent threats civic actors face.

Policy and Practice

- **Shift from charity to co-creation**, treating local actors as equal partners and investing in their ability to rebuild.
- **Adapt funding models to conflict conditions** with mobile transfers, flexible reporting, and alternative oversight methods.
- **Localize aid through mutual aid networks**, which will empower communities to lead in service delivery and resilience-building.

Context and Rationale

Sudanese civic actors have played a vital role in responding to the country’s ongoing war and are widely viewed as central to its future reconstruction and recovery. Operating in deeply challenging conditions, Sudanese civic actors face significant barriers, particularly from entrenched military forces resistant to any expansion of civic space. These civic actors are often positioned in direct opposition to dominant power structures that view both the war and the marginalization of civic voices as part of a broader effort to retain control over Sudan’s political and economic systems.

The October 2021 coup, undertaken jointly by the SAF and RSF, ousted the civilian-led, civil-military hybrid transitional government. The coup reversed gains toward a democratic governing dispensation made since the 2019 revolution, which had ended 30 years of autocratic rule. The result was remarginalization of civil society and the dismantling of newly formed institutions intended to guide Sudan toward democratic governance. In April 2023 the SAF and RSF, unable to address their fundamental differences or to govern Sudan effectively in the face of nationwide protests and international disapproval of the coup, initiated a devastating war, now in its third year. Yet, as one prominent civic actor told the Center, “This is a counterrevolutionary war, a war against civilians.”

In the power vacuums left by conflict, armed actors have demonstrated limited capacity, and in some cases limited willingness, to provide even the most basic of governance functions, including humanitarian relief, civilian protection and essential public services.¹ According to interlocutors, neither the SAF nor RSF appears positioned to meaningfully fill this role in the near term, despite having established parallel administrative structures and asserting sovereign claims. Many Sudanese who were displaced to neighboring countries and later encouraged to return to Khartoum following the SAF’s recapture of the capital have chosen to leave again due to unlivable conditions. Humanitarian actors expressed growing concerns that both the SAF and the RSF continue to use hunger and aid denial as weapons of war.² According to the U.N., more than 25 million people in Sudan are experiencing food insecurity. Of those, nearly 9 million face severe hunger, and parts of the country are at risk of famine conditions due to conflict-related disruptions to food supplies and humanitarian access.³

In this context, civic actors have emerged as the primary responders to Sudan’s vast humanitarian, psychosocial, public health, protection, and basic service needs. ERRs (*ghorfa tawariya*), women’s rooms (*ghorfa al nisaa*), and soup kitchens (*takayya*) have delivered both life-saving and day-to-day support with a high degree of accountability to the communities they serve. Their deep roots in these communities and their voluntary, community-driven nature have made their interventions especially effective and resource-efficient. Even before the war, resistance committees and neighborhood committees also played key roles in localized service delivery, underscoring the longstanding importance of community-based initiatives in filling the governance and service gaps left by successive governments in Khartoum.

As of late 2024, 54% of humanitarian actors operating in Sudan were local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), 36% were international NGOs and just 8% were United Nations agencies – a breakdown that speaks to the prominence of Sudanese civic actors.⁴ In the nonhumanitarian space, their presence is even more dominant. Sudanese grassroots and civic actors, particularly ERRs, have proved to be highly effective frontline responders, even amid the kind of international aid access challenges seen in contexts such as Myanmar and Syria. Their growing credibility and impact have been internationally recognized; ERRs were

¹ See: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/05/08/sudan-civil-war-conflict-rsf-saf-uae-hemeti-burhan/>.

² See: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/06/using-starvation-weapon-war-sudan-must-stop-un-experts>.

³ See: <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/reports/unicef-sudan-humanitarian-situation-report-january-2025>, <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/sudan-emergency>, <https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/sudan-emergency> and <https://www.fao.org/emergencies/where-we-work/SDN/en>.

⁴ See: <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/reports/unicef-sudan-humanitarian-annual-situation-report>, <https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/sudan-crisis-response-plan-2024-2025>.

nominated for the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize and awarded the European Union's 2025 Human Rights Prize.^{5,6}

Civic actors are poised to play a critical role in Sudan's response to the conflict for the foreseeable future, whether in the context of war or a transitional phase toward participatory governance. Expanded roles for civic actors in the longer term following the war will derive from their proven capacity and responsiveness, the failure of armed actors to provide basic governance or equitable services, and the international community's inability to fill this gap effectively. Civic actors have historically led community-based responses during times of both peace and conflict, and their significance is increasing as the crisis continues.

Sudanese civic interlocutors consulted did not immediately see themselves as central to Sudan's long-term recovery. This vision belies the all-encompassing nature of the conflict. It also reflects a historical marginalization of civic actors in formal governance processes and a recognition that peace or a political resolution feels distant for nearly all those consulted. When asked to reflect on their potential roles in a post-conflict Sudan, particularly amid inevitable governance and service delivery deficits, most interlocutors responded with pragmatism and caution. Their tempered expectations reflect both the scale of the challenge and a clear understanding of the opportunities and limitations ahead.

Methodology

This research is based on structured interviews with a targeted sample of 65 Sudanese civic actors from civil society organizations (CSOs), community-based groups, and voluntary initiatives, both inside Sudan and in key regional host countries in the region, including Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda – countries to which large numbers of Sudanese civic actors have fled the conflict.

While the term “diaspora” is used throughout this report, we understand that many Sudanese who have fled the country did not do so by choice, nor do they consider themselves permanently settled elsewhere. They exist in a state between displacement and exile, often in neighboring countries, living in limbo and holding onto hopes of returning home. Our use of “diaspora” reflects this shifting and unsettled condition, rather than a stable or voluntary migration. In addition, 17 Sudanese actors participated in two in-person focus group discussions held in Egypt and Uganda. Despite significant challenges, particularly communication constraints, The Carter Center conducted 30% of its interviews with people within Sudan, more than in any other location. This research included participants from 14 of the country's 18 states, including areas controlled by the SAF or RSF.

All interviews and discussions were guided by a set of questions that explored three broad areas: the conditions and intentions surrounding the return to Sudan of displaced or relocated civic actors; the roles that civil society actors envision for themselves in Sudan's post-conflict recovery, governance, and pursuit of justice; and the effectiveness of international support to Sudanese civil society and how it could be improved.

⁵ See: <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/msf-briefs-un-security-council-sudan-catastrophic-war-people#:~:text=%22The%20humanitarian%20response%20alters%2C%20crippled,civilians%20and%20meet%20humanitarian%20needs.>

⁶ See: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/sudan/european-union-sudan-human-rights-prize-2025_en#:~:text=The%20EU%20Human%20Rights%20Prize%20recognises%20the%20invaluable%20contribution%20of,by%20the%20war%20in%20Sudan.

Respondents reflected on the immediate realities of working under conflict and on their long-term aspirations, including priorities for accountability, reconciliation, and inclusive political processes. Focus group discussions covered similar themes while also allowing for collective reflection and shared perspectives. Findings in this report are drawn directly from those respondents; their identities and affiliations have been kept confidential. Focus group sessions lasted between two and 2.5 hours. Participants across all engagements represented a diverse cross-section of Sudanese civil society, including youth and women, humanitarian responders, grassroots organizers, educators, peacebuilders, health professionals, human rights defenders, and representatives of formal organizations and informal volunteer networks. Their work spans a wide range of sectors, including civic education, gender equality, digital advocacy, governance, transitional justice, and emergency response. Sudanese participants outside of the country came from all 18 Sudanese states.

Most one-on-one interviews were conducted in person; 20 were held virtually with participants in Sudan and Ethiopia. They were conducted in Arabic and English and lasted an average of two hours. A Carter Center staff member moderated each discussion, while another took notes. Interviews followed a semi-structured guide, and all participants gave verbal consent. Some were recorded, with permission, to support data synthesis and analysis. Transcriptions were completed by a Carter Center staff member to maintain confidentiality.

Although the study draws on a diverse sample of civic actors from across Sudan and the diaspora, it does not aim to offer a statistically representative or comprehensive account of Sudan's civic landscape. Security risks, access limitations, and the fast-changing nature of the conflict restricted the geographic and demographic scope of the research. Nonetheless, the insights gathered provide meaningful reflections on the evolving realities and future role of Sudanese civil society. Rather than offering a full mapping of the crisis, this study highlights strategic and programmatic priorities to inform more effective engagement by donors and policymakers.

Findings

Vision for the Future of Civil Society in Sudan

Sudan's future needs are of vast proportions – the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has designated Sudan as “the largest humanitarian crisis ever recorded.”⁷ The end of the conflict, whenever it comes, will not eradicate these challenges. To the contrary, as areas stabilize and displaced populations return, new political, justice, and governance issues will emerge, expanding the scale and complexity of needs.

Many respondents believe a lasting resolution is still distant and difficult to achieve. Although there is a desire for peace, the political and military dynamics in Sudan have prolonged the conflict, making peace seem further away than expected. As one respondent said, “We are surviving today. Peace is a hope for tomorrow.”

Some respondents noted that the possibility of peace feels so remote that they struggle to plan beyond short-term survival, raising concerns that recovery efforts may be based on unrealistic assumptions about when peace will come.

⁷ See [Stories from Sudan: The largest humanitarian crisis on record | The IRC](#).

Civic actors expressed cautious optimism about peace talks and international engagement, seeing them as potential catalysts for change. This optimism is based on three main factors: the resilience of local communities, the steadfast work of CSOs, and the hope for a community-driven peace process. Despite low levels of trust, respondents believe such a process could gradually inspire change through visible local progress.

The path to recovery remains uncertain. Many civic actors pointed out that while peace is a priority, immediate survival needs and the influence of armed groups often overshadow it. Respondents emphasized the difficulty of imagining a peaceful Sudan amid continued violence and unpredictability, and they expressed skepticism about the timeline for peace.

Despite these challenges, civic actors are determined to move beyond emergency response and focus on long-term recovery and resilience. They recognize that sustained peace will require more than meeting immediate needs; it will require planning, rebuilding institutions, and fostering lasting change.

Civic actors have significantly expanded their skills and capacities during the conflict. As primary responders for both those remaining in Sudan and those who fled, they have become some of the most trusted entities operating in the country today. Without civic actors such as ERRs, “Sudan simply would have collapsed,” said the head of one Port Sudan-based organization.

Looking ahead, civic actors expect their roles to vary significantly. Some believe that “civil society must pick up the slack of a government unlikely to be willing or able to serve Sudanese for the foreseeable future,” while others emphasize a more traditional division of responsibilities between government and civil society. One respondent said, “Civic actors should not seek to replace the role of government in society.” Still, all respondents recognized the critical role civil society has played and will continue to play in their communities’ survival. As one civic actor noted, “Before the war, civil society played a lot of the roles of the state. After the war, [we] will have an even bigger role in this.”

During interviews, many civic actors expressed deep frustration that they are expected to shoulder the burden of rebuilding a country devastated by what they see as a wholly unnecessary conflict. “Both sides are going to outsource services,” said one interlocutor, referring to the RSF and SAF, “given their inability to govern and their disinterest in doing so.” Analysts and respondents alike pointed to the motivation of armed groups to prolong the conflict in order to avoid duties and responsibilities expected of sovereign authorities of their respective territories (and of Sudan as a whole), while allowing civic actors to fill the void.

This sense of injustice was echoed in accounts of how civic actors are now tasked with leading recovery efforts, despite having played no role in starting the war or causing social and physical destruction. “They think their voices are louder than ours because they have weapons,” said one. Another added, “We are filling the gap they should have been filling themselves.” That burden is made even heavier by the direct threats civic actors face, including targeted killings, torture, detention, or expulsion, often at the hands of armed groups who view them as aligned with the opposing side of the conflict. Given the humanitarian nature of their work, such attacks may amount to war crimes.

Civic actors' aspirations for the future are closely tied to Sudan's political trajectory. If a peace process once again favors armed actors with the most armament and combatants, a dramatically different environment for civic action may emerge. In contrast, a genuinely inclusive transitional process with clear milestones and civic participation could offer new opportunities. Many respondents voiced deep fear about the possible return of the National Congress Party (NCP), Islamists, and security actors into government. As a respondent put it: "It is hard for Sudanese to trust another government unless that government proves it is here to help." People continue to trust and rely on civil society because of its consistent responsiveness to local needs.

Many expressed a desire to move beyond emergency response and return to long-term efforts, including peacebuilding, development, and capacity building – work that many civic actors were engaged in before the war. In fact, some have already begun to shift back toward this kind of work, particularly in areas of relative stability.

Like the society they serve, civic actors are diverse. Polarization among civic actors is widespread, either out of necessity to enable delivery in their respective areas or because of more deeply held convictions about the future of Sudan. Those who have declared their alliance with the RSF or the SAF may be elevated to deliver services in their respective areas of governmental control.

Moving Past the Role of Aid Provision

Restoring the democratic transition preoccupies many activists. This maximalist approach to a post-conflict Sudan helps keep alive hopes of a return to the halcyon days of the 2018-2019 revolution that sought "freedom, peace, and justice" – even as many of those consulted, especially those based inside Sudan, feel less optimistic about any return to a participatory process.

Many civic actors acknowledged the weight of continuing their work, despite the risks and frustrations with the lack of progress toward a peaceful resolution. Furthermore, many participants expressed hope that there would be scope to shift away from the emergency mindset and modalities of delivery and to contribute to recovery, rehabilitation, and development. CSO leaders hope to work in long-term economic empowerment in addition to creating opportunities for securing one's basic needs, short-term temporary work, and trauma healing.⁸

Many civic actors emphasized the need to shift from a purely aid-based model toward livelihood-oriented strategies that create sustainable economic opportunities. These include supporting local businesses, cooperatives, and civic-private partnerships that generate income and build community resilience. Such models offer long-term value with fewer resources and reduce dependency on external assistance, offering a more stable foundation for recovery. As one respondent said, "[We are] looking forward to more than just emergency response." A more detailed arc offered by another respondent suggested, "We need to shift from aid and relief to peace, then to development." Another said, "We already started preparing for the post-war

⁸ Livelihoods support people in meeting basic needs through activities like farming or small trade. Cash-for-work provides short-term income through temporary jobs, often linked to community projects. Economic empowerment aims to give individuals long-term control over resources, decision-making, and financial independence.

phase and peace. We work mainly on social peace. We're trying that, at least, IDP and refugee camps get together and mend the social fabric. We won't have peace unless we start now.”⁹

Respondents acknowledged that longer-term perspectives rest heavily on improving working relationships with international actors to boost the localization of aid, build institutions and support policymaking. Respondents also noted that community-based economic initiatives often face barriers due to limited access to capital and high financial risk. To address this, many called on donors to co-create financial tools that reduce risk to local investment – such as matching grants, micro guarantees, and pooled risk-sharing mechanisms. These tools would encourage entrepreneurship, unlock local economic energy, and foster inclusive, locally rooted recovery.

While acknowledging previous international efforts, many interviewees called for a fundamental shift in how external actors engage with Sudanese civil society. As one civic actor in Kampala put it, “Donors really have no idea how to help civil society.” On avoiding the risk of reinforcing elite capture in Sudan’s broader reconstruction effort, another respondent said, “The international community needs to look at us as partners, not beneficiaries.” This sentiment was overtly a component of a larger vision to help communities “move from dependence to sovereignty” through strategy development, community asset development, mobilization, and mapping of resources.

Although many CSOs focus on delivering aid, some are already engaged in peacebuilding work. To support a shift from emergency response to longer-term recovery, respondents called for international approaches to take a broader, future-oriented view of Sudan – one that prioritizes localization of humanitarian and development assistance, addresses root causes of conflict, rebuilds social fabric, and includes civic actors in high-level peace efforts.

Civic Actors’ Role in Peace and Political Processes

Civilian actors have a role to play in both peace processes and in mending Sudan’s social fabric. As Sudan’s war continues to divide communities and reinforce military control, civic actors are calling not only for a seat at the peace negotiations but also for support in rebuilding trust and unity at the grassroots level. Peace and social recovery are closely connected, and civilians are essential to both. Without their meaningful involvement, efforts to end the war and rebuild Sudanese society risk repeating the exclusion and divisions of the past.

Respondents called consistently for the inclusion of nonpartisan civilian voices in any ceasefire, peace agreement or political negotiation. Historically, civic actors have been frozen out of peace processes that have seen armed actors fight their way to prominence and to the negotiation table. Many of the stakeholders consulted wish to be elevated to participate in any coming peace and political deliberations, and they advocated for expanding the peace process to include diverse views and actors, especially youth and women. One diaspora-based civic actor warned that “if they have SAF and RSF sit together to make that deal, they will not consider civilians.”

⁹ Evidencing a holistic and long-term approach, the respondent continued: “We bring kids here [to an IDP, or internally displaced person, camp] every Sunday from different ethnic backgrounds, and they bring their mothers. They learn Arabic and play sports, kids from different ages. We discuss with their [mothers] issues on gender and social peace. We try in all our activities to work on trauma healing through diverse coexistence.”

Many of those consulted showed awareness of their role in supporting social recovery and the repair of social fabric through the promotion of peaceful coexistence, which has been critically damaged by a cascade of divisive hate speech, particularly online. The Sudanese civic community in Kampala was particularly eager to focus on such work, simply because it is the largest and most diverse of these regional communities, with some polarization within both the displaced population and the civic actors. When asked, “How are we going to live together after this war ends?” one respondent declared, “We must not give [the warring parties] a chance to destroy our unity.”

The role of art and cultural promotion was touted as key to bringing people together and repairing a shared sense of what it is to be Sudanese. Some civic actors mentioned the Connecting Classroom project as an example of an initiative that promotes social cohesion. Funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the British Council, the project focuses on boosting students’ critical thinking skills and digital literacy, helping them assess the quality of information and build empathy through technology. It also encourages intracommunity connection over marginalization and online hate speech.

Many respondents agreed that the war and the rebirth of civil society and civic action represented an opportunity to “reshape civil society initiatives and change the pre-war way of working,” which was largely characterized by a centralized, donor-driven approach focused in the urban center of Khartoum. That system suffered from limited grassroots participation, constrained civic space due to government restrictions, and fragmented, short-term projects that often lacked inclusivity and local ownership. Representatives of organizations located inside Sudan had different ambitions and intentions after the war from those outside the country. Where refugees spoke more readily about reviving Sudan’s transition, the ambitions of those inside Sudan and living close to the conflict daily revealed more modest goals and lowered sights. When asked, respondents inside Sudan were only able to contemplate a narrower set of themes and possibilities, including reconstruction.

Notably, where some civic actors highlighted an inherent distinction between civil society and government, they expressed regular interest in taking up a role as a watchdog to monitor the progress of key initiatives such as ceasefires, safe corridors, protection of civilians, political agreement implementation, and other peace efforts.

Respondents across the board are seeking a greater role for civil society in the country’s deliberations over how to end the war and shape Sudan’s political and social arrangements. This demand was born of an awareness of the failures of past post-conflict arrangements that had elevated armed actors’ interests over those of the broader population. Their track record of community service makes them credible voices for inclusion in peace processes. However, they felt unable to claim this space on their own, appealing repeatedly for the international community to facilitate their place at any future negotiating table. This highlights that civic actors feel and remain comparatively weak in the heavily militarized Sudanese context.

Maintaining Civic Responsiveness to Evolving Needs

In interviews and focus groups, civic actors spoke more readily about the modalities and opportunities for delivery than specific interventions or programming sectors. This perpetuated a sense that Sudanese civil society groups are thinking closely about the practicalities of *how* to work, rather than prejudging *what* they would do in response to community needs and demands. It also suggests a readiness to be flexible. Many did not want to assume they would know the most critical needs of a population suffering after two years of war. In focus groups,

civic actors focused on how to remain responsive to the evolving needs of their communities rather than being guided by fixed programming sectors or themes driven by external priorities. This underscored a strong commitment to bottom-up approaches. They emphasized the importance of allowing needs to emerge from the ground, particularly as daily life and survival strategies have shifted significantly since the war began. This flexibility reflects not only a practical strategy but also a principled stance rooted in humility, inclusion, and community trust.

The heroic response of civic actors to the conflict was undertaken in an ad hoc manner, with little to no preparation, given the sudden onset of the war. Civic actors encountered considerable chaos as they scrambled to respond under exceedingly tough conditions. Most organizations did not have expertise in humanitarian or emergency response, yet they pivoted their focus and developed capacities to respond as need dictated, and as funding allowed. Although some groups have started to find their feet through existing structures such as the localized coordination council for Khartoum ERRs, many are small grassroots entities that may not have even existed before the war and don't have the necessary internal or partnership structures to keep them functioning.

Civic actors' hopes of contributing to Sudan's recovery and building community resilience are tempered by their acute awareness of the constraints they face – from direct targeting by armed actors, brain drain as skilled professionals flee the conflict and associated hardships, and the overwhelming scale of the social and humanitarian catastrophe in Sudan. “What is happening is exceeding the ability of civil society to react,” said one NGO leader in Kampala.

Funding remains a key constraint. Sudan has received only a fraction of the humanitarian assistance requested since the war began, while global aid budgets have shrunk and other crises have absorbed international attention.¹⁰ Recovery funding will be even more scarce. The near-complete withdrawal of U.S. assistance, which accounted for nearly half of Sudan's humanitarian funding in 2023, has been devastating for civil society.¹¹ As civic actors across sectors acutely felt this loss and a drop in funding from other international donors, they feared for their future viability as working organizations. Though diaspora contributions have helped, they are insufficient to fill the gap left by major donors in Washington, London, Stockholm, and The Hague.

Across all interviews, Sudanese civic actors expressed a strong, unwavering commitment to serve their communities despite immense personal, organizational, and political challenges. Since the start of the war, they have adapted quickly and effectively, often with little prior experience in humanitarian work, to meet urgent needs amid extreme risks and uncertainty. Their response has been mostly ad hoc, underfunded, and carried out while facing threats such as targeted violence, displacement, and political exclusion. Yet they have stayed present where others have stepped back, becoming some of the most trusted actors on the ground. This dedication is driven not by political ambitions but by a sense of responsibility, deep community ties, and a desire to support long-term peace and recovery.

Many actors noted they do not aim to replace the state but instead to fill critical gaps while pushing for a more inclusive and accountable political process. As one respondent said, “We

¹⁰ The Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2025 requires US\$4.16 billion to reach 20.9 million people in need. As of April 8, 2025, it was only 10% funded. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/international-community-must-urgently-respond-humanitarian-crisis-sudan>

¹¹ See: <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/212/summary/2023>.

don't think about joining government. We aren't that ambitious. We work for the community." Despite being overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis, civic actors are already looking beyond emergency response toward rebuilding, social cohesion, and long-term development. Their determination is not just about survival but also about laying the foundation for a different future.

The availability of funding will be critical to civil society's ability to continue functioning at scale – not only to meet emergency needs but also to sustain the hope and civic capacity needed for long-term recovery.

Looking Forward: Return, Recovery, and the Future Role of Sudanese Civic Actors

The views of civic actors on their future role, the challenges they may face, and what recovery might look like over time significantly shape their perceptions and planning for the future. The conditions under which displaced civic actors might return to Sudan remain critical.

Nearly all displaced civic groups and individuals interviewed by The Carter Center said they would like to return to work inside Sudan, but the perceived opportunities to do so rest on several unlikely premises in the near future: safety and security, including an end to targeting based on tribe or ethnicity; the return of armed actors to their barracks and their retreat from governance and the economy; the exit of Islamists and the NCP, which have historically posed particular existential and structural threats to civil society; the rehabilitation and rebuilding of infrastructure to enable effective operations; and, more optionally for some, a return to a transitional political process (described as “the minimum” by one civil society leader).¹²

In a context filled with armed actors fundamentally opposed to a civilian outcome in Sudan, opportunity for action by civic actors is necessarily limited, and civic actors understand this better than anyone. Said one respondent based in Uganda, “We are nothing in this ocean of powers. We have no clear plan. We will try to evolve our methods and activities.”

Although civic actors are under immense pressure and feel overwhelmed by the scale of destruction, they carry with them a deep well of experience and legitimacy. Their role as essential providers of services and civic leadership has grown since the war began. Though exact figures are difficult to capture in the current context, these bodies have consistently delivered critical support, providing tens or even hundreds of thousands of meals daily through community kitchens and offering emergency medical care to individuals severely impacted by extreme – and often gender-based – violence. This record of action through grassroots engagement has generated a reservoir of trust and created a wide base of constituencies across Sudan. International actors should take heart from the impact and effectiveness of these organizations, operating in what may be the world's most challenging context for humanitarian delivery.

Some respondents noted that 10-15 years may be a realistic minimum timeframe required to reach a sufficiently peaceful context. A ceasefire was seen by many as a necessary but wholly insufficient step toward a return to peace. In the absence of deeper guarantees of peace and

¹² These fears do not just apply to civic actors prospectively operating inside Sudan. One Kampala-based respondent declared that, as a Darfuri, she no longer felt safe sharing that her mother is Reizegat (the same tribe as RSF leadership) and felt reduced – even in Uganda – to being viewed simply as “a dark-skinned Darfuri woman.”

safety, “many civilian actors will remain at risk,” said one male respondent in Sudan. Additionally, for those who can afford it, life in Kampala or Nairobi is a comparatively appealing prospect for professionals with families. One displaced respondent pointed out that the conditions in his home area in the east of Sudan are dire with no electricity or water, but that in Nairobi, his children were in school and receiving a quality education – a far cry from the context the family would face if they returned to their home in eastern Sudan.

The limits on what civic actors can realistically provide in the ongoing war context are manifold. According to interlocutors, Sudan’s challenging and risky conditions will not dissipate with a ceasefire; such is the level of violent, heavily armed economic competition that will inevitably take place given the perilous state of the economy. Neither the RSF nor the SAF has shown any sign of leniency or accommodation toward civil society groups working in their respective areas of control, and both sides remain suspicious of civic actors.

Recommendations to Support Sudan’s Civic Actors

Civic actors eagerly took advantage of the opportunity during interviews and focus groups to provide recommendations for international stakeholders to consider; they cumulatively offered an extensive set of suggestions. The recommendations directly reflect the voices of Sudanese civic actors and have been compiled to inform and expand international support to civic actors inside and outside Sudan.

Rather than reiterating broad calls for increased funding and basic services, this report highlights the most practical and widely supported recommendations provided by those interviewed. They are grouped into three categories: resources and capacity support, thematic initiatives, and policy and practice.

Resources and Capacity Support

Include civic actors and civilians in peace and political negotiations: Civic actors working within their communities should be meaningfully included in peace and political processes, to help break Sudan’s recurring pattern of power-sharing agreements that reward armed actors who fought their way to the negotiating table. To ensure a more durable process, international actors should communicate clearly to negotiating parties that the inclusion of nonpartisan civilians – including women and youth – is a nonnegotiable condition for credible and meaningful engagement.

Provide digital communication equipment: International stakeholders should work to ensure access to essential digital tools, including internet (e.g., Starlink), phones, routers, power banks, solar chargers, and satellite equipment. These tools are necessary for coordination, remote training, and emergency response, particularly in areas where mobile service is limited or restricted.

Strengthen CSO governance, leadership, and operational capacity: CSOs should prioritize steps to strengthen their internal governance, leadership structures, and core operational capacities. Support is needed to accomplish this. This is especially important in contexts where leadership is highly personalized. As one respondent noted, “In some cases, when the founder dies, the organization disappears.” Enhancing governance systems can ensure continuity, institutional memory, accountability, and resilience beyond individual leaders, while also addressing common concerns among donors about the ability of small and nascent

organizations to manage external funds. At the same time, targeted support is needed to build key organizational skills, including project management, monitoring and evaluation, financial oversight, strategic planning, and the effective use of digital tools for advocacy, mobilization, and countering hate speech. Strengthening these areas will better position CSOs to play a sustained and credible role in peacebuilding and democratic transitions.

Maximize use of local resources: As one respondent noted, “We have so many community assets, but how can we mobilize these assets in light of the shortage of money?” Rather than relying on external mapping of local resources, it is crucial to prioritize community-driven approaches that focus on identifying resource gaps and building connections within and between communities. Fostering collaboration and strengthening local knowledge will support civic actors in identifying and mobilizing underused community resources, such as land, water, local skills and networks. International actors can help facilitate resource-sharing networks and provide technical assistance to identify gaps, rather than attempt to map every asset. This approach empowers communities to take ownership of their own development while strengthening resilience. For example, reducing risk for impact investments can reduce reliance on traditional aid and enable more sustainable development. These efforts can strengthen local food systems, economic security, and foster inter-community collaboration, increasing resilience to both conflict and hunger.

Expand access to specialized professional training to help civic actors respond to community needs: Civic actors need advanced, context-relevant training in legal aid, psychosocial support and trauma healing, child protection, digital security, hostile environment, and emergency response. Provision of such capacities would strengthen their ability to respond to urgent community needs in a conflict-affected environment.

Equip CSOs with basic office tools: After widespread looting of offices across Sudan, many civic organizations lack essential items such as laptops, printers, transportation (vehicles and fuel), storage units, and spaces for working, meeting, and training. Filling these gaps is essential to sustaining programming and community services.

Increase access to small, flexible grants for grassroots initiatives: Many local organizations deliver strong results with minimal funding and modest support (e.g. \$5,000–\$7,000) for activities such as transportation for students, educational materials or basic supplies. These high-impact, low-cost initiatives can make a major difference in the local context. Prioritizing the value of grants over their size ensures broader reach and greater responsiveness, especially in Sudan’s dynamic and evolving environment. The flexibility to increase or decrease grant amounts depending on project scope and local needs would help ensure the most effective use of resources.

These entry-level grants also provide emerging or underrepresented civic organizations in Sudan an opportunity to demonstrate their capacity, innovate beyond traditional donor frameworks, and address local needs more effectively.

In Sudan, many grassroots organizations face limited access to banking, with high fees and delays for cross-border transfers due to sanctions. To address this, donors have successfully used mobile money platforms, cash transfers, and direct procurement of supplies. These methods provide more accessible and cost-effective ways to ensure funds reach local actors, especially in remote areas with unreliable infrastructure.

Scale up predictable, multiyear, flexible funding for Sudanese civic actors: International stakeholders should restore and expand access to core funding, particularly for smaller community-based organizations that often operate informally and that have historically lacked direct access to international financing. This kind of support is essential for building organizational sustainability, reducing dependency on short-term project cycles, and fostering long-term civic engagement. Sudan's current crisis highlights the urgency of localizing aid and investing directly in grassroots networks.

Strengthen regional bodies' ability to engage effectively: Donors should provide technical and operational support to African multilateral bodies such as the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development so that they can play a more active and capable role in supporting Sudanese-led responses to the conflict.

Invest in volunteer support and leadership development: Volunteers are the backbone of essential service delivery, but they often lack the necessary resources. Providing stipends for mental health and leadership development support, especially for marginalized or first-time group leaders, would improve sustainability and expand impact.

Initiatives

Strengthen capacities for documenting human rights violations: Efforts should focus improving the technical skills and knowledge of civil society actors to support transitional justice, mediation, and constitution-making processes, both broadly and thematically. The international community should consider initiatives that build CSO capacity to document incidents to the high standards required for interventions in regional and international courts. This can be achieved through specialized training on how to document specific violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

Equip women to be part of peace and political processes: To ensure meaningful participation in peace and political processes, women should be supported through training and technical assistance that prepares them to engage with other stakeholders on peacebuilding, security sector reform, national dialogues, transitional justice, and constitution-making. Developing a unifying women's agenda around which all women could coalesce would support greater solidarity across the demographic, reduce polarization and fragmentation within groups that are fighting for scarce resources, and present an entry point for women in the various national discourses.

Develop and apply protection mechanisms: Given the daily extreme threats faced by civic actors, who undertake the vast majority of lifesaving actions in Sudan, the international community should enhance the development and implementation of protection initiatives. This includes political and diplomatic pressure on violators, legal assistance, digital security, and access to safe spaces for staff at risk.

Unite civilian voices across divides: The international community should prioritize initiatives that help unify Sudan's fragmented anti-war constituency and strengthen solidarity among civilian actors, particularly women and youth. Respondents emphasized that polarization driven by the conflict has severely weakened civilian influence, to the benefit of the warring parties. In contrast to the revolutionary period, which was marked by civic unity, strength, and real political leverage, the current moment is characterized by divisions that limit the ability of civilians to pressure armed actors to end the war. Women's groups have been particularly affected. As one civic actor explained, "There is fragmentation now amongst women's groups,"

and, “The conflict affected women in their agenda.” To tackle this, supporting common agendas and solidarity platforms will enhance their ability to counter polarization and engage more effectively in national peace and governance efforts.

Prioritize the mental health and well-being of civic actors and frontline workers: Addressing burnout, trauma, and long-term stress is essential to sustain the work of frontline responders and ensure organizational sustainability. To prevent further emotional impact on aid workers, especially those assisting survivors of violence or vulnerable communities, donors and international partners should incorporate psychosocial support and well-being initiatives into all civic engagement programs.

Enhance accountability through civil society monitoring: International stakeholders should support community-led observation and reporting of ceasefires, political agreements, and humanitarian initiatives. Complementary international and local monitoring efforts can improve transparency, inform diplomacy, and pressure armed actors to uphold their commitments. This would not only boost transparency but also complement international observation mechanisms, providing grounded, real-time insights that external actors might lack.

Policies and Practice

Localize aid through support for mutual aid networks: The international community should empower grassroots service providers and mutual aid networks, shifting away from top-down aid delivery models. In Sudan, it is imperative to empower local institutions and service providers, as local organizations are often best placed to address urgent needs, strengthen resilience, and promote community-led development.

Adapt funding models to conflict-affected contexts: Donors should modify funding and operational policies to better reflect the realities of conflict-affected areas, where traditional banking and money transfer systems may not be functional. This involves exploring various disbursement options, such as mobile payments or local cash distribution systems, and offering greater flexibility in compliance and reporting. Engaging local stakeholders to develop funding systems that are practical in these environments is crucial to ensuring that support reaches those who need it most, in a timely and effective manner.

Revise oversight approaches to high-risk environments: Traditional project oversight methods often fail in conflict zones due to logistical challenges and security concerns. Donor oversight policies should be adapted to maintain accountability while allowing for more flexible, context-aware monitoring methods. This could include alternative reporting approaches, third-party verification, and fostering continuous dialogue with grantees. Oversight should be adapted to ensure that donor requirements align with the actual capacity of local partners while also reducing administrative complexities that might block effective and timely responses.

Focus on livelihoods, not just aid: The international community should support local businesses, cooperatives, and initiatives to create jobs and build long-term economic strength. This is more sustainable than short-term aid and helps reduce dependency on international donors.

Make community investment less risky: International stakeholders should work with local groups to create simple tools such as matching grants or shared risk funds. These can help small businesses grow, support local entrepreneurs, and make recovery fairer and more lasting.

Establish real-time, responsive funding and support mechanisms: To expedite decision-making, funding approval, and disbursement, international organizations should establish systems for timely information-sharing and rapid coordination with local partners. This could include setting up dedicated communication channels (such as WhatsApp groups, secure online platforms, or regular virtual briefings) with frontline civic actors to monitor needs, track emerging developments, and prioritize interventions. Integrating local expertise into programming and decision-making processes, including by hiring local staff or forming advisory groups of civic actors, will also ensure that support is more timely, relevant, and grounded in the current realities on the ground.

Increase donor flexibility to meet local needs: Donors should adapt their funding policies and compliance frameworks to better support conflict-affected environments like Sudan. This includes considering streamlining reporting requirements, allowing implementing partners to adjust activities in response to real-time community needs without lengthy approval processes, and exploring alternative disbursement methods such as mobile money or in-kind support. Reducing rigid expectations around timelines, budgets, and deliverables will empower local partners to adapt to changing circumstances without penalties for adjusting to new needs. Additionally, donors should consider implementing oversight models that balance accountability with practicality, decreasing administrative burdens that can hinder timely and effective local responses.