



Voices Beyond the Battlefield: Sudanese Civic Actors in Wartime and Diaspora

Synopsis

Since April 15, 2023, Sudan has experienced a catastrophic collapse following the outbreak of war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. Over 14.5 million people have been displaced, famine is deepening, and war crimes — including mass killings, sexual violence, and forced displacement — continue with impunity. The collapse of the state has left a vacuum in governance, services, and protection. Sudan now faces what the International Rescue Committee has called “the largest humanitarian crisis ever recorded.”

With the collapse of state structures and infrastructure, Sudanese civic actors, both within the country and across the diaspora, have become frontline responders, organizing aid delivery, evacuating civilians, supporting survivors, documenting violations, and sustaining local networks. They operate without protection, pay, or recognition, often under direct threat from armed actors who view civic activity with suspicion or hostility. In the diaspora, Sudanese organizations struggle with legal ambiguity, lack of registration options, and diminished access to funding, yet remain determined to support their communities and return when conditions permit.

The international response remains severely underfunded and politically disengaged. The United States had been the largest donor to Sudan, providing over US\$1.4 billion in assistance since 2022. The U.S. government’s recent cuts to foreign aid, including to Sudan, have further deepened the gap and marginalized long-term development and peacebuilding efforts there. The international community’s lack of sustained engagement risks normalizing the war and further entrenching those who profit from instability.

This report is based on nearly 70 interviews and group discussions conducted in April 2025 with civic actors in Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Chad. It provides firsthand insight into the conditions these actors face, the strategies they use to adapt and survive, and the support they urgently need.

Key Findings

- **Civic voluntarism has surged:** Wartime has intensified rather than diminished civic engagement. Communities have mobilized around solidarity and mutual aid to fill the vacuum left by the state.
- **Civic actors have adapted to a collapsed state:** Organizations are operating informally, using encrypted communications, shifting their focus locally, and, where necessary, maintaining cautious relationships with the armed group that controls their area.
- **Civic actors face extreme risks:** Civic actors are frequently harassed, detained, or killed. The warring parties have destroyed their offices and displaced their staff. In both RSF- and SAF-controlled areas, operating space is minimal and dangerous.
- **The diaspora remains engaged but constrained:** Legal status, organizational registration in host countries, and scarcity of funding limit the Sudanese diaspora actors’ ability to work and have impact. Yet most express a strong desire to return if safety, civic space, and political inclusion are restored.

- **Civic space is shrinking, but actors are holding the line:** From delivering basic services to defending democratic values, Sudanese civil society is doing more with less — often in silence, and often alone.
- **The international response does not meet local priorities:** Civic actors welcome global engagement but express deep frustration with fragmented funding, bureaucratic obstacles, and the prioritization of short-term emergency relief at the expense of long-term recovery and civic infrastructure.

Key Recommendations

To prevent the collapse of Sudan’s civic life and support a just recovery, Sudanese civic actors recommend that international donors and actors:

- **Protect and include civic actors in all political and peace processes,** particularly women, youth, displaced persons, and conflict-affected communities. Civilian participation should be a critical element to any potential peace processes.
- **Adopt a dual-track approach** by pairing emergency humanitarian relief with investments in long-term governance, peacebuilding, human rights, and essential service restoration.
- **Shift toward locally led models** by removing procedural barriers, engaging trusted intermediaries, and mapping and supporting a wider range of grassroots and underrepresented civic actors.
- **Invest in mental health and organizational resilience** by recognizing burnout and trauma as threats to the sustainability of frontline civic efforts.
- **Strengthen donor coordination and accountability** by requiring joint planning with local partners and co-designed monitoring systems that reflect real needs and lived realities.
- **Consider flexible, multiyear funding that supports Sudanese efforts — localized, midsized, informal, and diaspora organizations.** Funding should cover core operational costs and allow adaptation to shifting realities on the ground.
- **Bridge divides among civic actors** by supporting coalition-building and inclusive dialogue to unify fragmented civilian voices around a shared agenda for peace and transition.

Conclusion

Sudanese civic actors continue to play a critical role in addressing immediate community needs and maintaining essential services in the absence of functioning state systems. Their work spans humanitarian response, documenting rights violations, and supporting public health, education, and local peacebuilding efforts. Despite war-related disruptions and growing constraints, these actors have adapted their work through informal networks, voluntary coordination, and cross-border collaboration. Their activities reflect both long-standing community commitments and an ability to respond to urgent and evolving conditions on the ground.

With targeted, long-term, flexible approaches, Sudanese civic actors can continue to deliver localized assistance while helping to accelerate postwar recovery, accountability and inclusive governance. To maintain and strengthen this capacity, donors, multilateral institutions, and international partners should pursue coordinated, long-term strategies grounded in democratic values and rights-based frameworks. This dual-track approach — which responds to immediate humanitarian needs while also supporting the development and continuity of civic infrastructure— is essential to supporting Sudan’s vibrant civil society and civic space over the long term, reducing the potential fragmentation of Sudan’s civic activism caused by the war.