TAKAAYA

How community kitchens offer a local lifeline to Sudan's hunger crisis

Contents

Mohamed, one of the takaaya leaders in Khartoum, has been at the forefront of community efforts to feed families displaced by conflict

Foreword

Sudan is currently facing one of the most devastating humanitarian crises in recent history. The conflict, which erupted in April 2023, has triggered the world's largest displacement crisis, with over 12 million people uprooted from their homes, and has plunged more than half of the population into acute food insecurity. Famine has been declared in multiple regions, including El Fasher in North Darfur, where communities remain under siege, cut off from humanitarian aid and basic necessities.

In the face of collapsing state and international humanitarian systems, Sudanese communities have turned inward, drawing on deep-rooted traditions of mutual aid and solidarity. Among the most remarkable manifestations of this resilience are the takaaya — community kitchens that have emerged as a lifeline for millions. These grassroots initiatives are not merely food distribution points; they are expressions of Sudan's enduring social fabric, grounded in Islamic values of charity (sadaqah) and hospitality, and shaped by Sufi traditions of communal care and spiritual service.

Organised horizontally and embedded within local networks such as mosques, Sufi orders, neighbourhood committees, and generous individuals, takaaya exemplify the principles of localisation in humanitarian response. They operate with transparency and community ownership, often in areas inaccessible to international actors. Locally led responses are more agile, contextually appropriate, and trusted by affected populations.

Yet, despite their effectiveness, these initiatives remain underfunded and under-recognised. The takaaya movement is a living testament to the potential of community-led action in crisis settings, aligning with the humanitarian sector's call for a "humanitarian reset" that prioritises localisation. However, this agenda often falters when international actors retain control over resources and decision-making, undermining the very communities they aim to empower.

Islamic Relief's support for takaaya in regions such as North Kordofan and Darfur demonstrates the transformative potential of equitable partnerships between international NGOs and local actors. By providing resources whilst respecting local leadership, Islamic Relief has helped strengthen community capacity and ensured aid reaches those most in need — even in the most challenging environments.

This report documents and elevates the voices of Sudanese communities who, through takaaya, are redefining 21st-century humanitarianism. Their work challenges us to rethink the architecture of aid and invest in the power, knowledge, and agency of local actors.

As we bear witness to Sudan's suffering, we must also recognise its courage. The takaaya are not only feeding bodies — they are nourishing hope, dignity, and the possibility of a more just and locally grounded humanitarian future.

Dr Faiza El-Higzi OAM
Trustee, Islamic Relief Worldwide

Executive summary

Sudan is facing a hunger crisis of historic proportions. Following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, half the population – 24.6 million people – face food shortages.

Famine conditions has been confirmed in five locations in the western region of Darfur and the Nuba Mountains in the country's south, and similar conditions are seen in dozens more places across the country. Children are starving to death, despite parents sacrificing whatever food they have. In the southwest city of El Fasher, a siege of more than 500 days has left markets empty and families going whole days without eating. New research conducted by Islamic Relief in Darfur and Gedaref has found acute and widespread food insecurity, with 83 per cent of households surveyed reporting they cannot access sufficient food, and more than a quarter (27 per cent) saying they do not have any food for tomorrow. Yet as people starve, the world has largely looked away.

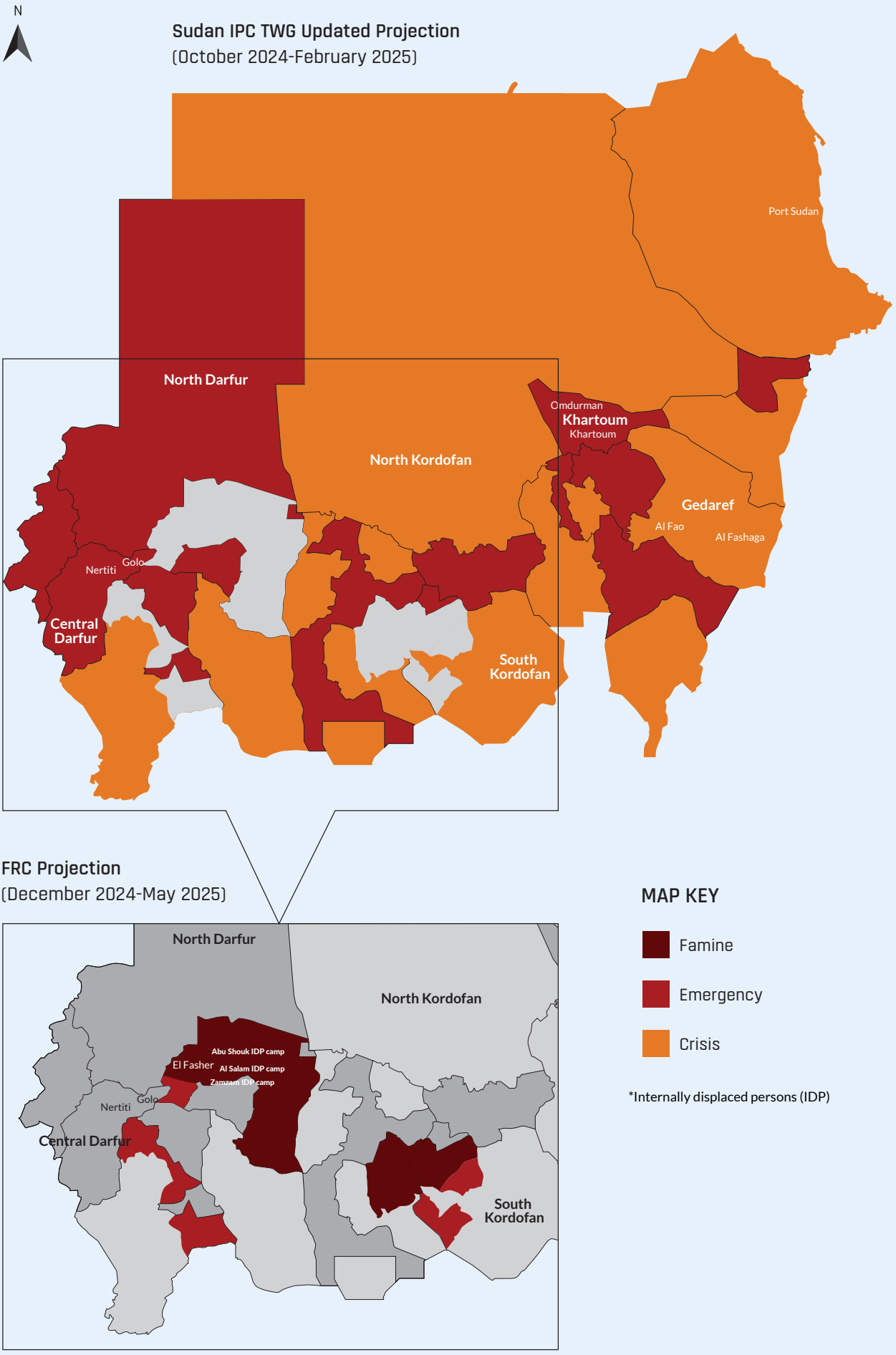
With the people of Sudan grappling with famine in the face of global indifference, this report reveals how local community kitchens – takaaya – have created a lifeline for hungry families across the country. Rooted in Sudanese cultural traditions of solidarity and the Islamic principles of zakat (a form of alms-giving and religious tax) and sadaqah (voluntary charity), takaaya draw on principles of social reciprocity, community ownership, and dignified access. In an increasingly restrictive humanitarian environment, takaaya put forward a new model of localised aid.

> "With supply lines broken and the local economy in collapse, takaaya like ours have become an absolute lifeline, and a last defence against hunger for the most vulnerable in our community." Dawina, takaaya volunteer.

Through extensive new interviews with local volunteers who run these community kitchens across Sudan, including in some of the most inaccessible regions, this report highlights both the huge humanitarian potential of this approach and its fragility. Funding cuts, shortages of food, water and fuel, and sheer exhaustion in the face of more than two years of horror and global neglect, mean that these vital lifelines are disappearing. The community spirit that sustains them is being crushed as the spectre of famine looms ever larger. There is an urgent need to sustain these lifelines and recognise them within broader humanitarian frameworks. The international community must take a comprehensive approach to support local efforts, prevent even larger scale disaster and transform its approach to aid.

We urge the international community to scale up funding for the humanitarian response, and support the local response to stop hunger in Sudan by:

- urgently providing flexible, direct funding and support to takaaya so they can continue to provide life-saving services
- deepening understanding of the community-led crisis response to shape short and long-term responses
- investing in immediate and long-term programmes which support the priorities of grassroots groups, as defined locally
- ensuring direct access for and recognition of local efforts in the humanitarian response
- investing in local efforts and adapting humanitarian aid approaches to accommodate local responses
- fostering genuine partnerships for medium and long-term impact
- leveraging trusted national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and diaspora networks to strengthen the broader local aid ecosystem both in the medium and long term
- capturing lessons and enhancing accountability for the future of the humanitarian architecture.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Sudan IPC TWG Updated Projection
(October 2024-February 2025)
Port Sudan
North Darfur
Omdurman
Khartoum
Khartoum
North Kordofan
Gedaref
Al Fao
Al Fashaga
Nertiti
Golo
Central Darfur
South Kordofan
FRC Projection
(December 2024-May 2025)
North Darfur
North Kordofan
Abu Shouk IDP camp
El Fasher
Al Salam IDP camp
Zamzam IDP camp
Nertiti
Golo
Central Darfur
South Kordofan
MAP KEY
Famine
Emergency
Crisis
*Internally displaced persons (IDP)

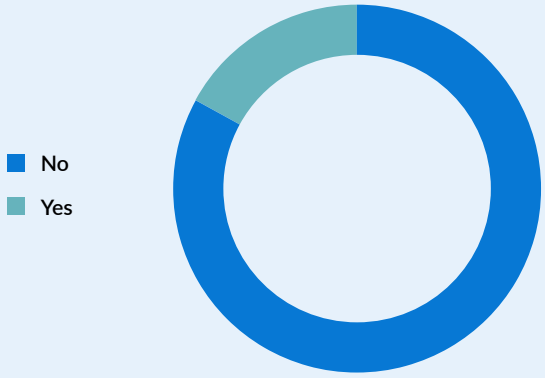
A mother cradles her malnourished son at a local health centre, a stark reminder of the human toll of Sudan's hunger crisis

1. The world's biggest hunger crisis

Since April 2023, Sudan has been engulfed in a devastating conflict which began in the capital Khartoum and spread quickly to major cities and rural areas across most of the country. The conflict has caused mass killings and widespread displacement, sexual violence, looting, and the almost total collapse of essential services.[1] Sudan's education, healthcare and banking systems have collapsed, and its main roads and transport routes have become extremely insecure, with regular hijackings and long delays at checkpoints. Most concerning of all is the hunger gripping nearly half of the country's population: between 24 and 25 million people are suffering food shortages,[2] with nearly 9 million people experiencing critical hunger, alarming rates of acute malnutrition, and excess mortality. As of September 2025. between 638,000 and 755,000 people are estimated to be experiencing famine – starvation, death, and the irreversible collapse of livelihoods.

Islamic Relief has conducted household research across four localities: Al Fao and Al Fashaga in Gedaref and Golo and Nertiti in Central Darfur, with findings pointing to acute and widespread food insecurity. As of September 2025, out of 585 surveyed households, **488 (83 per cent) reported not having sufficient food,** while only 97 households (17 per cent) indicated that they currently have enough to meet their household needs.

Access to sufficient food for households across four localities



Based on a survey of 585 households conducted in September 2025.

[1] P Loft, J Gill and T Robinson, Humanitarian Situation in Sudan, House of Commons Research Briefing, June 2025.

[2] Sudan: Acute food insecurity situation - updated projections and FRC conclusions for October 2024 to May 2025 | IPC - Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (2024) IPC. See also IPC Alert: Famine-affected areas in Sudan (2025) ReliefWeb; WFP calls for urgent access to preposition food in Sudan (2025) World Food Program USA; Kirui, O.K. et al. (2024) Evolution of Food Insecurity in Sudan During the Ongoing Conflict. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, pp. 1–7; Kayaoglu, A., Baliki, G. and Bruck, T. (2024) Gendered effects of climate and conflict shocks on food security in Sudan and the mitigating role of social protection. working paper. Berlin, Germany: Households in Conflict Network, pp. 1–20; Kirui, O.K. et al. (2024) Evolution of Food Insecurity in Sudan During the Ongoing Conflict. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, pp. 1–7.

Moreover, out of 585 surveyed households, 157 (27 per cent) reported having no food stocks remaining ("zero days"), while an additional 145 (25% per cent) said their food would last less than one week. Taken together, **52 per cent of households indicated that their food supplies would not last beyond one week**, underscoring severe food insecurity and limited household coping capacity.

Food consumption patterns[3] indicate severe food insecurity across the assessed areas, with over **41 per cent of households (241 households) classified as having a poor food consumption score, 32 percent (186) in the borderline category,** and only 27 per cent (158) achieving an acceptable score.

"The war did not just destroy our buildings; it reversed time, taking us back [to] when we had nothing."

Notably, our research has also found that access to available food sources remains highly inequitable across population groups and locations. Overall, only 19 per cent of surveyed households (111) reported that all affected people—including women, men, children, older persons, and people with disabilities—had access to food in their area, while the vast majority, 81 percent (474), indicated that some groups were excluded or unable to access available food sources.

But behind these figures are individuals whose lives have been completely upended, as a volunteer from Khartoum tells us: "I wish the world understood that we are not just statistics. We are engineers, teachers, farmers, we are ordinary men… The war did not just destroy our buildings; it reversed time, taking us back [to] when we had nothing."

Despite this, the global political and humanitarian response remains insufficient, with extremely limited funding and attention given to the disaster. "The crisis is entirely overlooked by media," says Hisham, a Sudanese professor and takaaya organiser. "I don't feel that the international media covers the Sudanese crisis as it should." This neglect is worsened by heightened security and operational challenges for the delivery of humanitarian aid by international NGOs (INGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies. These challenges include deliberate political obstruction and attacks on humanitarian workers, which force organisations to scale down operations or even withdraw completely from certain regions[4] – especially in parts of Darfur and Kordofan. "There is very restricted access to the affected area," Hisham says. "In some areas, there are still ongoing attacks on humanitarian workers".

Maha (in blue) and Islamic Relief colleagues register mothers in Dar Al Salam, Omdurman, during the distribution of mosquito nets to protect pregnant women from dengue and malaria

In the face of these enormous challenges, Islamic Relief has continued to deliver life-saving aid, support resilience, and advocate for protection of civilians, and has reached more than 1.2 million people with support. Our response includes working in partnership with takaaya in places hard to access such as North Kordofan. The scale of the challenge, however, means that vast swathes of the population remain beyond the reach of formal assistance. Unable to access humanitarian aid, communities on the ground have developed their own solutions, drawing on longstanding traditions of solidarity, mutual aid, and faith-driven charity to set up and run takaaya, community kitchens that provide not only life-saving nutrition but also a network of resilience. As hard data is difficult to collect in the worst-affected areas, this report uses interviews with community volunteers to highlight the successes and fragilities of the community-led response to Sudan's hunger crisis. As the UN and the international community seek a global reset for how they deliver humanitarian aid and support local efforts, takaaya provide a successful example of grassroots mobilisation rooted in local cultural and spiritual tradition. But with funding plummeting and resources depleted, takaaya need urgent support.

[3] The Food Consumption Score (FCS) is a composite indicator used to assess household food security based on dietary diversity, food frequency, and the relative nutritional importance of different food groups. It classifies households into three categories—poor, borderline, and acceptable—reflecting the adequacy and quality of food consumption over the seven days preceding the survey.
[4] Sudan: MSF withdraws from Wad Madani after months of obstruction and harassment (2024) Doctors Without Borders - USA. Available at: https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/latest/sudan-msf-withdraws-wad-madani-after-months-obstruction-and-harassment (Accessed: 01 October 2025).

ISLAMIC RELIEF IN SUDAN

In many ways, Sudan marks the beginning of Islamic Relief's story. In 1984, a group of doctors and activists in Birmingham, United Kingdom, were moved by reports of famine in the Horn of Africa to begin fundraising for relief. We've been committed to supporting vulnerable people and communities in Sudan ever since.

Since the start of the conflict on 15 April 2023, Islamic Relief has provided aid including:

996,098

people received more than 15,000 metric tonnes of food.

54

hospitals and clinics kept running with medicine and medical supplies in Al Jazirah, Central Darfur, Gedaref, and Sennar states.

82,917

displaced families received cash or cash-voucher assistance, enabling them to buy what they need and support local markets.

57,450

farmers in Gedaref state received 586 metric tonnes of agricultural seed, along with agricultural inputs for 2,224 farmers and goats to support another 1,250 families.

Nearly **13,000**

hygiene and dignity kits, containing items like soap, toothpaste, and sanitary pads.

26,105

people received clean water, along with 20,947 water storage kits.

1,500+

tents and 3,400 temporary shelters provided for displaced families.

Baby Sara is receiving care at a nutrition centre in Gedaref, where health workers support mothers struggling to keep their children nourished amid Sudan's hunger crisis

2. Takaaya: Grassroots responses to international community failure

Takaaya are part of Sudan's long tradition of voluntarism. Communities across the country have historically organised themselves to respond to the impacts of conflict, providing support to both local residents and displaced people, often with assistance from a large international diaspora.[5] Sudan's mutual aid and social capital networks traditionally form the backbone of civil society and are deeply embedded in cultural norms. These 'informal social safety nets'[6] provide welfare and assistance to those in need, channelling resources from better-off to less well-off members of the community. They are rooted in Sudan's traditions of nafeer, a type of organised communal labour that becomes especially important during crises,[7] and darra, the routine sharing of meals within the community.[8]

Takaaya often operate alongside Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) – social service networks that have been at the forefront of the humanitarian response to the outbreak of the 2023 conflict. Including a variety of local actors and institutions such as youth and women's associations, faith groups, businesses, professional networks, and other civil society organisations, these networks have been critical in providing essential services to communities.[9] They are based on participatory and inclusive governance, and decentralised, 'ground-up' organisation.[10] Each ERR is unique in its origins, capacities, and operational arrangements. While many ERRs have emerged following the outbreak of the 2023 conflict, some ERRs had previously developed as a response to Covid-19, and others due to earlier conflicts such as in Al-Damazin in 2022.

ERRs provide social protection, including individual and group cash transfers, community kitchens, and food baskets, as well as shelter, health, protection, and evacuation, reflecting the broad thematic scope of community-based mechanisms. Some have even established women's emergency rooms to assist pregnant and lactating women and female survivors of sexual violence.[11] Robust data on the number of mutual aid groups across Sudan is limited, but in 2024, Khartoum alone hosted 335 communal kitchens, over 40 health centres, and more than 75 women's cooperatives supported by ERRs. In Darfur, between April and July 2024, 21 of 35 identified grassroots organisations were ERRs providing services across multiple localities.[12] In the Zamzam IDP camp, North Darfur, eight communal kitchens prepared two daily meals for approximately 10,000 arrivals in November 2024.[13]

ERRs are governed by several frameworks. ERRs in Khartoum state, for instance, are organised under coordinating structures established in May 2023, which include a parliamentary body with three representatives from each of the city's seven districts with ERRs, gender representation, and established term limits. Additional structures include executive committees for programming and finance, specialised offices for health, protection, and women's response, as well as a charter outlining the values of transparency, equality, participation, and accountability. Similar coordination structures are also present on a national scale, including the Localisation Coordination Council formed in September 2023 to link ERRs with national and international NGOs. Around 30 state-level ERR representatives collaborate with partners at these council meetings to discuss supplies, services, and protection.[14] Despite this high-level organisation, locally based ERRs retain autonomy over programming decisions to ensure that interventions meet local needs. The horizontal structure is inclusive, with roles assigned according to capabilities rather than hierarchy.

[5] Asquith, P. (2024) Solidarity Beyond Borders: Mutual Aid and Diaspora Alliances in Complex Emergencies. Working paper. Shabaka.
[6] Birch, I., Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2024) Effective social protection in conflict: Findings from Sudan [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/ids.2024.011.
[7] Buchanan-Smith, M. (2024) The meeting of humanitarian and civic space in Sudan. rep. London, United Kingdom: Humanitarian Practice Network, pp. 1–30.
[8] Sharfi, M. (2025) 'Working Paper: the role of nafeer and social networks in Sudan's humanitarian response and the challenges for international aid', The Journal of Social Encounters, 9(1), pp. 55–69. doi:10.69755/2995-2212.1330. See also Fitzpatrick, M., Satti, H.A., Beheiry, S. & Stites, E. (2022) Harnessing Informal Social Safety Nets for Resilience and Development. Boston, MA: Feinstein International Centre, Tufts University
[9] Birch, I., Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2024) Effective social protection in conflict: Findings from Sudan [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/ids.2024.011.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Asquith, P. (2024) Solidarity Beyond Borders: Mutual Aid and Diaspora Alliances in Complex Emergencies. Working paper. Shabaka.
[12] Ibid.
[13] ICRC (2024) Sudan: Community kitchens bring vital food relief to thousands in North Darfur as humanitarian conditions worsen. Geneva: International Committee of the Red Cross.
[14] Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025) Supporting mutual aid in Sudan: Conflict-sensitive approaches to risk and accountability [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/basic.2025.009.

"The ERR is a democratic experience where people are learning by doing. It is a dialectic happening between all these structures. Ultimately, people will learn from this experience and find the model that suits them." Mohammad Nutasim, ERR organiser in Shambat.

ERRs operate without formal structures, offices, or salaries. They are decentralised, volunteer-driven systems run by teachers, engineers and young people who mobilise resources locally and through the Sudanese diaspora. In many areas, ERRs are the only functioning safety net after the collapse of government services and limited access for aid agencies.

Mazin, a dedicated volunteer, helps coordinate daily meal distributions that feed hundreds of displaced families in Omdurman, Khartoum

3. Understanding takaaya's model for community-led aid

While the ERR's localised aid model has gained traction nationwide, many ERRs remain under-resourced, limiting their capacity to deliver services effectively. Partnerships with International Humanitarian and Development Actors can help to deliver life-saving assistance, yet these collaborations are complex because of administrative and political barriers.[15] Now widely recognised for community-based aid, ERRs represent only one form of voluntary action in Sudan and, like all organisations, their capacities, operational approaches, and effectiveness vary.[16] Typically based in mosques, homes, or community centres, takaaya have become vital informal safety nets amid Sudan's collapsing state infrastructure. While some existed in limited forms prior to the current conflict, particularly during Ramadan or other religious festivals, their number, scale, and significance have grown dramatically since the outbreak of war in 2023. Over the last two years, takaaya have become the primary or sole source of sustenance for many communities.

In Omdurman, Khartoum, one of the few takaaya still operating is run entirely by volunteers like Mohammad and Mutaz, who continue to serve despite dwindling resources and funding

[15] Birch, I., Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2024) Effective social protection in conflict: Findings from Sudan [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/ids.2024.011.
[16] Ibid.

"We don't want to wait for someone to save us"

Ibrahim is a 24-year-old from Khartoum, who volunteers at his local takaaya. "Before all this, I was in my third year at university studying engineering," he tells us. "I had plans, I wanted to specialise in renewable energy, maybe work on solar projects in rural areas. Now the university is closed and the shop I used to work part time at is also destroyed."

Ibrahim started working at the takaaya four months ago, but the hours are long, and the work is not easy: "I usually arrive around 10am. First thing is checking what supplies we have, whether it is rice, lentils, oil, whatever there is or what came in. Then we start the cooking, which takes hours because we are feeding 300 to 400 people daily. The big pots are heavy, and the heat from the fires is brutal, especially in the summer. It is [a] horrible heat. But then, around the afternoon [time] we start distributing. By 6pm I am finished, and I walk home. Sometimes there is electricity, sometimes not. I read by candlelight or just sleep. Then I do it again the next day."

One of the hardest parts of Ibrahim's day, he says, is the distributions: "Actually managing the crowd, making sure everyone gets their share fairly, dealing with people who are desperate and sometimes aggressive, is difficult. Last week, a man started shouting that we had given him a smaller portion than others. He grabbed the ladle from my hand and was about to hit me with it. Later I found out he has five children and his wife is pregnant. Hunger makes people do things they wouldn't normally do. You have to remember that when things get tense."

But the real hardship for Ibrahim lies in witnessing the impact of the conflict on young people's hopes and dreams: "I know a guy who volunteers with me, his name is Mustafa. He is 22, super smart with computers, he was studying computer science. We always talk about this how he should have been building apps or working for a big tech company. Instead, he is now stirring rice in a giant pot with his father. I can see myself in him, and all the other young people. Every single person here had dreams, and this conflict has just paused everything. It is hard to think about [the] what ifs to be honest.

"I refuse to let this situation break me… I remember something we say in our family: Even if the world is ending tomorrow, plant a tree today. I suppose you could say that's what the takaaya are. And honestly, the work itself keeps me sane. If I was just sitting at home, unemployed, watching everything fall apart, I would lose my mind. At least here I am doing something and seen as useful… I am not saying I am noble or anything, most days I am just tired and angry at what is going on in Sudan. But I am still here, my family is still here. I am trying to just the make the most of the days.

"I refuse to let this situation break me… I remember something we say in our family: Even if the world is ending tomorrow, plant a tree today. I suppose you could say that's what the takaaya are."

"I want to finish my degree. I want to walk down a street without worrying about safety. I want to sit in a café with friends and complain about normal things. I don't want to see all these young kids being hungry and so unwell. I have seen kids sleeping in the streets, barely able to walk due to hunger. I just want Sudan to be boring again, without the war, I just want things to be normal again.

"I want people to know that Sudan is still here… we are not just statistics or headlines. Every person has a name, a story, a life that mattered before this conflict and will matter after. We young Sudanese people aren't passive, we are very active, we do organising, we are part of the volunteers, we try to keep our families going. We don't want to wait for someone to save us, insha'Allah we will get Sudan back."

Takaaya have been evidenced to significantly improve the caloric intake of recipients,[17] and community kitchen food aid has played a vital role in stabilising food access for thousands of people. In many cases, takaaya helped maintain pre-war levels of daily calorie intake and prevent extreme caloric deficits, particularly in the early months of the conflict. Early reports of community kitchens in Jebel Awlia village appeared on social media in December 2023, far before World Food Programme (WFP) convoys were able to enter the area, highlighting their importance during periods in which areas were largely unreachable to conventional humanitarian actors.

Providing food also has knock-on effects on other social protection indicators, as takaaya volunteers report that the kitchens have led to a reduction in children dropping out of school, and improved community wellbeing. "Providing food for affected families means that the children are more likely to stay in school and engage in classrooms rather than be forced to look for work," Habib, a programme manager for a national NGO in North Kordofan, explains.

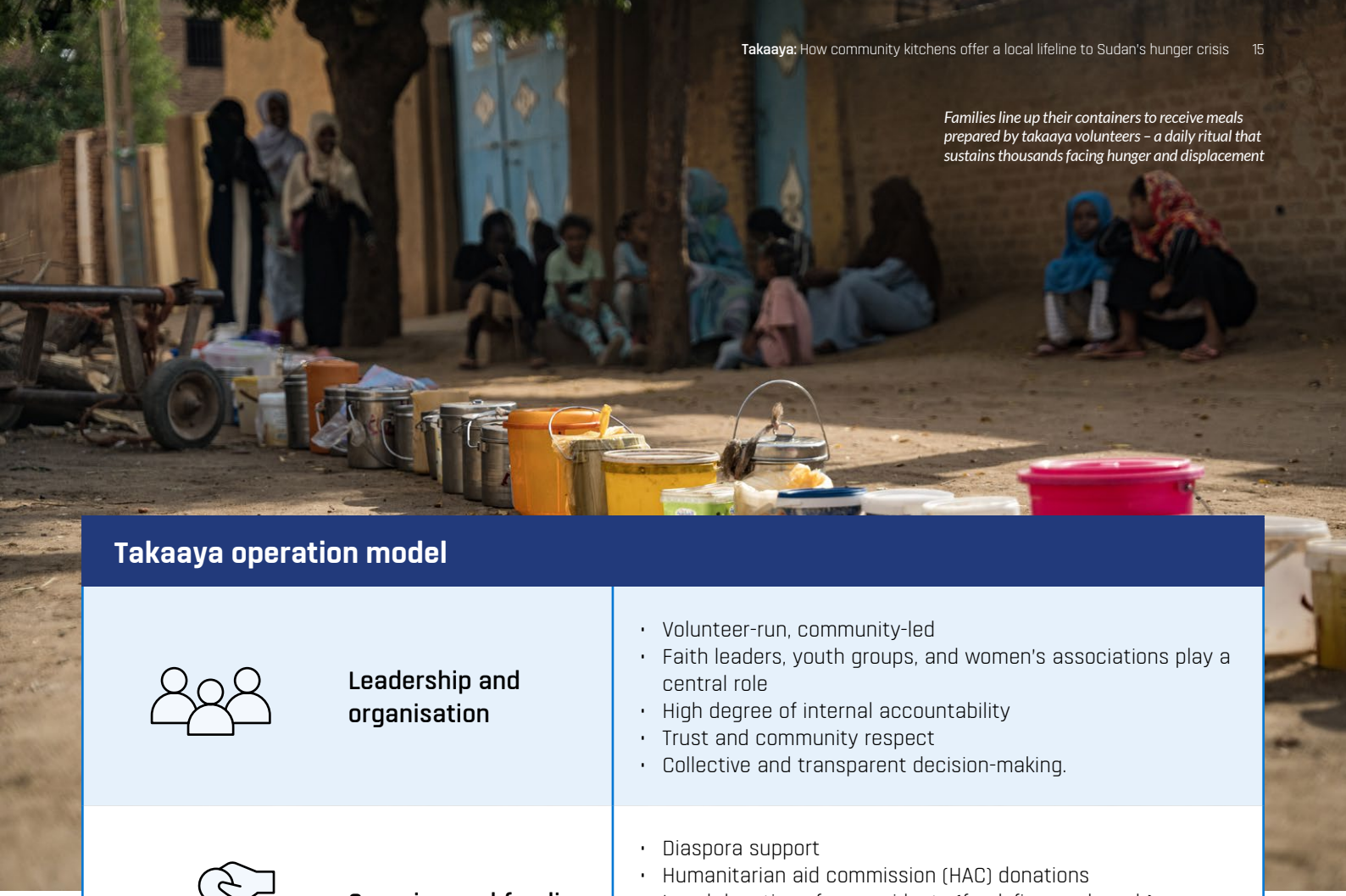
Takaaya provide a flexible, rapidly deployable, and locally designed mechanism for addressing acute food insecurity. However, their operations are frequently disrupted by funding shortages, insecurity, and telecommunications blackouts. Their funding comes mainly from community contributions, both local and from the diaspora. Local support is easily affected by displacement, job losses, poverty, and inflation, and diaspora support is often stretched thin. This was worsened by the USAID cuts in 2025. Volunteers report that some takaaya have had to pause or close operations due to insufficient resources. "It was like someone cut a rope we were holding onto," one volunteer says. "Before March, we had a small, regular stream that let us plan. We knew we could serve at least one meal a day. Now? In the last month, I would say there were 10 days we went to sleep not knowing if we could cook the next day. The uncertainty, it's worse than having nothing." Now, diaspora support is the main lifeline keeping takaaya alive, as volunteers explain that "if diaspora support stopped tomorrow, we would close within a week or less."

The lack of funding also means that meal distribution has generally reduced from two or three times a day to once a day since the start of the conflict. "The amount we serve fluctuates wildly," says Anwar, a volunteer from Omdurman, Sudan's second most populous city. "Yesterday we served about 400 meals. Last week, there was a day we could only manage 200. Compare that to six months ago? We were consistently serving 500, sometimes 600 a day. The need is greater, but the resources are becoming thinner." In another takaaya, the average number of meals per day have similarly dropped from 600 to 350-400, with a volunteer predicting that "most takaaya will close if nothing changes in six months, with maybe one or two surviving in each area." This has already begun happening in parts of Port Sudan, where one takaaya remains in an area that used to host several, serving around 2,000 people.

> "Most takaaya will close if nothing changes in six months, with maybe one or two surviving in each area."

Some community kitchens provide specialised services, such as one in southern Sudan feeding malnourished children or another in northern Sudan supporting IDPs with kidney failure. In some cases, provisions can also be delivered to homes for those unable to attend distributions. Despite these efforts, the scale of need often exceeds available resources, leading kitchens to ration food to cover the maximum number of households. "This is the hardest part of my day," a volunteer from Omdurman says. "We don't have a formal system. We feed everyone, but one time we had to tell a mother at the end of the day that we had nothing left for her two children and that she should come back tomorrow early. She didn't even cry, she just looked deflated. I went home and I couldn't even speak to my own family that night. The shame of having food in my stomach when that child did not, it is a heavy feeling for me."

[17] Ibid.



Families line up their containers to receive meals prepared by takaaya volunteers – a daily ritual that sustains thousands facing hunger and displacement

Takaaya operation model

Leadership and organisation	• Volunteer-run, community-led • Faith leaders, youth groups, and women's associations play a central role • High degree of internal accountability • Trust and community respect • Collective and transparent decision-making.
Sourcing and funding	• Diaspora support • Humanitarian aid commission (HAC) donations • Local donations from residents (food, firewood, cash) • Some international support • Religious contributions drawn from zakat or sadaqah.
Meal preparation and distribution	• Large communal pots over open fires or simple stoves • Volunteer-run • Highly adaptable, adjusting locations, expanding to multiple meal stations, or coordinating with nearby kitchens to manage demand.
Programme design and monitoring	• Community-led, tailored to local cultural and nutritional needs • Coordination among community-based groups enhances capacity for proposal development, intervention planning, and wider-scale response • Monitoring and evaluation integrated into program cycles to track needs, impact, and service gaps.
Recipient selection	• Led by community volunteers in consultation with local members • Focus on the most vulnerable, including women, children, and older people • Prior displacement experiences and cultural considerations, such as dignity concerns.
Coordination and communication	• Coordination and communication among takaaya vary depending on context • Generally organised according to HAC regulations.

4. More than food: Takaaya as networks of community resilience

Takaaya do more than provide food. They are trusted and dignified mechanisms of aid delivery, grounded in cultural legitimacy and community ownership. Recipients are not passive beneficiaries; many participate in cooking, cleaning, or distributing meals, fostering a sense of mutual responsibility. They have become "a focal point for the community – people come not just for food but for information, for companionship, to feel less alone," explains a volunteer from Omdurman. The work of takaaya provides a dignified response rooted in solidarity, building trust and legitimacy. Community members that can afford to can make donations to support those in greater need. "They are giving money not because they want to give charity, but because they are members of the community themselves," Mohammad, an ERR organiser in Shambat, Khartoum North, says. "They are just giving money as part of our collective effort - active solidarity, even more ownership of the work itself. For them, that modality means giving the power back into the hands of the community."

Takaaya offer hope and foster self-determination, addressing the social fractures caused by war while avoiding aid dependency. As one volunteer from Khartoum describes it: "The role of takaaya is more than [providing food], it is preserving the social fabric that war tries to tear apart… I tell the children, today you receive help. Tomorrow, when you are stronger, you will be the one helping others. That is how we rebuild, we remind them of our core values that war sometimes takes away."

Organised horizontally, similar to neighbourhood committees and mutual aid groups, takaaya emphasise transparency, democratic decision-making, and accountability to the communities they serve rather than to external donors.[18] This structure, coupled with financial transparency, improves community ownership and accountability. "Decentralisation means you do not have that hierarchy where it becomes like the status quo of UN or humanitarian work - where you have a donor dictating the agenda, then mediators like the UN or INGOs or national NGOs, then a layer of implementers from the private sector distributing things or community volunteers, and finally the community at the bottom," one takaaya organiser explains. "Here, it is just the people on the ground: kids, women, girls, elderly people, the sheikh of the mosque… People use checks and balances, they correct mistakes, and they progress. This is how societies grow - rather than [by] bringing in experts."

Takaaya's broad access and social legitimacy allows them to operate even in contested or insecure areas. Aid is culturally appropriate, with food that is familiar to recipients and distributed in a manner that preserves their dignity. Some takaaya, such as one in North Kordofan, adopt a principle of "hidden charity" by going door to door to give supplies to families in a discrete manner which preserves the dignity of the families. Moreover, volunteer-driven operations, in-kind contributions, and minimal overheads make these initiatives highly cost-effective. The price of a meal provided by takaaya in Khartoum, for instance, ranges from $1-$2.50 (75p-£1.8) for breakfast and $2-$4.50 (£1.5- £3.38) for lunch. Moreover, they are responsive and adaptable, quickly adjusting to evolving community needs without the delays often associated with formal humanitarian protocols. "Local trust and embeddedness distinguish us from international aid organisations," says Professor Osama, a volunteer from Khartoum. "We know the people and their circumstances. That closeness helps us target quickly and sensitively in ways that outsiders might find difficult."

[18] Eliassen-Viejo, K. and Olwen Rowbotham, S. (2025) What can we learn from locally led experiences in Sudan? Fennia - International Journal of Geography. 203(1). doi:10.11143/fennia.162748.

"Partnership means listening to us"

Nasreen is a 45-year-old teacher and volunteer from Omdurman. "I finish at the school around 1pm, then I go directly to the takaaya. Some days I am there until 5 or 6pm, especially when we are preparing meals for the next day.

"It's exhausting – both jobs require significant effort, and by the end of the day, my body aches. I am on my feet from 7am until evening. When I am teaching, I see hungry children trying to learn and trying to make sense of this new world that they have been forced into. When I am at the takaaya, I see children who should be in school but can't afford it because their families need them to work. I carry both worlds with me constantly. Some nights I lie awake thinking about how to help more, how to do better. My husband tells me I need to rest, but how can I rest?

"Honestly, it became personal when I saw my own students coming to school too weak to hold a pencil. One of my brightest students, Ilhan, she used to answer every question, always eager to learn. Then she started falling asleep. I asked her what was wrong, and she told me that she hasn't eaten properly in a couple of days. Half of the children who receive meals are my students. They are overjoyed to be with me in both the school and the takaaya. I am proud to feed them, but I wish they didn't need the takaaya at all.

"I hold more leadership power in the takaaya because I am a teacher. For instance, when I call on the community to help arrange and organise the takaaya space or to participate in preparing meals, they respond. But I also listen to everyone and ask for input when we are deciding the menu or organising the schedule. Sometimes, the best ideas come from the women who have been cooking for their families for 30 years. They know what children will actually eat, what is affordable, what can be prepared quickly. My role is to help structure those ideas, to ensure everyone's voice is heard. We make decisions together.

"What [international] organisations often miss is that we need sustainability. Don't just give us food for three months and then leave. Help us build systems that last. Involve us in the design of these programmes. We know our community. We can tell you what will work and what won't. Partnership means listening to us, not just implementing your plans.

"I have faith that God sees this work, that He will give me the strength I need. Some days that faith is all I have, and it's enough."

Children gather at a takaaya in Khartoum, waiting patiently as Mazin, one of the volunteers, serves meals that have become their only source of nourishment and hope

5. At risk of collapse: Takaaya's struggle for sustainability

Despite their strengths, takaaya face serious challenges. Financial fragility is perhaps the most pressing issue, as most takaaya and ERRs lack predictable or sustained funding and often operate day-to-day on available resources. A lack of safe water and firewood further impact the ability of takaaya to continue serving meals. Moreover, market disruptions, particularly due to insecurity, blockades, and lootingshinder the flow of goods. Blockades of Al Fasher in North Darfur and Dilling in South Kordofan have disrupted local markets, while 'Dagalo markets' supply looted goods.[19] Hyperinflation also affects food supply. Volunteers from takaaya report a reduction in the quantity and quality of food served over the last two years, and a critical need to increase and diversify available food items to ensure accessibility of three nutritious meals per day. "My biggest fear is that in six months, the community will be completely exhausted," says a volunteer from Khartoum. "We are all getting poorer and angrier. If the diaspora stopped support tomorrow? I think many takaaya would collapse with a week. It worries me what will happen when that chain breaks."

> "In the last month, I would say maybe 12 days - less than half - we knew for certain we had enough [food] for the next day. The rest of the time, I'm making phone calls, sending messages, trying to find someone who can contribute. There were at least five or six days where I genuinely didn't know where the next meal would come from. We have had to close for a day or two when we had absolutely nothing, and those are the days I feel like I have failed everyone." Samir, a takaaya volunteer from Khartoum

Ahlam struggles to provide for her children while sheltering in an IDP camp

[19] Craze, J. and Makawi, R. (2025) The Republic of Kadamol. A Portrait of the Rapid Support Forces at War. Geneva: Small Arms Survey.

The prolonged crisis has also heightened stress among volunteers.[20] Volunteers – particularly female volunteers - risk harassment, detention, sexual violence, and accusations of collaboration with one side or another. "I worry about the volunteers burning out," Samir, a takaaya supervisor from Khartoum, says. "Beyond the physical exhaustion, security is another issue. There have been incidents of arguments, thefts, and threats from armed men who wanted to control distribution for political purposes. We have managed to keep the takaaya safe and neutral, but it required constant vigilance." The informal nature of these initiatives limits access to formal coordination mechanisms, technical assistance, and funding. Volunteers report gaps in project design and lack of adequate training from the government sector and partners. There remains a need to improve practical skills such as proposal writing, registration of target populations, documentation and communication, and fundraising.

Disease outbreaks compound operational challenges, as the destruction of health and sanitation infrastructure, flooding, and reduced vaccination coverage have led to cholera, dengue, malaria, measles, polio, and rubella outbreaks.[21] "The biggest risk is to those working at night to provide food for the morning because they can get bit by mosquitoes which spread dengue fever," one volunteer says.

Limited communications further constrain operations, with unreliable internet and phone monitoring in conflict zones reducing organisers' ability to coordinate with supporters and document humanitarian needs safely.[22] In Kordofan, ERR volunteers managing multiple kitchens in a single town use their local knowledge and communication skills to address fairness concerns and maintain community cohesion: "We coordinate meetings to get actual numbers of beneficiaries and their names," reports a volunteer from Khartoum, "We also use social media between takaaya, such as Whatsapp, to share information such as what kind of meals to cook." But long-term internet blackouts undermine coordination and the ability for effective planning, service delivery, and engagement with external actors, including lobbying local authorities when necessary. "It's really difficult because everything is through applications now," says Hisham, who organises diaspora groups to collect funding. "When the internet fails, it has a big impact on communicating and transferring money."

Local dynamics also influence the effectiveness and inclusiveness of community-based responses. As ERRs and takaaya are rooted in pre-existing relationships and local networks, some vulnerable groups may be inadvertently excluded. Local actors are embedded in political and conflict dynamics, and engagement with external humanitarian actors is politically complex. Consequently, careful partner assessment and recognition of the variability in capacities, operational procedures, and levels of community participation are essential for effective collaboration.[23]

"The biggest risk is to those working at night to provide food for the morning because they can get bit by mosquitoes which spread dengue fever."

Moreover, gender politics and dynamics also play a part in the operations of takaaya. While all takaaya differ in their set up and structure, in many cases, "management is handled by men" and "the big decisions, the money, and everything else, are most times decided by men" explains a volunteer from Shambat, even if women are volunteering in the kitchens. This is partially due to security risks. According to a volunteer from Khartoum: "Although it is a bit safer now, we are all afraid of rape and kidnapping. We have had women here who were kidnapped. That is why women do not participate – it is too dangerous". Underlying gender dynamics play a significant role: "it is just the old way," one volunteer says. Moreover, gender also plays a role in receiving aid. "In some conservative families, men believe it is shameful for their wives to be seen accepting charity," says one takaaya committee member, "So the wives suffer silently at home while the husband tries to maintain dignity [by not accepting aid]."

Takaaya represent a powerful example of community resilience in the face of Sudan's hunger crisis. Yet their fragility underscores the urgent need for greater support, recognition, and integration into broader humanitarian efforts.

[20] Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025) Supporting mutual aid in Sudan: Conflict-sensitive approaches to risk and accountability [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/basic.2025.009.
[21] Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025) Supporting mutual aid in Sudan: Conflict-sensitive approaches to risk and accountability [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/basic.2025.009.
[22] Ibid.
[23] K. Olson, S., Dahab, M. and Parker, M. (2024) Key considerations: Mutual aid lessons and experiences from emergency response rooms in Sudan [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/sshap.2024.056.

6. Rooted in tradition: Faith, culture and the soul of takaaya

Takaaya are deeply rooted in Sudan's religious traditions, cultural norms, and communal life. Their legitimacy and resilience derive not only from the meals they provide but from the values, trust, and social relationships that underpin them. Unlike top-down humanitarian interventions, takaaya reflect and reinforce faith, cultural models of mutual and social cohesion, shaping a uniquely local model of aid and development.

Central to the takaaya model is the cultural practice of nafeer, a longstanding Sudanese tradition of mutual aid and communal labour.[24] In the words of a volunteer from Port Sudan: "This is in our Sudanese nature. You help because you are them, and they are you."

Nafeer also motivates volunteers by fostering accountability and mutuality organically within local communities. Volunteers report feeling a sense of obligation to those in need around them, and communal acceptance once they are involved in these networks. "[The takaaya] provides motivation for future work and motivation from the feeling that you are helping others. You help a child, you save a child's life, and you help a woman, you help widows. This gives me motivation that makes me feel comfortable. It makes me feel I have added value in life and have contributed to life," Ibrahim, a 25-year-old volunteer, says.

Volunteers are also driven by faith and sunnah (the teachings, deeds and sayings of Prophet Muhammad, [peace be upon him]). "[Our payment] is not money, but it is debt to God," one volunteer from Khartoum says. A centuries old practise, the origins of takaaya lead back to the practice of Sufi Islam in Sudan, with takaaya forming as big religious centres for travellers and people in need of food. To this day, faith-based teachings of charity play a large role in motivating those involved in mutual aid networks. "The religious have an incentive that encourages [them] towards charity. For whoever gives charity, our Lord, the Blessed and Exalted, has rewards for charities that yield ten to seven hundred times, and many multiples," a faith leader involved in a takaaya explains.

"In Islam we are taught to help one another," Nidal, a 35-year-old volunteer from Port Sudan says. "Our religion is based on cooperation and mutual support, and that is what guides us here."

Existing social networks and influence from faith-based spaces further drive the growth of takaaya. "I use the Friday prayer sermons to encourage people to contribute their time and money to the takaaya," an imam from Khartoum says. "At first there were a lack of volunteers in our area, so I especially used the sermons to encourage more volunteers. Now there is no lack of volunteers."

> "This is in our Sudanese nature. You help because you are them, and they are you."

[24] Sharfi, M. (2025) 'Working Paper: the role of nafeer and social networks in Sudan's humanitarian response and the challenges for international aid', The Journal of Social Encounters, 9(1), pp. 55–69. doi:10.69755/2995-2212.1330.

[25] K. Olson, S., Dahab, M. and Parker, M. (2024) Key considerations: Mutual aid lessons and experiences from emergency response rooms in Sudan [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/sshap.2024.056.

Driven by faith and culture, takaaya draw strength from dense webs of social relationships and reflect principles of social reciprocity, community ownership, and dignified access, which are culturally and socially embedded:

- Social reciprocity: Even those receiving aid are often involved in preparing or serving meals. This mutuality reduces stigma and upholds dignity.
- Community ownership: Takaaya are not "for" the community, but "of" the community. This fosters high levels of commitment and accountability without requiring formal mechanisms.
- Dignified access: Aid recipients are treated as neighbours, not beneficiaries. Food is shared in familiar settings - mosques, homes, courtyards - rather than in impersonal distribution lines.

In a context where trust in political and humanitarian institutions has eroded, takaaya serve as sites of hope, resilience, and social cohesion. They help stitch together communities fractured by violence while reaffirming Sudanese traditions of hospitality, generosity, and collective care. Accountability to the communities they serve remains central to their operations, reflecting a strong commitment to principles of local responsibility and social reciprocity.[25]

Asawer (centre) sits with her parents and siblings in a camp – one of countless families forced from their homes by the ongoing conflict

7. Real localisation: Supporting community efforts in Sudan

The humanitarian reset, the UN-led reform initiative launched in March 2025, emphasises shifting power and resources closer to the people most affected by crises, making localisation a central principle. Supporting these local efforts not only ensures more timely and culturally appropriate assistance but also builds resilience and dignity within communities. By prioritising localisation, the reset recognises that sustainable humanitarian action comes from empowering local actors who understand the context and can mobilise quickly to meet urgent needs.

This reset has encountered several obstacles: a perception that local actors lack the capacity to meet accountability and due diligence standards,[26] funding constraints that stop local actors from receiving support,[27] and external shocks, such as USAID funding cuts. In response, some philanthropists and charitable foundations have increased direct support to mutual aid and community-based groups,[28] while the humanitarian community has also begun to increase engagement with community-based groups, scaling up cash transfers and other forms of support, in an effort to accommodate the informal nature of community-based groups, treating them as beneficiaries and adjusting compliance, contracting, and reporting requirements accordingly. Even so, the funding provided through these channels remains limited and structural, perceptual, and funding barriers continue to limit the scale and impact of support for grass-roots actors, highlighting the need for more sustained, flexible, and trust-based engagement.

> "People discuss national ownership, localisation, grassroots movements, and community participation. But in Sudan, the community does not just participate – they decide what they want and need, and they implement it themselves. I would say, with all pride, that this is really the definition, practice, and reality of all these ideas." Mohammad, INGO worker in Shambat

While community efforts in Sudan have relied primarily on self-funding and diaspora support, since late 2023 ERRs have begun to gain greater international recognition, and international humanitarian and development actors have sought to coordinate with and support them. For example, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) provides small grants through the Sudan Humanitarian Fund to ERRs and partner aid groups. Nonetheless, significant challenges to engagement remain. These include rigid bureaucratic processes, often ill-suited to volunteer-led grassroots organisations;[29] the need to make difficult decisions about which communities and organisations receive support when only limited funding is available; donors' risk aversion, especially towards faith-based or volunteer-led groups; and differences in approaches to faith, gender norms, and organisational models. Mohammad, an INGO worker in Shambat, explains: "INGOs want due diligence for downstream partners who are implementing. They need financial systems, judicial governance, all these kinds of restrictions. If you want to give money, but you are asking people to fill out all these formats and templates and reports, that is ridiculous. It's a modality that feels very isolated from the reality on the ground. There is only one INGO working with us that is flexible, that only asks for a one-page proposal and then gives you the funding – I think that is a much better model."

[26] Birch, I., Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2024) Effective social protection in conflict: Findings from Sudan [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/ids.2024.011

[27] See Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025) Supporting mutual aid in Sudan: Conflict-sensitive approaches to risk and accountability [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/basic.2025.009; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) (2025) Sudan Humanitarian Fund Annual Report 2024. Available at: https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-fund-annual-report-2024 (Accessed: 9 September 2025); Carstensen, N. and Sebit, L. (2023) Mutual aid in Sudan: the future of aid? Humanitarian Practice Network; Asquith, P. (2024) Solidarity Beyond Borders: Mutual Aid and Diaspora Alliances in Complex Emergencies. Working paper. Shabaka; Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025) Supporting mutual aid in Sudan: Conflict-sensitive approaches to risk and accountability [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/basic.2025.009

[28] Carter, B. and Satti, H.-A. (2025) Supporting mutual aid in Sudan: Conflict-sensitive approaches to risk and accountability [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/basic.2025.009

[29] Asquith, P. (2024) Solidarity Beyond Borders: Mutual Aid and Diaspora Alliances in Complex Emergencies. Working paper. Shabaka.

Extensive regulations can demoralise volunteers, Mohammad says, pointing to bureaucracy and dignity as two key potential problem areas. "The moment you need to go through this bureaucracy, there is also this element where people feel: 'You want to give me money, but you want me to do all of this and take photos?' They do not want to take money under those conditions. The dignity element is still very present. For instance, when I told my own community about applying for an INGO grant, they were saying, 'We are already raising 15 times that from our own contributions. Why would we expose ourselves and our dignity?'"

Despite these structural barriers, there are significant opportunities to engage and support takaaya and local efforts in ways that preserve their identity and enhance humanitarian effectiveness. Takaaya offer a chance to rethink localisation, moving beyond tokenistic participation toward genuine, dignified, and practical inclusion of community-led, faith-rooted responses.

"People have seen the power of taking control of their own development agenda," says Mohammad. "I am sure that in Sudan's future, this modality will be there."

Bridging partnerships between INGOs, national NGOs, and local groups can lead to financial, technical, and administrative support in planning, monitoring, or reporting without co-opting local leadership. That donors recognise and respect existing civil society structures and their historical, political and social roots – rather than attempting to formalise or "NGO-ise" them – is critical to supporting effective local action.[30]

"We don't need an INGO to come and take over. They cannot do what we do. We know our community and the work. They cannot build the trust we have in an afternoon. But they can do what we cannot: they can give the funding to keep it going." Anwar, volunteer from Omdurman

Some INGOs have adapted to this successfully. For instance, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) has simplified financial reporting, implemented flexible funding thresholds, and provided technical and psychosocial support, while maintaining oversight through checks and balances in collaboration with ERRs.[31] This approach, combined with transparency measures, such as open forums and social media reporting, strengthened accountability while empowering local actors.

ERR volunteers also reported that training and coordination support from international partners complemented their local knowledge, enhancing security mechanisms and operational effectiveness. Recognition from international partners has elevated ERR credibility, providing them with a "seat at the table" in wider humanitarian forums.[32] Even beyond the funding and training, external recognition is a key factor in driving hope: "It is not [just] about the money," Hisham, a Sudanese professor and organiser, says. "It is that someone sees and appreciates what they do, at least someone knows about their efforts. It is more than money, it is motivation."

Localisation in Sudan requires flexibility to respond to rapidly evolving operational challenges. Supporting ERRs and takaaya means both enabling immediate humanitarian delivery through localactors and contributing to broader systemic reform in the international humanitarian system.

Evidence from other contexts, such as Syria, suggests that 'high-quality localisation' improves outcomes, better meets local needs, and increases mutual confidence between national actors and international partners.[33] In the words of a UN staff member: "I hate to say it, but we are an industry – the aid industry, whether humanitarian or development – and we need to come up with new modalities of work where we are not the implementers ourselves. We should not become parallel governments creating parallel structures. We should rather invest in system strengthening, national ownership, and local leadership."

[30] Eliassen-Viejo, K. and Olwen Rowbotham, S. (2025) What can we learn from locally led experiences in Sudan? Fennia - International Journal of Geography. 203(1). doi:10.11143/fennia.162748.
[31] Norwegian People's Aid (2025) Annual Report 2024. Available at: https://www.npaid.org/files/Publications/NPA_report_RR-Eng.pdf (Accessed: 20 August 2025).
[32] K. Olson, S., Dahab, M. and Parker, M. (2024) Key considerations: Mutual aid lessons and experiences from emergency response rooms in Sudan [Preprint]. doi:10.19088/sshap.2024.056.
[33] Birch, I.; Carter, B. and Satti, H-A. (2024) Effective Social Protection in Conflict: Findings from Sudan. Working Paper, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/IDS.2024.011.

1. Recommendations: Rethinking aid to support locally led solutions

Sudan's crisis calls for a fundamental rethinking of how aid is delivered, who delivers it, and which systems are trusted and sustained. The rise of takaaya illustrates that communities are not passive recipients of aid, but active agents of survival, solidarity, and care. Supporting them effectively requires the humanitarian system to shift from working around local actors to working with and through them.

We call on institutional donors and donor governments to:

1. **urgently empower grassroots groups with flexible, unrestricted support and funding**

Grassroots initiatives require adaptive and empowering approaches to funding and engagement, including:

- predictable and unrestricted funding covering core costs and coordination mechanisms
- meaningful participation of grassroots representatives in humanitarian and development decision-making spaces
- capacity strengthening of local groups, with success metrics reflecting local leadership and operational effectiveness.

2. **deepen their understanding of community-led crisis response to shape short and long-term responses**

Institutional donors need to engage deeply with the methods and practices of community groups, including needs assessments, beneficiary selection, and community-based monitoring and accountability. Understanding how external requirements can complement these existing mechanisms allows aid to build on, rather than disrupt, local systems.[34]

3. **invest in immediate and long-term programmes which support the priorities of grassroots groups, as defined locally**

Volunteers' priorities include securing:

- funding to improve the quantity and quality of meals provided
- training and learning opportunities
- access to information and coordination networks
- expanding activities to involve other services and sectors.

Supporting these priorities ensures that interventions are responsive, relevant, and sustainable.

4. **prioritise resilience, and sustainable food systems**

Support should extend beyond immediate humanitarian capacity-building to long-term resilience by:

- strengthening Sudan's food systems, with a focus on localised and decentralised production
- building agricultural systems that are resilient to both conflict and climate change
- supporting productivity and sustainability in ways that address long-term systemic challenges alongside urgent food insecurity.

[34] Buchanan-Smith, M. (2024) The meeting of humanitarian and civic space in Sudan. rep. London, United Kingdom: Humanitarian Practice Network, pp. 1–30.

We call on local authorities to:

5. ensure direct access for and recognition of local efforts in the humanitarian response

Local authorities and parties to the conflict should be pressed to recognise and fund humanitarian activities by grassroots groups, including mutual aid networks, ensuring protection and security for local responders. They should also ensure that takaaya and ERRs are included in humanitarian coordination mechanisms.

We call on UN agencies and INGOs to:

6. invest in local efforts and adapt humanitarian aid approaches to accommodate local responses

Recent efforts to simplify reporting demonstrate that the international system can adapt to local conditions, complementing cash support with protection, capacity building, and relationship management. To strengthen pass-through funding arrangements, UN agencies and INGOs must develop:

- simplified reporting requirements for grassroots partners, including simplified monitoring and evaluation frameworks
- a strategically coherent approach to aid delivery chains and intermediaries, recognising their strengths and limitations
- clear mechanisms for sharing reputational and financial risks among donors, intermediaries, and grassroots groups, including coordinated responses when risks materialise
- budgeting for intermediary costs in capacity support and relationship-building
- mechanisms to include ERR and takaaya representatives in coordination forums and decision making
- organisational learning that bridges compliance, legal, and operational teams to improve support to grassroots actors.

7. foster genuine partnerships for medium and long-term impact

Humanitarian actors should forge authentic partnerships with local actors, engaging them from the inception of aid interventions through to implementation and monitoring. The most effective humanitarian response in Sudan integrates local systems, such as nafeer and kinship networks, with the operational capacity of international aid, balancing respect for local culture and practices with the limitations of informal mechanisms. Such collaborative approaches enhance both the cultural sensitivity and effectiveness of humanitarian action.

8. leverage trusted national NGOs and diaspora networks to strengthen the broader local aid ecosystem, both in the medium and long term

National NGOs can serve as intermediaries, bridging international actors and grassroots structures, given their deep contextual knowledge, capacity, and long-term presence. Similarly, diaspora supporters and philanthropic initiatives provide critical, longstanding support. International actors should partner strategically with these entities, investing in their core capacities to strengthen the broader local aid ecosystem.

9. capture lessons and enhance accountability for the future of the humanitarian architecture

The grassroots response in Sudan offers critical insights for improving humanitarian inclusivity and accountability. Sharing lessons learned and integrating local practices into planning between humanitarian and development actors can improve both immediate and long-term responses.

9. Conclusion: How Sudan's grassroots takaaya can redefine humanitarian aid

The ongoing crisis in Sudan has highlighted both the vital role of grassroots initiatives such as takaaya and ERRs and the structural challenges of the international humanitarian system.

These locally-led responses demonstrate remarkable resilience, adaptability, and legitimacy, rooted in Sudanese cultural practices such as nafeer, communal solidarity, and deep social networks. Takaaya are social, spiritual, and culturally embedded structures that provide dignity, strengthen trust, and sustain community cohesion even amid widespread violence and displacement.

Despite their effectiveness, these initiatives face substantial barriers, including financial fragility, security risks, bureaucratic constraints, and limited recognition by formal humanitarian actors. Complex reporting requirements, indirect and restricted funding, and a lack of understanding of local capacity continue to undermine their potential. Yet, the experience of takaaya shows that when international and local actors collaborate thoughtfully, respecting the identity, leadership, and accountability mechanisms of grassroots groups, the results can be transformative.

Emerging examples of support from UN agencies, INGOs, diaspora networks, and philanthropic initiatives demonstrate the potential of high-quality localisation. These partnerships fill resource gaps while enabling the exchange of knowledge and skills, building mutual trust, and ensuring interventions are conflict-sensitive and culturally appropriate. Flexible funding adapted monitoring frameworks, and recognition of informal support networks are essential to sustaining these initiatives and ensuring they meet the nuanced needs of affected communities.

Mutaz, a young volunteer, devotes his days to helping prepare and distribute food at a local takaaya, keeping hope alive for his community

The experience of Sudan provides a critical opportunity for systemic reform. The international humanitarian system can learn from the takaaya model to integrate locally led, faith-rooted, and community-based approaches into wider responses. But this opportunity is fragile. Without timely, unrestricted support, meaningful engagement, and careful stewardship, the gains achieved through these local initiatives risk being lost, and millions of civilians may face prolonged suffering.

Ultimately, the lessons from Sudan could serve not only as a blueprint for ethically localised aid in the country itself but as a revolutionary model for humanitarian response globally.

Publisher information: Published by Islamic Relief Worldwide
19 Rea Street South, Birmingham, B5 6LB

November 2025

Researched and written by Sevval Oz (Research and Project Coordinator, Islamic Relief Worldwide), Research support and content collation: Ibtisaam Ashur (Advocacy Content Communications Coordinator, Islamic Relief Worldwide), Editorial Consultant: Dr Emma De Angelis

Design and Production Credits: Tahir Saddiq and Charlotte Mitchell

Photo credits: Mohammed Abdulmajid Mohamed Elhassan

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17407546

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Islamic Relief Worldwide
19 Rea Street South
Birmingham
B5 6LB
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 121 605 5555
Fax: +44 121 622 5003

irw@irworldwide.org
www.islamic-relief.org

Registered Charity No. 328158
Registered Company No. 02365572