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A **Learning Paper** by Local to Global Protection (L2GP) for Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs), Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), other community initiatives, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), donors, and other aid actors working in Sudan.

Local2Global Protection (L2GP) is an initiative and network focused on documenting and supporting locally led crisis response and mutual aid to change how aid is understood and carried out. L2GP was founded in 2009.

SUPPORT FOR MUTUAL AID IN THREE CENTRAL STATES IN SUDAN:

GAME CHANGING AND SAVING LIVES

> The mindset is not only to achieve - or not achieve. Now, we ask **how** to deliver, not just to deliver. **(NATIONAL NGO STAFF)**

Executive Summary

> Working with mutual aid groups has been mind-blowing. It has been a game changer, and it has been lifesaving.
> **Staff with international aid actor**

The statement above resonates with the dominating responses from community volunteers and members who are part of the activities investigated here. The activities by Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), other Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs) and community initiatives in three central states in Sudan were found to have been of crucial importance for the people. It reached people at a time when they most needed it and when little or no other humanitarian aid reached them.

The findings and learning presented here emerged from research into an approximately USD 1 million grant implemented across three central states of Sudan. The grant was implemented in a close collaboration between 35 ERRs, 95 other MAGs and community initiatives, two national NGOs, one international NGO, and one international donor. The project was realised between May 2024 and end July 2025. The activities were all implemented in the context of the intense conflict and associated massive displacement and immense humanitarian needs in Sudan.

First responders were supported through an (average) USD 3,200 micro grant after two national NGOs (supported by the INGO) had screened, mapped and selected the groups and then introduced them to the "supporting community led response" (sclr) approach. At the same time, some groups were familiar with the F system as developed by the Sudanese volunteer Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) network.

This research is based on key informant interviews (KIIs) with volunteers from 6 ERRs and 20 MAGs and initiatives across three states as well as six interviews with national and international staff with the involved NGOs and the donor. These interviews were supplemented by 80 orally based on-line survey responses with individuals expected to have benefitted from the activities. Additionally, the researchers had access to a wide range of project documentation. The majority of the research and data collection was carried out remotely for reasons of limited access, security as well as time and financial limitations.

Despite the extremely difficult and often dangerous contexts the community responses were found to have benefited exposed and vulnerable families and individuals - including the displaced, children, women and people living with chronic or acute diseases or disabilities. In many cases this covered populations in areas under siege.

The vast majority of responders stated that as per their experience the activities implemented by community groups were better at addressing the most pressing needs and meeting them in ways which were more sensitive to local priorities, habits and sentiment than help and support executed in more traditional and top-down ways. Several interviewees stressed the significance of supporting the most vulnerable in ways that did not erode their sense of dignity - for instance by avoiding photographing or filming people waiting for food handouts.

> The best thing that can be done is to engage the community and form associations for response and sustainable projects. They must be involved and develop the project.
> **Community volunteer**

While about ⅔ of the activities supported under this project focused on food and nutrition several groups also chose to respond to other pressing needs. This included health, hygiene kits/sanitary pads, shelter materials, water and sanitation related activities. A few groups addressed protection needs, income generation for female headed households, psychosocial activities targeted at children or conflict transformational activities.

This diversity of responses is an important finding and appears to be, at least partly, linked to the national NGOs' ability to identify a range of different groups and initiatives including some with diverse scope and skillsets i.e., supporting individuals with specific vulnerabilities

and needs (women, children, protection, conflict transformation, awareness raising etc.) and specific chronic diseases (HIV/Aids, kidney failure etc.). The knowledge, mentoring and commitments of the national NGOs staff was greatly appreciated by the majority of the volunteers interviewed.

Observations from groups who had a chance to work with several rounds of grants indicate that this allowed the groups and the two NGOs to benefit from the training and on-the-job learning from the first round and thus respond both faster and better during 2. and 3. circle grants. With repeated circles of grants there were also indications that some groups - when and where the situation allowed for it - moved from short term immediate humanitarian responses (handouts and soup kitchens) to more sustainable and long-term response strategies such as small-scale income generating efforts for vulnerable female headed households.

Another characteristic was that while almost all interviewees stated that the grants and related aid was greatly appreciated, they also stressed that the grants were far too small and too short-lived in relation to needs. This must, however, be considered alongside the finding that the majority of grants – with the training and mentoring provided by national NGOs - had a multiplier effect. In other words, they helped sustain longer lasting activities by the same ERRs and other MAGs. Such activities were supported through additional funding from the groups own local and international networks (diaspora).

The above finding points to how supporting community led responses can help bolster ongoing spontaneous and organic mutual aid efforts - the importance of which almost per definition is impossible to accurately assess but which may have been a very - possibly the most - important source of life-saving aid during the current crisis in Sudan.

Closely associated with the synergy and multiplier effects is the finding that the community response volunteers and community members contributed very significant resources to the responses - in some cases even exceeding the grant itself. These contributions took the form of time invested in the response as well as additional in-kind and cash contributions. A conservative estimate indicates that if assigned a monetary value, just the time the volunteers invested in implementing the grants constitute an added value of approximately USD 250,000 – more than 50% of the cash value of the grants made available to them.

The very significant efforts by the community response volunteers did not come without risks. While the situation in some states was one of relative calm during the project period, volunteers in some areas faced a very difficult and often dangerous security environment where they were at constant risk of being accused of siding with one or the other of the warring parties. Despite these risks the groups found - often creative - ways of working which allowed them to reduce risks and continue responding.

Where possible, the national NGOs played a crucial role by ensuring that local authorities, including, where present, the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), at relevant levels were informed and in agreement with the activities of the individual community groups. Using their status as legally registered and well-connected NGOs was seen by many MAGs and initiatives as having helped ensure a better and safer work and security environment in a majority of the localities where activities were carried out.

Apart from security related issues, the key constraints and challenges reported by the ERRs and other MAGs and the involved NGOs centred on difficult (occasionally impossible) communication related to very limited electricity and occasional internet/phone "black outs". In some cases, physical access to remote and vulnerable communities (groups of IDPs) was very difficult and dangerous due to the ongoing conflict.

Technical issues with the transfer of funding and micro grants were a continuous struggle for all involved and related to both domestic and international transfers. This challenge will continue to require ongoing minute attention as realities on the ground continue to change. Several ERRs and other MAGs took issue with the detailed and difficult requirements and demands related to reporting and accountability. Given the extreme challenges and dangers, they faced, several asked for greater flexibility from both NGOs and donors.

Concluding, the principal asks from community volunteers and community members were more, and more sustained, support in the form of cash grants - including

grants flexible and sustainable enough to address both immediate humanitarian needs but also medium-term issues such as small-scale income generation and recovery efforts. Learning and training opportunities for the volunteers were also in high demand covering a range of topics related to response management and reporting. Associated with that, was an ask for more peer learning and networking opportunities for the involved Sudanese NGOs and community volunteers. Lastly, several interviewees with the ERRs and other MAGs/initiatives recommended donors to be less focused on only working with INGOs and allow for more flexible and unrestricted funds for NNGOs and MAGs.

The authors would like to thank all those who volunteered their time and shared their experiences and insights with us. For reasons of safety and security none of the interviewees are identified by name. That does not make our debt to the interviewees and survey respondents any smaller. The paper would not exist without you. Thanks.

Introduction & background

Introduction

The humanitarian response activities explored in this Learning Paper were carried out in collaboration between more than 130 Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs) and other community initiatives, national and international NGOs and an international donor and coordination body.

The activities were carried out in Sudan between May 2024 and July 2025 with a focus on alleviating the humanitarian crisis due to intense war and conflict including massive displacement and in places extreme food and water shortages. The crisis was - and remains to this day - characterised by a widespread food and protection crisis and has been exacerbated by soaring inflation, severe reduction in food production and distribution systems as well as a near breakdown of basic services such as health, water and education. Access for all humanitarian actors has been - and remains - severely restricted and hampered and looting of crucial and lifesaving humanitarian supplies has been and continues to be widespread. Civilians including humanitarian staff, volunteers and activists have time and time again been exposed to harm and subjected to targeted and arbitrary killings, torture, sexual violence, disappearances, arrests and extreme levels of harassments and threats.

Altogether this contributed to making the humanitarian situation in Sudan the one crisis which currently affects the most children, women and men globally.

In spite of this, the crisis that followed the outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023, was - and remains - also characterised by an enormous outpour of self-help and mutual aid across the country - not least where the fighting, destruction, suffering and displacement has been (is) most intense. Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), community led response and other mutual aid efforts emerged within hours and days of the outbreak of war.

In the early days, weeks and months the efforts of ERRs and other MAGs were either self-funded (volunteers themselves) or supported from the wider community (sharing and hospitality by local private sector and wealthy but very much also ordinary individuals). When and where communication has allowed for it, Sudanese abroad (diaspora) made and continue to make very significant contributions to this work. See more about this in the box “Mutual Aid going to scale” (page 9). After a few months (by May/June 2023) a few international aid actors began looking for ways to support some of these mutual aid groups. As time has passed, support through mutual aid has become one of - if not the - most important way(s) for international aid actors to reach parts of the Sudanese population caught up in the ongoing crisis.

For detailed information of the depth and breadth of the humanitarian crisis in Sudan, please refer to some of the documents and web sites listed in the literature list in Annex III.

The humanitarian activities explored in this paper were aimed at responding to these multiple crises through

supporting the work of ERRs and other MAGs in three central states of Sudan. In doing so, the involved humanitarian actors applied a contextualised form of the "supporting community led response" (sclr) approach including Group Cash Transfer guidance. In Sudan, many community response groups use the F-system (a set of project documents and agreed procedures) as first developed and refined by the ERRs network. To some "sclr" is also known as "Rushash" - the first rain that helps seeds begin to germinate (see box on terms and acronyms).

Activities explored here were implemented by 35 ERRs and 95 other MAGs. These groups were assisted with resources and on the ground support and mentoring from two national NGOs, one international NGO, and one international donor. For technical and administrative reasons, the original project period was extended by 3 months as per agreement between the involved organizations.

The total project grant was around USD 1 million. Of this, about 45% were dispersed as 130 group cash grants at an average of around USD 3,200 per group - varying between SDG 2,500,000 to SDG 10,050,000 per group depending on the activities. The remaining 55 % of the grant covered program support and management costs held by the involved national and international organisations - including a part (about 10% of the overall grant) spent on training and experimental learning activities aimed primarily at the local and national actors.

Building on the training and experience accumulated during this first project, subsequent projects were able to ensure that between 60% and 75% of the total grant was allocated to the community response groupss while the involved NGOs spent considerably less on support, management and admin activities (see P 17 for more on this).

This research and Learning Paper were covered by the latter component of the grant along with additional funding from the Local2Global Protection initiative.

Purpose, limitations and methodology

The primary scope of this paper and the associated research has been to capture key experiences and lessons at the level of community response groups as well as all involved national, international and donor organizations as they played their respective parts in realising the project. The authors also hope this may improve future community led response activities in Sudan - and beyond.

The findings in this paper builds on the experiences and perceptions shared with the authors in 26 key informant interviews with a balanced selection of 20 MAG and six ERR volunteers across three central states of Sudan which were carried out between April and July 2025. This was supplemented with in-depth interviews with four staff members of the national organizations, two staff members of international organisations and one senior official with the donor organization. The in-person interviews were supplemented by a sample of 80 orally based AI-assisted (but subsequently manually corrected for errors) on-line survey responses with predominantly members of communities expected to have benefitted from the activities (see Annex II for more details). All the interviews were carried out remotely for reasons of limited access, security as well as time and financial limitations.

The above material was cross-referenced with documentation relevant to the specific project including monitoring reports and project tracking sheets along with the written notes from 60 experimental learning sessions conducted over the course of the project between the MAGs, and the national organizations. The research was also informed by a wide selection of relevant published literature and media coverage (Annex III).

The findings and lessons learned presented in this report are based on the experiences and perceptions related to activities in specific localities in three central states. The findings are there for specific to these localities at the time and the realities when the activities were carried out. Hopefully some findings will still prove relevant for similar humanitarian interventions elsewhere in Sudan and possibly beyond. Still, the authors need to caution against generalising the experiences, findings and lessons expressed here beyond the time and context from where they originate.

DEFINITION & ACRONYMS

Brief working definitions of mutual aid and community-led responses:

Mutual Aid is the spontaneous and voluntary action of individuals, families and groups to help each other when facing crises or adversity. It happens based on people's own resources and networks.

Community-led responses may in some cases be the same as mutual aid but is often used to describe responses led by communities with varying degrees of external support.

Supporting community led response (sclr) is one approach for building on mutual aid. sclr aims to strengthen communities' capacity to respond to crises as well as reducing vulnerability to future crises.

The F-system (Form) is a set of project documents and agreed procedures supporting and guiding the implementation, monitoring, accountability, coordination and other issues and relationships between LCC, ERRs, MAGs and the supporting NGOs and donors. It is used by many ERRs and other MAGs across Sudan and was developed by the ERRs with some initial inspiration from the sclr approach.

Group Cash Transfer (GCT), in the context of the above, is a modality offering specific guidance on the transfer of unconditional small cash grants to community groups. In Sudan, the "Cash Working Group" recommends transfer values between USD 3,000 & USD 6,000.

Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs): community-led, youth-driven initiatives providing humanitarian assistance for communities affected by Sudan's current crisis

Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs): the term is used to cover a range of community initiatives and formations – some structured and longer term - some more spontaneous and short-lived

Localization Coordination Council (LCC): is a coordination entity that includes 13 state ERR representatives and 9 NNGOs to coordinate, strategize and share resources

NNGO: National non-governmental organization - Sudan-focused scope of work, varying sectoral expertise and often a deep understanding of the Sudanese context. NNGOs may also serve as donor/intermediary donor in the context of community led responses

INGO: International non-governmental organization. INGOs often have multiple geographic area and sectoral focus and expertise. INGOs often also serve as a donor/intermediary donor to NNGOs or directly to MAGs/ERRs in the context of community led responses.

Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC): Sudan's governmental body responsible for coordination of humanitarian interventions in Sudan - currently only covering government controlled parts of the country.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDP): people who are forced to flee their home of origin to other areas inside the country, due to conflict, natural disaster or other reasons.

Local to Global Protection (L2GP) was founded in 2009 with research into community responses to crises. This research provides the foundation for the "supporting community-led crisis response" (sclr) approach. Today, L2GP works with a variety of local, national, and international organisations to implement this approach around the world.

Background on the situation in the three central states

During the project period, some states in Sudan experienced communication blackouts among other as thermal stations were attacked. These blackouts often coincided with mass atrocities by armed actors resulting in killing, injury, torture, rape, kidnapping, theft of livestock and looting of the properties of thousands of civilians.

Civilians have faced multiple displacement waves. First in April 2023 from central Sudan to neighbouring states. Armed actors then also targeted agricultural production, which contributed to the failure of the farming season. This in turn led to renewed massive displacement waves from the farming communities and areas - further complicating and worsening an already desperate humanitarian situation. Later, attacks were documented in numerous villages prompting another wave of displacement.

The situation also worsened for IDPs in border states because of floods (2024) and they were forced to move once again to other areas. The floods and the breakdown of most of the health and water services also led to cholera outbreaks.

One of the states that was part of this research, was under siege for much of the project period - often leaving the populations with no routes in or out. Heavy conflict occurred and led to displacement waves to neighbouring states. Cholera outbreaks were difficult to control, because of deterioration of the health sector (no functioning hospitals in addition to the displacement of the health care professionals).

Generally speaking in the three states, the volunteers' abilities and capacities were severely challenged by the very high numbers of people in need but also the fact that many of the volunteers themselves were displaced - often multiple times - in addition to high levels of insecurity, targeting by armed actors, difficulty of movement, breakdown of infrastructure, and lack of funding.

Project implementation

Once contracts and agreements were finalised (May 2024) between all the involved organizations the project implementation started with a four day long co-design and training workshop for all the relevant staff. This workshop was led by an experienced Sudanese sclr trainer and mentor. Based on this and additional written and online guidance and learning materials on community led responses, the two national NGOs produced the in-house guidance, procedures and policies - including contextualising the sclr approach as required for them to begin implementing the project. At the same time, the involved ERRs and some MAGs were already familiar with the F-system as developed by the ERR networks.

The three states where the activities should take place were identified in agreement with the donor. Within the three states, the national organization in consultation with the international organization applied their own identification and selection process and criteria to determine the specific localities and communities to reach.

Slightly different approaches were followed by the national organization, in the subsequent identification and selection of community initiatives. Wherever possible, one of them held public community consultations through which active and credible initiatives were identified, and proposals were encouraged. The other organization relied on its existing staff, volunteers and extensive local networks to do a comprehensive mapping of community initiatives and capacities in the areas. This then helped the organization identify eligible groups and invite them to put forward proposals.

The two national NGOs then had selection committees including (where relevant) local authorities such as HAC. Their work with the committees was guided by the proposal selection criteria they had learned from the "generic" sclr co-design curriculum but adapted to the context. Prior to this, the two national NGOs had introduced the project to HAC and other relevant local authorities at high levels in the states and areas and where that was possible. Through this engagement the national organizations were able to acquire the relevant technical agreements and permissions required for them to implement the activities.

Once the final proposals and groups were selected and groups informed about the decision, the individual initiatives and groups began planning and subsequently implementing their activities. Many started within a few months from the original signing off on the overall project by the donor. Some activities were supported over

several rounds of smaller grants while a number of groups experiencing delays related to technical reasons could only implement some activities in the last weeks of July 2025. For reasons of time their experiences could not be included in the research for this paper.

Key findings, experiences and lessons learned

Key findings & lessons - communities and Mutual Aid Groups

Presenting key findings and lessons from research as comprehensive as this, there is always a temptation to start off by presenting something new - something original. But in fairness to the essence of the interviewees and those contributing to the online survey, the most prominent finding is a resounding validation of what others [See Annex III Literature list] already have pointed out: **The responses by the ERRs and other MAGs across Sudan, and in this case the three central states, have been of crucial importance for the basic survival of the people reached.**

In the words of one centrally placed interviewee:

> Working with mutual aid groups has been mind-blowing. It has been a game changer, and it has been lifesaving. In many areas it has been the only way to work and forced international actors to change - to step back and find a new way of working.

This statement resonates with one of the dominating responses from community volunteers and activists as well as the people they tried to reach: Assistance brought forward by the involved ERRs and other MAGs reached vulnerable individuals at a time when they most needed it and when little or no other humanitarian aid reached them. A majority of interviewees also indicate that the available assistance, as much as possible under the given circumstances, was targeted at exposed and vulnerable families and individuals including the displaced, children, women and people living with chronic or acute diseases or disabilities. In many cases this covered the population of areas under siege.

All interviewed MAGs responders pointed out that support implemented by community groups was better at addressing the most pressing needs and meeting them in ways which were more sensitive to local priorities, habits and sentiment than help and support executed in more traditional top-down ways.

Terms and expressions like timely, dignity, ownership and "led by community needs" are associated with a majority of the responses investigated. Several interviewees stress the significance of supporting the most vulnerable in ways that do not erode their sense of dignity - for instance by avoiding photographing or filming people waiting for food hand-outs - or by changing ways of distribution to reach individuals and families in more discrete ways than public soup kitchens and hand-outs - for instance by distributing food packages in less public ways.

> Sudanese people have pride and greatness. They can die of hunger, but they do not go and be photographed. Most organizations were forcing people to take pictures. We took sample pictures - but we took permission from the people.
> **Community volunteer**

While about ⅔ of the activities supported under this project focused exclusively or predominantly on food and nutrition (soup kitchens and/or food item distributions) several groups chose to respond to what they experienced as other pressing needs. This included health, hygiene kits/sanitary pads, shelter materials, water and sanitation related activities. Others addressed grave protection needs, income generation for female headed households (widows as result of conflict or husbands who did not flee the conflict areas), psychosocial activities targeted at children or conflict transformational activities. One MAG did awareness raising through radio drama, addressing issues like orphaned children, Gender Based Violence and

peaceful coexistence. In addition, it should be mentioned that one national NGO reported that the groups and initiatives they worked with referred 2,000 vulnerable cases to relevant service providers during the project.

This diversity of responses is an important finding. So is the fact that this to a degree appears to be linked to the national NGOs' ability to identify a range of different groups and initiatives including some with a more specific scope and skillsets - such as supporting individuals with specific vulnerabilities and needs (women, children, evacuation or other protection needs etc.) and chronic diseases (kidney diseases, HIV/Aids etc.).

The Kidney Patients' Association for instance, worked to support kidney patients displaced from several conflict-affected states with crucial medications. Some of the patients were even hosted by the kidney centre. This experience had a significant impact on the displaced patients - but also on the community in the respective state.

This points to an important role played by the involved NNGOs. They used their contextual understanding of the areas where they operated to put together a "response package", which on one hand manifestly addressed what was perceived as the most acute needs in the three states at the time: Food and nutrition. At the same time, including groups with different specific focus also allowed for a response which addressed other crucial needs - including groups which had little or no prior access to outside funding and technical support. In some cases, this also allowed the NNGOs to reach people in need who live beyond the reach of the ERRs and more established MAGs.

In these cases, but also more generally speaking, not only the group cash grant but also the technical support and guidance delivered by the community facilitators of the NNGOs (backstopped on some issues by knowledge resources of the INGO) was generally appreciated by the groups.

Several interviewees expressed appreciation of the basic training and ongoing mentoring they had been able to draw on from the two involved National NGOs. Many also expressed a need for further knowledge and training in basic project implementation and management skills - as well as in some cases knowledge on how to better address particular needs and vulnerability. Such requests came mostly from more recently formed and less well-connected groups.

> I really liked the idea of experiential learning. If this is generalized and there are forums, Allah willing, people will come. I'm sure there will be a huge development.
> **Community volunteer**

A majority of the interviewees at community level pointed out that the support that came from this project helped them in already existing community-led responses. So, while, in a majority of cases, the direct impact was limited and usually deemed too short (on average about one month) in relation to needs, the intervention worked as an important stimulant and motivator for already ongoing efforts. In other cases, the grant and support from this project helped start and sustain new expressions of voluntarism and community level responses.

Community led activities in other contexts have demonstrated a potential to not only address urgent humanitarian needs but also to deliver more longer term and sustainable activities. Globally, it appears that working with the same groups over time not only delivers better activities but also enables groups to begin addressing longer term challenges - and in some cases more fundamental root causes.

In the case of the activities examined here, for instance a community group used the grant to supplement their own very considerable fundraising to realise a solar driven water station. Another initiative tried to create income-generating opportunities for IDP women and seemed to have had a positive impact on the income and social dynamics of that IDP community. Months after the activity started, and despite a large mobility among the IDPs, 25 women out of 46 were still producing items which they then sold in the market.

> We had a livelihood project, after it finished, the IDP women organized a fund (each one paid 200-500 sudanese pounds), and they set up a Juma (Friday) market, where they sell their handmade stuff, and other things.
> **National NGO staff**

A number of the interviewees also explained that the activities supported by this project had prompted more community members to volunteer for these and future activities.

> The best thing that can be done is to engage the community and form associations for response and sustainable projects. This is the most important thing you can learn to prevent corruption. They must be involved and develop the project.
> **Community volunteer**

Associated with the above finding, it was apparent that apart from the resources and support from the established aid actors involved in this project, the time and efforts invested in the activities by the ERR and MAG volunteers represents a very considerable and indispensable value. The execution of each grant would often involve several days (in some cases weeks) of full-time efforts by 5 - 10 individuals.

Putting a monetary value to voluntary work, integral as it is to all mutual aid, is equally difficult and tricky as it risks undermining the very essence of mutual aid and voluntarism. That said, the crucial importance of these contributions needs to be captured and given due prominence and attention. Conservatively guesstimated, volunteers have contributed time worth more than USD 250,000 as they implemented the activities covered in this report*. Put in relation to the *total* grant from the donor to the overall project this could be considered a 25% value added - and in relation to what has been transferred to the ERRs and other MAGs more than a 50% value added. Such calculations - tentative as they are - highlights the crucial importance of the volunteers - and illustrate the obvious fact that without volunteer contributions there would be no mutual aid - and no externally supported community led responses.

In addition to the indispensable value of the volunteers/ activists' time, efforts and the risks they take upon themselves, many groups reflected on how they had "topped up" the group cash grants by money or relevant in-kind materials from their own means or through crowd sourcing from others (domestically & diaspora) in order to achieve their goals and aspirations.

Similar observations with community-led responses globally have prompted the Local2Global Protection initiative to routinely add a conservative extra 20% of value to donor and NGO reported project values when tracking the pick-up of sclr-style grants and projects globally in annual surveys.

* This estimate is based on 130 groups with an estimated average of 8 volunteers per group each spending about 10 days on the project activities. This equals 10,400 days of voluntary work here assigned a value of 25 usd per day and resulting in an estimated monetary value of USD 260,000.

MUTUAL AID GONE TO SCALE…

What many today call mutual aid has a long history, multiple expressions and several names in Sudan - as in many parts of the world. "Nafeer" "نفير" is a common term in the daily lives of Sudanese - supporting a neighbour to build their house, collaboratively repair a village school, or to mitigate floods in the rainy season.

These efforts are not well-documented, since they do not take the form of registered "projects", and depend on crowdsourcing of people's own resources, diaspora, philanthropists, traders and others. It does not follow the regular project and accountability mechanisms as we know them in "professional aid" - but is based on community trust and tradition. Takeya for instance, is a form of public kitchen, which distributes free meals as charity. It was originally connected to the rural cultures, as they provided a space for people passing through their areas who could then have free meals and a place to rest until the morning.

While going back hundreds of years or more, the forms of mutual aid which have now risen to prominence in Sudan may be seen as evolutions of older traditions and social norms, but they have now been "powered up" by the emergence of the ERR structures and a multitude of other new or pre-existing volunteer initiatives (MAGs). So, while mutual aid is nothing new to Sudan, its current manifestations have changed and been amplified in response to a range of factors such as the breakdown in usual services (governmental or institutional aid) and the huge changes in the social and economic fabric following two years of intense and widespread war and displacement. Add to that the emergence of new trust-based networks operating through face-to-face interaction and digital connects - sharing crucial information, resources and knowledge of the whereabouts of resources, security briefs, access to individuals

with specific skills (medical, engineering etc.) and structures/networks. This often happens instantly within a given locality, across states and beyond, to include the large and deeply involved Sudanese diaspora.

Important for understanding this manifestation of mutual aid, is the fact that among both the host population and the estimated 10 mio. displaced people, you find a large number of individuals with a variety of relevant professional skills, courage, motivation, creativity and networks - along with the constantly updated contextual awareness that comes with learning how to survive in this war.

All are victims of a protracted and vicious war and in a traditional aid perspective many would be the rightful receivers and "beneficiaries" of relevant state and traditional humanitarian aid responses. But in the current realities many of these individuals are first and foremost extremely capable, motivated and risk-taking first responders. The professional and personal skills of many of the interviewees in this research illustrate an impressive voluntary mobilisation of skills and motivation - individually and collectively. So does the language and terminology used by many interviewees who display a fluency with many of the terms, principles and expressions used by established aid actors - including terms like vulnerability, conflict sensitivity, ownership, dignity, psychosocial issues, special needs of children, disabled and gender related concerns.

The diverse acts of mutual aid encountered and explored in this research appear to be the result of not only visible structures such as the ERR network and other established civil society entities - impressive as they are in so many ways. What became visible during the research is a result of a wider and extremely complex interaction of crowdsourcing and funding, networking and collaboration between a multitude of actors. This includes private hospitality and charity, individuals with specific skills and/or resources, local, national and international humanitarian actors, diaspora activists and donors, national and local private sector (including traders and transporters) and individuals or entities previously related to local or national government paid services in for instance health, engineering, media and social services. For more than two years now, more than 10 million Sudanese have been displaced from their homes and experience a near complete loss of livelihood and regular income. A very significant number of these individuals rely to a large extent on support from the sort of mutual aid initiatives described in this paper.

Describing this complex decentralised response in any degree of detail is past the scope of this paper. Still, trying to recognize the contours of this complexity and its contribution to mitigate the current crisis is crucial for supporting elements of mutual aid - and thus "tap into" its importance in responding to the needs and desires of the millions exposed to often extreme vulnerability in Sudan.

Bringing these reflections back to the specific research, the importance of the wider mutual aid phenomenon is illustrated for example by the impact of a grant of a few thousand dollars that helped sustain the efforts by a group of displaced pharmacists in one of the areas examined. This initiative, running largely on voluntary contributions, has helped patients accessing crucial, often lifesaving, medication and other medical services for about two years. Still, it found the support from the project examined here extremely valuable and timely.

> I [pharmacist volunteer] contacted the Sudanese Pharmacist Initiative, and every pharmacy owner donated their pharmacy to citizens. I collected medications at home, and we also opened a small health center.
> **Community volunteer**

So far, this paper has mainly focused on the positive responses the research brought up. The following sections will highlight some of the most common challenging and critical responses, experiences and lessons the research also brought up.

While greatly appreciating the support they had received, many interviewees found that the financial support they received only covered a limited number of existing needs - and only for a relatively short amount of time. Community response volunteers reported that they often had to leave out families or entire areas which they could not cover with the resources available.

Apart from pointing to the fact that needs in many parts of Sudan hugely outgrows available aid resources, these concerns, repeatedly raised by volunteers, points to an associated challenge felt very directly by them - but

pointing back to a shared responsibility for all involved. Volunteers are members of the very communities they try to serve - including too often also having to make very difficult choices between who can be assisted - and who not. These choices lead to frustrations, frictions, and conflicts that they must face daily - unlike traditional aid workers who rarely reside in the communities they are trying to assist.

One way to address such issues is to step up the size and the frequency of grants. But even with increased financial support extended over longer periods, such dilemmas are not likely to disappear in any immediate future as external and mutual aid is likely to continue to fall far short of needs and expectations.

Other experience suggests that involving community leaders may also help both balance the delivery of aid and protect the volunteers. If community led responses are to be sustainable for the individual volunteers and activists, they need to be better equipped to manage such dilemmas, frustrations and possible conflicts. There is no easy solution to this. But, apart from increased funding and possible support from community leaders, opportunities for peer learning and mentoring along with possibly outside experience in how best to manage and live with such dilemmas and tensions - institutionally and individually - could be a first step. Over time and if given opportunities to learn from other similar initiatives, community groups could be better prepared to meet and to some extent manage such pressures and challenges.

Delays in receiving funds were mentioned as an important frustration and complication by some groups. Such delays created disappointment and distrust within the communities and in some cases, due to inflation, also eroded the value of the grants. Delays were related to administrative issues with the donors and I/NNGOs as well as issues related to challenges with communication and bank transfers.

> The faster the response, the greater the trust between the community and the initiative.
> **Community volunteer**

In Feb 2024, much of Sudan experienced full blackouts. While power and internet were partially restored in some areas, central states continue to face partial communication blackouts. Parts of them still do not have reliable connectivity but in some areas use Starlink devices and face to face communication as alternatives.

Communication blackouts, along with the volatile environment, made it hard for the volunteers to operate safely and complicated transfers of both funding and the required reporting. This has in some cases delayed and complicated implementation for longer than anticipated. This delay also affected the initial budgeting, as one volunteer explained it:

> The main challenge was to communicate with volunteers, we send a message, they reply after two days, then take another two days to have an invoice in place, this resulted in coordination issues among the group and changing initial budgeting which means reducing the number of beneficiaries.

Many groups appreciated the technical support they received from the NNGOs to fulfil the narrative and financial reporting required. Still, several of the interviewees stressed that some of the reporting requirements seemed to be more than what they themselves deemed relevant. A small handful of interviewees highlighted that particularly requests for formal invoices had proven to be a challenge as that often invoked an additional tax of 17% on expenses related to purchases. This unforeseen expense forced some of the groups to either reduce the number of people they had announced they would support - or in some cases they used other resources to make up for this shortfall.

Subsequent interviews with representatives of the involved organizations showed that this and other issues around reporting and accountability had been the subject of some initial confusion and changes in regulations over the project period. As of the writing of this report, collecting and sharing invoices/receipts at the level of purchases by ERRs and other community response groups is encouraged - but it is not a mandatory requirement by international organisations or donors. Unclarity around these issues is being continuously explored and increased flexibility should now be in place - or will soon be.

Even then, acute attention to the minute details around cash grant transfers and the associated reporting and

documentation requirements will continue to be needed. Partly because new options for transfers may evolve - and partly as the context around the volunteer groups and those who support them continue to change - sometimes for the better (a more stable and less violent environment) - and at the same time in other aspects for the worse (as new and old stricter governmental regulation, control and manipulation kicks in).

Risks faced by volunteers

The fact that the NNGOs very early on introduced the project and the intended activities to relevant levels of the authorities (HAC and Ministry of Social Welfare where possible) appeared to be linked to the fact that relatively few groups reported serious incidents of harassment, arrests - or worse. In areas where this was possible many experienced that such "groundwork" by the NNGOs had helped clear the way for the individual group activities (ERRs and other community groups are usually not registered with the relevant authorities).

In areas controlled by the RSF, this "preparing the ground" was not possible and that coincides with where several groups reported a very difficult and dangerous work environment. In one area, volunteers were exposed to multiple risks by warring parties. One community volunteer described operating in such areas as a "suicide mission". For instance, soldiers were accusing volunteers of being funded by the other warring side's intelligence. This was mentioned in four interviews. One volunteer explained how 3-4 soldiers came to their soup kitchen asking them if the other side was funding the work. They clarified it was purely humanitarian. The soldier then hit them and left. Volunteers used different coping mechanisms to continue operating within that situation, one volunteer explains:

> We tried to be very cautious, even when we bought something or moved around the market, we made sure that there would be no indication that we were supported by an organization or anything similar.
> **Community volunteer**

Another group developed a strategy of distributing food parcels disguised as trash in the evenings - thus avoiding very public distributions and unwanted attention by de-facto authorities.

In general, volunteers in other states did not report that they were exposed to similar risks, probably because of the coordination that was made early on by NNGOs with HAC and other local authorities. Still some groups reported challenges when implementing activities. One group was asked about registration and if they are affiliated with any party. In contrast, other groups, in a different locality, were encouraged by local authorities to ask for any support the may need at any given time.

Complaints mechanisms

Most of the respondents in a parallel AI assisted data collection survey, (see more under methodology and in Annex II) reported they had been comfortable with raising concerns to the local partners or even filing complaints with observations and serious issues. The respondents either raised their complaints through hotline numbers, or in direct/in-person complaints.

One respondent reported a lack of a complaint mechanism. Two others reported that they could not complain because they think the local partner team is already volunteering, and it is not fair to complain because simply they can't provide more assistance - which was their main request.

Key findings & lessons - National organizations:

> We have seen a big change working with community led responses. The load on us as an NGO is less because we do not implement directly. Instead, we support the work of the groups and work more like a fund manager and donor than before.
> **National NGO staff**

A general enthusiasm from working with community led responses ran through all the interactions with staff of the two national NGOs. Words and expressions like *community led, rapid, relevance of support, dignity and reaching the most vulnerable and most remote* were prominent in their interview responses. Their feedback also stressed the benefits of focussing not only on a particular short-term goal but as much on how you achieve it, and what that means for the long term.

Concerns were expressed about accountability, inclusion, good-enough assessments and risks of corruption for the groups if this way of working were scaled up too fast.

The experience of working community-led prompted national NGO staff to point out how their own role had shifted dramatically from one of implementing activities themselves - including all the time-consuming back and forth with donors - to now working as a support and mentor to a large number of community initiatives. They also reflected on how that at times came close to being a fund manager or even donor in the relationship with the community groups.

> Once we got things in place this has become very rapid. We can basically do all steps in only one day: contact the initiative [community group], do the verification, request and fill the forms and do the contract - and then transfer money to the group. It can all happen in one day - if we have money in our account.
> **National NGO staff**

As reflected by the interviewees, it took a while to prepare the wider circle of volunteers and staff of the NNGOs to the practicalities, guidance and new roles. It is now required of them to be able to identify, train, mentor, monitor and support a multitude of diverse initiatives in all kinds of ways. This was even more so true in localities where NNGO staff had good prior contextual knowledge and contacts - but no or limited direct access during the project period (due to the war).

The first rounds of initiative identification and support thus became an important period of "learning as you go" for the community groups and for much of the NNGO staff. This again required the involved INGO colleagues and mentors to be on stand-by with additional support and mentoring beyond the initial 4-day training and co-design course. This "learning as you go" continued throughout the entire implementation period for all involved - something it is important to take forward also for future activities. Working community-led is not something you can learn in a 4-day workshop. Judging by the interviews, it was experienced more like a continued process of experimenting, learning, tweaking and fine tuning according to the individual specific contexts and as experience and events evolved.

Crucial elements in managing this sometimes-steep learning curve included clarity on selection criteria for which groups to support – criteria which must be known and transparent to all involved. The same was true for grants management including expectations on accountability towards all involved (including the finer details of narrative and financial reporting all along the response chain). More flexibility of policies and practices, as requested by some groups, had to be agreed and shared with both the groups and the donor- particularly where this related to proof of disbursement of funds and required documentation for expenditures related to the community cash grants.

> The key tool in the sclr methodology: We talk to the whole community publicly. They choose their own representatives, and we conduct a workshop on the methodology for the community. We transfer the money for them, and they intervene in their area - that's why sclr is effective.
> **National NGO staff**

Some groups are now acting on second and third rounds of grants. As the situation has stabilised somewhat in parts of the three states in question, some initiatives have begun addressing issues like small income generation for vulnerable groups (for instance female headed households) or (re-)establishing more sustainable water supplies powered by solar panels. The national NGOs found that the flexibility within the sclr approach, once well understood and agreed by all involved, allowed them to follow such shifts in community needs and priority much faster than usual programming - also when that include initiatives that border on recovery and developmental aspects of life.

This echoes with experiences with the sclr approach globally, where it is often observed that community led responses work equally well across what is sometimes referred to as "the nexus" - spanning humanitarian, development and peace/ conflict resolution.

Working to ensure the best possible communication links proved to be crucial and was to some extent addressed by establishing alternative (Starlink based) communication in some places.

Lastly, but equally crucial, identifying the best possible money transfer options also took time and a lot of effort to achieve. Once in place, it improved the speed and ease of dispersing grants and with that lessened frustration and delays with the groups.

The role played here by NNGO's community facilitators as connector, critical friend, technical support and quality insurance was seen to be crucial - in this research as well as based on global experience with community-led response programming. Alongside the volunteers and activists, the personal and professional capacities, skills and engagement of the community facilitators are crucial to success or failure in this kind of work.

> A visit to [sclr] initiatives gave me motivation because some people still want to learn and know and do more. This enhanced my own motivation.
> **National NGO staff**

ROLE & FUNCTIONS OF NGOS

It is difficult to capture all the roles and functions exercised by the involved NGOs as they supported the activities implemented by the 130 community response groups under this project. Still, below we've tried to list the most obvious ones in a short overview.

What such a list does not capture well, may in some ways be the most important of all. The way dedicated volunteers, community facilitators and other staff engage with the mutual aid groups not just with their professional skills - but also very much with their entire personality and all their passion.

- Screening, mapping and selecting the groups to receive grants and the associated technical support
- Where possible and safe, introduce activities and the involved stakeholders to relevant local and state level authorities ensuring that regulations and registrations are upheld and thus help minimize possible issues and risks for the community groups
- Transferring, distributing and keeping track of all funding internationally, nationally and locally including overcoming complicated and challenging financial, political and logistical challenges - and yet be in keeping with internal and external regulations, requirements and best practises
- On-the-job training and mentoring in all relevant aspects of implementation - design, planning, implementation, accountability, gender, inclusiveness, protection (including referral of cases when relevant), safety & security, financial and narrative reporting, conflict sensitivity/Do Less Harm and experimental learning
- Monitoring and financial and narrative reporting - collating and processing information for donor and back donor reporting requirements in the approved formats and to set requirements
- Coordination with all other relevant actors through formal and informal local and national level coordination mechanisms
- Lead in overcoming communications and access challenges when and where needed
- Lastly, the NGOs' play an important role in identifying and putting together a sufficiently diverse and complete list of groups and initiatives in order to ensure that major humanitarian issues such as food and water are addressed but also initiatives addressing more specific needs and vulnerabilities (women, children, protection, conflict transformation, awareness raising, chronic diseases, HIV/Aids etc.).

> We train them, although it takes some time and they make mistakes, they still do the work. And the mistakes are corrected through mentoring.
> **National NGO staff**

One national NGO reported that peer-learning activities such as the "experimental learning sessions" had proven useful by community groups members and in at least one case led to attempts to establish a volunteer/activist peer-learning network of which the NNGO was not in direct control.

> The experimental learning has been important to help groups and us to continue to learn and improve. You can really see that when you do a second and third round of grants. The next grant(s) is much faster because now we all understand the process and trust each other.
> **National NGO staff**

NNGOs have supported the establishment of new community initiatives aside from this project, but as an impact of working with the sclr approach. One example was in an IDP shelter where local partners implemented a project of food distribution. Women, though, could not speak publicly about their needs for sanitary pads and other reproductive health-related items. The NNGO supported this group to organize and connect to other initiatives to be able to cover their needs.

Another example occurred where the NNGO supported one community group in delivering services for students. Once the project concluded, some students established another initiative trying to secure that all students at their school could pay their required fees. The NNGO supported the new initiative by connecting them to other donors.

The NNGOs established conflict sensitivity committees in the three states to intervene and oversee issues related to community needs and protection, and to advise on certain situations. These committees were also part of the selection process deciding which community groups would to be supported using their contextualised knowledge and experience of the areas.

> During discussion with them [IDPs] - they were empowered. I got the sense of their satisfaction of their effort.
> **National NGO staff**

Key findings & lessons relevant to INGOs and donors:

> Mutual aid groups have proven that they can work when and where the old aid systems did not work. It has shown itself to be more effective at saving lives than traditional aid.
> **Staff with international humanitarian actor**

Responders working with the INGO and donor for this project pointed to many of the strengths and weaknesses already touched upon in the preceding sections. This section will therefore focus on areas where the involved international actors identified findings and lessons that have helped shape this and future work on support of community led activities.

> In many places supporting mutual aid was the only way to work so the situation forced us as international actors to step back and find another way to work.
> **Staff with international humanitarian actor**

While none of the involved international actors expressed doubts about the relevance and effect of supporting community-led responses, issues around ensuring sustainability, scale and quality of the responses and the work of the community groups came up during the interviews.

Concerns around sustainability focused on how best to support mutual aid groups in developing strategies for continuing and/or developing their own ability to mobilise

resources. At the same time, the international actors were concerned with their own role and responsibility in continuing to find more - and more long-term funding opportunities for the future. This includes looking for funding committed also to support community led responses beyond just urgent humanitarian needs and into longer term recovery when and where the situation in Sudan allows for that.

> For this to work we have to trust the national NGOs and thus enable them to create the same trust-based relationship and space for the mutual aid groups to do their best.
> **Staff with international humanitarian actor**

Making the case for supporting mutual aid towards large institutional donors continues to be a priority and one where the international actors have a particular responsibility to make best possible use of their access to decision makers - but do so in a manner that is rooted in the practice and priorities of the Sudanese mutual aid volunteers and activists.

Given the diversity displayed by the already known activities, a further scaling up is likely to confront mutual aid groups and supporting national and international actors with an increasing number of proposals and initiatives aiming to address more demanding and complex issues - such as for instance physical and mental health, protection or WASH.

Developing the relevant skills, competences and knowledge of referral opportunities will be increasingly important to ensure the required professional knowledge and good practice - and minimise the risk of doing harm. This is, and will continue to be, a challenge and a responsibility shared throughout the response chain including mutual aid groups and the supporting national and international aid actors. In some cases, this may also have to include the option of not selecting an initiative for support when the relevant technical knowledge is not available.

> Since we began supporting mutual aid, we really haven't designed any programs. The mutual aid groups do all the designing! We just deliver resources and technical support.
> **Staff with international humanitarian actor**

As mentioned in the introduction, the specific grant explored in this paper saw about 45 % of the funding being channelled to mutual aid groups while the rest was spent on cost coverage by the national and international NGOs. In subsequent grants from the same donor, 60 - 65%, and in one case about 75% of the original grant, went to the mutual aid groups thus reducing the overhead and cost coverage for the national and international NGOs. Making as much funding available for the mutual aid groups seems to be an agreed principle for those asked. Still, concern was raised as funding from other sources, in one example, had to be used to partially cover outstanding costs necessary for the NNGO to extend meaningfully support, mentor and guide several community response groups.

Sending funding to partner NGOs in Sudan continues to be challenging. A key lesson for the INGO involved in this project has been that significant ongoing attention needs to be given to ensuring that transfers and transfer modalities are in keeping with internal and donor compliance and regulations. It is equally important to ensure the best, safest and most cost-effective transfer modalities. As realities change so does the options available - or not available - for financial transfers. Large financial transfers are complicated and may include transfers between several banks and/or other entities. The slightest error easily translates into weeks of delays in transfer and result in delays in reaching partner NGOs and the community response groups - with all the issues that come with that.

In Sudan, numerous actors including the ERR/LCC structures and NGO forum and specialised working groups continue to explore and exchange experience on these aspects of supporting mutual aid - including Hawala transfers, bank transfers (Bankak) but also experiments with for instance blockchain currencies. Being in touch with the evolving best practice will remain a necessity for all involved actors - also as the military, political and socio-economic realities in Sudan change constantly and differ very significantly from one part to another. A shared concern here is that the rules, regulations and structures of the old politically biased governance systems increasingly are manifesting themselves in parts of Sudan. With that, there is a growing risk of new restrictions and attempts to control and manipulate aid resources - including those implemented by community groups.

> Risk sharing has been essential all along. Nobody really is safe, and the volunteers know that. They know the risks and opportunities better than anyone. They lead and if they say something is too dangerous - that's where we stop. In some cases, we can help through advocacy and policy work. But even then - what we do must be informed and led by the insights and advice of the mutual volunteers. Otherwise, we'll get it wrong.
> **Staff with international humanitarian actor**

Support to mutual aid groups have and continue to go through different channels and streams. Some donors and INGOs prefer to work directly with the ERR and LCC structures. Some work - as the project examined here - through a response chain composed of a donor body, an INGO, one or more national NGO(s) and through them with community groups.

Both ways have their advantages as explained by one aid worker: "Working directly with the ERR and LCC is fast and to a degree you know what you get. Working with a national NGO on the other hand may take longer but then enables you to reach potentially thousands of communities and groups, which are not part of the ERR/LCC systems and that may result in a more diverse and inclusive response."

Given the enormous needs across Sudan, the many different local realities and an ever changing military and political situation, the international actors interviewed for this report did not see the different ways of working as "an either or". Rather, working both as directly as possible with the ERRs/LCC as well as supporting community groups including ERRs through capable and relevant national NGOs was seen as complementary in terms of maximum reach, diversity and inclusion. It also makes sense in order not to be dependent on only one modality, which could be at risk of being closed or reduced in its outreach because of events beyond anyone's control.

Conclusion

> Sometimes the answers are so simple. But as internationals we tend to oversee that and try to come up with extremely complicated solutions.
> **Staff with international humanitarian actor**

Working with community-led activities requires everybody involved to work as one collaborative and trust-based response chain. Each part has unique and specific roles which they need to fulfil for this type of activities to truly deliver towards their short-term goals (often addressing urgent needs) but also strive to fulfil a wider potential - strengthening the ability of communities to respond themselves across a wide range of short- and longer-term challenges and opportunities.

This means requiring a different mindset as well as new capabilities along the entire response chain - starting with communities and community volunteers and following through with the involved NGOs and donors. Respondents throughout this research welcomed this and pointed to how this more explicit interdependency also helped change the dynamics and power relationships between all involved in ways they considered positive.

Conducting a piece of research like this is one small step towards that. Much more important is creating opportunities for peer-learning such as the experimental learning elements built into the project examined here. In such spaces volunteers and activists get a chance to share results, inspire one another and exchange hard won experience. L2GP's experience from other countries strongly points to the positive impact supporting such opportunities for "the doers" can have - on learning, on feeling appreciated - on motivation.

Equally, connecting with national and regional peer learning networks on community led responses in the Middle East and East Africa may serve many of the same functions for NGO staff. In such networks they get opportunities to develop their knowledge and experience with colleagues performing similar roles in immediate support of community groups and volunteers.

One way to honour, in concrete ways, the time and efforts invested by the volunteers, would be to increase the resources and capacities of the national NGOs to help equip mutual aid group volunteers and activists with more, new and better skills relevant to their efforts. The demand for this came clearly through the interviews and survey with the mutual aid volunteers. This would also have a positive effect on the future activities of the groups.

All the involved national and international aid actors interviewed for this paper pointed to the fact that working in support of community led responses was very different from usual more top down and traditional projects and programming. This was considered positive - and long overdue. With that also followed scrutiny and to some extent a re-think of mind sets, existing procedures and practice including financial and other compliance regulations.

One area that warrants further development is to re-evaluate and reform how the impact of community led responses are assessed and evaluated - including investigating the actual value of current ways of estimating "beneficiary figures" and, based on that, assessing "impact". For instance, this research indicates that the potential "multiplier effect" of supporting communities' own agency and capacities to respond should be monitored as a benchmark and a success criteria along with more immediate deliverables such as more or less accurate/ meaningful estimates of "beneficiary numbers".

Improving monitoring and evaluation tools must be a continuous "work-in-progress" as experience is gathered and new methods are being tested. In this context, it seems relevant for the involved humanitarian actors to consider connecting with a current global two-year study undertaken by ALNAP in collaboration with L2GP and many of its national and international partners. ALNAP's focus is on the impact of community led responses, how it connects to mutual aid - and how new and existing MEL tools may be improved and become more relevant and adequate when assessing mutual aid and community led responses.

This research has the ambition to try to capture some of key lessons and experience from volunteers across the three states in question. Equally, through the online survey, input was sought from a sizeable number of community members. As we draw this paper to a conclusion, it feels right to sum up some key recommendations and suggestions as expressed directly by them - the "end users" of the project.

Needs as expressed by community members:

Food baskets (flour, sugar, oil) consistently ranked as the top priority. Food was followed closely by clean water and medicine - in some cases for chronic diseases - and then cash support, and safe mobility. Some respondents also expressed a need for household supplies, children's clothing and toys.

Community members also offered suggestions for improvements:

- Increase the quantity of food and medical aid and provide cash support to help families meet their diverse needs.
- Develop internal small-income-generating projects to reduce long-term dependency on aid.
- Ensure access to basic services like education, healthcare, electricity, water, and provide assistance in obtaining national IDs.
- Increase distribution frequency, ideally more than once every two weeks.

Recommendations and suggestions by MAG/ERR volunteers:

- More and more flexible funding allocation for MAGs/ ERRs in the area or state where the interviewee was active as a volunteer
- More learning and training for the teams on different topics: management, finance, logistics, communication, report writing and awareness raising on different topics.
- Volunteers stressed that recovery projects - and not only emergency assistance - needs to be given prominence as people have begun returning to their homes in parts of Sudan.
- More networking among Sudanese NGOs and MAGs/

ERRs for more strategic interventions and coordination efforts (towards sectoral coordination) and possibly peer learning.
- Address the root causes of inequality in Sudan, rather than doing short-term projects that will not have a real lasting impact.
- A general recommendation for donors: Be less focused on only working with INGOs but allow for more flexible and unrestricted funds for NNGOs and MAGS/ERRs.

As we undertook this research, we encountered so much more insights and lived experience than what can be reproduced in a report. We therefore strongly urge readers to not stop here. Instead, please move straight on to **Annex I - "In their own words"** - for a selection of the most telling testimonies gathered during this research.

Lastly, we know full well that a short paper like this can never do justice to the activities, the courage, motivation and experiences we've encountered during the research. We can only hope the report itself will be both truthful to the experience gathered from many of those involved and at the same time useful and informative for ongoing and future activities.

Annexes:

I. **"In their own words"** - a selection of the most telling testimonies gathered during this research and many of which could not make it into the report due to space limitations
II. **Summary of AI Foretell surveys**
III. **Literature list**

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