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.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY of a **Learning Paper** by Local to Global Protection (L2GP) for Mutual Aid Groups, Emergency Response Rooms, national and international non-governmental organizations, donors and other international aid actors working in Sudan. // Local2Global Protection, October 2025

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

SUPPORT FOR MUTUAL AID IN THREE CENTRAL STATES IN SUDAN:

GAME CHANGING AND SAVING LIVES

> 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.

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