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**Humanitarianism in Resource-Constrained Environments:
INTERSOS' Adaptations Strategies in Sudan**

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Abstract

As global humanitarian needs reach unprecedented levels, funding gaps have intensified, leaving critical aid operations under-resourced and millions vulnerable to displacement, malnutrition and death. The current environment necessitates an urgent examination of how humanitarian actors can uphold their principles amid severe resource constraints. The research thus aims to answer the following question: *How does resource scarcity affect INTERSOS in its operational choices and adherence to humanitarian principles in Sudan?*

Sudan serves as an instructive case study, given the chronic underfunding the country continues to witness and its ongoing armed conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), both of which impose significant constraints on humanitarian agencies operating in the territory. Chapter One provides a contextual overview of Sudan's socio-political landscape and humanitarian needs. Chapter Two examines the current challenges of humanitarian access within the country, the state of humanitarian funding and determines how these cuts have impacted operational capacity. Chapter Three investigates the operational trade-offs that humanitarian actors face — particularly the tension between upholding humanitarian principles under resource constraints. It then synthesizes the findings, critically assessing the strategies employed by humanitarian actors to reconcile resource scarcity with adherence to humanitarian principles. By incorporating interviews and broadening the analysis to resource-related dilemmas, this research ultimately aims to provide recommendations into how humanitarian actors can re-envision their operational models to sustain both effectiveness and principled action in an increasingly resource-constrained environment.

Key Words

Sudan – Resource Scarcity – Humanitarian Principles – Humanitarian Access – Operational Strategies – Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) – Adaptation Mechanisms

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK	4
METHODOLOGY	5
RESEARCH LIMITATIONS	6
CHAPTER ONE: SUDAN’S LANDSCAPE & HUMANITARIAN NEEDS.....	8
1.1 SOCIO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE.....	8
1.2 SUDAN’S ECONOMY	9
1.3 OVERVIEW OF HUMANITARIAN NEEDS.....	10
CHAPTER TWO: CHALLENGES TO THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR	13
2.1 HUMANITARIAN ACCESS.....	13
2.2 THE STATE OF FINANCIAL CUTS.....	16
2.3 A DEPENDENCE ISSUE? THE TANGIBLE EFFECTS OF UNDERFUNDING	17
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS & STRATEGIES: INTERSOS’ APPROACH.....	21
3.1 ADHERENCE TO HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES: OPERATIONAL METHODS	21
3.2 STRATEGIES IN PLACE	24
CONCLUSION	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	32
TABLES AND FIGURES.....	34

Introduction

An interesting article entitled “The Paradox of a World Aspiring for Peace Amidst Pervasive Conflicts”¹ illustrates how pervasive discussions on global peace are within global society, while conflicts not only continue undeterred, but new ones emerge with an alarming frequency. This paradox is further compounded by the chronic underfunding of humanitarian action and the increasing politicization of aid observed in recent years. Alongside the efforts of international diplomacy, numerous organizations, whether international or local, governmental or non-governmental, work on emergency assistance, development, conflict resolution and prevention and yet, armed conflicts remain a persistent reality. Added to this are systematic violations of international humanitarian law (IHL)², with 2024 having marked the deadliest year for humanitarian workers worldwide.³ Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly necessary for humanitarian organizations to reflect on how to remain both operationally effective and ethically grounded while ensuring the safety of their staff. This research does not claim to provide a path to global peace but seeks to shed light on the realities faced in the field, with front-line agencies striving to provide care under near-impossible conditions, while giving due importance to the issue of protracted crises in resources-constrained environments.

The humanitarian sector is confronted with an unprecedented crisis, as recent budget cuts from leading donors undermine decades of progress in health, education, and poverty reduction. For over six decades, the US Agency for International Development (USAID)⁴ has been the world’s largest funder of humanitarian and development assistance, credited with substantial reductions in child mortality, infectious disease deaths and widespread improvements in global health.⁵ Yet, in January 2025, an executive order suspended foreign aid and reduced 90% of USAID’s programs

¹ Chitondo et al., “The Paradox of a World Aspiring for Peace Amidst Pervasive Conflicts,” *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 2024, Vol. VIII, Issue II, p. 2471 ff. DOI:10.47772/IJRISS.2024.802177.

² Hereinafter referred to as “IHL”.

³ ACAPS, “Humanitarian Access Overview: Spotlight on Violence Against Workers”, 2024, available at: < <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/archives/detail/humanitarian-access-overview-december-2024#:~:text=This%20report%20highlights%20a%20global,the%20record%20set%20in%202023> >.

⁴ Hereinafter referred to as “USAID”.

⁵ Hardgrave et al., “The Impact of USAID Budget Cuts on Global Development Initiatives: A Review of Challenges, Responses, and Implications,” *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 2025, Vol. XII, p. 219 ff., p.220.

withdrawing support that previously accounted for 42% of global humanitarian funding.⁶ The repercussions have immediately been visible, with marginal or interrupted refugee assistance, food distribution activities and protection programs in crisis zones such as Sudan, Ethiopia and Haiti. Meanwhile, initiatives in education, gender-based violence prevention, and youth empowerment face abrupt collapse.⁷ These reversals not only jeopardize fragile societies but also destabilize public health systems and economies that had long relied on such contributions. Attempts by African governments, regional institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to mobilize domestic financing and innovative mechanisms like epidemic funds show resilience yet remain far from compensating for the scale of lost US resources.⁸ At the same time, the United States is not alone in retreating. Funding from EU institutions fell by nearly 13% in 2024,⁹ with Germany, Norway, France, and several other European donors implementing sharp reductions, in some cases exceeding 20–50%.¹⁰ Altogether, 16 of the 20 largest humanitarian donors have scaled back their commitments just as global demand has surged to record levels, with a staggering 300 million people requiring assistance in 2024.¹¹ This convergence of shrinking resources and escalating needs leaves the humanitarian system dangerously overstretched, forcing agencies to scale down life-saving operations, prioritize some crises over others and reconsider the sustainability of an aid model built on external funding. Thus, donor retrenchment marks a historic setback for international development and humanitarian solidarity.

This research aims to analyze the impact that such funding shortfalls are having on the Italian NGO INTERSOS, particularly on its work in Sudan. INTERSOS has a long-lasting experience in the humanitarian and emergency sector, it operates in twenty-one countries around the globe, all of which are mired in different types of conflicts. Since its first project in 1992 in Somalia,¹² the

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 224–225.

⁸ Ibid., p. 226–227.

⁹ Nilsson-Julien and Yilmaz, “How have cuts to humanitarian aid impacted the sector?,” *Euro News*, 2025, available at: < <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/11/how-have-cuts-to-humanitarian-aid-impacted-the-sector#:~:text=Meanwhile%2C%20funding%20from%20EU%20institutions,from%20France%20dropped%20by%2015%25> >.

¹⁰ Handicap International - Humanity & Inclusion, “Millions of people waiting for humanitarian aid,” 28 February 2025, available at: < <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/millions-people-waiting-humanitarian-aid#:~:text=The%20year%202024%20was%20marked,for%20aid%20is%20sharply%20increasing> >.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Intersos, “La nostra storia”, 2025, available at: < <https://www.intersos.org/storia/> >.

organisation has been active on a needs-based approach, focusing mainly on the Protection and Health sectors. Sudan's mission has recently (in 2024) been re-opened, after nine years of inactivity. Today, the conflicting parties have partially changed but the obstruction of the humanitarian space remains the same, as both parties impose severe restrictions on humanitarian agencies' activities. Thus, with strict registration requirements, obstructed aid routes, persistent underfunding and IHL violations resulting in civilian deaths, this difficult environment is further compounded by the abovementioned cuts¹³. Consequently, the operational feasibility of the mission in current times deserves to be researched, in the hope of providing some useful recommendations on how the humanitarian sector can adapt to recent budget cuts while staying true to its principled underpinnings. Profiting from the possibility of delving into the operational behaviour of this NGO, while complementing the thesis with qualitative research on the humanitarian landscape amidst resource constraints, the paper aims to answer the following research question: *How does resource scarcity affect INTERSOS in its operational choices and adherence to humanitarian principles in Sudan?*

The paper's analytical foundation will be based on the guiding principles of humanitarianism: humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality. The methodology will explain how the research has been carried out, while the analysis will unfold into three chapters, delving into a context-specific discussion on INTERSOS' operational capacity in Sudan. Ultimately, the research intends to reiterate the importance of foreseeing adaptation strategies in such volatile contexts, like the humanitarian one, and aims to draw recommendations for the wider international community, on the basis of INTERSOS' experience.

¹³ ACAPS, "Sudan: Humanitarian access developments (October 2024 to March 2025)", 2025, available at: < https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20250410_ACAPS_Sudan-Humanitarian_Access_Developments.pdf >.

Analytical Framework

The humanitarian sector is grounded on four core principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. These principles, closely tied to the framework of IHL and formally endorsed by the United Nations through General Assembly resolutions,¹⁴ provide the ethical and operational compass for aid organizations. Humanity is often regarded as the overarching principle, since it reflects the conviction that suffering is a universal condition that must be addressed wherever it is found.¹⁵ It calls for the protection of human dignity, the preservation of life and the alleviation of distress, while also embedding the “do no harm” imperative to prevent aid from inadvertently damaging the communities it seeks to help. Impartiality requires that assistance is to be determined exclusively by the urgency of needs, ensuring both non-discrimination — helping people irrespective of race, nationality, gender, religious belief, political opinion, or class — and proportionality, which prioritizes those in greatest danger.¹⁶ In practice, this is achieved through systematic needs assessments before projects are initiated. Neutrality, meanwhile, is indispensable for maintaining trust from all parties to a conflict, enabling organizations to operate in sensitive environments and reach populations otherwise isolated from support.¹⁷ This entails that any organisation must not take sides to a conflict, nor can it be viewed as doing so. Independence, finally, underpins both neutrality and impartiality by guaranteeing that humanitarian choices are made free from political or military agendas. Independence is fundamental as it denotes autonomy in decision-making but in practice it must be balanced against operational realities such as national regulations, visa requirements or donor frameworks. These practical constraints may limit complete autonomy, but the principle remains vital in ensuring that humanitarian work is driven solely by humanitarian objectives rather than external interests. To deliver a comprehensive response to the research question, the study is thus strongly rooted in these four guiding pillars of humanitarian action.

¹⁴ UNGA Resolutions A/RES/46/182 (1991) and A/RES/58/114 (2004).

¹⁵ UNHCR, “Humanitarian Principles”, *UNHCR Emergency Handbook*, 2025, available at: < <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection-principles/humanitarian-principles> >.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Methodology

This study adopts an analytical framework that evaluates the extent to which access and funding constraints have influenced INTERSOS' operational performance. The four humanitarian principles serve as reference parameters, guiding the assessment of how the organization has sought to remain effective and aligned with humanitarian standards. To do so, the paper employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a literature review, in-depth interviews with INTERSOS staff and participant observation gained through prior field engagement with the organization, to stimulate a thorough exploration of the subject. The author's experience provided access to refugee camps in Chad, at the Sudanese border and offered firsthand insight into the challenges and operational dilemmas of humanitarian action in crisis settings. While this insider perspective enriched the analysis with direct experiential knowledge, it is also recognized as a form of participant observation, whose strengths and potential biases have been considered throughout the study and further described within the "Research Limitations" section.

Concerning the interviews, the author acknowledges the possibility of potential biases in having consulted former colleagues and members of the NGO under scrutiny. Such conversations were recorded by the author with the consent of the interviewees and were carried out in a semi-structured manner. This method allowed for the preparation of a fixed amount of open-ended questions that were submitted to each interviewee, with the possibility of exploring emerging themes along the way. The choice of the participants has followed both purposive and snowball sampling. The former was used to explore the subject matter with INTERSOS officials operating either in Sudan or from headquarters positions for the same mission, while the latter allowed the selection of other interviewees by referral from other participants. While the number of participants remains limited, the research aimed to provide a thorough answer to the research question. To qualitatively analyse the interviews, the software ATLAS.ti was utilized, to identify recurring patterns or themes, such as humanitarian needs, the consequences of USAID cuts, operational and principled challenges, localisation strategies and strategic choices.

The paper divides into three chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of the study. The opening Chapter lays the groundwork through a literature review drawing from scholarly literature, data-driven platforms, government and NGO reports, to briefly present Sudan’s ongoing conflict and highlight the critical humanitarian needs on the ground. Chapter Two addresses the current state of humanitarian access and underfunding, elaborating on the impacts that these have on operational capacity, by analyzing both secondary sources and interviews. The final Chapter investigates the operational trade-offs that humanitarian actors face and evaluates the strategies INTERSOS is either developing or has already adopted to address such challenging context. For this chapter the main source of information is thus represented by the four interviews held within the scope of this research in between August and September 2025, alongside a further interview undertaken by the author in April 2025 for the purpose of another research. For security and privacy concerns, the names of such interviewees will be kept confidential and will be referred to as “Interviewee I”, “Interviewee II”, etc. Below, it is possible to find a table to clarify the general profiles of the interviewees. Through this methodology, the research aims to provide a multidimensional perspective on the subject matter and to ultimately answer the research question.

	Time of interview	Place of interview	Age range	Sex	Profession
Interviewee I	August 2025	Online	35-45	M	Deputy Regional Coordinator
Interviewee II	August 2025	Online	45-55	F	Senior Humanitarian Advisor
Interviewee III	August 2025	Online	25-35	F	Project Manager in Sudan
Interviewee IV	September 2025	Online	25-35	F	Head of Base in East Chad
Interviewee V	April 2025	Online	45-55	M	Former Head of Mission, Sudan

Table 1: Interviewees’ General Profiles

Research Limitations

Although this study seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment, it inevitably comes with some limitations. Firstly, a positionality statement deserves mention, as the author’s identity and background inevitably shaped the way data were collected and interpreted in this research. Having first engaged with INTERSOS as a colleague from September 2024 to March 2025, the researcher

later re-situated this experience within an academic framework, using it as a basis for the present research between July and September 2025. This dual role facilitated trust and access, but it may also have influenced the dynamics of the interviews and the ways in which participants chose to frame their experiences. Thus, the author recognizes that their social location — marked by age, gender, skin color and professional status — may have affected both the questions posed and the interpretations drawn. Throughout the research process, the researcher sought to remain aware about these dynamics, acknowledging that they constitute not only a potential source of bias but also an analytical lens through which the findings must be understood.

As partially acknowledged above, a further limitation of this study lies in the scope of the sample. By focusing primarily on INTERSOS staff, the research captures an insider perspective that, while valuable, remains partial. The research would have certainly gained from incorporating additional perspectives, including voices from other humanitarian actors, but also local civil society, political stakeholders or beneficiaries themselves to provide a broader basis for triangulation and contributing to a more nuanced understanding of INTERSOS' role and practices within the wider humanitarian landscape. However, the sensitive character of the subject has limited access to certain categories of information, including private operational and strategic decisions made at the NGO level which naturally can not be publicly shared. Moreover, securing such external contributions proved challenging due to the operational difficulties that accompany open discussions on the conflict and the delicate nature of humanitarian funding. For these reasons, the researcher acknowledges that the study should be viewed primarily in relation to INTERSOS' experience, and while its findings cannot be generalized to the wider humanitarian community, the strategies identified may nonetheless serve as valuable recommendations.

Lastly, it must be noted that public information on humanitarian access in Sudan remains fragmented and incomplete, due to frequent shifts in the front lines, limited or outdated public documentation, bureaucratic constraints and security concerns, among other factors.¹⁸ Data collection and reporting is further rendered inconsistent by the variety of administrative structures present in the country and the obstructions perpetrated by the rival parties,¹⁹ making it crucial to cautiously consider the data reported in the paper.

¹⁸ ACAPS, *supra* note 13, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter One: Sudan's Landscape & Humanitarian Needs

1.1 Socio-Political Landscape

Rivalries within Sudan's security forces have plunged the country into civil war, the roots of which are deeply entrenched into the country's history and security architecture, among authoritarian regimes, ethnic divides, exploitation of resources and external influences. However, the current violence is the most proximate result of a fraught political transition in the wake of the ouster of former President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. The conflict in Sudan essentially sees the contraposition between two armed groups: the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), commanded by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as "Hemedti".²⁰ It is opportune to highlight the cooperative nature of these armed forces, which for decades had been part of the same security architecture, under al-Bashir's regime. Even before al-Bashir came to power, the Sudanese army had already begun to create, support and arm a series of militias, mostly organized along tribal lines, and had already begun exploiting them to fight the unfolding civil war with southern Sudan, which became independent in 2011.²¹ One of these militias, created in the early 2000s for the war in Darfur, was the so-called "Janjaweed", an Arab-ethnic militia, present in the south to attack villages. President al-Bashir, in fact, by arming and formalizing the Janjaweed Arab militias, found in this group a way to combat armed opposition groups in Darfur,²² which, at his behest, was later institutionalized as a paramilitary force within the state's military architecture.²³ Al-Bashir decided to then transform this militia into what resembled a private guard for the defense of his own regime in Khartoum, granting the group significant access to economic resources and smuggling routes through Darfur, including gold exploitation and human trafficking across the Sahara towards Libya, as well as the

²⁰ De Waal, "What's driving the conflict in Sudan", *The Daily Star*, 24 April 2023, available at: < <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/whats-driving-the-conflict-sudan-3303466> >.

²¹ Panozzo, "IL SUDAN NON È UNA CRISI LONTANA", *Rimini Meeting*, 23 August 2025, available at: < https://www.meetingrimini.org/eventi-totale/il-sudan-non-e-una-crisi-lontana/?fbclid=PAQ0xDSwMZHpnleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABp1o8DTvytE3YJAX0smWclvaEooch-a-dy7ucQkW2zQZhcc_Rra6P3TFsZ2Iq_aem_IL1nQPRjrxYzZ6gaTck9zg >.

²² De Waal, *supra* note 20.

²³ Panozzo, *supra* note 21.

possibility of operating as mercenaries.²⁴ Through time, the Janjaweed militia transformed into today's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), whose leader, Hemedti, learned how to leverage the group's favorable status to dominate Sudan's gold industry, exporting through the United Arab Emirates to secure alliance with regional powers, to independently finance his forces and to ultimately amass personal wealth. Most recent hostilities between the SAF and RSF erupted in April 2023, marking the end years of opportunistic collaboration between the two factions, as Al-Burhan and Hemedti had jointly ousted Omar al-Bashir following widespread protests and later worked together to halt Sudan's transition to civilian governance in October 2021.²⁵ In fact, Hemedti served as al-Burhan's deputy in the Sovereignty Council during the transitional period, reflecting their cooperative behavior, at least up until December 2022. Their alliance unraveled after that date, with the presentation of an arrangement to restart the civilian transition which would have entailed integrating the RSF into the SAF, agreement which would have naturally jeopardized Hemedti's political, military and economic influence. The RSF has since gained a military edge in Darfur and continues to position itself as the strongest power holder in the region, meticulously maintaining control over the supply routes from the Central African Republic and Chad.

1.2 Sudan's Economy

The fighting has thus paralyzed governance structure and eroded state authority, leaving the country's social cohesion extremely fragmented, with intra-community violence and deep social and economic inequalities. Economic productivity has naturally collapsed, with an estimated USD 15 billion in economic losses.²⁶ Sudanese civilians face critical challenges, linked to limited access to healthcare, food and shelter, alongside recurrent exposure to violence and related psychological trauma.²⁷ The overwhelming influx of IDPs in cities such as Port Sudan has exacerbated the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ De Waal, *supra* note 20.

²⁶ Lahrich, "Crisis in Sudan: A Complex Power Play With Regional Implications and Global Stakes," *Policy Center for the New South*, 19 November 2024, available at: <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/crisis-sudan-complex-power-play-regional-implications-and-global-stakes>.

²⁷ Alfahal et al., "Conflict and displacement in Sudan: Health challenges, socio-economic strain, trauma, and coping mechanisms among internally displaced persons in Port Sudan shelters," *Medicine*, 2025, p. 1 ff., pp. 1-3. DOI: 10.1097/MD.00000000000042232.

already fragile infrastructure, aggravating existing socio-economic disparities.²⁸ An observational study considering only IDPs in Port Sudan reveals that 86.1%, out of the 256 participants sampled, live in areas affected by conflict or violence, with no participant reporting a high income and with varying displacement timelines.²⁹ Concerning access to essential resources, findings depict a situation whereby 69,3% of participants do not have access to food, water and shelter, while 56% report not having access to medical services.³⁰ These figures are reflective of the whole country, with the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)³¹ reporting 15 million people without access to healthcare, while three-quarters of all health facilities result inoperative.³² Inflation has spiraled as the Sudanese pound depreciates, while government revenues have plummeted amid loss of control over resource-rich areas, triggering widespread unemployment.³³ Nearly half the workforce is jobless and basic goods have become scarce due to widespread looting and destruction of infrastructure.³⁴ Moreover, the war has cut Sudan off from much international aid and investment, as donors suspend programs and humanitarian actors struggle to access affected populations. Prospects for economic recovery in the near term seem unattainable given the destruction of infrastructure, the soaring inflation and the rampant insecurity.³⁵ As a result, there is an imminent need for interventions to restore these critical social services sectors across Sudan.

1.3 Overview of Humanitarian Needs

As the total of forcibly displaced individuals amounts to 12 million,³⁶ the magnitude of this number reflects the scale of the conflict, engendering enormous consequences for neighboring states. Chad, Egypt and South Sudan are receiving the largest influxes of refugees, followed by

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Hereinafter referred to as “OCHA”.

³² Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Sudan Humanitarian Update*, [EN/AR], 2024, available at: < <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-update-23-february-2024-enar>>.

³³ ACAPS, “Country Analysis Sudan”, 2025, available at: <<https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/sudan#>>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ OCHA, *supra* note 32.

³⁶ UNHCR, “Sudan Situation Weekly Update Mapping”, 2025, available at: < <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/118170> >.

Libya, Uganda, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic.³⁷ Wider implications for regional stability are thus evident, aggravating humanitarian needs throughout the area, straining host countries', already limited, resources and consequently impairing humanitarian efforts.³⁸ Sudan's economic collapse has driven millions into acute food insecurity, with nearly 24.6 million people — almost half of the population — suffering from severe hunger.³⁹ The World Food Program (WFP) reports that this is the highest figure recorded anywhere globally, with ten areas already classified as facing famine.⁴⁰ At the same time, the healthcare system is in near-total disarray: more than 70% of hospitals in conflict-affected zones are no longer functional, having been bombed, looted, or repurposed for military use, in clear breach of IHL.⁴¹ This has triggered a nationwide health emergency, marked by recurrent outbreaks of cholera, measles, and malaria.⁴² Meanwhile, education has also been devastated: an estimated 90% of school-aged children, out of 19 million in total, are currently out of school, deepening social exclusion and severely undermining future prospects for Sudan's younger generations.⁴³ Children are disproportionately affected, representing 76% of the 30 million people in need of assistance and 53% of all internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁴⁴ Their plight is compounded by the alarming rise of gender-based violence (GBV),⁴⁵ with 12.2 million women and children at risk: an 80% increase compared to the previous year.⁴⁶ GBV is in fact carried out amidst the widest impunity. The UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, established by the Human Rights Council in October 2023,⁴⁷ has documented widespread patterns of sexual violence, including "rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, forced marriage, and trafficking for sexual exploitation across borders."⁴⁸ Beyond sexual violence, children face killings, maiming, abduction, displacement and separation from their families.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Maru, "Sudan's atrocious political transition: resolving the displacement and humanitarian crisis", *The United Nations University Institute on Comparative Regional Integration Studies (UNU-CRIS)*, 2023, p. 5 ff., pp. 8-10.

³⁹ World Food Program, "Famine in Sudan", 2025, available at: <<https://www.wfp.org/emergencies/sudan-emergency#:~:text=A%20total%20of%2024.6%20million,face%20catastrophic%20levels%20of%20hunger>>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ The Lancet, "Sudan: a health catastrophe ignored", *The Lancet*, 2025, Vol. 406, p. 417.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Lahrich, *supra* note 26.

⁴⁴ OCHA, *supra* note 32.

⁴⁵ Hereinafter referred to as "GBV".

⁴⁶ OCHA, *supra* note 32.

⁴⁷ Through the Human Rights Council Resolution A/HRC/RES/54/2.

⁴⁸ OHCHR, "Sudan: UN Fact-Finding Mission documents large-scale sexual violence and other human rights violations in newly issued report", 2024, available at: <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/sudan-un-fact-finding-mission-documents-large-scale-sexual-violence-and>>.

Pregnant women too, are often forced to give birth without skilled medical assistance, sterile equipment, or access to emergency obstetric care, while mental health and psychosocial support for survivors of GBV and other trauma remains virtually absent.⁴⁹ In total, 30.4 million people are expected to require humanitarian assistance in 2025, the vast majority being women, girls and children.⁵⁰ The overlapping crises of famine, violence, impunity and economic collapse have created a profoundly fragile humanitarian environment, affecting every sector, from food security and health to education, protection, shelter and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). To respond, OCHA has set strategic objectives under Sudan’s 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, emphasizing life-saving interventions, protection activities and equitable access to basic services that are principled, gender-responsive and prioritize the most vulnerable — including IDPs, host communities and residents. Yet, despite the scale of the crisis, funding for the response remains grossly insufficient, with only 15% of Sudan’s 2025 humanitarian requirements met by July of the same year.⁵¹

⁴⁹ The Lancet, *supra* note 41.

⁵⁰ OCHA, *supra* note 32.

⁵¹ OCHA Services, “Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025”, *Financial Tracking Services*, 2025, available at: <<https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1220/summary>>.

Chapter Two: Challenges To The Humanitarian Sector

2.1 Humanitarian Access

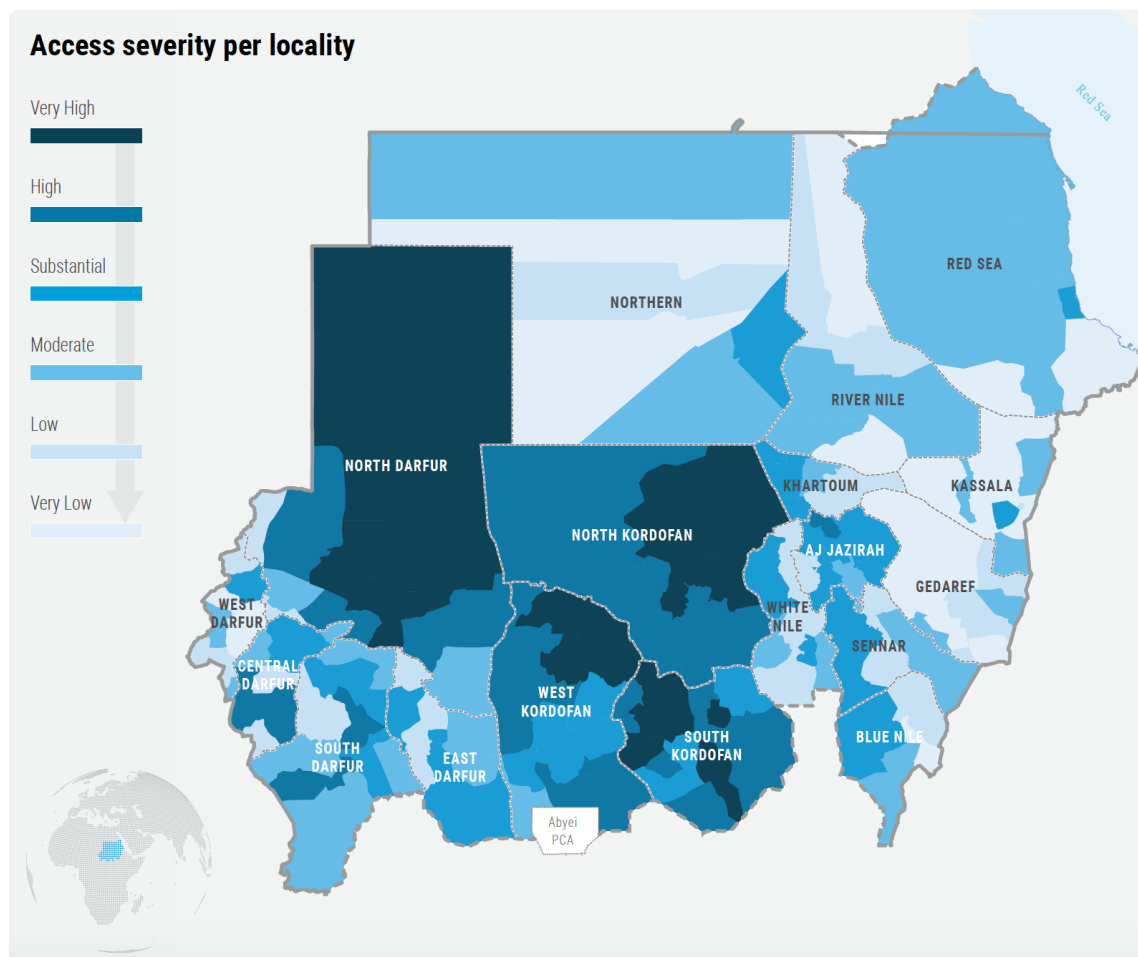


Figure 1: Sudan Humanitarian Access Severity Map June 2025.⁵²

Two years and a half into the conflict, humanitarian access remains extremely restricted, with persistent obstructions and impediments by the conflicting parties which continue resulting in the denial of assistance to the civilian population. The figure above shows the magnitude of

⁵² OCHA, *Sudan: Humanitarian Access Map*, 2025, available at: <
<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-access-snapshot-june-2025>>.

access constrains in the country, which is regularly assessed by OCHA's Humanitarian Access Severity map. Through this map OCHA measures two variables: how difficult it is for organizations to deliver aid as well as how safe it is for civilians to receive it. To do so, it analyses different factors: conflict, security risk management, humanitarian presence and road access through cross-border or crossline modalities.⁵³ North Darfur and certain areas of the Kordofan states appear as the most arduous areas to access, with July 2025 having seen an increase in violent incidents targeting humanitarian personnel, five of which were killed in an attack in June.⁵⁴ Moreover, OCHA provides an up-to-date graph showing the number of humanitarian workers killed and wounded from January to June 2025, these figures show 35 killed and four wounded, throughout only the first six months of 2025. OCHA further reports that in Central Darfur, an INGO team was abducted and released only 48 hours later.⁵⁵ The implications on disruption of aid delivery are twofold: on the one hand it directly translates into famine and starvation for civilians and on the other it triggers severe security risks for relief workers. However, this does not seem to be a new phenomenon in Sudan, as the country has a history of controlling aid flows on behalf of the government and of different non-state groups, with the intent to instrumentalise aid to serve one's own political ends.⁵⁶ OCHA, in fact, also reports that in Tawila (North Darfur), authorities are often found imposing various fees and taxes on local communities, which can even take the form of requiring a share of their humanitarian aid.

In-country and cross-border aid movements require strict coordination between several actors, among which the federal governments, the state governments and the non-state armed groups active in the country, whose troublesome collaboration hinders once more the viability of aid routes in the country.⁵⁷ Securing travel permits continues to be extremely challenging for many, as negotiation between humanitarian actors and the RSF or SAF aid bodies remains the only option to ensure such permits. Such RSF and SAF-controlled agencies are, respectively, the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO) and the Humanitarian Aid Commission

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF), "Humanitarian access, local action and conflict sensitivity in Sudan since April 2023", 2023, available at: < <https://csf-sudan.org/humanitarian-access-local-action-and-conflict-sensitivity-in-sudan-since-april-2023-introducing-a-new-csf-blog-series/> >.

⁵⁷ ACAPS, *Sudan: Snapshot of Humanitarian Access*, 2024, available at: < <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/archives/detail/sudan-snapshot-of-humanitarian-access> >.

(HAC)⁵⁸, formally entitled to administer aid on their behalf. To further complicate humanitarian work, the presence of unexploded ordnance (UXO) places organisations at a heightened risk of insecurity.⁵⁹ Cross-border routes share the same perilous characteristics. Bordering Chad on the west, the latter represents the main cross-border route for organizations active in Darfur. There are three main cross-border points (CBP): Tina to North Darfur, Adré and Um Dukhun to West Darfur.⁶⁰ The first two, Tina and Adré, are the most utilised routes, whereas the Um Dukhun CBP had been used without major impediments since August 2023 but has been discouraged by the Chadian authorities in Goz Beïda — eastern Chad — due to increasing security concerns.⁶¹ The Adré-Geneina CBP is the most crucial corridor for humanitarian aid convoys and refugees, as it is the largest border town in Eastern Chad.⁶² Nonetheless, issues concerning its usage have not lacked, as for about a year it had been closed, to finally reopen in August 2024.⁶³ However, after reopening, it was planned to close again on November 15th, 2024, but the allowance was extended for another three months, making it accessible until February 15th, 2025. The extension has been further prolonged, as INTERSOS currently uses this route. Interviewee I explains that the government of Port Sudan is reluctant to authorize such movement, since the route encompasses non-governmental areas that are under the control of what SAF considers non-state forces. What humanitarian can refer to is a *vadevecum* which allows them to transport aid into the country and, for now, it is enough to keep going. However, with the rainy season approaching, according to Interviewee III, the route is already compromised, meaning a proximate decrease in aid deliveries and in the movement of workers and migrants. In short, access obstructions do not only come as movements hindrances but also in the form of burdensome bureaucratic procedures, resulting from the competition between HAC and SARHO, framed to delay humanitarian convoys, visas approvals and to impose directives and opposing travel permits.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Hereinafter referred to as “SARHO” and “HAC”.

⁵⁹ OCHA, *supra* note 52.

⁶⁰ USAID and iMMAP Inc., *Sudan: Cross-Border Humanitarian Access Analysis*, 2023, p. 1 ff., p. 7, available at: <https://immap.org/product/sudan-cross-border-humanitarian-access-analysis-november-2023/>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² IOM Chad UN Migration, “IOM Hands Over Renovated Border Post at Chad – Sudan Border”, 2021, available at: <https://chad.iom.int/news/iom-hands-over-renovated-border-post-chad-sudan-border>.

⁶³ UN News, “Sudan: UN chief welcomes decision to reopen key border crossing for aid delivery”, 2024, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/08/1153311>.

⁶⁴ The Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF), *supra* note 56.

2.2 *The State of Financial Cuts*

Since its establishment in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy's Foreign Assistance Act, USAID has served as the central organ of US foreign assistance, aiming to alleviate poverty, foster democratic reforms, advance global health, and provide humanitarian relief worldwide.⁶⁵ Kennedy's USA was the first country to ever commit to such an endeavor, of course, amid the Cold War, the US President had seen this as equally beneficial to its own country's economy and projection of soft power, and so did the following administrations, at least, until now. With a presence in over 60 nations and a staff of approximately 10,000 people, USAID has historically been both a diplomatic instrument and a humanitarian agency, channeling tens of billions annually into critical sectors. In fiscal year 2024 alone, USAID disbursed over USD 35 billion to support 130 countries, prioritizing humanitarian relief, health, governance and economic growth.⁶⁶ The agency has left a strong imprint on global health by fighting HIV/AIDS, polio, and smallpox, while also funding nutrition, education, and infrastructure projects across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As the largest funding agency for humanitarian and development aid worldwide, USAID's support was in fact crucial in the fight against adult and child mortality, in low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs). A recent study reveals that USAID, from 2001 to 2021, had been responsible for a 15% decrease in age-standardized all-cause mortality, 32% reduction in children under-five mortality, 65% reduction in mortality from HIV/AIDS, 51% from malaria and 50% from neglected tropical diseases.⁶⁷ However, recent developments have challenged this trajectory and such numbers now can only be seen as dangerous indicators of future prospects for the humanitarian sector, with forecasting models predicting highly potential increases in all-age deaths by 2030.⁶⁸

On January 20, 2025, as mentioned in the introduction, with Executive Order 14169, the Trump Administration enacted a suspension of foreign aid and initiated deep budget cuts that revoked nearly 5,800 grants and dramatically curtailed 90% of USAID's programs.⁶⁹ In sub-Saharan

⁶⁵ Hardgrave, *supra* note 5, p.220.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

⁶⁷ Cavalcanti et al., "Evaluating the impact of two decades of USAID interventions and projecting the effects of defunding on mortality up to 2030: a retrospective impact evaluation and forecasting analysis," *The Lancet*, 2025, Vol. 406, p. 283.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Hardgrave, *supra* note 5, p. 221-222.

Africa, USAID's retreat threatens gains in education, teacher training and youth empowerment, in Ethiopia and beyond, the reduction exacerbates entrenched poverty, unemployment, and economic fragility.⁷⁰ Responses among recipient nations and NGOs are still weak and wavering. African governments and the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have turned to domestic financing, diaspora contributions, and innovative "epidemic funds" to fill the void, while NGOs experiment with income generation, local philanthropy and joint advocacy strategies to survive.⁷¹ As previously stated, although these measures highlight resilience, they cannot fully replace USAID's scale. The implications are twofold: for those countries benefitting from aid, the cuts intensify humanitarian crises, impede the functioning of public health systems and threaten education and economic progress; for the humanitarian sector, they trigger a funding vacuum that is already altering the balance of global aid architecture. Ultimately, while some interpret the crisis as a wake-up call for self-reliance in the Global South, the loss of USAID resources represents a historic setback for international development, with profound consequences for both the world's most fragile societies and the credibility of US leadership in humanitarian affairs.⁷² Exacerbating matters, is the fact that also funding from EU institutions for humanitarian aid has dropped considerably.⁷³ Albeit some EU countries have increased their aid budgets in 2024, most of them have drastically reduced it. Germany and Norway have in fact cut theirs by more than 20% compared to 2023, with Germany having already announced it will pursue these cuts by more than 50%.⁷⁴ Meanwhile France's reduction amounts to 15% but has likewise declared a further decrease by 18% by the end of 2025.⁷⁵

2.3 *A Dependence Issue? The Tangible Effects of Underfunding*

It thus appears opportune to reflect on the relationship between the humanitarian sector and a single country, the United States, acting as a foreign policy tool and a financial provider for worldwide humanitarian assistance at the same time. Although the structural dependency of the

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 224–225.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 226–227.

⁷² Ibid., p. 229–230.

⁷³ Nilsson-Julien and Yilmaz, *supra* note 9.

⁷⁴ Handicap International - Humanity & Inclusion, *supra* note 10.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

sector on a limited pool of donors has long been acknowledged by the sector itself, this unexpected decision rendered the extent of this reliance particularly stark. According to *The New Humanitarian*, in 2023 the three largest donors accounted for 62% of all international humanitarian funding, with the US alone contributed approximately 43%.⁷⁶ Such concentration of resources creates an asymmetry of power that exposes the sector to volatility, the effects of which, reverberate across entire response systems. The following graph clearly shows the trend of growing dependence on the US in the last decade.

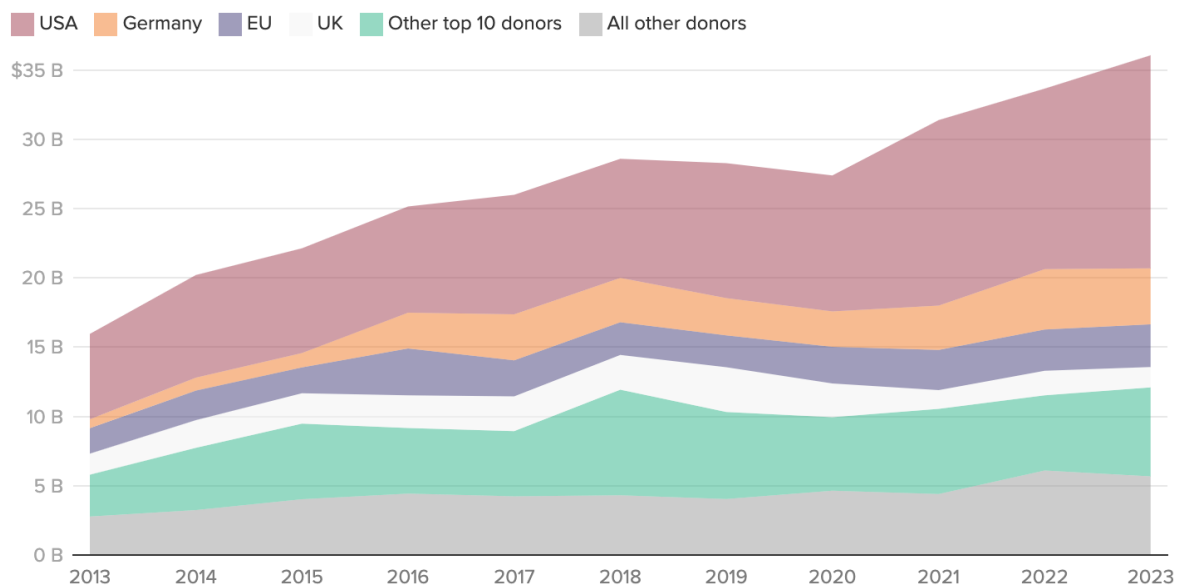


Figure 2: A decade of growing dependence.⁷⁷

The same analysis also reveals that the Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP) of 18 countries received more than 50% of their fundings from the US, from 2022 to 2024,⁷⁸ with USAID fundings amounting to a staggering 71% only for Sudan's HRP. This case underscores how reliance on a single hegemonic donor can not only represent an existential threat but also undermine the very pillar of independence on which humanitarianism rests. Addressing this imbalance requires a concerted effort to broaden the donor base and explore new pathways, which will be discussed in the following chapter. Without such measures, the independence and sustainability of humanitarian

⁷⁶ Pearson, "Humanitarian aid's extreme donor dependency problem in five charts", *The New Humanitarian*, 2025, available at: < <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2025/03/04/humanitarian-aid-extreme-donor-dependency-global-charts> >.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

action will remain precariously tied to the political and fiscal priorities of a limited pool of donors. What are, then, the concrete consequences of such dependence issue?

Underfunding has led to dramatic humanitarian needs across Sudan, with Darfur remaining the area with the most pressing ones, notwithstanding the persistent violence and famine in other areas of the country. For the humanitarian sector this situation calls for interventions targeting the health and nutrition sectors, integrating activities that focus on rehabilitating hospitals, delivering medicines and food, within ongoing programs. This has been the case for INTERSOS as well, which, notwithstanding its cornerstone field, which is protection, is now prioritizing health/nutrition-integrated responses, having assessed the needs on the ground. This development has twofold but parallel implications: the first relates to NGOs operational choice and the other to donor behavior and the funding priorities at the system level. Both developments stem from the same causes: resource scarcity as well as the urgent needs evaluated at the international level, but they operate at different levels. The former implies that those organizations which used to focus on other sectors, must now re-adapt to meet current needs, with negative consequences on those fields that inevitably remain overlooked. Although, the survival of the population, through basic care and food distribution is pivotal, those activities that were, for instance, once focused on the physical and psychological protection of women and children are now partially neglected. The latter appears to be the natural shift in focus, of major donors, on health and nutrition projects, leaving behind those organizations that do not have the capacity to change their *modus operandi* and their core mandate overnight. In short: donors' shift makes NGOs' re-adaptation more urgent, while NGOs' struggle to adapt widens the gap in vital, but less urgent sectors.

A further consequence of these cuts, as described by all interviewees, is the exponential increase in competition among NGOs in Sudan. Naturally, with fewer resources available, donors are compelled to channel the funds at their disposal, more selectively, to the detriment of many organizations. In the interviews, this is illustrated clearly with reference to the current policy of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) of prioritizing UN agencies and certain US NGOs with European sub-offices, organizations that were most dramatically affected by the US funding contraction and now require European support to remain operational. This shift not only squeezes out smaller or newer entrants but also reshapes the funding ecosystem by reinforcing the dominance of incumbent organizations. This environment

leaves limited space for innovation or program diversification, as donors' behavior requires rapid adaptation to core life-saving sectors, and NGOs failing to adapt risk exclusion. In what were “normal times”, with the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA)⁷⁹ funding still present to absorb demand and sustain multiple actors, competition was less acute, and the probability for organizations to secure diverse project calls was much higher. Today, however, scarcity leads to prioritization, making access to funds contingent not only on population needs and operational capacity but also on rapid adaptation capabilities of NGOs.

Needless to say, another repercussion has been widely felt by the human resources present both on the ground and at the headquarters of many organizations. As Interviewee I reveals, in Sudan the organization is operating with what is effectively a “two missions in one” model — maintaining structures in both government-controlled Port Sudan and RSF-controlled Darfur — which doubles administrative and coordination needs without the financial means to properly staff them. This has forced INTERSOS to forgo dedicated positions such as a security or access coordinator, relying instead on a national liaison officer and inter-agency coordination mechanisms, which are not always enough to tackle such a crucial concern like the security one. While, for now, this makes operations financially feasible, it places a heavy burden on existing staff, with expatriates and national colleagues alike absorbing tasks outside their formal profiles, increasing the risk of burnout. Interviewee III in fact confirms how her colleagues share feelings of extreme tiredness, with a Rest and Recuperation (R&R) cycle⁸⁰ that does not always follow the adequately foreseen structure. This is due to the technical and administrative difficulties the staff has in re-entering the country after each pause, which render cycles longer for operational purposes. Similarly, for other organizations, the financial pressure has resulted in having to pause or downsize entire projects, leading to layoffs of national and international staff. Even where activities have now resumed through the World Bank or unfrozen BHA funds, the disruption left organizations' staff in precarious situations and eroded continuity of expertise. In a nutshell, in terms of human resources, these cuts have translated directly into smaller teams with heavier workloads, undermining the human capital needed to sustain an effective humanitarian response.

⁷⁹ Hereinafter referred to as “BHA”.

⁸⁰ The R&R cycle is a policy which foresees a mandatory time away from intense crisis zones for humanitarian staff, the cycle duration varies with the country and organization in question. Source: HR Information Sheet, HR Portal, *United Nations Careers*, 2015, available at: https://hr.un.org/sites/hr.un.org/files/Rest%20and%20Recuperation_Nov%202015_EN_0.pdf >.

Chapter Three: Methods & Strategies: INTERSOS' Approach

3.1 Adherence to Humanitarian Principles: Operational methods

Adherence to humanitarian principles in Sudan, given the structural effects of resources scarcity and the political fragmentation, appears to remain rather difficult for organizations active in the country. The interviews highlight that impartiality is perhaps the most endangered principle under current conditions. Faced with the lack of financial resources to sustain structures and staff, organizations must choose more narrowly where to work and which populations to prioritize. Interviewee II asserts that INTERSOS' choice to be present on both sides of the country, was a very strategic one, as it allows the organization to conduct projects on behalf of the civilian population, regardless of whether these were under the SAF or RSF forces. However, with little financial resources it becomes more difficult for all organizations to continue operate equally on both areas to ensure impartiality. The unattainability of sustaining equal presence is in fact, flagged as the most tangible consequence of USAID's retreat, which equally impacts impartiality and neutrality of country-wide humanitarian organizations. Impartiality is affected when organizations are forced to close offices and decide which activities to pursue and which to forgo, inevitably leading to a prioritization of certain communities that will enjoy ongoing programs, to the detriment of others which will not anymore. Neutrality, consequently, is compromised by the incapability of maintaining structures and programs in both areas as it forces organizations to choose one area over the other, hence, from both the SAF and RSF's perspectives: a government over the other.

Neutrality essentially means gaining the trust necessary to be able to work in the most underserved areas without complications. However, the uttermost obstacle standing in the way of ensuring such neutrality is embodied by the issue of registration. It is standard practice for NGOs or UN agencies to register with the government of the country in which they seek to implement either humanitarian or development programs, but Sudan's dual governing setting complicates the picture. Organizations must always interact with the authorities — whether the HAC in Port Sudan or SARHO in Darfur — but legitimizing either one is seen as politically dangerous by the other. This

is exemplified by the case of the UN which, after having fled the country consequently to the eruption of the conflict in April 2023, upon their return they officially recognized the government of Port Sudan, precluding to this day, any possibility of being present in RSF-controlled areas. Currently, in fact, there is no UN agency present in any Darfur state. According to Interviewee III, the UN presence in the area remains limited to some representatives, from OCHA, the WFP and UNICEF, relying on active NGOs' offices to be able to move around RSF-controlled areas, connect with other humanitarians and assess the situation on the ground. Thus, the INGOs community has decided not to pursue the registration with SARHO, being the civilian agency linked to a non-state armed group, like the RSF. Accordingly, INTERSOS' approach remains that of regularly negotiating technical agreements with SARHO to secure projects in Darfur, without compromising its operational capacity with a controversial registration. The latter would entail an official legitimization of RSF governance structures, directly impairing relations with the government in Port Sudan. However, this decision leads to a further issue: negotiating with SARHO, which is in turn, impacted by the scarcity of resources as it reduces the margin to negotiate humanitarian access, presence and projects-based agreements. Because, as Interviewee II points out: "with few funds available, organizations must make difficult choices based on over-prioritization, which may not align with the needs of local authorities who are notoriously accused of politicizing humanitarian aid and therefore trying to redirect it to the areas that interest them most.". Larger organizations with robust legal and advocacy teams might absorb the costs of lengthy negotiations or find ways to maintain dual systems of compliance; smaller NGOs with limited administrative resources risk either being coerced into concessions that could compromise neutrality or being excluded altogether from RSF-controlled territories.

These operational dilemmas also reveal how the question of legitimacy is far from settled within the humanitarian community itself. While some practitioners consider engagement with the RSF as unavoidable, others view both SAF and RSF as armed actors whose claims to legitimacy are contested. This divergence highlights the inherent difficulty for humanitarian organizations: their mandate does not include adjudicating which authority is "legitimate," yet operational realities often force choices that may appear to do so. From this perspective, the challenge is about preserving impartiality and safeguarding access in contexts where all parties may seek to politicize humanitarian presence. INTERSOS' decision to avoid formal registration with SARHO, while

maintaining technical negotiations to implement projects, reflects one possible balance within this highly constrained environment.

Equally significant are the risks to the principle of independence. As stated in the analytical framework, independence always entails a more pragmatic angle, because even if in principle organizations should remain autonomous and free from external pressure, in practice these always depend on local authorities. Sudan's case exemplifies how difficult it is to achieve such a balance. First, dependence on the willingness of the local authorities to issue visas, to allow movement on certain routes, to grant permissions for projects' activities and many other factors, is particularly acute in the country and it impedes the complete independence of the humanitarian community. Second, because NGOs and organizations alike are dependent on external funds and, as shown by the recent decrease in funds, over reliance on one donor can trigger dramatic consequences. While consortia strengthen coordination and widen access, they also constrain autonomy, as activities must fit into donor-driven frameworks, leaving less room for NGOs to independently determine operational priorities. As Interviewee I acknowledges, this has resulted in INTERSOS having to partially adapt its projects to suit donors' preferences, focusing on health and food distribution activities as entry-points, to then later focus on standalone protection work.

Although in INTERSOS' experience in Sudan, USAID was not the crucial donor as it was in other missions or for other organizations active in the country, it becomes evident how, for the general humanitarian sector, excessive reliance on a single donor blurs the boundary between humanitarian objectives and political agendas. This is illustrated by the US decision in January 2025 to declare both the SAF and the RSF responsible of war crimes and the RSF further responsible for crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and ultimately, genocide in Sudan.⁸¹ By virtue of its being a major funding actor, the US designation of the RSF as responsible for genocide illustrates the tension between humanitarian independence and donor-driven political agendas, as humanitarian organizations dependent on such donors, may face implicit pressures in how they prioritize assistance, negotiate access or frame their discourse. This is therefore a theme that humanitarians must consider when choosing their donors and their areas of intervention.

⁸¹ US Secretary of State, "Genocide Determination in Sudan and Imposing Accountability Measures", January 7, 2025, available at : < <https://2021-2025.state.gov/genocide-determination-in-sudan-and-imposing-accountability-measures/> >.

Finally, humanity embeds the importance of protecting human dignity as well as the alleviation of distress, among other activities. Although the interviews stress that the most pressing needs in Sudan remain basic survival — health, nutrition, and access to aid in hard-to-reach areas, and INTERSOS has rightly focused on those — other crucial aspects such as gender-based violence, child protection, psychosocial support risk being substantially undermined. The consequence is that the broader human dignity dimension of humanitarian action is compromised, as humanity requires more than keeping people alive; it demands addressing the full spectrum of needs, including those less visible or less fundable. In sum, the interviews show that humanitarian principles are not abandoned but are under constant pressure. Resource scarcity narrows options, inflates costs and strengthens local authorities' leverage, all of which combine to make adherence to the principles more fragile. The main risk lies in the structural compromises imposed by scarcity, where the inability to be everywhere forces partiality, the need to engage with contested authorities risks neutrality, the dominance of donor priorities weakens independence and the sidelining of less fundable needs undermines humanity. INTERSOS continues to navigate these tensions by maintaining cross-line operations, resisting SARHO registration and mainstreaming protection where possible, but the interviews make clear that scarcity makes principles harder to sustain in practice, even as they remain the guiding compass of action.

3.2 *Strategies in Place*

Faced with the multitude of complexities characterizing Sudan's humanitarian space, INTERSOS is mobilizing to shape and adopt new strategies. A major priority naturally entails the diversification of the organization's portfolio, which is now represented by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development (AICS),⁸² Stichting Vluchteling (SV), a Dutch foundation, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF), through OCHA. Where feasible, a possible approach specified by Interviewee III seems to be the integration of two donors: in North and West Darfur in fact, the progress of AICS-funded projects is strengthened by the presence of SV funds which complement AICS' ones. Linked to donor-frameworks is another strategy proposed by Interviewee I, namely that of positioning the mission in strategic areas

⁸² The acronym comes from the Italian "Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione e lo Sviluppo".

through smaller donors, on the rationale that being operational in those hard-to-reach areas now could unlock larger donors' opportunities in the most proximate future. This approach is based on the assumption that, because the organization has made the effort of moving to highly dangerous and complicate areas, often with low support costs for offices and personnel, it will be better prepared for what will come next and will thus be a valuable contributor to larger donors. Of course, it also includes the aspect of anticipating potential risk areas, where needs will become more acute and thus organizations will be most needed. For instance, Interviewee I points out that such tactic had been implemented in the previous year, by positioning INTERSOS in Tawila (North Darfur), yet funding gaps let better-resourced actors overtake that initial positioning.

Security management within INTERSOS Sudan is heavily shaped by financial constraints, which prevent the recruitment of a dedicated international security coordinator. Even though, the security realm, in INTERSOS, always falls under the responsibility of the Head of Mission, the volatile context would require a specific figure dedicated to security concerns and mitigation methods. For now, the country is thus supported by a national liaison officer who covers both access and security and the organization relies strongly on coordination platforms that pool information and strategies across the humanitarian community. The INGO Forum serves as the central body, while the Access Working Group (AWG) addresses clearance challenges and liaises collectively with authorities. The International NGO Safety Organization (INSO), the Dutch platform providing support to NGOs working in risky areas, after April 2023 worked to build a more responsive structure. It continues doing so through a hybrid system combining remote work from Kenya and marginal presence in Port Sudan.⁸³ Although it remains non-operational in extremely dangerous areas, such as Darfur and South Kordofan, it aims to secure a stronger presence in those areas in the next months. INSO is thus a valuable contribution to the security realm in the country, providing updated numbers on access routes possibilities and incidents against civilians and aid workers, involving artillery, airstrikes or drone attacks.⁸⁴ Therefore, in Port Sudan, security concerns are regularly evaluated thanks to the establishment of INSO and a coordination platform where all INGO's Sudan directors participate to meet on a regular basis, exchange on security concerns, discuss and propose solutions. In RSF-controlled territories, instead, this coordination is more

⁸³ INSO, "Two years of conflict in Sudan, marked by continued attacks on civilians and aid workers", 2025, available at: < <https://ngosafety.org/latest/two-years-of-conflict-in-sudan/>>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

complicated, due to the lack of such counterparts. However, as Interviewee III points out, there are other coordination platforms covering North, West and Central Darfur, led by the “Area Based Coordination”, namely INGO Forum, with the intent of providing the same level of information. INTERSOS’ strategy, therefore, is to plug into these external mechanisms to compensate for its thin internal capacity, leveraging peer networks and shared analysis to guide movement decisions, manage access and reduce national staff exposure, while still recognizing the persistent gap in dedicated security leadership.

Cooperation appears to be a key way to strengthen operations and exploring community-led access pathways can represent a beneficial option to organizations active in Sudan. Recognizing the importance of local humanitarian actors, often the first to intervene in emergencies, and promoting cooperation initiatives is part of the process of localization, a cornerstone of humanitarian action in recent times. Localization is “a way of re-thinking the humanitarian sector from the ground up”,⁸⁵ acknowledging the fundamental role played by local actors amidst crisis and emergencies. It thus entails fostering equitable international-local partnerships, international investments to sustain local actors and respect for local laws, with the aim of ultimately reinforcing the reach, effectiveness and accountability of humanitarianism.⁸⁶ Interviewee I in fact, acknowledged that INTERSOS is seeking to work with the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), in order to develop projects on community-led crisis groups in North Darfur to enhance acceptance and reach. The ERRs exemplify a comprehensive locally-led structure, which, after the violence’s outbreak, in the absence of international organizations or state-led responses to the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe, have undertaken the duty to provide essential needs and basic care to the civilian population.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, these informal networks have always been lacking the necessary funds to sustain their operations, despite their incredible efforts and recognized frontline humanitarian work. Therefore, a collaboration would epitomize a strategy of using a well-established local network to reach inaccessible populations, divert access obstructions, gain trust and recognition, in order to share the economic burden and ultimately serve humanitarian

⁸⁵ IFRC, “Localization”, available at: < <https://www.ifrc.org/happening-now/advocacy-hub/localization> >.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ MacCuish, “Sudan’s Emergency Response Rooms in the time of war”, *The Upstream Journal*, 2024, available at: <<https://upstreamjournal.org/sudans-emergency-response-rooms/>>.

purposes. This cooperation was proposed for a project which, unfortunately, was not accepted, hence INTERSOS will pursue this attempt with new funds in the near future.

As former Head of Mission (HoM) of INTERSOS in Sudan asserted in a past interview in April 2025, avoiding isolation and enhancing consortia, helps organizations access pooled resources, donor platforms and advocacy strength. Moreover, aligning with peers also creates a buffer of legitimacy around sensitive access decisions, reinforcing shared accountability. The interviewee in fact emphasized the importance of collective responses, in such a polarized environment. To exemplify his point former HoM acknowledged the existence of some organizations which had independently registered with SARHO, to gain unobstructed access to Darfur. This decision has however contravened a unified humanitarian stance and has jeopardized the neutrality of all actors operating in the country, as HAC (and thus the SAF) can interpret the choice as a betrayal of state sovereignty. Although operational urgency or access needs are widely understood, such decisions can increase perceptions of partiality and fuel mistrust towards the overall humanitarian community working in RSF-controlled areas. Undermining collective credibility endangers access, compromises security, limits the space for unified advocacy and weakens the negotiating power of the entire humanitarian response apparatus. For these reasons, former HoM had suggested regular and transparent interaction not only with local stakeholders but also within the humanitarian community, to shape common strategies.

The third interview held identified a key cause-and-effect problem linked to the financial cuts: even if INTERSOS in Sudan lacked BHA funded projects, other partner organizations did not. When even one organization lacks the funds to keep hospitals, health campaigns and food distribution activities running, this influences other NGOs that were either cooperating on ongoing projects or those that were considering opening new programs in such hospitals or through such health campaigns. In Sudan, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) have not been able to open their hospitals for months after the US administration's decision, engendering services gaps and missed opportunities for other organizations, as Interviewee III asserts. This can be overcome through reinforcing consortia in different ways: building alliances among large international organizations or collaborating with more organizations on the field. Through its strategic alliance, INTERSOS has cooperated with ShelterBox, Airlink and Action Medeor, other influential international organizations, to allow a valuable procurement of emergency shelter kits, medicines and other

items into Sudan. For in-country built consortia instead, collaboration requires more time and a sharp networking capacity. INTERSOS is still relatively new in Sudan and thus lacks an extensive network but is working on this aspect and while waiting for the obtainment of the due diligence to directly apply for projects funded through the SHF, it is building its presence through partners-guided consortia to access such funds. A further example of this cause-and-effect issue is the interdependence between Sudan and Chad. This theme was in fact further explored with Interviewee IV, as her work at the border between the two countries proved incredibly valuable to understand how interlinked the missions are. The financial cuts in fact, have had an important impact on the operational capacity in Chad and, especially, on its human resources. To minimize costs, this mission has seen a decrease in its workforce, with consequent repercussions on the quality of the coordination and support to Sudan's team. Since international roles are economically heavier than their national counterparts, Interviewee IV acknowledges that some international positions have thus been replaced by national colleagues. Although this underlines the reality of layoffs that characterizes such times, it also serves this analysis as INTERSOS mitigates the training gap through *ad hoc* capacity-strengthening activities.

Lastly, as evidenced by the incredibly small, funded portion of the SHF and by the paucity of information in the media, global attention on the crisis in Sudan remains scarce. Despite its gravity, international silence continues, neglecting the scale of humanitarian needs defining the country. Advocacy thus represents a crucial mechanism to raise awareness and keep the conflict visible to donors and policymakers. Pursued within a context of limited resources, which constrains the ability to develop a fully-fledged communications or external relations unit, advocacy is embedded into operational and donor relations work, with managers and coordinators using every available platform to highlight humanitarian needs and constraints. A potential channel is staff participation in sector coordination and inter-agency fora, such as the INGO Forum, where advocacy messages are amplified collectively to increase leverage with authorities and international actors. Michele Morana, Head of the AICS field station in Addis Abeba, underlines the fundamental role that humanitarian workers on the ground have in fostering advocacy, through data collection, testimonials and powerful narratives.⁸⁸ INTERSOS is thus trying to avail of external opportunities

⁸⁸ Morana, "IL SUDAN NON È UNA CRISI LONTANA", *Rimini Meeting*, 2025, available at: < https://www.meetingrimini.org/eventi-totale/il-sudan-non-e-una-crisi-lontana/?fbclid=PAQ0xDSwMZHpnleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABp1o8DTvytE3YJAX0smWclvaEooch-a-dy7ucQkW2zQZhcc_Rra6P3TFsZ2Iq_aem_IL1nQPRjrxYzZ6gaTck9zg>.

— such as public panels like the Rimini meeting in August 2025 — to draw attention to the crisis and its humanitarian implications. OCHA’s itinerant representatives serve as another indirect advocacy vector, conveying NGOs reality and concerns through international platforms. Looking forward, support from SV is expected to arrive for a short time in Sudan, to contribute to evidence-based advocacy capacity, particularly in producing materials that combine operational data with protection analysis. Overall, advocacy is not yet developed enough to compensate for the funding gaps or to mobilize public attention, organizations are aware of such shortcoming and are working to break this cycle of silence. For INTERSOS, the strategy hinges on coalition-based advocacy and strategic donor engagement, leveraging partnerships and shared platforms to keep humanitarian principles and needs visible.

Conclusion

This research set out to explore the question of how resource scarcity affects INTERSOS in its operational choices and adherence to humanitarian principles in Sudan. Against the backdrop of escalating humanitarian needs and unprecedented global funding shortfalls, the study has traced both the contextual humanitarian challenges shaping Sudan’s crisis and some of the strategic adaptations required of humanitarian actors. Each chapter of the analysis has sought to build a layered understanding of the operational and ethical dilemmas facing INTERSOS, while drawing broader lessons relevant to the humanitarian community. Chapter One examined the Sudanese landscape and the scale of humanitarian needs, highlighting how the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has fractured governance and generated one of the world’s gravest humanitarian emergencies. Chapter Two analyzed the main challenges facing the humanitarian sector in Sudan, including severe constraints on humanitarian access, insecurity and political manipulation, while illustrating the tangible effects of underfunding. Chapter Three focused on INTERSOS’ operational methods and the strategies it has adopted to remain present in Sudan while upholding humanitarian principles, while several key strategies emerged from the interviews held.

In a nutshell, to answer the research question, underfunding influences both adherence to the principles and operational feasibility. Firstly, because humanitarian pillars are strained by financial, political and access constraints. Limited funding has challenged its impartiality by forcing prioritization of some communities over others, its neutrality by narrowing presence across contested areas, and its independence by increasing reliance on donor-driven frameworks. Secondly, because competition among NGOs increases in times of scarce resources and because staff capacity, organizational sustainability and continuity of services are all negatively impacted in return. Yet, even under these pressures, INTERSOS strives to pursue a humanitarian approach, adapting strategies to remain present in both SAF- and RSF-controlled territories.

The strategies envisaged are summarised as follows. First, INTERSOS is pursuing portfolio diversification, engaging different donors to stabilize its funding base and reduce reliance on any single actor. Second, it seeks to position itself strategically in hard-to-reach areas, anticipating that presence in underserved locations may attract future donor investment. Third, the organization is compensating for resource shortages by leveraging consortia and coordination mechanisms, strengthening advocacy platforms and sharing security analysis with peers. Fourth, INTERSOS is exploring cooperative models, through consortia and locally led access strategies, such as collaboration with Emergency Response Rooms, to build trust, legitimacy and community-based pathways into contested territories. Fifth, adherence to a collective humanitarian identity and response appears to be crucial in such a polarized context, to reinforce accountability. Lastly, advocacy — although constrained by resources — has become a critical tool to highlight needs and maintain visibility in a context often overlooked internationally.

From INTERSOS' experience, several recommendations for the wider humanitarian community can be deduced. First, diversification of funding streams is no longer optional but essential. Heavy dependence on a handful of donors leaves agencies vulnerable to abrupt policy shifts, as illustrated by the suspension of USAID's programs. International NGOs must cultivate new partnerships, including with private foundations, regional institutions and diaspora networks, to secure a more resilient financing base. Second, humanitarian organizations should invest in strengthening collective approaches, as in polarized contexts, unified strategies mitigate risks of fragmentation and amplify the credibility of principled humanitarian action. Third, community-led models should be more fully recognized and resourced. Local networks like Sudan's ERRs demonstrate

extraordinary capacity and legitimacy but remain chronically underfunded. Supporting these actors not only enhances access but also embeds humanitarian responses within existing social structures, ensuring sustainability beyond external interventions. Finally, the study underscores the importance of sustained advocacy and visibility. Sudan's crisis has received limited global attention despite its scale and donor disengagement reflects this neglect. Humanitarian organizations should strengthen evidence-based advocacy, combining operational data with field-stories to maintain donor and public engagement. Advocacy cannot substitute for funding, but it can generate the political will necessary to mobilize resources and keep crises like Sudan from fading into silence.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that INTERSOS' strategies in Sudan offer valuable insights into how humanitarian actors can adapt to resource-constrained environments. While the findings cannot be generalized to all contexts, as these have been drawn by INTERSOS' experience in the country, they nevertheless highlight the urgent need for the humanitarian sector to rethink its operational models. The task for the wider humanitarian community is to build on such experiences, fostering a more sustainable and principled future for humanitarianism.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Interviewees’ General Profiles. Source: created by the author.

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