

Beyond traditional models: Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms and the future of mutual aid

"If you are a risk-averse donor, fund mutual aid. If you are risk-tolerant, stay with the mainstream system." This surprising statement emerged during KUNO's recent expert meeting on Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms. At the meeting, donors and INGOs were urged to embrace and directly support the community-led mutual aid initiatives that have emerged in response to the civil war that has been ravaging the country for over two and a half years. In times of crisis, international responders are often slowed down by bureaucratic procedures and access constraints. Local communities, on the other hand, know the terrain, they have the trust of their neighbours, and they can act quickly. Their agility allows them to reach people in areas where international organisations simply cannot reach, which, as in Sudan, often places them as first responders. However, enabling aid to directly reach first responders like Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms requires breaking away from the institutionalised norms of the humanitarian system - and a willingness to trust local initiatives to define and deliver what they know is best for their own survival.



Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) illustrate how direct community funding channels (on the left) enable faster, more accountable humanitarian action, with fewer resources lost to traditional steps (on the right).

Grassroots solutions in a war-torn country

Since war erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) two and a half years ago, the people of Sudan have been enduring unspeakable atrocities. While humanitarian needs are soaring, international humanitarian agencies and INGOs are struggling to acquire access to provide

emergency support. Life-saving aid mainly continues to reach people thanks to Sudanese communities themselves -organised in the so-called Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), which have garnered growing attention in recent months. The ERRs - as decentralised, community-led networks - are reaching places where international organisations cannot.

“We do not favour any side of the war. We are strictly humanitarian and non-political. We are grassroots. We work in our neighbourhoods and among our communities. We respond immediately and change our tools and approaches according to the needs on the ground at any given moment.” Alsanosi Adam, External Communications Officer with the ERR’s Localisation Coordination Council (LCC) in Sudan, explained how the ERRs – currently comprising over 20,000 volunteers, including professionals, technicians, community members, and activists – provide essential services ranging from health clinics and hospitals to evacuation centres and community kitchens. The ERRs are restoring electricity and water, installing solar systems, and setting up internet connectivity. They also run alternative education programmes, farming and women’s cooperatives, and local food supply chains.

A nation-wide, self-learning network

The first ERRs were launched by young people in Khartoum, but – as needs grew – they quickly expanded across all 18 of Sudan’s states. The key to the Emergency Response Rooms’ success is that they are strictly community-driven initiatives. Alsanosi offered a succinct and elegant summary: “The beauty of the ERRs is that they are not about people coming in from elsewhere to offer assistance - it is the people from a certain place coming together to help themselves.”

There are currently between six and seven hundred of these mutual aid initiatives in Sudan operating at a hyper-local level in various neighbourhoods. As neutral and purposely unregistered initiatives, the ERRs operate autonomously in both SAF and RSF controlled areas. They have coalesced into a self-learning network, sharing relevant data and experiences among and across their various groups via Facebook and Instagram. In this way, the ERRs learn from and are accountable to one another. The volunteers themselves came up with the idea of developing a mentoring system to connect Sudanese professionals with specific experience or skills to volunteers on the ground. This crucial network that offers support ranging from emotional and psychological counselling to technical advice and financial management. They also launched a newsletter and an interactive online forum to broaden volunteers’ awareness of wider issues in humanitarian aid, social dynamics, and conflict resolution. Not least because they required out-of-the-box thinking around capacity building, both initiatives struggled to find financial backing through official (I)NGO channels.

Skills-based governance

Skills-matching and good governance are at the heart of how the ERR system works. As Alsanosi explained: “When you're a doctor, you go to the health office. Are you good at training people? Then you're placed with capacity-building. If you're a journalist, you join the media work. And if you studied finance, you're welcome in the finance office.” His Localisation Coordination Council (LCC) serves as the ERR's national coordination mechanism that also decides on the distribution of funding across ERRs. It includes elected community representatives from each state, who serve for four months. Sixteen local organisations are currently represented on the LCC, alongside five international organisations as observers -with requests to join from seven more. Alsanosi: “The LCC helps to ensure just and equitable coordination across the country and helps avoid duplication. It also enables the ERRs and local organisations to bring any issues they are facing directly to the table. The council offers an open space for people to discuss how to deal with issues, improve efficiency, and speed up responses.”

Under threat: risks faced by volunteers

Despite their neutrality, ERR volunteers face significant risks. At least 80 volunteers have been killed since the war began, and many more face harassment and arbitrary arrest. Alsanosi expressed his deep concern and sadness over the severe lack of formal diplomatic outrage. In response to a question on how donors and INGOs can offer support beyond financial aid, he issued an urgent call for those organisations to do much more to advocate for their protection through bilateral diplomacy and UN agencies like OCHA. Ensuring they are visible and recognised is the best way to reduce the risks faced by ERR-volunteers.

Funding gaps and donor hesitation

While the ERRs receive substantial donations from the Sudanese diaspora, international donors remain reluctant to offer direct funding. In most countries, mutual aid initiatives still remain a fringe activity. A perceived lack of accountability is the main stumbling block. Justin Corbett of Local 2 Global Protection – an organisation that works to change the humanitarian system, pushing for meaningful localisation – has been working with a direct funding mechanism for the ERRs. It channels funds through Proximity 2 Humanity (P2H), a US-based NGO that delivers the funding directly to the LCC. Corbett promptly and firmly dismissed accountability concerns as unfounded: “In the ERRs, people worry about 80 dollars that have gone missing – out of the many millions that have gone in. Few NGOs are able to maintain such close oversight. ERR-volunteers take this very seriously. It is their money all the way through.”

Transparency in action

Alsanosi underlined that the LCC immediately distributes the funding coming in from external organisations to the ERRs: “Direct funding is funnelled straight to the emergency responders. Amounts are calculated according to each state's population

size, the number of volunteers they have on the ground, the criteria and the activities they carry out. Microgrants of up to 5,000 euros are disbursed on a weekly basis. Weekly expenditures are immediately reported on to qualify for the next week's disbursement. All spending on the ground is tracked with photos, videos and narrative and financial reports." "It is clear," Corbett confirmed, "that the financial and narrative reporting system developed by Sudan's ERR network goes way beyond the demands of even the most exacting donor. Without the help of the institutionalised humanitarian sector, ERR volunteers with IT expertise have developed their own sophisticated tracking mechanism. A private-sector software programmer IT expert, who was astounded to read about what the ERR teams were achieving, offered his help to develop a way to digitise all of their reporting systems, ensuring that every last cent is accounted for. Local communities know everything coming in, which gives you as a donor much more security than you have ever had just funding the UN or an INGO who rely on the blunt tool of reporting with invoices."

A scalable model for direct funding

In support of Sudan's ERRs, the P2H mechanism has been set up as a cost-effective go-between between donors and informal mutual aid networks. It gets rid of a lot of the extra demands normally included in the international humanitarian sector's dealings with local NGOs, while satisfying donor accountability requirements. Corbett explains: "This is an approach that is very different from the way that we as internationals often engage. It is a model that can basically serve as a bank account for the mutual aid mechanism, while ensuring that decision-making and ownership remain 100% in the hands of the Localisation Coordination Council as the ERR coordinating mechanism. With a maximum of 5% operating costs, 95 dollars out of every hundred that are donated, go straight down to the ERRs for them to use."

Unlearning 'aid as usual'

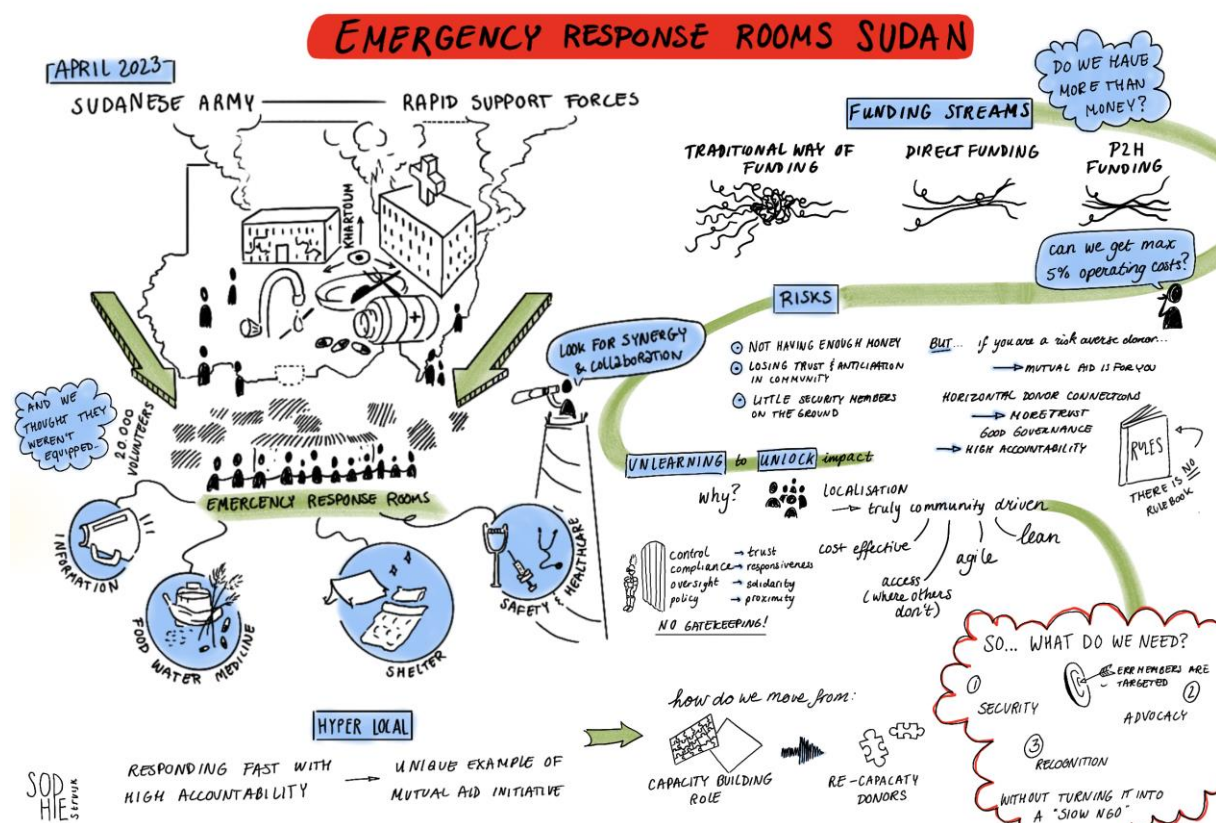
The Netherlands Refugee Foundation (Stichting Vluchteling, in Dutch) is one of the frontrunners that is now starting a pilot with a share of their Sudan budget being sent directly to the ERRs through the P2H mechanism. East Africa programme officer Renée van Hoof said: "Over the years the humanitarian sector has invested in compliance frameworks and reporting protocols aimed improving the quality of humanitarian interventions, but at the same time it has centred accountability upwards as opposed to towards communities themselves. The Netherlands Refugee Foundation has taken the bold move to break away from this logic. Sudan shows us, as international aid actors, that to maximise impact, we must let go of some established procedures - we need to unlearn, de-institutionalise and rethink accountability. This takes moving from control and compliance to trust and responsiveness, grounding our work in solidarity and proximity rather than rigid oversight." To achieve this, the organisation has taken responsibility for any calculated risks that may occur with the invested funds. Alsanosi commended the Netherlands Refugee Foundation for believing in the P2H direct funding

model: “You ensure that we can be agile and fast and not weighed down by bureaucracy and paperwork before we can respond to a crisis on the ground.”

Time to walk the talk

Corbett strongly urged mainstream donors to examine the ERR funding, tracking and reporting mechanisms for themselves: “Get your experts to look at it. I am pretty certain they will be amazed at the level of accountability.” A former USAID official confirmed: “We did a very extensive analysis on the F-system – the LCC’s own planning, approval and reporting system - just prior to the dissolution of USAID and actually found that it exceeded our rules and regulation requirements. We were ready to fund this at scale.”

The Sudanese experience makes clear that, as outsiders, international actors are not equipped to become first responders. Corbett called on donors and INGOs to rethink the way in which they work: “What is happening in Sudan with the Emergency Response Rooms is unique and a learning experience for all of us. It is new territory. We need to develop a new rule book.” Van Hoof added: “The challenge for us is how to support and amplify their efforts, putting local communities in the driver’s seat. Since the war began, we’ve talked the talk - now it’s time to walk the walk.”



The way forward: co-creation over control

Despite their impressive results, it is clear the ERRs cannot shoulder the entire humanitarian response alone. Alsanosi underscored that mutual aid can do a lot - and even more with increased funding - but not everything: “We still need professional

INGOs with expertise in public health, infrastructure, education, women's issues, and peacebuilding.” But what needs to change, he stressed, is the traditional top-down approach: “If there is one lesson to be learned from Sudan's ERR experience, it is this: Ask local responders for their solutions and see where INGOs and donors might be able to play a role to help them solve the issues they bring to the table. Co-create with local communities. Finding synergy between the agility of grassroots organisations and the institutional capacity of international humanitarian actors: that is the way forward.”

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