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PROTECTING FROM THE GROUND UP: ISSUES WITH CIVIL SOCIETY-LED SOCIAL PROTECTION IN SUDAN

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Abstract

This paper examines the issues with civil society-led social protection in Sudan. The government has traditionally been responsible for implementing social provision initiatives by introducing various policies and programs to address the significant portion of the population living in poverty. However, ongoing identity-based conflicts and clashes among armed factions have severely strained the Sudanese government's ability to uphold this crucial role. This situation has created gaps in the provision of essential services, presenting opportunities for civil society organizations to step in and address the deficiencies in the state's capacity. In the current scenario of weakened state capacity, these roles can prove to be operationally valuable. Adopting a qualitative methodologyconstructed using a search strategy that employs relevant keywords and Boolean operators to extract information from electronic academic databases, the paper delves into the various mechanisms of social protection offered by civil society organizations in conflict-era Sudan, the challenges that face such organizations and the response of the Sudanese state to the engagements of these organizations in social protection. Among others, the paper posits that civil society organizations, when involved in the implementation of social protection initiatives, are driven by the objective of mitigating the adverse impacts of conflict-induced shocks, an endeavour that often materializes in the form of social assistance programs, where faith-based and community-based groups play a prominent role. However, findings show that the effectiveness of these organizations is influenced by a spectrum of political and economic factors that limit their scope and impact. One of the key political factors is the confrontational stance of the government, evident in the rigorous regulatory frameworks imposed on the activities of civil society organizations. It was recommended that due to these groups' proximity to the population needing humanitarian assistance, it is important to integrate them into social protection programs in the aftermath of conflict as they play a pivotal role in catalysing post-conflict recovery and contributing to the restoration of the state's legitimacy in Sudan.

Keywords: Civil Society Organisations, Service Delivery, Social protection, Sudan.

Introduction

Social protection is a concept firmly embedded in contemporary global thinking about social systems, reflecting its multiple significant roles. It maintains a positive correlation with developmental outcomes and serves as a vital facilitator in the transition between various stages of economic growth (Nathan, 2014; Ramesh, 2014). The International Labour Organization (2022) emphasizes that social protection programs promote inclusive economic growth and productivity. Additionally, there is a consensus regarding social protection's ability to effectively respond to social shocks and crises (Brady, 2020). This is achieved through policies and programs that meet basic human needs and ensure social welfare and equitable resource access. The Asian Development Bank (2003) defines social protection as programs to mitigate exposure to social shocks and stresses. Typically, these policies and programs are embedded within formal administrative structures, with government institutions taking a prominent role in their design and implementation. This perspective has led to various conceptualizations of social protection within a state-centric paradigm. Standing (2001), for instance, suggests that social protection programs are essentially a collection of state-run programs and social services designed to uphold "the protection of social civility, fraternity, and social solidarity" (p. 2). As a result, the quantification of social protection has focused on the outcomes of government policies, including regulatory policies, public expenditure, and tax administration (Tanzi, 2000).

This state-centric approach has prevailed in Sudan, where the state has been central in administering and implementing programs and policies in response to deteriorating social indicators, particularly poverty-related (Machado & Bacil, 2020). The significance of these policies has grown, especially in the face of increasing social divisions rooted in racialization and regional inequality across Sudan (Ali & Mann, 2023). Consequently, the state has increasingly designed and implemented social protection policies to address internal fractures and mediate polarization, ostensibly aimed at maintaining social cohesion. However, these interventions have faced recurring obstacles over the years, stemming from normative and practical constraints. According to Ali and Mann (2023), these obstacles are historically linked to events such as the debt crisis, the subsequent rise of neoliberal discourses, and donor politics. Another major challenge has been the long history of large-scale violence that has made the Sudanese state more vulnerable. In addition to ongoing identitarian conflicts, clashes between the Sudanese military and the Rapid Support Forces since April 2023 have significantly reshaped government policy agendas, impacting the state's ability to provide essential services to the Sudanese public. The resulting capacity gaps have left more than a million displaced people vulnerable to unhealthy humanitarian conditions caused by the conflict. Simultaneously, these gaps have created opportunities for the emergence of non-state actors within Sudanese civil society. These actors are characterized by their capacity to provide essential services, aligning with Paffenholz's classification (2015). This trend aligns with the broader shift where civil society organizations, as independent entities separate from the state, have taken on roles traditionally reserved for the state, particularly in delivering services to marginalized communities worldwide (Ingram, 2020). This shift is partly a response to the changing landscape of development policy and the need to enhance service delivery, coupled with historical patterns that extend back to and beyond the colonial era (Clayton et al., 2000).

Given the weakened state capacity in Sudan, civil society organizations' role is paramount. They can be operationally valuable. However, the extent to which they are applied in the context of Sudanese social protection remains a developing area of inquiry, which we aim to discuss in this paper. Our analysis in this paper is based on the premise that civil society

organizations are indispensable components of social protection mechanisms in conflict-era Sudan, particularly given the erosion of state capacity due to the ongoing conflict. In developing this argument, we will explore three lines of inquiry: 1) the types of social protection mechanisms offered by civil society organizations in conflict-era Sudan, 2) the challenges faced by civil society organizations in providing social protection, and 3) the responses of the Sudanese state to the involvement of civil society organizations in social protection.

The structure of the paper follows a logical sequence. It begins with a discussion of the concept of "service delivery," drawing from Paffenholz's framework for civil society functions. It then outlines the paper's methodology and briefly overviews the Sudanese context. The subsequent sections take turns to highlight the types of social protection mechanisms offered by civil society organizations, their challenges, and the Sudanese state's responses to their involvement in social protection.

Methodology

This paper relies on a qualitative secondary dataset constructed using a search strategy that employs relevant keywords and Boolean operators to extract information from electronic academic databases. For the factual analysis of civil society's role in social protection, we draw from grey literature published by non-governmental and international organizations operating in or focused on Sudan. Additionally, we observe digital communication platforms used by civil society organizations, such as social media accounts and websites. Data collected from these sources are coded and analyzed to understand civil society organizations' roles, perspectives, and challenges in providing social protection during conflict-era Sudan.

Conceptual review

Civil Society and Service Delivery

Civil society is a concept that lacks precise parameters and exhibits a fluid identity, resulting in various assumptions rooted in different epistemological worldviews. Civil society encompasses voluntary, uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes, and values. It serves as an intermediate realm between various sectors of society (Merkel & Lauth, 1988). This paper defines civil society as organizations and groups with formal and legal independence from the formal state structures of administration and governance in Sudan. Our understanding aligns with the definition of civil society as a sphere of voluntary action distinct from the state, political, private, and economic spheres. It consists of a diverse set of voluntary organizations, competing and oriented towards specific interests, that are autonomously organized and interact in the public sphere (Spurk, 2010). Regardless of the numerous connotations assigned to civil society, there is no doubt that civil society organizations have assumed important roles within social structures, which have been categorised into various variables. According to Paffenholz, such roles, which apply within the context of peacebuilding, encompass protective and service delivery roles (Paffenholz, 2015). The service delivery role applies when state capacity has collapsed or weakened. It is particularly valuable in the context of war-affected societies that require reconstruction (Paffenholz, 2015).

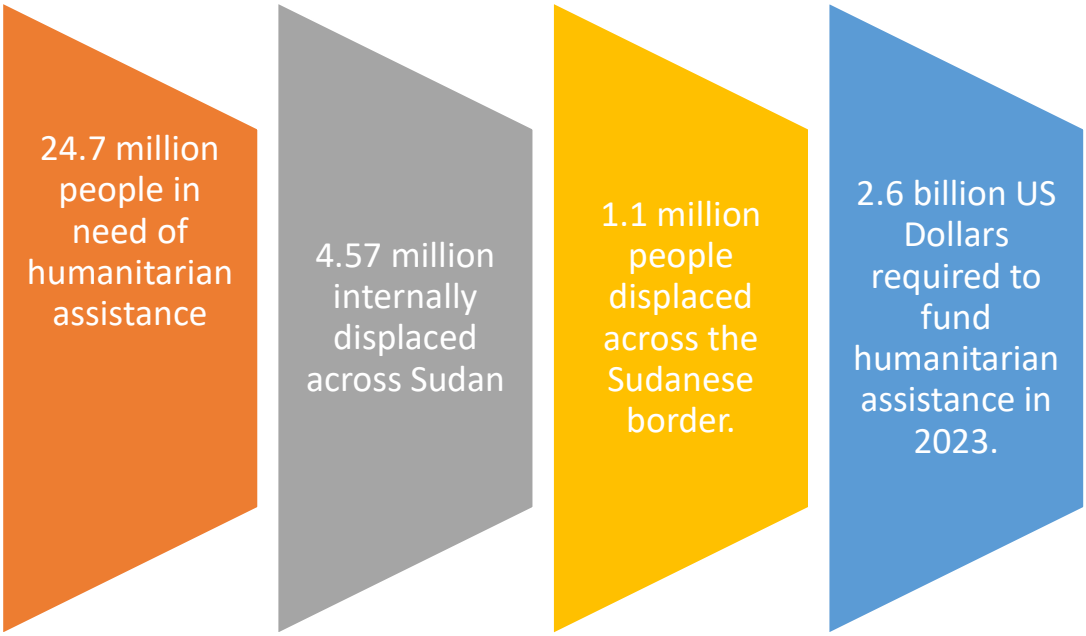
Sudan: Country Overview

Sudan, located in northern Africa, occupies a strategically significant position at the intersection of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. The country has a tumultuous

political history, characterized by numerous armed conflicts, many of which are considered ideo-ethnic conflicts. In addition to well-known civil wars that dominated much of the 20th and early 21st centuries and culminated in the secession of South Sudan in 2011, Sudan has also witnessed devastating conflicts in regions like Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile. These conflicts are rooted in historical disputes over resource control, internal fragmentation accentuated by ethno-religious tensions dating back to colonial dynamics, and a general crisis of government legitimacy (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012). Sudan's volatility has made it a focal point for global discussions on humanitarian concerns, especially due to the significant demographic changes resulting from population displacement. According to the World Bank, Sudan is both a major contributor to and recipient of irregular migration, hosting over a million refugees from neighboring countries and regions, such as South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Chad, Central African Republic, Syria, and Yemen (World Bank, 2023).

The recent outbreak of fighting, stemming from intense power struggles between the Sudanese military and the paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces, has plunged the country into a dire humanitarian crisis. Notably, this conflict has given rise to a severe humanitarian emergency, particularly regarding deteriorating food security and escalating hunger. A lack of sufficient humanitarian supplies has exacerbated these issues. Simultaneously, the conflict has displaced approximately 5.6 million people within Sudan and beyond its borders (Nashed, 2023; UNOCHA, 2023). The humanitarian fallout from this conflict has necessitated assistance for over 20 million people, with an estimated 9,000 casualties, particularly in the regions of Khartoum, Darfur, and Kordofan (UNOCHA, 2023). The full extent of the humanitarian crisis is documented in *Figure 1*.

Figure 1: Sudan's Humanitarian Crisis in Focus



Source: Adapted from UNOCHA (2023).

The exacerbated humanitarian conditions have undoubtedly compounded existing social challenges. Inflation has remained high at 139% since 2022, the poverty rate stood at 66.1% in 2022, and the unemployment rate is estimated at 20.6% (African Development Bank, ADB, 2023). This is consistent with a historical trend dating back to at least the 2006 Human

Poverty Index Indicator, which indicated high levels of social deprivation, statistically recorded at 52% (Faki, Nur & Hashim). The deteriorating humanitarian conditions are also evident in soaring food prices and a shortage of clean drinking water (Richon & Martini, 2023).

Conflict-Era Social Protection in Sudan: Decentred State and Empowered Civil Society

Social protection in Sudan has traditionally been state-driven, with active support from international institutions like the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the United Nations Children's Educational Fund (UNICEF). These organizations have adopted such policies as tools to address and manage the negative consequences of generally dire economic and social conditions. The administration of the social protection system has largely been dominated by agencies and organizations integrated into the formal organizational structure of the Sudanese state. Key institutions in this regard include the labor, finance, health, and education ministries and the apex bank (Ndip, Etang, Hassan, & Osman, 2020). Over the past two decades, many programs have been implemented, including medium and long-term development plans influenced by secular and ecumenical ideologies. The government-managed social protection system has been multidimensional, designed to address diverse economic needs and exigencies. This system comprises various components, including:

> "*safety net interventions including unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) and in-kind transfers by the government and Zakat Fund/Islamic Charity … contributory social insurance programs including a pension fund, social security fund, and health insurance fund … general subsidies and support to certain medical care services, including free treatment in emergencies and free lifesaving medicines; … microfinance, and … support to special groups such as rural women and returnees from South Sudan, support to humanitarian crises in conflict-affected areas, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs for ex-combatants and vocational training centres to enhance youth unemployment."* (Ndip, Etang, Hassan & Osman, 2020: 3).

The existence of ecumenical-themed social protection programs, embodied by the Zakat System, reflects the Sudanese state's theological foundation, established with the introduction of Sharia in the 20th century. The Islamic Zakat system was intended as a welfare and developmental program, focusing on healthcare, pro-poor policies, and poverty reduction (Hassanain & Saaid, 2016). Beyond Zakat, another program actively pursued by the state has been cash transfer programs, designed to act as safety nets against the removal of subsidy regimes. These cash transfer programs aim to leverage the proven potential of cash transfers in redirecting families' economic behavior towards productivity, improving access to human capital, reducing poverty, and enhancing resilience to economic shocks (Tasha, 2021).

The limited effectiveness of these numerous programs, as reflected in empirical and quantitative terms (cf. Ndip et al., 2020), has been exacerbated by the dynamics of the ongoing civil war, which has dramatically disrupted the institutional structures of the Sudanese state due to hostile actions by warring parties. In this context of coerced institutional failure and a capacity deficit resulting from conflict dynamics, civil society groups in Sudan have emerged to fill the void, often informally, by providing services related to basic human needs. Within this framework, communal groups, also known as resistance committees, have become significant service providers.

"Local Resistance Committees" and "Faith-based organizations" as locus of social protection.

The rise of resistance committees reflects the growing assertiveness of grassroots neighborhood groups, granting them significant visibility. Initially borne out of popular movements to advance Sudan's democratization, these resistance groups have evolved into service providers, filling the void left by the deteriorating state capacity.

Amid the ongoing conflict, these resistance committees have marshaled material and human resources to engage in various initiatives, such as evacuations, the provision of essential medical supplies, and the procurement of fuel for vehicles and motorcycles (Nashed, 2023). The motivation behind their participation is deeply rooted in the broader context of the struggle for democracy, making extensive use of indigenous knowledge resources. Their service provision is seen to further delegitimize the Sudanese state. This is evident in the following account:

> "*Beyond the public face of protests, the communities have offered-at the level of neighbourhoods- many of the services that the state stopped offering many years ago … building on their service-oriented origins in the volunteer movements, the resistance committees look after their neighbourhoods. They clean up and take out the trash, they aid needy students and have organized community-based health checkups. This public service has given them a sense of purpose and hope in a time when the outlook at the national level is indeed bleak*." (Bishai, 2023, 1481).

Beneath these actions lies a determination to mitigate the impact on ordinary civilians resulting from the conflict, caused by organizations that stand in stark contrast to the revolutionary character of the resistance committees, and are indifferent to the security and safety needs of the Sudanese populace, as indicated in a widely circulated social media communique. Concurrently, the responses of these groups intersect with and uphold traditional norms, including *sanduk* mutual aid collectives and *nafeer*, which are community-based social protection alternatives to state-run programs. These local systems are particularly resilient in natural disasters and emergencies (Reumert, 2023).

In the Sudanese capital, the Khartoum Food Bank, run by civilians, operates like a crowd-funded initiative, with residents pooling resources to address food, water, and medical supply shortages. These supplies are then distributed based on need (Adler, 2023). The actions of faith-based charities complement neighborhood organizations' efforts. The Zakat Foundation, for instance, has undertaken a wide range of initiatives aimed at providing emergency aid to displaced populations, continuing its longstanding presence in Sudan with a history of interventions targeting food security, healthcare, and social needs (Zakat Foundation, 2023). Similarly, the Islamic Relief has implemented well-structured, multi-dimensional programs that include cash transfers, medicine, hygiene kits for the displaced, and healthcare support to over 225,000 people across Sudan (Islamic Relief, 2023).

Social protection programs conducted by grassroots organizations have often lacked a systematic structure. However, they have consistently adhered to the overarching theme of the urgent need for such programs, influenced by Sudan's extensive history of violent conflicts. One significant challenge faced by various civil society organizations engaged in humanitarian interventions is the collapse of Sudan's essential state institutions and

infrastructure. According to Mercy Corps, one of the organizations actively providing humanitarian aid to distressed communities in Sudan, civil society organizations increasingly confront the risk of state-level institutions being weaponized due to attempts by warring parties to reshape the political landscape. Furthermore, the ever-present threat posed by checkpoints manned by actors from different parties in the conflicts restricts the scope and effectiveness of assistance to these communities (Mercy Corps, 2023).

Additionally, civil society organizations must grapple with the severe repercussions of extensive damage to financial institutions. Sudan's largest bank, the Bank of Khartoum, has suffered significant damage to its operational infrastructure, resulting in drastic measures that have directly impeded customer access to funds (Channels, 2023). There have been reports of armed groups involved in the conflict targeting financial institutions to deny others access to cash, exacerbating an already dire cash shortage (ACAPS, 2023). Punitive actions taken against the leadership of the Sudanese state's apex bank have directly hindered the institution's operations and capabilities, further contributing to the scarcity of cash (Channels, 2023). These financial disruptions also manifest in the disruption of remittance flows due to the closure of foreign exchange transfer firms, resulting in a general shortage of liquidity, which is further compounded by disruptions to informal money exchange structures (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2023).

The rise of local resistance committees and their foundation in the democratization discourse inherently threatens the existing political order. However, they exist within a context of state-civil society relations that have been marked by complexities, tending towards co-optation, repression, and tight control by the Sudanese state (Ali, 2010). In the current conflict scenario, members of local resistance committees have been vulnerable to hostile actions from parties to the conflict. In May 2023, reports surfaced about the forced detention and torture of two members providing emergency services by members of the Sudanese military because they were collaborating with the Rapid Support Forces (Ikoku, 2023). Such intimidation and attacks directed at these groups are inherently connected to the political economy of the conflict and have seen the deployment of language framing members of respective resistance groups as 'enemy combatants' to gain hegemony over aid relief distribution (Nashed, 2023). Undoubtedly, this has interfered with the delivery of aid and services to communities in need of assistance.

Nonetheless, there is little room for dispute regarding the fact that the emergence of civilian-based groups on the scene has reshaped the social protection landscape in Sudan. A key observation made by analysts is that the emergence of these groups signals the introduction of innovative practices that have redefined social protection based on "civicness." This concept is premised on the idea of manufacturing voluntary consent through normative frameworks that draw from humanist principles, emphasizing the imperative for participatory, bottom-up humanitarianism (Mercy Corps, 2023).

Conclusion and recommendations

When examining the topic of social protection during conflict in Sudan, it becomes clear that civil society organizations have played vital roles. The most influential types of civil society organizations have been citizen-based, particularly neighborhood organizations like local resistance groups, and faith-based organizations. These groups have primarily focused on providing essential human necessities, effectively making social protection less formal in the face of a weakening state capacity. However, the ability of these groups to adequately address these needs has been hampered by disruptions in the economic and political sectors of Sudan,

which have hindered their capacity to gather resources. Nevertheless, these groups' proximity to the population needing humanitarian assistance underscores the importance of integrating them into social protection programs in the aftermath of conflicts. This integration is essential for effectively administrating social protection initiatives and achieving the objectives embedded in these programs to meet social needs.

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