

Local humanitarian actors in Sudan

A study of the local response ecosystem

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Contents

Disclaimer **1**
Glossary **2**
1. Executive Summary **3**
1.1 Key Findings: 3
1.2 What the findings mean for localisation 5
1.3 Recommendations 5
2. Introduction **6**
2.1 Sudan's humanitarian crisis and the emergence of locally led response 6
2.2 From local response to the localisation question 6
2.3 The localisation picture in Sudan 7
2.4 Aim of mapping 7
2.5 Analytical Framework 8
3. Cross-cutting themes shaping the local response landscape **9**
3.1 Forms of local response organisations 9
3.2 Perceptions of localisation 9
4. Localisation in practice: legitimacy, coordination and authority **10**
4.1 Origins 10
4.2 Local legitimacy: community, civic and political foundations 13
4.3 Coordination and collective action 17
4.4 External interfaces and relationships with humanitarian actors 21
4.5 Representation, leadership, and power 25
5. Conclusion and recommendations **29**
5.1 Conclusion 29
5.2 Recommendations 30
6. References **33**

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Glossary

Acronym	Meaning
ERR / ERRs	Emergency Response Room(s)
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
HNRP	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
INGO / INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organisation(s)
KII / KIIs	Key Informant Interview(s)
LCC	Local Coordination Council
NGO / NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisation(s)
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SCLR	Survivor and Community-Led Response
UN	United Nations
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

1. Executive Summary

Sudan's locally led humanitarian action has become a central part of the response to the war that began in April 2023. It encompasses a diverse range of organisations, networks and community-led initiatives with different histories, organisational forms and relationships with communities and the wider humanitarian system. This mapping examines how that diversity shapes legitimacy, coordination, representation and authority within the local response.

The research is based on qualitative interviews with local humanitarian and civil society actors, international stakeholders and a focus group discussion, complemented by a review of relevant literature and limited analysis of open-source material. It is exploratory rather than representative and should not be understood as a comprehensive census of Sudan's local response.

1.1 Key Findings:

- **Sudan's local response is diverse and historically rooted**

Local humanitarian action did not emerge through a single pathway. The mapping identified organisations and networks that developed from civic and resistance organising, mutual aid and crisis-driven community action, established community organisations, and efforts to bring different local actors together. Many therefore have origins outside the humanitarian system. These histories continue to shape organisational identity, relationships with communities and the forms of legitimacy on which actors draw. The distinction between formal and informal organisation is consequently less clear-cut than it can appear within humanitarian policy discussions. Some organisations, including groups that have their origins in mutual aid, see registration, financial systems and organisational development as strengthening their capacity and independence rather than weakening their local character.

- **Local legitimacy is relational and is not the same as formal status or international recognition.**

Respondents associated legitimacy with relationships with communities, presence during crisis, local knowledge, shared experience and sustained provision of services valued by the community. Formal registration or partnership with international organisations may strengthen an organisation's institutional position but does not automatically establish community legitimacy. Legitimacy is therefore not simply a characteristic that an organisation possesses; it develops through relationships, experience and demonstrated action over time.

- **Coordination creates collective capacity but can also create representative authority.**

Local actors have developed their own networks, platforms and collective structures to share information, solve practical problems and connect geographically dispersed actors. Coordination can therefore function as

infrastructure through which fragmented local action becomes collective capacity. It is also important for addressing the scale problem: individual organisations may have limited ability to engage donors, UN agencies and INGOs, while collective structures can provide a stronger external interface.

However, once coordination structures begin to influence resources, programme priorities or external relationships, they also acquire representative significance. The experience of the Local Coordination Council (LCC) illustrates how structures created to address fragmentation can become part of the distribution of power within the local response.

- **International recognition and resources can reshape power within local civil society.**

International organisations and donors remain important sources of funding, technical support, advocacy and access. At the same time, the humanitarian system influences which organisations are considered capable, credible and representative through funding arrangements, partnership models, due diligence and capacity requirements.

Respondents described a recurring gap between being treated as a partner and being engaged primarily as an implementer, with local actors sometimes carrying operational responsibility and risk without equivalent influence over assessment, programme design or priorities. International engagement can also distribute visibility and recognition unevenly, allowing organisations with stronger institutional connections to accumulate further resources, access and influence.

- **Representation is both necessary and contested.**

Sudan's local response is too diverse and geographically dispersed to function without mechanisms of representation. However**, being representative is not the same as being recognised as a representative**.

The former depends on relationships, participation and accountability to a constituency; the latter can be conferred through access to humanitarian institutions and decision-making spaces. This distinction is particularly important in relation to Sudan's political geography.

Actors may be deeply embedded within local communities while having limited national visibility, while actors with greater access to national and international institutions may become more visible as representatives of wider constituencies. Representation is also shaped by gender, generation, disability, class, displacement and organisational status, meaning that questions of voice cannot be reduced simply to centre–periphery dynamics.

1.2 What the findings mean for localisation

These findings complicate a simple understanding of localisation as the transfer of funding, functions or organisational capacity from international to national actors. Authority is negotiated at multiple levels.

International agencies, donors and UN institutions retain substantial influence through funding, standards, due diligence, partnership arrangements and recognition, while local actors are simultaneously negotiating authority, representation and influence among themselves. The central division is therefore between **legitimacy within a constituency** and **recognition within the humanitarian system**. These may reinforce one another, but they are not the same.

The mapping therefore suggests that the key localisation question is not simply who receives resources or who is included in humanitarian structures, but **how actors arrive at positions of influence and who has the authority to define, decide, represent and act**.

1.3 Recommendations

The findings point to five practical priorities for donors, UN agencies and INGOs:

- **INGOs and UN agencies should: Move from local participation to shared authority.**

Partnerships should make clearer which decisions sit with international partners and which sit with local organisations, with greater local influence over needs analysis, programme design, geographical priorities and resource use.

- **UN agencies and donors should: Strengthen coordination without unnecessarily concentrating representation.**

Federated, regional and area-based approaches can help connect dispersed actors while clearer mandates and accountability mechanisms can reduce the risk that coordination structures acquire authority beyond their constituencies.

- **INGOs and UN agencies should: Broaden how capacity and legitimacy are assessed.**

Financial management, governance and safeguarding remain important, but due diligence should also recognise community trust, local knowledge, access, speed and contextual capability. Organisational support should respond to capacities identified by local actors rather than defaulting to repeated capacity building based on the priorities of the international rather than local actors.

- **UN Agencies, INGOs and donors should: Examine how recognition and influence are distributed.**

International actors should look beyond who receives funding to consider who is repeatedly invited to participate, speak and represent, and should avoid relying on

a small number of organisations or individuals as proxies for Sudanese civil society as a whole.

- **UN agencies, INGOs and donors should: Treat legitimacy and representation as questions requiring evidence.**

When engaging representative structures, external actors should consider who is represented, how the mandate was established, how representatives are selected, and how accountability to constituencies is maintained. The objective is not to avoid representation, but to ensure that representative authority remains connected to the constituencies from which it derives.

2. Introduction

2.1 Sudan's humanitarian crisis and the emergence of locally led response

The war that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 has generated one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. By 2026, an estimated 33.7 million people required humanitarian assistance, while millions had been displaced internally or across borders. At the same time, humanitarian access has been repeatedly constrained by insecurity, bureaucratic restrictions, shifting frontlines, attacks on aid workers, and the destruction of critical infrastructure[1].

Across Sudan, communities have organised themselves to meet urgent needs, protect vulnerable people, mobilise resources, share information, and sustain collective forms of support under conditions of extreme uncertainty. A universe of civil society actors, from the formal to the informal became an indispensable part of the response landscape.

While many of these initiatives have received increased attention since the outbreak of war, they did not emerge in a vacuum. Contemporary forms of civil society, mutual aid and community mobilisation are rooted in histories that have long enabled Sudanese communities to navigate crisis, conflict and state neglect. The current war has transformed and expanded these forms of organisation, but it did not create them[2].

2.2 From local response to the localisation question

Global discussions on localisation frequently focus on technical aspects, such as funding flows, partnership models, and institutional capacity. Yet, less attention is given to the broader social, political, and relational foundations of local action.

As a result, local actors often perceive themselves as being “instrumentalised”, being understood primarily as potential implementing partners rather than as autonomous actors with their own histories, constituencies, forms of legitimacy, and visions of collective action. Existing localisation frameworks have repeatedly

[1] HNRP UNOCHA, 2026
[2] HPN-ODI, 2024

identified structural barriers relating to power, representation, leadership, and decision-making, yet these challenges remain largely unresolved[3].

2.3 The localisation picture in Sudan

The debate around localisation has taken on particular significance in Sudan. Local actors have demonstrated an ability to reach affected populations in areas inaccessible to much of the international response, in ways that are locally adapted and accepted by the people they serve. Yet many continue to report limited access to funding, strategic decision-making spaces, and humanitarian governance structures. Existing partnership arrangements are often perceived as requiring local actors to adapt themselves to externally defined standards of capacity, accountability, and risk management, while offering limited opportunities to influence the rules themselves[4].

Consequently, there are concerns around the co-option or "NGO-ification" of community-led initiatives, unequal distributions of risk, and the emergence of what some responders describe as "empty partnerships". This describes partnerships that are “in name only” without a genuine shared decision-making relationship between local and international actors[5].

In addition, several studies have warned that localisation efforts risk becoming mechanisms for transferring risk, without transferring power, resources, or decision-making authority. This was characterised by one of the respondents of this mapping exercise as “… not risk sharing, but risk dumping”[6].

In summary, from a Sudanese perspective, localisation is more a debate about legitimacy, representation, leadership, and, for some, the future shape of Sudan itself, than it is about technical debates about funding percentages or contracts clauses.

2.4 Aim of mapping

This mapping approaches localisation not as a predefined objective, but as an area of ongoing negotiation between diverse actors with different experiences, interests, and visions of what locally led response should look like.

Rather than beginning with categories recognised by humanitarian institutions, it starts from the actors themselves. It explores who they are, how they emerged, how they organise, what gives them legitimacy, how they coordinate and mobilise resources, and how they navigate relationships with communities, authorities, donors, NGOs, and one another.

Therefore, an assumption the mapping makes is that Sudan’s locally led response is not simply a collection of organisations seeking to join the international

[3] Alliance 4 Empowering Partnership (A4EP), 2023
[4] Conflict Sensitivity Facility (CSF), 2022
[5] Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform (SSHAP), 2024
[6] KII with researcher

humanitarian system. It is an evolving system of collective action with its own sources of legitimacy, forms of coordination and structures of authority.

Working from this assumption, we need to not only examine how power is distributed between international and local actors, but also how legitimacy is translated into influence within the local response itself.

The key questions we must ask are:

- Who is recognised as having authority?
- who is able to represent others?
- How control over resources and access to humanitarian institutions shapes that authority?

2.5 Analytical Framework

Analysis is informed by a framework developed through an initial review of interviews, open-source materials, and literature. Five interconnected domains emerged as particularly important for understanding locally led response in Sudan:

- Origins
- Local legitimacy
- Coordination
- External interaction with the humanitarian system
- Representation, power and authority

These domains are further shaped by a range of contextual constraints, including conflict dynamics, displacement, resource limitations, political pressures, security risks, and donor practices. Together, they provide an analytical lens through which the diversity of local response efforts can be examined while also highlighting common challenges and opportunities across different contexts.

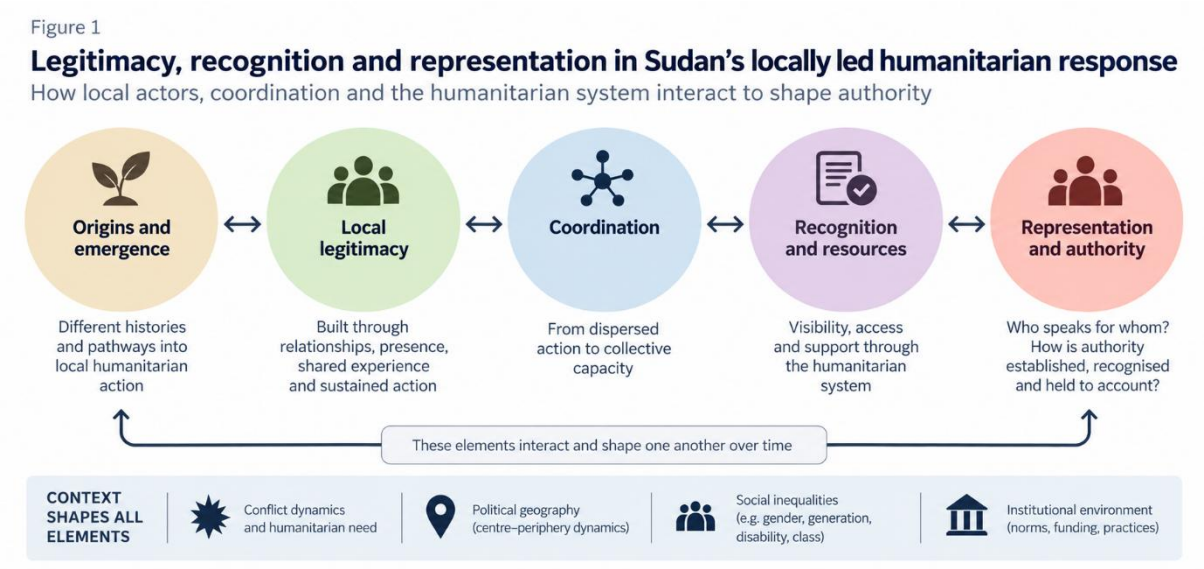


Figure 1: Analytical Framework Diagram

3. Cross-cutting themes shaping the local response landscape

3.1 Forms of local response organisations

The term “local actor” encompasses a wide range of organisational forms, from informal community initiatives and mutual aid groups to established national NGOs and increasingly formalised networks and platforms. These actors have emerged through different pathways and operate through different structures, even where they may ultimately respond to similar needs. A community initiative may become a registered NGO; an ERR may operate through a wider network; and a formal NGO may retain highly localised and community-based ways of working.

The mapping identified different broad organisational forms:



Figure 2: Forms of local actor

3.2 Perceptions of localisation

it is important to understand how Sudanese local actors themselves perceive and define *localisation*. The interviews suggest that there is no single, agreed definition. Despite this variation, there is considerable convergence around one central idea:

- Localisation should involve local actors having greater authority over decisions that affect their communities[7].

[7] KIIs and FGD with researcher

Funding remains at the heart of the debate about power and decision making. As one respondent argued:

> "*Unless there's direct funding that's shifted to national organizations, it would be really, really difficult to shift decision-making to them as well.*"
> — Local humanitarian actor

Furthermore, the respondents demonstrate considerable scepticism about the extent to which these ideas are reflected in the current practice of the internationally led humanitarian system. A recurring theme was this often-cited concern:

- That localisation often becomes a language through which local actors are incorporated into externally defined humanitarian structures without a corresponding redistribution of authority to make decisions based on their own experiences[8].

4. Localisation in practice: legitimacy, coordination and authority

4.1 Origins

The organisations and groups interviewed have emerged in very different ways. Some grew out of civic and political mobilisation. Some developed through community-based mutual aid during the war. Some were established national organisations that gradually expanded their humanitarian work. Others were created to bring together different local organisations and networks.

These different origins matter. They help explain how organisations understand their role, where they believe their legitimacy comes from, and how they relate to formal humanitarian structures.

4.1.1 From civic and resistance organising to humanitarian action

For several respondents, humanitarian organising grew out of networks that existed before the current war. Resistance committees, neighbourhood groups, volunteering and other forms of civic organising provided relationships and networks that were later used for humanitarian response.

One important factor to note is that women played an especially prominent and leading role in civic organising and resistance.

[8] KIIs and FGD with researcher

Women's groups were among the first to establish Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) in April 2023, coordinating evacuations, facilitating access to medical assistance, and providing essential goods and services to communities affected by the conflict. This builds on a much longer history of women's leadership within broader civic and political movements, going back to the 1960s[9].

> "....*we have like 70% of the protesters were women at that time. And we led that protest with the 'zaghareta' (the vocal ululation performed by women to express intense emotion) and with everything.*
> — Female humanitarian activist

Overall, the important takeaway here is that these organisations did not start with the humanitarian system. Their starting point was their communities and wider civic and political networks.

4.1.2 Mutual aid and crisis-driven organising

Another pathway is the emergence of local response groups in response to conflict itself.

For example, respondents in Darfur and Kordofan described communities organising because their direct experience of conflict and the perception that conventional humanitarian actors were unable to reach them or had withdrawn. Volunteers organised assistance, shared information, supported evacuation and identified people in need.

> *" Basically, we have been in this situation since 2003, so we know very well how to organise ourselves. We know how to do "nefeer". Collective work is community work. Our community organised themselves long ago because they expect people to become IDPs at any moment, and they know how to respond before any NGO can come and respond."*
> — Grassroots Responder

4.1.3 Established community organisations

With this form of organisation, a key theme is that formalisation does not necessarily mean losing community connections. Respondents described long-term relationships with communities, community meetings, feedback mechanisms and continued engagement with people after projects ended.

[9] KIIs with researcher

As told to the researcher, some respondents saw formal systems and registration with authorities as useful. Registration, financial procedures, organisational structures and other systems were not viewed as a threat to local legitimacy. Instead, they were seen as necessary for growth and accountability.

> *" That's a proof that there is a progress. We improved and we developed our system….We can manage large funds now…..It's not that bad to say we work with donor requirement or due diligence... I think it's very useful."*
> — Local NGO staff

This is important because it challenges the idea that there is a simple divide between "informal" and "formal". For some local organisations, including some that started off as mutual aid groups, formalisation is seen as a way of strengthening local organisations rather than weakening them.

4.1.4 Federation and collective organisation

An alternative way of organising is the creation of structures intended to bring together different local actors.

One interviewee described the development of a platform bringing together grassroots groups, community-based organisations and national NGOs. This developed partly because local actors were spread across different areas and had limited ability to act collectively[10].

> *" …. we need to have, you know, sort of, recognition and that the international community should consider us as one of the main... platform that can be depended on to coordinate or to strengthen… localization...The forum, I think it's one of the key gaps after the war... to make sure that all organizations and Sudanese actors have kind of unified the space when they are speaking to the international actors.*
> — Leader of NGO platform

The purpose was not to create another large organisation but instead provide a way for different local actors to share information, coordinate, represent themselves and engage with external organisations. This points to a practical problem in localisation. Local actors may have strong community legitimacy but still struggle to influence donors and international organisations individually. A collective structure can provide greater influence and a stronger voice.

[10] KII with researcher

4.1.5 Summary of findings

The interviews therefore suggest that localisation should not begin by asking simply whether an organisation is "local", or whether it meets a standard organisational definition of capacity.

A better starting point is to ask:

- Where did this organisation or group come from?
- Who created it?
- What relationships does it build on?
- Who sees it as legitimate?
- What kind of role does it play in its community?

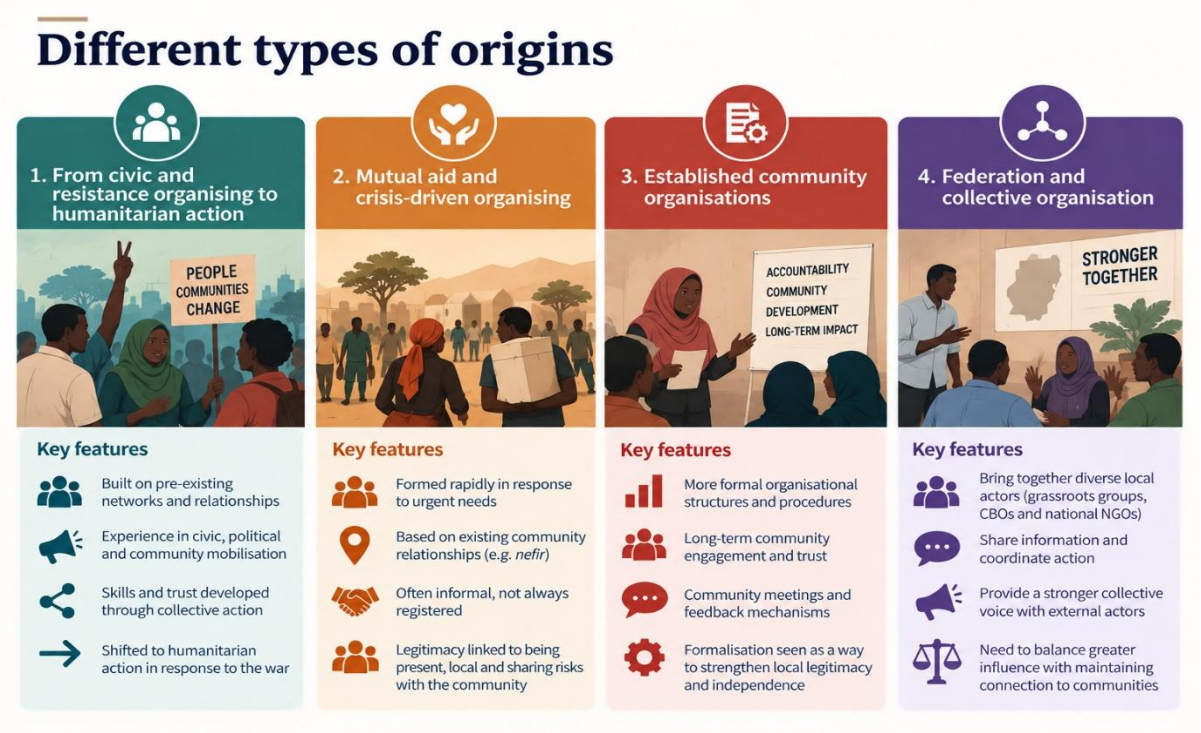


Figure 3: Different types of origin

4.2 Local legitimacy: community, civic and political foundations

The interviews suggest that local legitimacy cannot be reduced to being simply Sudanese, being geographically close to affected populations, or having formal organisational status. Instead, legitimacy is built through relationships, experience and demonstrated action.

As mentioned in the previous section, many local actors' humanitarian role developed from existing civic relationships, community networks and forms of collective action. As such, the legitimacy of many of these actors predates their engagement with the formal humanitarian system

4.2.1 Legitimacy rooted in pre-existing civic relationships

The strongest example of this comes from actors whose histories are linked to resistance committees and wider civic mobilisation. These actors were very careful in their wording to distinguish between political activity and humanitarian action, but they do not necessarily seem to see them as unrelated.

The relationships and forms of trust created through earlier mobilisation provided a foundation for collective action when existing institutions were unable or unwilling to meet community needs

One respondent described this as a form of “base legitimacy”:

> *" ….. we call it the base legitimacy, which is the people on the ground who they are working and the other people, they're seeing them working and they are providing a lot of necessities. That's why they capture the legitimacy.*
> — Grassroots responder

For these actors, legitimacy is therefore closely connected to having demonstrated a willingness and ability to act in support of their communities when those communities needed it most. Legitimacy is not bestowed by participation in the humanitarian system but comes from the people they have served and advocated for over a long time period.

4.2.2 Shared experience

The interviews suggest that shared experience can be an important foundation of legitimacy within the local response. Local responders may themselves be displaced, face insecurity or have family members or friends killed or affected by the conflict. The distinction between responder and affected population can therefore be much less clear than in conventional humanitarian programming.

> *" ….. because I was born in the place, in the location where there is continuously war and there is massive killing in our region... I was born in the location, that's unique.*
> — Grassroots responder

This does not make an organisation legitimate automatically. It does, however, create a degree of shared experience and shared consequence that can shape how communities perceive and relate to those responding.

4.2.3 Holding local knowledge

Respondents described knowledge not simply as information about humanitarian needs, but as a deeper understanding of local relationships, geography, displacement patterns, social dynamics and the realities of operating in a particular

area. Holding a profound knowledge about the local area, people and culture reinforces a local actor's legitimacy among their constituencies.

Local knowledge can also shape how humanitarian actors adapt their approaches to different social, cultural and security contexts. For example, respondents described how women in Eastern Sudan may exercise leadership through more discreet forms of coordination where public visibility and media exposure are culturally sensitive[11].

This is knowledge that can only develop through being present over time. It is therefore different from contextual information collected through an assessment for a particular programme.

One respondent emphasised that people outside a particular area cannot simply substitute their own understanding for those who are there[12].

4.2.4 Continuity of service and the development of trust

For the respondents that were interviewed, legitimacy develops through continued and positively viewed service provision.

> *" We establish a common ground and transparency between us and the community themselves to let them know who we are and even the fund that we are bringing from where and how many, how much that we have for this project... to enhance the communication and to let the community feel free and get the feedback from them even"*
> — Local NGO Staff member

Legitimacy and trust are built from maintaining relationships with communities through repeated engagement, feedback and communication about its work and resources. Therefore, trust, and therefore legitimacy, is not produced by a single consultation or project, but by providing a service valued by its users over the longer term, developing over time as communities observe whether an organisation listens, remains engaged and adapts those services.

This also distinguishes local legitimacy from formal recognition. Registration or partnership may establish an organisation's institutional position, but it does not necessarily determine how communities view it. Community trust must be developed through repeated sustained and equitable interactions.

[11] KIIs with researcher
[12] KII with researcher

4.2.5 Summary of findings

Across the interviews, local legitimacy emerged as something that is developed through relationships, experience and demonstrated action rather than being given by formal status. For many local actors, this legitimacy predates their engagement with the formal humanitarian system and is rooted in pre-existing civic relationships, sustained presence, shared experience, local knowledge and the continued provision of services that communities value.

These different forms of legitimacy are closely connected. Being part of a community, understanding its social and political context, experiencing the effects of conflict alongside others, and remaining present and responsive over time can create relationships of trust that are difficult to establish through a single project or consultation. Legitimacy is therefore better understood as cumulative and relational. It develops as communities experience what an actor does, how it behaves and whether it remains accountable and responsive to them.

The interviews also suggest, however, that this is not necessarily the form of legitimacy that determines an actor's position within the humanitarian system. An organisation may be trusted by the community in which it works, have extensive local knowledge and a demonstrated ability to respond, while still having limited recognition from international organisations or donors. Conversely, formal registration, organisational systems or participation in humanitarian structures may provide institutional recognition without necessarily creating legitimacy among affected communities.

This distinction between local legitimacy and humanitarian recognition is important to understanding how local actors interact with the wider humanitarian system. The issue is not simply whether local actors have capacity or legitimacy, but how the humanitarian system defines and assesses these qualities, and which forms of knowledge, experience and organisational practice it recognises as evidence of them.



Figure 4: Local legitimacy

4.3 Coordination and collective action

The mapping clearly shows that local actors are not passively waiting to be coordinated by the international humanitarian system. They have actively developed their own networks, platforms and collective structures to connect different regions and organisational constituencies. These arrangements can generate capabilities that individual organisations do not possess, including wider access to information, stronger collective voice and greater ability to engage institutions operating at a different scale.

Therefore, coordination is seen not simply as an administrative function, but as infrastructure through which dispersed forms of local action can become collective capacity.

4.3.1 Coordination begins with practical problems

The forms of coordination described in the interviews generally developed in response to practical needs rather than as an end in themselves.

One interviewee's account of a foundational meeting in Cairo for members of mutual aid responses provides a useful example. The significance of the meeting was that people operating in very different contexts could meet, exchange experience and develop a common framework.

> *"... We had space to eat together, to think together, to bring all of the experience that we had in that 5 or 7 months of conflict. To bring it in the same table and discuss how we bypass all of that together and to share the knowledge..."*
> — Humanitarian Activist

Other respondents gave similar answers. From their viewpoint coordination without commonly identified obstacles or problems becomes less effective and tokenistic[13].

4.3.2 Networks create collective information sharing and capacity

Coordination can also bring together capabilities that are otherwise dispersed. Individual organisations may have limited geographical reach or information, while a network can provide a much broader picture of the response.

Coordination creates a form of capacity that no single organisation necessarily has on its own.

> *" Having such these NGOs at ground throughout Kordofan, they are the best people to reflect what is there... the recent cholera outbreak … was declared immediately and we reflected this news in the group... new displacement due to, air drone strike and conflicts are immediately reflected. By who? By (our) members themselves*
> — NGO platform leader

Information sharing is one of the most consistent functions of coordination across the interviews. Local organisations often possess information that is highly specific to communities, but this knowledge can remain fragmented.

4.3.3 Coordination does not necessarily require standardisation and centralisation

The interviews also challenge the idea that coordination means making organisations operate in the same manner. Mutual aid groups, community-based organisations and established national NGOs have different structures and different ways of working. Several respondents emphasised the value of cooperation among these groups while retaining diversity[14].

> *" You know, like the ERRs in Darfur have a different origin to the ERRs in Khartoum because of the history of those different places… they're not all one size fits all*
> — Sudanese NGO staff

This is particularly evident in the accounts of network and federating structures. Their purpose is to connect different organisations rather than turn them into one

[13] KIIs and FGD with researcher
[14] KIIs with researcher

organisation. This suggests that effective coordination can provide collective structure without becoming uniform.

Respondents also questioned whether a single national forum would be practical under these conditions and suggested that regional or area-based coordination may sometimes be more effective. In some circumstances, smaller and more geographically grounded structure may be better suited to the realities of the response[15].

> *" You cannot bring someone from Khartoum to dictate to people in Zahalin what they should eat and drink, whether in Nyala, Al-Daein, Jebel Marra or Tawila, and then have that person create additional crises for us"*
> — Grassroots responder

4.3.4 Informal relationships remain important

Many respondents emphasised the value of informal communication and networks built through previous work. These arrangements can allow actors to exchange information or solve problems without going through a formal coordination mechanism.

> *" We were connecting to some of our leads in the resistance committees who were part of RSF, but they were resistance committees members. So we used that network, we used the relationships to bypass the checkpoints,"*
> — Grassroots responder

This can be particularly useful where formal systems are slow, inaccessible or poorly adapted to local conditions.

4.3.5 The scale problem

Coordination also becomes especially important when local actors need to engage collectively with larger institutions. Individual organisations may struggle to negotiate with donors, UN agencies or international NGOs.

This helps explain why federated structures have emerged alongside the growth of the local response. However, creating an effective collective interface introduces a new question:

- How does a structure that speaks to external actors remain connected to the organisations it claims to represent?

[15] FGD with researcher

This is where the issue moves beyond coordination itself and towards representation. The clearest example of this problem is the development of the Local Coordination Council (LCC).

The LCC was initially valued as a mechanism for connecting mutual aid actors, especially ERRs, across different areas. Over time, however, it was described as acquiring greater influence over resources, programme decisions and wider aspects of the response[16].

A structure that helps organisations communicate does not necessarily need equal representation from every geographical area. However, a structure that allocates resources or makes decisions on behalf of those organisations creates a different set of requirements.

Representation involves speaking on behalf of others and, potentially, making decisions that affect them. The interviews suggest that problems emerge when coordination becomes combined with representation without a corresponding change in how authority and participation are organised.

> *" ….the top management of the ERRs, who do represent the ERRs, they claim that they represent the whole movement, which is something you can never claim that you do... I do consider them as gatekeepers"*
> — Sudanese researcher

4.3.6 Summary of finding

Across the interviews, coordination emerges as an important form of infrastructure for the local response. It can connect dispersed organisations, generate collective knowledge, support practical problem-solving and provide ways for local actors to engage with institutions operating at a larger scale.

The LCC experience is important in this respect because it demonstrates how a structure created to address fragmentation can become part of the power structure within the local humanitarian response.

> *" the whole idea of the LCC was a platform of coordination, but not a decision-making mechanism for the people..., and it wasn't fully represented for the 18 states. And also it wasn't equal representation. So that's why it wasn't built... as a decision-making [mechanism]."*
> — Grassroots responder

[16] Mohamed, 2026



Figure 5: Coordination

4.4 External interfaces and relationships with humanitarian actors

The relationship between local actors and the wider humanitarian system is one of the clearest areas in which the perceptions of what localisation should be, come into tension with how humanitarian action is actually organised in practice.

Respondents suggest that international organisations and donors remain important sources of funding, technical support, advocacy and access. However, many of those interviewed believe that international involvement has a major role in shaping the terms on which local actors can participate. Examples of how this can include; funding arrangements, partnership models, due diligence and capacity requirements.

As such, external actors influence which organisations are considered capable, credible and representative, and how much authority they can exercise.

4.4.1 Partnership or implementation?

A recurring theme is the gap between being treated as a partner and being used as an implementer.

One staff member of an established national organisation described being brought into programmes after important decisions had already been made. It could influence implementation and respond to realities on the ground, but had little to no influence over assessment, analysis and programme design. Furthermore, respondents highlighted how this has created specific risks, putting the local organisation and their staff in a vulnerable position with Sudanese government institutions, such as the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC).

> *" If (HAC) asks us, why are you choosing this area? We say (that) we don't know, this is the donor (their choice), they (the donor) reached out to us and they want to work like this... It can leave you in a vulnerable position... And sometimes they (HAC) can think that even we have political views.*
> — National NGO staff member

The feeling that many respondents expressed was that a local organisation may manage staff, communities, access and operational risk but the humanitarian system in Sudan is set up so that they are not able to have influence over the priorities that determine what it is being asked to deliver.

From the perspective of respondents, this reflected not only perceptions of limited trust in local capabilities, but a humanitarian system structured around high levels of upward accountability, in which assessment, programme design and resource mobilisation often occur before local partners are engaged.[17].

In this sense, localisation often becomes a process of localising implementation rather than leadership[18].

4.4.2 Capacity as a gateway to humanitarian recognition

This perceived imbalance is particularly visible in assessing local capacity. Local organisations are generally required to demonstrate their capacity against standards they have had little role in defining, to institutions that ultimately decide whether they are acceptable partners.

From the perspective of respondents, assessments of capacity do more than manage financial, safeguarding or other organisational risks. They also act as a gateway through which the humanitarian system determines which organisations are considered sufficiently capable, credible and legitimate to participate in the system.

[17] KIIs with researcher
[18] KIIs with researcher

> *" Because some of organization or international NGO, they refuse to work with you because you are not systemized, you don't have use online system, for example. And some of organization, they cannot pay for that… it's really costly."*
> — National NGO staff member

This creates an important distinction between local legitimacy and legitimacy within the humanitarian system. As discussed before, respondents associated local legitimacy with relationships, presence, shared experience, local knowledge and the sustained provision of services valued by communities. These forms of capacity and legitimacy may not be captured by conventional capacity assessment processes.

> *" … We're very accountable to the community at that point; even when we get these small grants of money... the whole community knows that there is an activity here and this is the amount. But if you ask any one of these communities how many already existed (projects funded/run by INGOs) no one will know... So, from this perspective we believe that we are much more accountable than the INGOs playing in the same arena"*
> — Grassroots responder

The consequence is that local actors may be recognised by their communities as legitimate and capable actors, while not necessarily being recognised by international organisations as sufficiently capable to participate directly in the humanitarian system when assessed primarily against externally defined organisational standards.

4.4.3 International recognition can create local winners and losers

The interviews also point to a wider effect of international engagement. Donor and INGO relationships do not simply distribute resources; they distribute visibility and recognition.

Organisations that are repeatedly funded, invited into strategic spaces or selected as partners accumulate relationships, experience and credibility. Those advantages can then make further international engagement more likely.

> *" … You can have a very nice organization and a very nice website with excellent proposals and all these things. In the ground, there is nothing. So, you know, big organization getting the money and they try to subcontract (to a) small organization, this is not going to work."*
> — National NGO staff member

Local actors with weaker international connections may be much less visible, even when they have significant operational reach or strong relationships with communities. This is particularly important given the geographical and structural inequalities identified elsewhere in the interviews. When international organisations repeatedly engage with actors who are already well connected to the international system, they can reinforce existing inequalities within local civil society.

4.4.4 Intermediaries and the creation of new gatekeepers

Intermediary organisations can help address some of the barriers described above. They can enable donors to reach smaller organisations, provide technical support, manage compliance and create channels through which funding can reach actors that would otherwise struggle to engage directly with international institutions.

However, the interviews also suggest that intermediary structures can reproduce some of the same dynamics they are intended to address. Once an intermediary controls access, it can influence which organisations are supported, which are visible and which remain marginal. The intermediary can therefore become a new gatekeeper between international resources and local actors.

One respondent described concerns about some individuals becoming recognised as speaking for much wider constituencies, without the perceived requisite legitimacy to do so.

> *" they're also speaking to certain people within these specific structures. And so that's even increased, you know, those tensions even more, where certain individuals are getting Opportunities to speak on behalf of such a wide range of groups, which is just, you know, not doable, and sort of driving the process…."*
> — Humanitarian Activist

4.4.5 Summary of findings

Across the interviews, the external humanitarian system emerges as more than a source of funding and technical support. It is also an important institutional gatekeeper. Through funding decisions, partnership models, due diligence, capacity frameworks and intermediary arrangements, it influences which organisations are considered capable, which actors gain resources and recognition, and how much authority local organisations can exercise.

Several respondents therefore see international intervention as a major part of the explanation for some of the weaknesses and tensions within the local humanitarian system itself. It suggests that some of the structures through which localisation is being pursued can actively reproduce the power imbalance they are intended to change.

The key point here is therefore not between international involvement and no international involvement, but between support and control.



Figure 6: Interaction with wider humanitarian system

4.5 Representation, leadership, and power

Representation emerges as one of the most contested issues in the interviews. Sudan's local response landscape is highly diverse and geographically dispersed, making some form of representation unavoidable.

The respondents, therefore, do not push back against the specific idea of representation. Instead, they draw attention to what happens when representation becomes detached from the base that originally gave it legitimacy.

This creates a difference between being representative and being recognised as a representative. The former is grounded in relationships, participation and accountability to a constituency. The latter is granted through access to

humanitarian institutions and decision-making spaces. The two may overlap, but the interviews suggest that they cannot be assumed to do so.

As previously noted, recognition can therefore become a source of power in its own right. Once particular actors become established as intermediaries, their access to information, funding processes and strategic discussions can reinforce their position, making it easier for them to secure further recognition. Representation is consequently not simply a mechanism for transmitting local voices into the humanitarian system; if done badly, it can perpetuate marginalisation by shaping whose voice becomes more influential within that system.

4.5.1 The effects of political geography

Representation is not politically neutral and questions around representation are inseparable from Sudan's political geography. Respondents repeatedly located contemporary tensions within longstanding inequalities between the centre and the peripheries, particularly between Khartoum and regions such as in Darfur, Kordofan and Blue Nile. The ability of a local actor to gain visibility, participate in national processes and influence humanitarian agendas is often shaped by where they are located within Sudan's wider political and institutional landscape[19].

The issue is not simply that some regions have less representation than others, but that institutions, networks and decision-making processes have historically been concentrated in certain parts of the country. This creates an uneven starting point for participation. Actors operating closer to established political, humanitarian and donor centres may have greater opportunities to develop relationships, access information and enter national coordination spaces, while organisations rooted in "peripheral" areas may have strong local legitimacy but fewer avenues through which to translate that legitimacy into wider influence.

This produces an important distinction between the ideas of being embedded locally and being visible nationally. An organisation may have extensive knowledge of, and accountability to, a particular community or region without being recognised as a significant voice within national humanitarian discussions.

> *" ... it was more Khartoum-centered kind of organizations who are having those kinds of relationship because they have better access. They have better facilitation through the language (they can speak English). And then when it comes to regions like Darfur, Kordofan, and Blue Nile, as well as the East, they are very disadvantaged when it comes to direct funding and access (to influence)."*
> — Sudanese NGO staff member

[19] Mohamed, 2026

Conversely, actors with stronger access to national and international institutions may become more visible as representatives of Sudanese civil society even if their direct constituency may be narrower.

4.5.2 Whose voice gets heard?

The consequences of this go beyond participation in meetings or coordination structures. Representation can also shape what is understood to be an overall humanitarian priority. If, or when, certain actors, regions or forms of knowledge are more consistently present in strategic discussions, their experiences are more likely to be readily incorporated into the overall humanitarian picture.

As such, the experiences of people with disabilities, young people, women and older people may be given less influence in decision-making and risk being treated as issues relevant only to particular groups, rather than as concerns that should inform the wider response[20].

This matters particularly in a context in which local actors are often expected to provide knowledge. Local knowledge may be actively sought by international actors while the organisations and communities generating that knowledge have less influence over the decisions that follow from it. The result can be a distinction between being consulted and having influence.

Actors from historically marginalised areas or groups may contribute information, needs assessments or contextual analysis without necessarily having an equivalent role in defining priorities, negotiating resource allocation or determining how those experiences are represented at national level.

Another aspect of representation and power was on the subject of female leadership. For some, the fact that some women have held positions of leadership within the local response has not necessarily translated into sustained influence over decision-making. Several female respondents, particularly those working within mutual aid organisations, perceived a decline in women's influence over time and a reduction in the number of women occupying leadership positions.

> "…. *from my perspective of gender lens, even there is no actual protection for women who are elite in this body. There is no leadership for women. There is no actual leadership. …"*
> — Female humanitarian activist

Indeed, some viewed the establishment of dedicated women's or gender offices as potentially reflecting this broader marginalisation. While such spaces can provide vital services and safe environments for women, their creation may also risk

[20] KIIs with researcher

separating women's concerns from the wider structures in which decisions about resources, strategy and governance are made[21].

Several female respondents further questioned whether women are being valued for their leadership and coordination expertise or primarily for their perceived value as a funding category.

> "…. *but they want me to stay because I know how to attract funders to this body.*"
> — Female humanitarian activist

Therefore, questions of gender, generation, disability, class, displacement and organisational status can shape whose perspectives are heard within particular communities and networks. Representation therefore involves multiple layers of inclusion and exclusion rather than a straightforward division between national and local actors.

4.5.3 Summary of findings

The interviews suggest that localisation is not simply a question of transferring funding, functions or organisational capacity from international to national actors. It is also a struggle over who has authority within the local system itself. Authority is being negotiated within Sudanese civil society, where some actors acquire greater influence than others and where questions of representation and accountability remain contested.

Authority operates through more than formal leadership positions. It is exercised through control over participation, access to resources, recognition by external institutions, the definition of legitimate organisational forms and the ability to speak for wider constituencies. Representation is therefore not merely an administrative solution to a fragmented landscape. It is one of the means through which authority is constructed and consolidated.

The politics of localisation should not be understood only in terms of international–local power relations. Therefore, it also concerns how representative authority is produced, recognised and sustained**,** and whether it remains accountable to the constituencies in whose name it is exercised.

[21] KIIs with the researcher



Figure 7: Representation and power

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This mapping finds that Sudan's locally led humanitarian response is not a single organisational system, but a diverse and evolving landscape in which legitimacy, collective capacity and authority are continually negotiated

A key finding is that **local legitimacy is relational rather than organisational**. Being Sudanese, geographically close, formally registered or described as grassroots does not in itself establish legitimacy. Respondents instead associated legitimacy with relationships, sustained presence, local knowledge, shared experience and demonstrated action. Formalisation can strengthen these foundations by providing greater organisational stability and independence, but formal status does not automatically translate into community legitimacy.

Coordination is an important source of collective capacity, particularly in a geographically dispersed and fragmented response. Local networks enable organisations to share information, solve practical problems and engage institutions operating at a different scale. But coordination also creates the conditions for representation. Once structures move beyond facilitating cooperation and begin to influence resources, programme priorities or external relationships, questions of mandate, constituency and accountability become more significant. The experience of structures such as the LCC illustrates how mechanisms created to address fragmentation can also become part of the distribution of power within the local response.

This leads to a broader finding about **representation and authority**. Representation is necessary: The respondents recognise that Sudan's local

response could not function without mechanisms through which dispersed actors can coordinate and engage collectively with larger institutions. The issue is not representation itself, but how representative authority is established, recognised and maintained.

International recognition, donor relationships and access to resources can extend an actor's influence beyond its original constituency and, in some cases, contribute to the over concentration of authority.

The findings also complicate a simple understanding of localisation as a transfer of power from international to local actors. **Power is also being negotiated within Sudanese civil society itself.**

International actors remain influential through funding, standards, due diligence, partnership arrangements and recognition, while local actors are simultaneously negotiating authority, representation and influence among themselves. International engagement is not inherently incompatible with locally led response; the key point is whether it expands local agency or reproduces structures of control.

Finally, the mapping suggests that the biggest factor for localisation is not only who receives resources or, who is included in the humanitarian system but:

- How did they get into that position?
- Who has the authority to define, decide, represent and act?

5.2 Recommendations

Finding 1: Local actors are often given responsibility without equivalent authority

The mapping found repeated concerns that local actors can carry responsibility for implementation, access and operational risk while having limited influence over needs analysis, programme design, geographical priorities and resource allocation. Localisation is therefore often experienced as localising implementation rather than leadership.

Recommendation: Move from local participation to shared authority

Donors, UN agencies and INGOs should design partnerships around a clearer distribution of decision-making authority, rather than assuming that transferring funding or implementation responsibilities constitutes partnership. Partnership agreements should explicitly identify which decisions are retained by the international partner and which sit with the local organisation. Local actors should have meaningful influence over needs analysis, programme design, geographical priorities and resource use, alongside greater access to direct, flexible and multi-year funding where appropriate.

The objective should be to move from localised implementation towards locally influenced and locally led decision-making.

Finding 2: Coordination creates collective capacity, but can also create concentrated representative authority

The research found that local coordination structures are essential for connecting dispersed actors, sharing information and engaging institutions operating at a different scale. However, when coordination structures acquire influence over funding, programme decisions or external representation, they can become part of the power structure within the local response.

Recommendation: Strengthen coordination without concentrating representation

International and local actors should support coordination models that connect rather than unnecessarily centralise. This could include stronger regional and area-based structures, federated models, clearer mandates for representative bodies, and transparent mechanisms for selecting and holding representatives accountable to their constituencies.

Coordination and resource-allocation functions should not automatically be combined within the same structures.

The principle should be coordination at the scale required for collective action without creating unnecessary concentrations of representative authority.

Finding 3: Humanitarian systems recognise some forms of capacity more readily than others

Respondents valued financial management, governance and safeguarding, but also identified community trust, local knowledge, access, speed, contextual understanding and the ability to operate under highly constrained conditions as core capacities. Conventional due diligence can privilege the former while making the latter less important**.**

Recommendation: Broaden how capacity and legitimacy are assessed

Donors and humanitarian organisations should adopt more proportionate and context-sensitive approaches to due diligence and organisational strengthening. Assessments should recognise multiple forms of organisational and operational capability rather than treating compliance with international organisational systems as the only indicator of readiness.

Longer-term organisational support should respond to capacities identified by local organisations themselves rather than defaulting to repeated training on donor procedures.

There should also be mechanisms put in place to measure mutual accountability: international organisations should be open to structured assessment by local partners of partnership quality, responsiveness, risk-sharing and adherence to agreed commitments.

Finding 4: International recognition can convert local legitimacy into wider influence, and can concentrate it

The mapping found that actors with stronger relationships with donors, UN agencies and INGOs can accumulate visibility, resources and access to strategic spaces. This can create cumulative advantages, while actors with strong legitimacy in less visible geographical or organisational settings may have fewer opportunities to influence wider decision-making.

Recommendation: Examine how recognition and influence are distributed

Donors, UN agencies and INGOs should look beyond who receives resources to consider who is repeatedly invited to speak, represent and participate.

Engagement strategies should broaden access beyond established organisational and geographical networks, including stronger regional and area-level engagement. International actors should avoid relying repeatedly on a small number of organisations or individuals as proxies for Sudanese civil society as a whole.

This should also include greater attention to the distribution of leadership and voice within local structures, including whether women are participating in broader governance and decision-making rather than primarily through gender-specific programming or funding categories.

Finding 5: Local legitimacy and international recognition are not the same thing

The mapping found that legitimacy is built through relationships, presence, local knowledge, shared experience and sustained action. Formal status and international recognition may strengthen an organisation's position, but neither automatically establishes legitimacy with the communities or constituencies an actor claims to represent.

Recommendation: Treat legitimacy and representation as questions requiring evidence

International actors should avoid assuming that visibility within the humanitarian system is a proxy for wider local legitimacy or representativeness.

When engaging representative structures, INGOs, donors and UN agencies should consider:

- who the structure represents;
- how that mandate was established;
- how representatives are selected;
- how accountability to constituencies is maintained;
- and whether recognition by international actors is reinforcing or substituting for that accountability.

The aim should not be to avoid representation, but to ensure that, as much as possible, representative authority remains connected to the constituencies from which it comes.

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