

Caught in transition: food aid in Sudan's changing political economy

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Executive Summary

Food aid has long been a part of Sudan's political economy; whether as a form of government budget support, a way of maintaining or attracting political allies, to feed soldiers or deny food to enemies. Powerful actors and institutions have found numerous ways to benefit from food aid or its denial. The 2019 revolution and political transition presents an opportunity for change; for maximising the positive impacts of food aid and for overcoming some of the harms of the past. This is particularly important in the current political, economic and humanitarian crisis, and in an international response in which food aid and food security support is a large component. **The aim of this report is to provide a preliminary analysis of changes in the political economy of food aid since the revolution, and to assist aid actors to navigate the dilemmas of distributing food aid in Sudan.**

In Sudan's multiple crises, **13.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, with 8.2 million in need of food security support.** The most food insecure are in the country's peripheries, and within them displaced, refugees and those in rebel-held areas are worst affected. Aid actors provide food assistance as humanitarian aid, and support government safety net programmes and wheat imports to further support food security. **These programmes are critically needed to help address the humanitarian and economic crises.**

Sudan's history has shown that **food aid can be used as a resource to buy political loyalty and feed into inequalities.** As such, it can affect the balance of power within the transitional government and in the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA). Donor-funded government programmes to support food security appear to be following a historical trend of prioritising urban populations – which makes sense from a political perspective as their protests form the biggest threat to Sudan's political transition, but they are not the most food insecure. **Funding for humanitarian assistance in the peripheries is underfunded by more than the FSP safety net,** thus potentially feeding into the very inequalities that the JPA and the political transition aim to address. Another factor is that granting food aid procurement and transport contracts was a way of securing political loyalty by the previous regime. While the regime has been ousted, **many of the businesspeople associated with the former regime still dominate the market,** and now have the potential to support the military component of the government. Whether the current high levels of food aid procurement in Sudan contribute to the economic crisis needs to be monitored. The use of **food aid as a political resource in the JPA** is too early to determine. It **may become important for the signatories to maintain their political constituencies,** or for actors who benefit from people staying in camps.

Food aid also becomes part of the political economy at the micro-level of practices. Aid access negotiations, vulnerability and need assessments, procurement, transport, targeting and distribution activities can all be affected by manipulation, diversion and efforts to exclude groups. **In 2021, official**

government authorisation for access has improved but in practice access to rebel-held areas remains difficult because of bureaucratic procedures and only certain routes and drivers can be used. Food prices are already disproportionately high in these areas, thus raising the possibility that some may benefit economically or politically. Attacks on camps, villages and warehouses in Darfur also constrain access. **Actions to address potential political effects of working with army-linked companies include diversifying suppliers** (or international bids in the case of wheat), use of own trucks, buying direct from small farmers **and liaising with the government's anticorruption committee**. In targeting and distribution, **a key positive change has been the role of the resistance committees and women's groups holding IDP Sheikhs, native administration and aid actors to account**. Most relief committees have been changed since the revolution. Targeting a proportion of the crisis-affected population in a highly politically volatile environment, however, risks ongoing diversion and exclusion and feeding into a range of new and old power relations.

Since the revolution the power to control food aid has shifted from the government to the international aid apparatus, specifically the World Food Programme (WFP) and its donors. Sudan's governments have long struggled with international aid actors to control food aid and the populations that receive it. Over much of the past three decades, international aid actors were seen as a threat to national security, to be controlled through access denials, approval of assessments (and food allocations), country agreements, travel permits and more. The Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), the key government agency, was staffed to a large extent by national security and military intelligence personnel. By the early 2000s, the Sudan government had also established strategic grain reserves that enabled government food distribution for political purposes. **In 2021, there is little government planning or thinking on food aid other than to welcome those who provide it** – which is mainly WFP. HAC is in transition. While a huge range of organisations is involved in food distribution, WFP is by far the largest, and is the main actor in all aspects of food aid. While this offers some benefits in terms of harmonising and standardising approaches, there are drawbacks for developing context-specific approaches based on local knowledge and for addressing the challenges highlighted above. It also risks a government backlash (as in the 1980s) in the form of tight regulations, and the focus on technical issues and the lack of food aid oversight by the civilian part of government gives room for others to use it politically.

The report ends with **recommendations** for conflict-sensitive programming, including **the importance of ongoing funding to the humanitarian response and the family support programme**, but with deliberation about options available, the acceptance of moral dilemmas and conflicting principles, and the need to gather information on which to base such deliberation. It also includes specific recommendations for systems and practices to take forward changes such as **reconciling the aid sectors' competing humanitarian principles and political objectives**. Another is to **build on the diversity of actors involved in decision-making** and developing appropriate food interventions, and on the **new accountability mechanisms** presented by resistance committees and women's movements. Finally, there is a need to **assess, monitor, research and act on the unintended political and economic effects of food aid and food security support** both at the macro- and the micro-level.

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The CSF provides analysis, capacity and outreach to support conflict sensitive aid in Sudan.

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Introduction

In April 2021, Sudan faces multiple crises but also opportunities with Sudan's political transition. The economy is struggling, food prices are high, the COVID pandemic is in its second wave, and violence and forced displaced is increasing in Darfur. Sudan's new transitional government, formed in August 2019 after the popular revolution ousting President Al-Bashir, is looking increasingly fragile. The 2021 Humanitarian Response Plan has appealed for \$1.9 billion, with funding for food security and nutrition forming a major component (UN OCHA, 2021a). This large humanitarian assistance programme is combined with support for Sudan's political transition, and for the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA). Aid actors aspire to be neutral and impartial in their food aid as humanitarian assistance, and also to support government food security programmes to aid the transition. This seeming contradiction builds on a long history of the use of food aid as a political tool and its integration within Sudan's political economy (Jaspars, 2018). **This paper lays out a preliminary analysis of whether and how the political economy of food aid has changed since the 2019 revolution.** Specifically, it seeks to respond to the following questions:

- How important is food aid as a political resource in the current context?
- Do traders and transporters have an ongoing role in manipulating food aid, and political links to the former regime?
- Have patterns of food aid diversions and exclusions continued, and how does it influence power relations?
- How has power within the food aid system changed?
- What does it mean for principled and conflict-sensitive programming?

In addition to reviewing available literature (grey and published), in March 2021 we conducted 16 interviews with aid actors currently working in food aid, 10 with long-term aid workers (mostly Sudanese but some international, 5 with government officials and 4 with researchers working on related issues. Some interviews included more than one person. Findings and analysis were discussed in two feedback sessions, with WFP and with NGOs, and peer-reviewed by five researchers with expertise on Sudan and/or food security.¹ What became apparent is that little information on recent changes in the political economy of food aid is readily available. Little field research on food aid has been done in the last 10-15 years, and little or no research on the manipulating of humanitarian assistance.² Aid actors were well aware of potential harms of food aid practices (in addition to benefits), and the current political and economic crisis is widely discussed and analysed, but few had thought about the two together. In addition, while aid workers and Sudanese are less hesitant to talk about food aid now than before the revolution, food aid is still a sensitive issue and thus difficult to research remotely. More practical issues relating to remote research were frequent power and phone network and internet disruptions.

While this analysis paper does not offer definitive answers to the questions above, it is intended to help aid actors better understand and navigate the complex political, economic, and conflict

¹ Thanks to Musa Adam Abdul-Jalil, Atta Al-Battahani, Jason Matus, Eddie Thomas, and Alex de Waal, for their comments on the draft report. The report also received extensive comments, reviews and edits by members of the Conflict Sensitivity Facility, in particular on the recommendations.

² The only information is gathered in WFP evaluations (done in 2010, 2013 and 2016). The latest UN Panel of Experts report for Sudan (2019) has half a page on humanitarian assistance.

implications of food aid in Sudan. For this purpose, it identifies a number of areas for deliberation within and between aid actors, and for field research.

First, examining the implications of the aid sector's two seemingly conflicting aims: directly supporting government programmes to improve food security (and the political transition), at the same time as providing food aid as neutral and impartial humanitarian assistance. Food aid addresses food insecurity but may also indirectly support army-linked transport and trading companies. Politically, this combination risks maintaining the fragility of the transition (particularly with current low levels of aid funding). Practically, how can principles and ethics in humanitarian assistance be maintained by mitigating risks, assessments that incorporate all crisis-affected populations, and building on local knowledge? Second, building on the positive developments in access and accountability in aid distribution, and the diversity of actors involved to achieve greater participation in decision-making. Third, field-level monitoring, evaluation and research on inclusion/exclusion in food distribution (deliberate and unintended on the part of aid actors), and how this feeds into current power dynamics. A closer analysis of actors and practices involved along the entire food aid process, their interests and patronage networks, and the wider political and economic effects is also necessary to promote aid that effectively reaches those most in need and minimises harmful effects.

The paper starts with a brief overview of the history of food aid as part of Sudan's political and economic processes. This is followed by a section on the current context, in particular aspects which are likely to be relevant to food aid and political economy. The findings are presented in sections on the possibility of food aid as a political resource (macro-level), how food aid practices can become part of political and economic processes (micro-level) and finally how power within the food aid system has shifted. The final section provides recommendations for conflict-sensitive programming.

Political Economy of Food Aid – Looking back

The questions posed in this analysis are based on existing knowledge of the history of food aid in Sudan, and how it has fed into political and economic processes.³ Sudan has received food aid since 1958, and experienced emergencies requiring external assistance every year since 1984. **For the first twenty years, food aid was a form of direct government support in part to reduce the socialist threat in neighbouring countries.** US food aid formed the basis of an urban bread subsidy, which came to be key in stemming social unrest (Jaspars, 2018). Subsidised wheat bread in Sudan's urban areas remains important part of the country's political economy to this day (Thomas and El Gizouli, 2020). Food aid programmes in the early days focussed on central Sudan and thereby **re-enforced existing inequalities.** Power and wealth have long been concentrated in Sudan's centre, with peripheries like Darfur, Kordofan and southern Sudan being under-represented, receiving little investment, and suffering repeated famine or food crisis.

From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, food aid in Sudan was mainly for emergencies, to save lives and support livelihoods of famine victims and displaced populations in the peripheries. However, with food aid being the main form of aid at the time, and under artificially low official dollar exchange rates, **it effectively functioned as government budget support.** It also **supported Sudan's central elite**

³ This history was summarised in an earlier blog for the same project: <https://bit.ly/3gg5DsM>

as transport and procurement contracts were often awarded to those close to government (Jaspars, 2018). In addition, market manipulation has been a way of gaining economic and political power – and food aid has become part of this (Keen, 1994, Duffield, 1994). **Government officers, traders and businesses were able to restrict the delivery of food aid which kept grain prices artificially high and thus maximised profits.** These tactics also resulted in displacement, especially from the South and the Nuba Mountains, and formed a source of cheap and exploitable labour for Sudan's elites (Keen 1994; African Rights 1997, Duffield, 2002). The denial of access to food aid has been a common counter-insurgency strategy in Sudan, and selective provision of food is a way of attracting people into government areas. Furthermore, **food aid has fed into conflict and unequal power relations through diversion and taxation by local authorities (government, rebel movements, displaced camp leadership), and by exclusions of vulnerable groups** such as some displaced, nomadic populations, or particular ethnic groups. These tactics, in addition to direct destruction, looting and theft of assets of particular groups, have contributed to some of the most severe famines in Sudan (African Rights, 1997, Keen, 1994, Jaspars, 2018). The large-scale food aid operation in 2005, in response to the crisis in Darfur, was the most successful in saving lives and supporting livelihoods.

From 2008 onwards, humanitarian actors have focussed on resilience and food aid shifted to food assistance, including vouchers and direct cash transfers as well as in-kind food aid. Overall, there was a reduction in food assistance which until recently was mainly going to displaced populations in Darfur. Until the revolution, it was also a time that **government largely controlled food aid**, in part through denial of access and because it established its own food aid apparatus consisting of government food aid and a strategic grain reserve (Jaspars, 2018).

Political and economic context in 2021

In examining the political economy of food aid in 2021, it is important to first provide a brief overview of the political and economic context that food aid is part of. **Food aid is needed because of conflict in Darfur (from 2003), conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile – also known as the Two Areas –, large numbers of protracted displaced, an economic crisis of increasing severity since 2011** as well as a number of recent droughts, floods, refugee influxes and the 2020 global COVID pandemic. The economic crisis has deepened since the loss of revenue from oil following the cessation of South Sudan, and the rise of gold as the main export earner (De Waal, 2019). Local currency depreciation, removal of subsidies and shortage of hard currency for production inputs has led to continuously increasing food prices even when the harvest has been good (see for example Fewsnets, 2019 and 2021). In total, **13.4 million people are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2021**, with 8.2 million in need of direct food security support (UN OCHA, 2021b). **The most food insecure are in Sudan's peripheries**, including Darfur and South Kordofan, Blue and White Nile and parts of eastern Sudan, particularly refugees, displaced and conflict affected. Those in rebel-held areas of Jebel Marra and South Kordofan are considered most food insecure (WFP Sudan 2020a and b; Fewsnets, 2021).

The nature of the economic crisis

In addition to food assistance as part of the humanitarian response, measures to address the economic crisis have included floating the Sudanese Pound on the international market, the removal of subsidies (encouraged by the US, IMF and World Bank), and a multi-donor funded cash-based

Family Support Programme (FSP) as a temporary safety net. While these interventions may address some of the causes and fallout from the economic crisis, there are significant factors that remain unaddressed. The military retains control of key economic institutions (or state-owned enterprises) which do not pay tax, and over which the Ministry of Finance or Bank of Sudan have no oversight (Baldo, 2021). This includes companies concerned with food import, production, transport and trade, and is therefore of importance to food aid.

The economy and control over key private sector institutions affects the balance of power in Sudan's transitional government (TGoS). The TGoS includes a sovereign council composed of a civilian element with new Prime Minister Hamdok, the revolutionary Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), and a military element composed of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) under Burhan and Dagolo's (also known as Hemedti) Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The SAF and the RSF took over the companies that were previously owned by Al-Bashir's National Congress Party (NCP) and National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS). This includes companies that import wheat and fuel, trucking companies, as well as export gold, oil, gum arabic, sesame, weapons, cars; and that provide telecommunications, banking, water, and construction. **Mercantile companies that were close to the previous regime or directly linked to NISS played a central role in wheat markets (import, milling, trade), and had access to subsidies and favourable exchange rates** (Gallopín, 2020a). The head of the RSF accumulated wealth from transport and agriculture as well as gold mining and providing troops to fight in Yemen (PAX, 2019).⁴ In addition, most government workers in key ministries, according to some of our interviewees, are still from the former regime and are thought to maintain allegiance to it.

The delicate balance of power within the TGoS is also threatened by external actors. The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have supported the RSF (and Hemedti in particular). The US and European countries, meanwhile, have offered support for Hamdok but slowly and minimally so far in financial terms (Gallopín, 2020a). Until recently, Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided cash and commodity subsidies to support the military component of the TGoS (Gallopín, 2020b). The role of agribusiness is also important. Gulf states and Egypt have invested in agricultural land in Sudan, using leased land as collateral to get loans. There is some evidence that international companies have looked to the aid market in Sudan as potential – and reliable – customers (Dixon, 2014).

In an attempt to bring the proceeds from military/security owned companies under civilian control, the Council of Ministers proposed an anti-corruption committee, which was established by law in late 2019. The committee regularly issues a press release about companies confiscated. So far, however, few military companies have been dismantled, as the committee appears to come under pressure when it attempts to do so. Some companies simply close down without handing over their assets. The agreement to hand over the Defence Industrial System indicates progress on this front (Aljazeera, 2021a). Public pressure has been crucial to keep the committee on track.

With those companies handling essential goods in the hands of the army or traders linked to the former regime, goods such as wheat, sorghum and fuel, can be manipulated to turn the population against the TGoS. Some interviewees highlighted that smuggling of grain by traders to Chad, South

⁴ Note that the RSF has been responsible for mass destruction, killing and displacement in Darfur particularly from 2013 to 2016 as part of a government-aligned militia.

Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea further increased prices (see also Fewsnets, 2020), and which has the same effect. The high cost of staple foods appears in part be due to speculation (ibid) and to the high cost of production and transport (fuel and other inputs) as well as high wheat and wheat flour prices (Fewsnets, 2021). These high food prices can in turn be used to claim that the TGoS cannot manage the economy, but more obviously, scarcity or high cost of essential items such as food, fuel, cooking gas, and irregular power supply can lead to protests against the government.

The Juba Peace Agreement and its challenges

In addition to addressing the economic crisis, **a key aim of the TGoS is to broker peace; and the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) was signed in October 2020**. While the JPA is dominated by Darfur and (to a lesser extent) the Two Areas, it was not signed by Darfur's SLA-AbdulWahid or SPLM-N Abdulaziz although the latter recently made a step towards peace talks (Al-Jazeera, 2021b). Opposition movements who signed gained new positions in government; including the Minister of Finance, and of Social Welfare. Our interviewees, however, felt that the process of reaching the agreement lacked involvement of many constituents: Arab groups, Masalit, Fur, Internally Displaced Populations (IDP) as well as much of civil society. Some argued that the JPA is being used to resolve the struggle between the three centres of power described above (military/security, civilian and supporters of the former regime), others that it does not address the structural causes of inequality and conflict. The signatories already appear to be aligning more closely with Hemedti than with Hamdok in part because of his access to resources (International Crisis Group, 2021). These issues are important in relation to food aid because it has been used in the past, in various ways, to maintain positions of power, control populations, or gain political support.

Conflict and violence has increased in Darfur and the Two Areas over the past year. Many of our interviewees suggested that renewed violence is **a destabilising strategy by those linked to the former regime or those who do not want power to shift from military to civilian leaders or from centre to periphery**. They build on tensions over land, returns, political status, and exclusions from the JPA. Arab pastoralist resentment and fear about marginalisation can be manipulated (as previous regimes have done before) to launch attacks camps and aid facilities (see also Kleinfeld and Amin, 2021). Other tensions that may be exploited include those between signatories and non-signatories, newly appointed leaders and those from the former regime, the RSF and other militia. In the past year, Gereida, Kass (South Darfur), Zalingei (Central Darfur), Kutum, Taweila and El Fasher (North Darfur) and most recently Krinding in Geneina (West Darfur), have seen attacks, violence and new displacement of more than 150,000 people. At the same time, arms continue to be smuggled into Darfur. In the first three months of 2021 violence in Darfur in particular has accelerated, which has been linked to the departure of UNAMID as the political transition, the JPA and resistance to both (Fewsnets, 2021). Understanding these tensions and layers of conflict are important to ensure that food aid doesn't exacerbate an explosive situation, and – if possible – contributes to longer-term stability and transition.

The possibility of food aid as a political resource

Food aid is needed to address food insecurity but can also be a political resource, **to buy political loyalty and to stem popular uprising in response** to scarcity and economic crisis, particularly in urban

populations.⁵ This section examines macro-issues of whether food aid continues to contribute to inequality, whether it influences the balance of power in the TGoS and how it could play a role in the JPA.

Food security as humanitarian assistance and support for government programmes

Food aid remains a major component of humanitarian assistance in Sudan. Although humanitarian organisations aim to switch to cash-based transfers and resilience programming, **most food assistance is still in-kind food aid**. **The quantities of food aid in 2020 were substantial; almost 240,000 MT⁶ was distributed (WFP Sudan, 2021)**. WFP Sudan purchased about 100,000 MT locally that year. In addition, Sudan is a source country for WFP sorghum purchases, with a total of 240,000 MT purchased in 2019 and as much as 440,000 MT in 2017 (WFP 2017 and 2020c). For 2021, only 20% of the food security needs in the Humanitarian Response Plan have been funded (and 8% of the Appeal overall) by April.⁷ Although not strictly food aid or food assistance, USAID (through WFP) supports the government with its wheat imports. For the last two years, this programme has supported the civilian part of the TGoS to purchase wheat on the international market; around 200,000 MT/year.⁸ **The Family Support Programme was also considered a form of food security support by our interviewees, as it is intended to address the consequences of the economic crisis – a key impact of which has been a reduction in access to food**. The Family Support Programme (FSP) is intended to provide the equivalent of \$5/person/month for 80% of the population for an initial period of 6 months. World Bank and donor funding through a Multi Donor Trust Fund was confirmed in February, after reform of the exchange rate (Marketscreener, 2021). So far, \$820 million has been granted for the first two phases, out of an estimated annual cost of \$1.9 billion (Radio Dabanga, 2021a). These programmes are important as interventions to address the humanitarian and economic crisis.

A number of interviewees commented that **with the new FSP starting in urban areas and wheat imports also benefiting mostly urban populations, these programmes can be seen as a response to political pressure from these populations**. The first phase of the FSP programme is focussing on Khartoum with some provision also to Red Sea, South Darfur and Kassala. This makes sense given the history of protests in response to the removal of subsidies. Wheat subsidies have been a means of containing potential social unrest for decades, with cuts in subsidies having frequently led to protests from the mid-1980s to the present day (see for example: Bickersteth, 1990). In fact, WFP and USAID consider the main aim of the **support for wheat imports as service provision for the government and as a way of relieving economic pressure** that could have political implications rather than as a food security measure. As such, today's wheat support is similar to the programme food aid of the 1960s and 70s which was an explicit foreign policy tool. An added aim today is to reduce corruption in the

⁵ This section makes use of Alex De Waal's concept of the Political Marketplace; a system of governance where transactions to buy political loyalty dominate institutions, laws, and regulations. In other words a system of governance in which political loyalty is bought or sold (De Waal, 2015).

⁶ This is more than half food aid at the height of the Darfur operation in 2005 (almost 450,000 MT) when it was WFP's largest operation globally, and the same as for the 1985 famine (see African Rights, 1997).

⁷ <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/1014/summary>. The Humanitarian Response Plan was 53% funded in 2020

⁸ Note that the country's requirement in 2021 about 3.5 million MT (Fewsnet, 2021). In the first year, TGoS benefited from wheat purchase on the international market and WFP got a preferential exchange rate to buy Sudanese pounds. This year, they will use the official rate and thereby support the civilian part of government with hard currency. USDA is intending to support the TGoS directly with wheat imports this year.

supply chain, as WFP avoids army-linked wheat import companies by only procuring through international companies (see also next section).⁹

However, **if support to urban populations with wheat and the FSP is not balanced by assistance to rural (and displaced) populations in the periphery, this could feed into centre–periphery inequalities.** The prioritisation of resources, often extracted from the peripheries, to provide wheat for urban and central Sudan populations has long been part of these inequalities (Thomas and El Gizouli, 2020). Sudan's concentration of power and resources within a small central elite has been a major contributing factor to conflict and food insecurity. Even though the whole country is experiencing economic crisis, food insecurity remains most severe in the peripheries (see e.g. Fewsnet, 2021). The transitional government and the JPA are intended to address these inequalities but perhaps less attention has been paid on how current food aid, food security or welfare measures could unintentionally feed into inequalities.

Food aid contracts to buy political loyalty?

Overall, interviewees reported little change in the role of food aid as part of political and economic processes since the 2019 revolution. In the past, food aid and its transport and procurement were a key component of the political economy, with contracts a way of securing political loyalty – including of the army and security services. **A key question is therefore, whether food aid is important for the military component of the government as a source of political finance.** This needs to be considered in relation to the funds from gold and other industries owned by the military-security apparatus. According to De Waal (2019) Hemedti has enough money from the Gulf countries and from gold to buy enough loyalty to subordinate or eliminate rivals (these funds also contributed to the shift in financial power from the NCP establishment to the RSF) (De Waal, 2019). Revenue from gold alone has been estimated at \$2.5 billion (The Enough Project, 2017), suggesting that finance from food aid transport and procurement contracts is not needed. **However, buying the loyalty of powerful actors or companies does not address the economic crisis or the inequalities that brought down President Al-Bashir.** Nor does it satisfy the protestors demanding political and economic transformation. For this Hemedti – and the military part of the transitional government – needs food aid and other safety nets. **It could be that the current set-up – economic crisis with limited food and welfare programmes – maintains the current fragile status quo,** combining international recognition, some pressure on the civilian part of government, but key enterprises staying with the military.

Potential for food aid as a political resource in the JPA

The JPA is another potential area where food aid can be used as a political resource. Issues of development, land, and returns were considered more important than food aid by our interviewees, although recognising that **food for IDPs and returnees is part of the JPA.** Interviewees suggested food aid may not be seen as a political resource for JPA signatories right now – but if no development aid is forthcoming, it may well do in future. With elections coming, and the SRF and SLA-MM turning themselves into political parties, those with new government appointments may soon learn about the use of food aid as a resource and to gain political support. This is already happening with disarmament, with the signatories expanding their military and security personnel in advance of DDR operations. Another factor is that on paper the JPA addresses many of the aims of the armed

⁹ Although the government itself continues to use these companies to import the bulk of wheat

opposition movements, but some argue that **in practice the process has been about 'dividing the cake between the signatories.'** Thomas and De Waal (2021, forthcoming), reach a similar conclusion: the peace agreement was bought with offers of sharing the patrimony rather than transforming the system; rebel leaders were more familiar with the political marketplace than the possibility of democracy. **This political bargaining increases the risks that food aid is used as political support, and would be consistent with historical trends.** Both opposition movements and government have used food aid in the past to boost their political constituencies; whether by distribution through Al-Bashir's Popular Committees, distribution in areas where political support is needed or denial of access to areas held by opposition movements (African Rights, 1997; Jaspars, 2018). In some sense this is already happening, as rebel-held areas in Jebel Marra (Darfur) and in South Kordofan, experience higher transport costs and higher food prices than elsewhere in Sudan, and face difficulties in bringing in agricultural inputs and food aid (Fewsnet, 2021). In contrast, on paper at least, the JPA assures access to crisis-affected populations, respect for humanitarian principles, and provisions for vulnerable groups.

Given the delays in the implementation of the JPA, aid actors thought it likely that IDPs will remain in the camps for the coming 2-3 years, and in any case that parts of the family will stay in towns (see also Young and Jacobson, 2013). Food assistance will be needed during this period – and could either create some breathing space to address issues of land tenure and justice, or it could feed into strategies of destabilisation. Returns and development are a key part of the JPA, and by extension, food aid and IDPs remaining in camps oppose the message of peace and return. Going forward, it will be important to **consider who benefits from IDPs staying in camps or urban areas, who benefits from returns, and how this feeds into political processes in particular once the Joint Humanitarian Committees have been established.** Traders buying food aid, service providers (NGOs, private sector), distribution committees, and those who are now living on land previously belonging to IDPs, all benefit from people staying in camps. In addition, local business may benefit from the availability of a flexible pool of casual labour. More directly, SLA-Abdulwahid may have political motivations for IDPs to stay in camps to maintain his support (although some IDP Sheikhs were brought over to the government side, see below). Perhaps at present, the most obvious link between the JPA and food aid is the increased violence caused by those trying to undermine it (see previous section) and the consequent need for food aid.

Food aid practices and the political economy

Food aid will always interact with local politics and conflict. In examining how food aid becomes part of the political economy, there are a number of processes and practices to consider. These include the denial of access to conflict-affected populations, including the manipulation of markets, and the benefits gained by government (or other warring parties) or private sector. Also common is diversion of food aid to or by soldiers, local government or other forms of leadership, and the exclusion of particular politically vulnerable groups. Control over food distribution can also strengthen political status (Macrae and Zwi, 1994). As such the practices of assessment, procurement, transport, targeting and distribution, can feed into existing power relations or conflict. If we know about these unintended political and economic effects of aid, or of the way in which it is provided, it becomes possible to try and prevent or mitigate them.

Denial of access and manipulating markets

Denial of access to humanitarian assistance, including food aid, is a common counter-insurgency strategy, despite being prohibited under international law. Previous research has shown that it can also yield benefits for traders as it keeps food prices high and livestock prices low (due to distress sales) and, through displacement, contributes to the availability of exploitable agricultural labour (Keen, 1994; Duffield, 1994). These strategies have been common in the war in southern Sudan, the Nuba mountains, and Darfur, contributing to some of the most severe famines (De Waal, 2018). Negotiated access arrangements, such as Operation Lifeline Sudan (Karim et al., 1996), were developed by aid actors in part in response to these issues.

Aid actors reported that since 2019 access to crisis-affected populations has improved compared to the immediate post-2009 period, when a number of international NGOs were expelled and local NGOs had their registration revoked. Some of these NGOs have been allowed to return since the revolution. International organisations now usually need to provide travel notification rather than obtain travel permits. This makes the process faster and more efficient, but aid actors interviewed noted that it **still gives the government control and the possibility to deny access**. Previously, the Darfur operation experienced various limitations in humanitarian access. From 2006, access to areas held by rebels who did not sign the Darfur Peace Agreement was often denied. Other access constraints included difficulties in getting authorisation for emergency assessment of new IDPs (in particular in rebel-held areas), and increased requirements for security clearance for food convoys from 2010 – clearances that could be delayed or denied. By 2010, rural Darfur, particularly areas where rebel movements were known to operate, received very little food aid. This contrasted with the early days (2004) when Arab groups (some of whom were associated with government-alligned militia) were excluded and food aid was mainly distributed in IDP camps which at the time were closely associated with the rebellion (Jaspars, 2018).

In 2021, access to SPLM-N controlled South Kordofan and SLA-AW-held areas of Jebel Marra remains problematic – not because official denials, but due to a combination of other factors ranging from suspicion within the affected areas to cumbersome bureaucratic procedures. In South Kordofan and Blue Nile, the population still fears the possibility of government interference with food aid and insist that it is supplied cross-border from South Sudan. No food convoys have yet gone into SPLM-N areas from Sudan. The history of food aid and access denial to the Nuba Mountains (in South Kordofan), and their exclusion from Operation Lifeline Sudan (Karim et al, 1996), will make such suspicions hard to overcome. Aid actors are only attempting small projects from the Sudan side and hope to assess needs before larger scale assistance. Added constraints are exorbitant charges on food convoys at the South Sudan border, and that only South Sudanese or local truck drivers are accepted. Similarly for Jebel Marra, food convoys are frequently delayed because of bureaucratic procedures, and because only drivers from the area can enter. **The movement of armed groups in Darfur, and attacks on camps or villages or warehouses, also disrupts food distribution or stops it from taking place**. The latest Fewsnet report highlights this as a risk for disruption of humanitarian assistance in Jebel Marra in the coming months.

While hoarding and speculating is generally accepted to contribute to the economic crisis, the people we interviewed did not believe that the deliberate denial of food aid or restriction of food aid for profit by particular actors played a role. At the same time, **increasing the economic crisis is clearly**

seen as a way of undermining the civilian component of the transitional government and reductions in food aid could contribute to that. Exacerbating the economic crisis is easier by manipulating exchange rates or withholding shipments of essential commodities than by limiting food aid, but there are a number of things to that need to be considered. First, **there is the potential that local purchase (and export) of food aid increases food prices, and this needs to be closely monitored** (Sudan is a major source country for WFP food purchase – see e.g. WFP, 2017 and 2020c). Second, **food aid is in effect already being restricted in some areas and through a variety of ways**. In Darfur, whether a political act or not, the looting of WFP warehouses will contribute to the economic and humanitarian crisis and could lead to further destabilisation and conflict. Even if not a deliberate or coordinated strategy, it is difficult to move food aid into rebel-held areas and access to food is already disproportionately constrained there. **Food prices in SPLM-N held areas are twice that in the rest of Sudan** (400% higher than February last year compared to 200% for the rest of the country). For both Jebel Marra and SPLM-N held Kordofan, transport costs are higher, production inputs difficult to obtain, production is low and agricultural labour may risk attack (for those in Jebel Marra) (Fewsnets, 2021). Such price differentials could indicate exploitative practices by traders, transporters and middlemen.

Mitigating the risks of working with army-linked companies

As discussed in the section on food aid as a political resource, the food aid transport, import, and procurement can be lucrative businesses – for those close to the previous regime and for army and security-linked companies. By necessity or ideology, **any large private company under the previous regime had to be close to government or the NCP**. Particularly in the 1990s, setting up a transport company was a money-making venture for politicians or others with NCP connections. Profits could also be maximised by delaying food aid transport and delivering less than planned to hard-to-access areas. In the early 2000s, the Darfur operation led to the massive expansion of three already large transport companies. At the same time, local procurement benefited large commercial farmers, brokers or middlemen close to the regime (Jaspars, 2018).

Despite a change in regime, many of the same transporters and traders contracted for food aid are still involved. Aid actors fear that these are part of the military-security apparatus and working with them could destabilise the government.

Even though aid actors are aware of the risks, the options are limited as few companies have the capacity to transport or procure large quantities of food aid. Nevertheless, several actions have been taken to minimise the potential harms as indicated below.

Challenges include those faced by the anti-corruption committee itself; i.e. army resistance to hand over businesses to civilian management. So far, only one of WFP's contractors has been suspended by the committee following anti-corruption audits.

Box 1: Options to minimise the need to work with military-owned companies

1. Increase bids for transport or procurement contracts and therefore the number of contractors to work with.
2. Find ways of working with small farmers and gather information about land/company ownership.
3. Diversify the means of transport, for example by rehabilitating the railways.
4. Close communication with the anti-corruption committee and regular checks whether the companies are still registered.
5. Aid actors use their own trucks.

Another constraint, which applies to all options, is the existence of companies whose real ownership is hidden. A company may seem independent but is really a branch of a bigger company from the previous regime. Others are re-aligning themselves to the current regime.

For local purchase of food aid, aid actors are also still reliant on the same large farmers and traders or middlemen. In this case, there is an issue with both land ownership and political affiliations of traders and middlemen. Again, the risks are recognised and the need to find ways of purchasing directly from smaller farms are well understood. With purchase of more than 200,000 MT of sorghum a year (and as high as 444,000 MT in 2017), WFP has become a key player in Sudan's grain trade. Determining the impact on markets (and the economic crisis), and investigating who owns the companies and farms supplying food (even if indirectly via the Agricultural Bank of Sudan) is important. While the average NGO does not have the capacity to explore this, **the expertise of FAO, Ministry of Agriculture, and other food security specialists would be valuable in examining land and trade issues, and in diversifying suppliers.** For wheat, WFP has explicitly chosen to work with international suppliers to bypass the army-linked companies charged with importing wheat otherwise, and thus to contribute to minimising corruption. In the long run, diversifying suppliers will also be useful.

It should be noted that these issues are not unique to food aid. Cash transfers also come with a whole infrastructure of shops (vouchers) banks or mobile cash transfer companies – and working with them will have political and economic effects. Cash transfers through banks, or vouchers, may encourage people to stay in towns – as was the case in Somalia (Jaspars et al., 2020). Zain and MTN as mobile money transfer companies, have the Sudan the security services as major shareholders (Gallopín, 2020a). Beneficiaries need to have an ID card to be able to register. These practices create both business opportunities and a means of surveillance. Cash transfers can also feed into the war economy and impact social networks (Thomas et al., 2018). These issues will need to be explored further elsewhere.

Changes in diversion and exclusion

In Sudan's past food aid operations, the most vulnerable population groups often received less than planned, while powerful groups or individuals benefited disproportionately through diversion or control of distribution (Keen, 1991, Keen, 1994, Jaspars, 2000, Young and Maxwell, 2013, Jaspars, 2018). A key change since the revolution, mentioned by all our interviewees, is **the role of youth, or resistance committees, and women's groups demanding greater accountability.** These groups have insisted that camp IDP Sheikhs (who controlled distribution) and in some instances native administration in rural areas, be removed, and that new committees should be formed for food distribution. Under the previous regime, many IDP Sheikhs had been brought over to the government side, and were associated with large-scale diversion. Our interviewees reported that food relief committees were changed in most camps. Once new committees were established, resistance committees in many areas have continued to monitor food distributions and in some cases are part of the camp food relief committees. For example, they may check how much food aid had been delivered by WFP and whether this was fairly distributed by the aid actor responsible. As the resistance committees have no central control or coordination mechanism, each committee has their own way of dealing with issues of diversion or exclusion and who to ask to act on this. Another new accountability mechanism is third party monitoring – where an organisation separate from the distributing agency provides a monitoring and feedback mechanism.

Aid actors have developed a food aid targeting and distribution system, in which only a proportion of the population receives food aid. While based on assessments, and expectations that over time IDPs developed new ways of accessing food, and necessary because of underfunding and logistical constraints, this has the potential to feed into existing political and social divisions. Past evidence shows that it is almost impossible to target limited quantities of food aid to the most vulnerable in a severe crisis (Jaspars, 2000). Current targeting practices for IDPs in camps in Darfur divide them into those who are no longer considered in need of food aid, those who continue to need direct food assistance all year, and those who need some food assistance but not as much as the most vulnerable group (i.e. for part of the year or for specific activities). A percentage of rural populations receives food aid following the Covid pandemic.¹⁰ **The political and social dynamics that these practices interact with include not only the old leadership-youth (resistance committee) but also signatory-non-signatory (found within some camps), army/militia- IDP (and IDP-land-occupier), and between new governors, local councils, ministries and HAC and those from the former regime who have been removed.** A number of these will be represented on committees for food distribution, whether at the level of locality, town, village or camp (see for example 567 in Young and Maxwell, 2013 – for the different governance structures represented in 2009). These power dynamics between the different groups and its impact on targeting food aid will vary by location, and needs to be explored in more

detail as such. Zalingei provides a good example (see Box 2).

Box 2 – Food aid and power in Zalingei

Aid actors' attempts to 'graduate' some IDPs from free general ration distribution to food-for-work led to violence in Hamidya camp. Sheikhs were perceived to manipulate the beneficiary list and were challenged. Sources of political tension included a change in governor and leadership struggles in SLA-Abdulwahid, as well as between resistance committee and former IDP Sheikhs. The new governor has a particular constituency in the camp and the previous governor was widely implicated in food aid – and general aid – diversion. The camp split, houses were destroyed, water and fuel pumps sabotaged, and some leaders were forced to leave. The distribution was postponed and a multi-agency effort was needed to resolve the disputes. Even though the camps in Zalingei are some of the most politicised, similar tensions are likely to play out elsewhere.

Even with new accountability mechanisms, scope for diversion and exclusion remains.

The aid actors we interviewed highlighted the ongoing risk in some areas of powerful groups prioritising people or communities close to them (e.g. home villages of army generals), of excluding Arab herders, and of excluding weaker groups within some camps. Aid actors thought looting of warehouses and begging after distribution were some of the consequences. Radio Dabanga also reports protests by IDPs against the reductions in food aid in the midst of a worsening food security situation, and the complete exclusion of a proportion of the camp from food aid (Radio Dabanga, 2021b). Issues of invalid exclusions were already highlighted in WFP's 2016 evaluation (Brewin et al., 2017), and the protests

¹⁰ Numbers of beneficiaries per locality are based on WFP assessments (separately for IDPs and rural populations) and the Integrated Phase Classification, in which a country working group (including government) classifies food insecurity in different areas based on available food security information. At locality level various authorities and organisations may discuss which villages to target and the targeting criteria (although with suggestions from WFP). At camp level, the committee will have another opportunity to adapt the targeting criteria. In some places, this discussion is facilitated by WFP field officers. Some of our interviewees, however, said that in their experience only WFP decides who gets food.

against the reduction in humanitarian assistance is one of the few issues mentioned by the UN Panel of Experts (UN Security Council, 2020). Some NGOs and volunteer groups have established separate distributions for those left out. **This highlights the need to gather information on the impact of exclusions (intended or not), and the link with power relations. The last study on targeting in Darfur was done in 2009**, when no targeting within camps or rural communities was actually done (Young and Maxwell, 2013). Studies of the impact of targeted or reduced food aid on power relations are equally rare, although studies in Darfur have shown the associated risk exploitative labour relations (Buchanan-Smith and Jaspars, 2007; Duffield, 2002) and today the main income source for IDPs is wage labour (WFP 2020a). This of course is only one aspect of power relations, the others being linked to the political affiliations in relation to the JPA and the transitional government, old and new leadership, etc. It appears that the Sudan's previous regime was highly successful in suppressing information about food aid, politics and conflict.

Another factor for aid actors to consider is the loss of employment and income earning opportunities in the switch from food aid to cash. For a long time, it was food aid that maintained the cereal market in Darfur, and stopped local traders from going out of business (Buchanan-Smith and Abdullah Fadul, 2008). Food aid gave many women the opportunity to start petty trading in camps, and for others to start transport businesses. Whether cash transfers have the same effect remains to be determined. Food aid may even have led to the revival of a local transport business in North Darfur (Jaspars, 2018). The loss of these positive unintended effects must also be considered more carefully.

Power within the food aid system and regimes of practices

Food aid can be seen as an industry, a system, or a regime of practices, which changes over time. It contains multiple actors, institutions and practices. As we have seen the actors may include government, UN, NGOs (international or local), local authorities, relief committees, resistance committees, women's movements, private sector entities (traders and transporters), and more. Army, militia and rebel movements may influence food distribution. Food aid as an institution is also linked with particular policies and ideologies which change over time (e.g. from saving lives to supporting livelihoods to protection and – now - resilience). These determine practices along the whole chain of assessment, logistics (transport, procurement), targeting, distribution, and monitoring. Actors at each stage will have their patronage networks and interests, and connections with wider social, economic and political processes. Detailed examination of all of these diverse interests and connections was not possible in the limited time for this analysis piece but we did find that power within the system has shifted since the revolution - from government to WFP.

Past struggles for control over food aid

Sudan's government and international aid actors have long struggled for control over food aid, and over the populations that receive it. This was most evident in the 1980s and 1990s – when international aid actors started bypassing government structures. Aid actors were perceived by the ruling regime as a threat to national security because they undermined government structures, aims of self-sufficiency and supported rebel movements. As a consequence, Al-Bashir's regime sought control of aid through country agreements, travel permits, and access denials. The Humanitarian Aid Commission was the main government body in charge of food aid (including authorising food convoys, vetting and participating in assessments) and included national security and military

intelligence agents. An important part of establishing control was the policy of Sudanisation of food aid, which included a national strategic grain reserve, government food aid and Popular Committees. This benefited large traders and middlemen, and government food distribution was used to attract or maintain government support. Up to the revolution, therefore, the Sudan government was firmly in control of food aid (both international and national) (Jaspars, 2018).

Little government thinking on food aid or food security

Since the revolution, there has been a shift in control over food aid from government, and the Humanitarian Aid Commission in particular, to WFP. **There appears to be little government planning around food aid, or on strategic grain reserves, other than welcoming aid organisations that can provide or support it.** One aid actor reported that the Ministry of Agriculture has stated repeatedly that it wants to phase out food aid, which highlights that different government departments may have different views on food aid. Others said that new heads of the responsible ministries, Finance, and Social Welfare, have little experience with food aid. Government officials reported that food aid appears to be entirely in the hands of WFP. This is not an official handover of responsibilities, but rather a consequence of the government's priorities being elsewhere. For some, the lack of control is a positive sign – believing that it had been excessive before. However, others were angry about WFP doing everything – and felt that the 'government had fused itself to WFP'. They also noted that aid actors had known that HAC included many security and military personnel but had remained silent. A recent review of HAC concluded that it had focussed too much on control rather than facilitation and coordination. The reviewers recommended that a new Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (DEMA) is established and takes responsibility for policy, strategy and programmes (Partners in Development Services, 2020).

It is not clear whether the new DEMA will also incorporate policies on a Strategic Grain Reserve. Sudan has had such reserves at different times in the past, with aims ranging from market stabilisation, to addressing food deficits, or providing relief. Currently, aims are not defined but the Agricultural Bank of Sudan (ABS) provides credit to large farmers and sometimes collects payment in-kind. It also stores grain in times of surplus and purchases for export (including by WFP). However, it retains its past legacy of purchasing from big traders, middlemen or large commercial farmers. Small farmers lose out either because they do not get ABS credit or sell on disadvantageous terms to middlemen. The ABS has become more active since 2018 when Sudan had a big harvest, much of which was exported.

WFP as main actor in the food aid system

With the government's own capacity in food aid limited, and HAC in transition, donors consider WFP to be the main actor with the necessary capacity to handle it in the quantities required. Today's WFP does much more than deliver food aid, however. As the world's largest humanitarian agency (Shaw, 2011), **WFP is involved in every aspect of food aid (and now also cash transfers): from assessment, to procurement, transport, targeting, and monitoring in Sudan.** WFP Sudan also supports the FSP and wheat imports, procures about 100,000 MTs sorghum annually (with HQ purchasing more), and has plans to support the Agricultural Bank of Sudan. In the current funding environment, this has advantages for donors in that it is more cost-effective to fund one large agency than a number of different smaller partners, and it is likely easier to assure harmonised and standardised approaches.

There are also a number of drawbacks to such dominance of a single actor. Room for innovation and context-specific approaches based on the local knowledge and experience of NGOs and committees is limited when they are only tasked with helping with implementation. A large number of organisations, authorities and committees are involved in food distribution but decision-making remains mostly with WFP. In our interviews, **questions were raised about the role of other food security organisations and specialists, who could assist in investigating issues around land ownership, elite control over trade, and the interests of different actors along the value chain.**

A final point is that UN and INGOs taking charge of food aid, and bypassing government, can backfire as it did in the 1980s. In the mid-1980s, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission worked closely with international organisations. However, when the lack of involvement of Sudanese staff, organisations or government in the aid operation became apparent, foreign organisations were seen as an 'invasion'. In 1988 the government passed a law to regulate their activities (African Rights, 1997; Jaspars, 2018). **Tighter regulations followed, combined with access denials in southern Sudan, making future humanitarian operations more difficult.** A further consequence of handing over famine relief to international NGOs, was that **famine came to be seen as a technical rather than a political issue** – and in the late 1980s this enabled the Islamist regime to use food aid as a way of building their constituency (see for example African Rights, 1997). A similar trajectory is possible in 2021 unless carefully monitored and avoided. With the civilian component of the transitional government showing little capacity to control food aid, and the domination of external technical aid actors, the potential for political actors to move in and use food aid for their own purposes.

Recommendations for conflict-sensitive programming

Food aid and food security programmes are needed to help address the humanitarian and economic crises. However, they will always have some unintended effects; even when they successfully save lives and support livelihoods. Providing resources into a resource-scarce, conflict-affected context will inevitably involve navigating moral dilemmas and conflicting principles. The current political environment provides real opportunities for maximising the positive impacts of food aid (and making sure that food aid actually reaches those most in need) but at the same time avoiding many of the potential harms of the past. In the current environment, we hope there is the space to discuss these issues openly and collaboratively so that they can be mitigated.

Making decisions about humanitarian – and in particular food aid – **programming requires a process of deliberation and gathering as much information as possible to inform this process** (Slim, 2015), as well as appropriate tools, systems and principles. Information is needed not only about the severity of humanitarian crises but also the different political and economic effects of the practices used and the authorities and institutions contracted or engaged. **This in turn needs local, context-specific, knowledge, and appropriate ways for organisations to collaborate and act on new approaches.** Below are a number of issues arising from this brief analysis where we believe aid actors may usefully focus attention and energy.

Balancing Principles with Politics

In present-day Sudan, aid actors provide food assistance and food security **interventions to support the political transition and want food assistance to be a form of neutral and impartial humanitarian assistance.** It cannot be both at the same time, but perhaps there is a need to recognise that following Sudan's long history of politicised food aid it is already seen as political by most actors in Sudan. Previous governments viewed it as a political tool of the West. Sudanese aid workers, beneficiaries and the private sector do not see food aid as neutral and impartial. Access denials inevitably meant it went to one side, particular groups (e.g Arab or nomadic groups) have been excluded repeatedly, traders and transporters close to government have benefited, and food aid has been used to encourage work, resilience, or returns (Jaspars, 2018). It is against this complicated backdrop that aid workers are currently navigating food aid's political effects and its goals of both supporting the transition and providing assistance according to need (i.e. being impartial). To support this process, we recommend:

- **Prioritising the needs of the worst crisis-affected populations.** With improved access (in theory) it becomes easier to include all crisis-affected populations in assessments, monitor where food goes and whether assessed needs are met. As such, aid actors may come to be seen as impartial to some extent.
- **Donor-level support to ongoing analysis and action around aid's impact on the political economy in Sudan.** This could include ongoing or additional support to the anti-corruption committee, and support to alternative aid delivery mechanisms that can bypass army-linked companies and corrupt systems.
- **Senior-level discussions with donors, UN, INGOs and NNGOs about the aid sector's principles, and how we reconcile political agendas with our principles of neutrality and impartiality.**
- Donor and organisational investments in understanding the political economies of the areas where we work, and how food aid has become part of this. This can be through

organisational or third party monitoring and evaluation systems, FSL cluster analysis (e.g on the nature of exclusions and inclusions in distribution practices and its effect on power relations, or system-wide initiatives.

Accountability and Innovation through Diversity

Participation in decision-making about food aid is currently limited. Donors have mainly funded one key actor (WFP), which then contracts a number of other actors (NGOs, private sector), who may subcontract and who then work with a range of actors locally (committees, authorities, leaders). **This system is diverse but concentrates decision-making and makes local knowledge distant.** Such a centralised system has advantages in terms of cost-effectiveness and standardisation but disadvantages in terms of participation and context-specific and politically-informed programming. As a diverse range of actors is already involved, the food aid system can be transformed to allow for more locally-informed decision-making on assessments, food delivery, targeting and distribution.

The positive developments in accountability can also be built on. The momentum of the uprising in demanding change is still tangible. This is particularly evident in the actions of women's movements and youth, or resistance committees. They are holding government and local authorities to account – at all administrative levels. They organise demonstrations in Khartoum and other large towns if the political transition does not appear to be progressing, and in terms of food distributions, have monitored subsidised food distribution in towns, emergency food aid in camps, and provided food to those excluded from distributions. **More specifically, this means women and youth groups need to be consulted in decision-making, and that resistance committees can provide additional checks and balance on food distribution.** A greater role needs to be approached with caution, and assessed in terms of co-opting their agency and in bringing a new politics into food distribution.

Specific recommendations include:

- **Donors, UN, and international organisations should deepen their investment in building on local knowledge and capacities** and transforming the food aid system to allow for more locally-informed decision making on assessments, food delivery, targeting, distribution, monitoring and feedback. A formal approach to this, through a working group or task force, may be a necessary element to marshal the political and financial resources.
- **Donors should consider funding a range of actors in food distribution (all aspects)**, which would encourage innovation and context-specific approaches and a wider range of information and knowledge about the threats and vulnerabilities (to food insecurity) faced by crisis-affected populations.
- **Those designing food aid projects should invest in, resource, and require, better accountability mechanisms** from implementers delivering food aid, including of the potential role of youth and women's movements to help provide accountability. Such an emphasis can also help to shift some of the balance of power to value local competencies, systems and approaches.

Invest in Learning, Flexibility and Adaptation

Many aid actors are aware of the dangers of supporting elements of the former regime, and understand that food aid can have both beneficial and harmful side-effects. However, they feel

limited in what they can do to avoid the risks or take advantage of the opportunities. It is necessary, but insufficient, to understand both the effects of specific practices and the wider political and economic effects of the combination of practices used. We must also be able to then **change the way we provide aid to mitigate those harms and maximise the benefits**. With political will, donors and organisations can improve both strategic and day-to-day decision-making that affects aid's impact on Sudan's political economy through:

- **Ongoing internal and external analysis, M&E and research on the following:**
 - Inclusion and exclusion at the local level, and its effects on political economy and conflict, by mapping and interviewing each of the different interest groups through trusted intermediaries.
 - Identification and analysis of actors along the whole chain of assessment, logistics (transport, procurement), targeting, distribution, and monitoring, their patronage networks and interests, and connections with wider social, economic and political processes.
- **Flexible work plans, objectives, budgets, and performance criteria** will enable organisations to change course if their monitoring and analysis indicates a potential harm being done.
- **Safe spaces between donors and implementers** may encourage greater commitment to learning and adaptation, if evidence of challenges is seen as an opportunity to learn and improve, rather than as a sign of failure. Lessons learned meetings can help to advance this framework shift.

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