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# Digital domination in war-torn Sudan

Political economy and experiences of  
digitalised food assistance

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# List of acronyms

CHC	Centre for Humanitarian Change
ERRs	Emergency Response Rooms
EU	European Union
Fewsnet	Famine Early Warning System Network
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IGAD	The Intergovernmental Authority on Development
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
IPC	Integrated (Food Security) Phase Classification
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SDG	Sudanese Pound
SARHO	Sudanese Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SLA-AW	Sudan Liberation Army, Abdulwahid faction;
SPARC	Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UN OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
WFP	World Food Programme

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# Executive Summary

In 2026, **Sudan enters its fourth year of nationwide war**. Active war and displacement continue in parts of the country, with more than 8 million still displaced internally and over 3 million to other countries. Famine has been declared in parts of Sudan (including Darfur), and more than half the country is food insecure and in need of humanitarian assistance. United Nations (UN) emergency appeals remain dangerously underfunded. These figures only tell part of the story. The RSF (Rapid Support Forces) has created famine by using starvation as weapon of war, as exemplified by the siege of Al-Fashir. The instrumentalisation of internet connections, and thus access to financial transfers, has become part of that war. In areas that appear more stable, the lack of infrastructure and the absence of the state make life extremely difficult and increases the scope for exploiting vulnerable citizens. Furthermore, the role of regional backers such as the UAE (United Arab Emirates) is important because of their support for the RSF, violent resource extraction and, paradoxically, the Bank of Khartoum whose banking app has been the main way of transferring money and saving lives in Sudan.

This working paper is part of an ESRC-funded project on the ‘Digitalisation of Food Assistance: Political economy, governance and food security effects across the global North–South divide’. **The study aims to understand how the digitalisation of food assistance has influenced vulnerability to food insecurity, and its role as a source of power and way of governing**. This working paper presents findings for the second, in-depth phase of the research in Sudan, with fieldwork carried out throughout 2025. It focuses on the experience of marginalised populations as well as how digital food assistance practices interact with political and economic processes.

We used **qualitative methods**, including purposive selection of the states of North and South Darfur, Al-Gezira, Omdurman and Kassala, because they are among the most food insecure, and present a range of economies, war activities and degrees of statelessness and aid provision. We then purposively selected food-insecure or marginalised populations to examine their experience of digitalised food assistance and welfare practices. Methods included observation by researchers in Sudan, and semi-structured

interviews with a range of people (in Sudan and the UK diaspora), authorities, businesses and organisations (local and international) (83 interviews in total).

**Since the start of the 2023 war, the digitalisation of food assistance has continued apace.** While international organisations innovate and develop new ways of digitally accessing conflict-affected populations, Sudanese initiatives and organisations remain the main aid providers. One of the key local responses has been the community kitchens, the *takaya*, implemented by groups such as the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) or others. **Digital financial transfers, mainly using the Bank of Khartoum banking app, have been the main lifesaver for those affected by war.** After more than three years of war, however, this is too heavy a burden for Sudanese alone and is affecting the food security and wellbeing of those in the diaspora too. Some funding for the ERRs comes from international organisations, with digitalisation of their interactions and information sharing. **International organisations have expanded the range of digital food assistance practices,** including mobile money transfers, self-registration links, electronic vouchers, and blockchain technology.

While it is lifesaving, **digitalised food assistance has not reached the neediest populations in Sudan directly.** It excludes many, either because they do not have the necessary documents, bank accounts and phones, or because the design or process does not take this into account. **Exclusions from digital food assistance operate along a continuum.** First, exclusion intersects with pre-conflict inequalities, so those who were digitally excluded before the war, remain among those most at risk of food insecurity in 2026. Many vulnerable populations remain unreached, even digitally; those assessed as in need may not receive aid; and those who are entitled to register for digitalised aid may not be able to do so. At the most extreme end, dis/connectivity is weaponised, which means some people are cut off completely because of internet shutdowns, destruction of infrastructure or extortion by the warring parties.

Even in (relatively) more stable situations, those without bank accounts are dependent on those who do have them (such as merchants), who charge a fee for this service and a higher one for providing cash. Where banks are operating, access is limited by the cost of getting ID documents and opening an account. With changes in currency (in December 2024) and in the

banking system, this is increasingly necessary and presents a form of coercive financial inclusion, making people more visible to, and controllable by, the state. With limited amounts of aid, and a large number of excluded, many are dependent on precarious or degrading work.

Overall, **digitalisation has replicated and deepened structural inequalities**. Rather than providing new solutions to problems of fraud and access, digitalisation amplifies existing inequalities, exclusions, discriminations and power relationships. Compared to in-kind food aid, digitalisation introduces new actors and practices, and the scope for exploitation increases in a largely deregulated state. A large range of mediators – including merchants, fintechs, banks, local authorities and organisations – broker access for those who are otherwise digitally excluded, and potentially benefit. Digitalisation has increased the potential for exploitation by merchants or traders and has amplified the power of international organisations.

At the national and international level, inequalities are magnified through depoliticisation, datafication and data extraction. Funding of ERRs by international organisations, alongside harassment and attacks by warring parties, has contributed to a shift from being revolutionary to humanitarian and claiming neutrality. Going forward this could undermine political transformation. The datafication of people and their interactions makes politics invisible and causation hard to determine. Finally, the role of big tech in data management and data extraction creates global inequalities reminiscent of colonial hierarchies. Regionally, the role of the UAE in digital financial transfers, as well as its role in the war, is of concern.

**As funding declines, digitalisation is likely to be further promoted as a cost-efficient way of providing aid.** Those promoting or implementing it will need to analyse the political economy context to inform digitalised food assistance practices, to ensure that it does not feed into the war economy, and to find ways of enabling access for the digitally excluded.

# 1.

## INTRODUCTION

After almost three years of nationwide war, Sudan's catastrophe continues. In April 2023, heavy fighting between the RSF (Rapid Support Forces) paramilitary force and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) for control of the country – and its resources – led to large-scale destruction, displacement and famine. Darfur was particularly vulnerable as a scene of war involving the same actors since 2003, and with large numbers of people already displaced. Displacement continues, with internal displacement increasing from 6 million to more than 8 million since 2024, and the number of people who have fled to other countries increasing to more than 3 million. Over 30 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2025 (UN OCHA, 2024, 2026a). As we will discuss, regional actors in neighbouring countries play key roles in this war: in backing either of the warring parties, in providing aid, and in digital financial transfers.

In early 2026, almost half of the country's population is acutely food insecure, with famine<sup>1</sup> in Al-Fashir (North Darfur) and Kadugli (South Kordofan). Famine was first declared in Zamzam displacement camp, near Al-Fashir, in July 2024 (Fewsnet, 2024). The RSF has created famine with a combination of attacks and sieges, using starvation as a weapon of war. The siege of Al-Fashir started in May 2024 and ended in October 2025, when it was captured by the RSF. Their siege tactics included regular attacks on civilians, the deliberate restriction of food supplies into the city, and destruction of other objects essential for survival (e.g. water and health infrastructure). At first this resulted in displacement, but later movement into and out of the town was also blocked. According to the UN's Human Rights Office these acts, in addition to the large-scale massacres that followed the fall of Al-Fashir, constituted war crimes, and likely crimes against humanity (UN OHCHR, 2026). The fall of Al-Fashir was followed

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<sup>1</sup> IPC level 3 or above is food-insecure. The IPC identifies famine as over 30% of the population with acute malnutrition, a mortality rate higher than 2/10,000/day and over 20% of the population with an extreme lack of food. Other definitions focus on entitlement collapse, or social disruption.

by an increase in active conflict in North and West Kordofan. Much of Darfur and Kordofan remained at risk of famine during 2025 (IPC, 2025a). While parts of the country appeared more stable during 2025, widespread infrastructure damage and a non-existent state, meant insecurity of all kinds has remained high. Al-Gezira was retaken by the SAF in January 2025, and most of Khartoum by March of that year, followed by some returns. International aid even to these areas remains extremely limited, with less than 10% of the population receiving assistance by September (IPC, 2025b). This is in part due to access constraints, but aid cuts by international donors also play a major role. Sudanese both inside and outside of Sudan, remain key to helping those in need.

This working paper is part of an ESRC-funded project on the ‘Digitalisation of Food Assistance: Political economy, governance and food security effects across the global North–South divide’. The project aims to understand how the digitalisation of food assistance has influenced vulnerability to food insecurity, its role as a source of power and way of governing, as well as its implications for addressing hunger, locally and globally. It includes case studies on India and the UK as well as Sudan. The main research questions are:

1. To what extent have food assistance and social welfare practices been digitalised and why? What are the key organisations, authorities and businesses involved?
2. How do digital practices interact with political and economic processes (linked to food) to influence inequality and power relations? How do they govern populations and influence their actions?
3. What are the implications of digitalising food assistance for the food security of marginalised populations?

This is the second working paper on the effect of digitalised food assistance in Sudan. In the first working paper, we focused on exploring the range of digitalised practices and identifying some of the key political economy issues (see Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025). The first working paper also traces the history of digitalisation and food assistance, and the rise of political, economic and food security crises over time. In this second working paper, we continue to examine how digital food assistance practices and their effects have evolved from mid-2024 onwards, both in terms of political economy and the implications for the food security of

marginalised populations. For this part of the project, research was conducted in Darfur, Al-Gezira, Khartoum, and Kassala.

We argue that the current war has contributed to an acceleration of digitalisation, including in aid. It has concurrently been a lifesaver, a tool for power, and a means of capital accumulation. While lifesaving, it could not reach those most in need directly, leaving them open to exploitation by those with digital access. Merchants, banks, internet service providers, authorities (including warring parties), and regional or international actors, benefited in different ways, perpetuating and intensifying Sudan's extractive violent political economy. While the diaspora continue to provide the bulk of aid to Sudan, we will show that digitalisation has intensified the disproportionate influence of international organisations, potentially undermining Sudan's sovereignty.

This working paper is for all those who are interested in food assistance and digitalisation, not only researchers but also policy analysts, activists and practitioners. The paper includes a first analysis of all our findings, which will form the basis of discussions with different key stakeholders on policy implications, and more in-depth analysis on particular themes in journal articles. Our analysis of research findings in all three case studies will be published in a final report in mid-2026.

This working paper starts by giving some background on aid and digital practices in Sudan and on developments in politics and war since our last working paper just over one year ago (Chapter 2). This is followed by a section on methods (Chapter 3). The bulk of the paper is in the three chapters following this. Chapter 4 discusses the range of digital food assistance (and cash transfer) practices, in particular how they have changed and evolved since 2024. It includes a discussion of the process of food assistance provision, and the various authorities, organisations and businesses involved. Chapter 5 analyses the access to digitalised food or cash transfers by marginalised populations and their experience. In addition to looking at internet and device access, and available infrastructure for connectivity, we also focus on Starlink and the role and effect of digital cash in the siege of Al-Fashir. In Chapter 6, we zoom out and look at how the digitalised food assistance, and its wider infrastructure (regimes of practices), interact with the exploitative and extractive political and economic processes at regional and national level. Chapter 7 presents our

conclusions on what digitalisation is actually doing, in terms of political economy, governance and food insecurity.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1 History of exploitation, conflict and famine<sup>2</sup>

Food insecurity and famine have a long history in Sudan and are intimately linked with inequality, the country's extractive political economy, and the tactics of war. Since independence, the country has experienced almost continuous internal war and regular food crisis or famine. The revolution in 2019, which overthrew President Omar Al-Bashir's authoritarian government, was in part a response to the ongoing and severe political, economic and humanitarian crisis. Until recently, food crisis and famine were mostly in the country's peripheries, but since 2023 even what were the most stable productive areas previously, such as Al-Gezira, have been engulfed.

Sudan's inequality is both geographic and social. Wealth and power have been concentrated in its centre, the capital Khartoum (and nearby Omdurman), and development (including service provision) in central Sudan. Development strategies focused on modern commercial agriculture in these central parts (including in Al-Gezira), neglecting subsistence farmers in peripheries. Huge social and political inequalities have existed within states for decades; for example, in Al-Gezira in the 2000s, between Islamist businessmen (close to the Al-Bashir regime) and tenants and labourers. The labourers, the *Cannabi*, were often from western parts of Sudan (and Africa) such as Darfur, and lived in camps lacking basic services scattered across the Gezira agricultural scheme. Furthermore, they were not allowed to own land or establish representative bodies, adding to their exploitation (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2024). In Khartoum and Omdurman, migrants from western and southern Sudan were also among the poorest; they lived on the outskirts in poorly serviced settlements, and

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<sup>2</sup> Some of this is also covered in our first working paper (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025).

were dependent on marginal and precarious labour. In Darfur, impoverished ethnic groups were pitted against each other through Al-Bashir's strategy of creating power imbalances, including through intensification of the long-standing divide-and-rule tactics, which undermined the political representation of particular groups (e.g. the Fur and Masalit), and increased the influence of Arab groups. After a rebel attack on government outposts, the government unleashed massive military support for Arab nomadic groups, who became known as the Janjaweed. From 2003 on, they destroyed, killed, raped and displaced millions of people considered non-Arab (Tar, 2005).

For much of this period, government was based on a combination of patronage, personal gain and crisis management. Sudan has long had a highly extractive political economy. In the last three decades, a military-security-industrial complex has controlled key economic resources (production, trade, business, fuel, gold) (Gallopín, 2020). Those who form part of it have benefited enormously, while those who do not became further impoverished. Those who benefit from famine' (Keen, 1994) include soldiers, certain traders, transporters and commercial farmers close to or part of Al-Bashir's regime. They gained from theft and looting, and through market manipulation. High food prices may benefit traders, as do sales of livestock at low prices due to distress sales. Displacement provides a source of cheap labour. Manipulation of food aid has become part of Sudan's extractive political economy by denying food aid to certain populations, for example, thus contributing to displacement and market distortions (Jaspars, 2018).

Food aid has been one of the main forms of aid to Sudan, first as budget support direct to government (since independence), and from 1984 on Sudan has received emergency food aid every year. Emergency food aid has largely been distributed by INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations) and UN organisations like the World Food Programme (WFP). Al-Bashir's government saw this as undermining their sovereignty and tried to restrict, control and benefit from it (Jaspars, 2018).

Political marginalisation and impoverishment led to rebellion, and to government use of a militia strategy to suppress it, first in Kordofan and southern Sudan and then in Darfur (de Waal, 2004). The RSF grew out of the Janjaweed in Darfur. In 2019, by participating in Al-Bashir's

overthrow, the RSF became a key part of government. When the transitional government tried to bring the military-security-commercial complex under civilian control, the potential loss by military and security actors of key economic resources led to, first, the military coup in October 2021, and then the war between the SAF and RSF in April 2023.

The war in Sudan should not be seen just as an internal conflict, however. It is more of an externally driven violent extractivism.

## **2.2 Regional dynamics and an extractivist political economy as causes of food insecurity**

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan is a direct consequence of a violent extractivist political economy driven by regional actors, primarily the UAE. Our analysis focuses on the UAE because it is the most influential economic, military and political regional actor, exploiting Sudan's resources while fuelling the war. For instance, the UAE is the largest 'investor' in Sudan in recent years (\$22 billion), far exceeding the second biggest Saudi Arabia (\$1 billion) and Turkey (\$758 million) (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). However, the UAE's dominant role in the war does not lie only in the magnitude of its investment but more in the political-economic nature of that 'investment'. Its 'investments' are militaristic and involve capital accumulation<sup>3</sup> through proxy intervention and the weakening of the state. The UAE has built a 'ring of fire' around Sudan (Coles, 2025), using allies in Libya, Chad and Somaliland to supply the RSF with weapons and logistics. It also has large shares in the Bank of Khartoum which is crucial in the analysis of the effect of digitalising financial transfers, as well as its role in the war (see section 6.6).

The UAE's sub-imperialist strategy leverages its economic power into security and political control across the region (in Libya, Somalia and Yemen for example) (Mahjoub, 2025). This includes "investments" in ports, logistics hubs, and security cooperation. Its strategy is challenged by rivals like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who support the SAF in order to maintain a

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<sup>3</sup> Here we acknowledge the deep and reflective discussions we had with Mark Duffield who generously shared his sharp analysis with us.

unitary state, but given these countries' much lower levels of investment, they are unlikely to exert much of a balancing effect.

The UAE is engaging in a proxy war and is violently depleting Sudan's economy while rebranding itself as a humanitarian donor and peace promoter. The Gulf states (which include the UAE) import 9.5 million live animals from Sudan/Somalia (80% of its livestock imports) (Duffield and Stockton, 2023: 2). This trade is violent, turning farmer–herder relations into permanent war, clearing agricultural land, and militarising production (Duffield and Stockton, 2023: 2). War benefits smugglers, militiamen, and informal border controllers. The UAE depends on food imports for 85% of its requirements and is a major foreign land buyer in Africa, targeting Sudan with \$10.2 billion in agricultural 'investment' (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2025). Its involvement in the gold sector is even more violent. Sudan shifted to gold as a major source of revenue when it lost 90% of its oil revenue after South Sudan's secession. Eighty per cent of gold production is unregulated artisanal mining, with 5 million miners selling at 35% below global prices. Security and militia companies 'feast' on waste (*karta*) using cyanide, outsourcing environmental and health risks to the local communities. In 2024, 64% of Sudan's gold was smuggled, with 96.8% of official exports going to the UAE, which refines and launders it (Abdelrahman, 2025). An estimated \$13.4 billion in illicit gold trade reaches the UAE via Chad, Egypt and others (Wintour, 2025).

The UAE seeks a resource-extraction model that negates state accountability, promotes private security and militias, and relies on soft power to silence dissent and to promote the RSF war narrative (Abbas, 2025).

## **2.3 Evolution of food and digital practices up to 2024**

The evolution of digital practices in Sudan started around the early 2000s and can be separated into three distinct periods (see Table 1). This section summarises the key findings on food and digital practices, for these three

periods, that we covered in more detail in our first working paper (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025).

The first period is President Omar Al-Bashir's regime up to 2019, when he was overthrown by a popular uprising, and during which the country was subjected to economic sanctions. International aid was mainly humanitarian. The government introduced electronic banking and international organisations started to use some digital food assistance practices, including vouchers and biometric IDs. The second, is the period of the transitional government that followed the overthrow of Al-Bashir. During this period development aid and World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) financial loans resumed, but with conditions that ultimately undermined the revolution. A new social protection programme (*Thamarat*) was insufficient to compensate for the hardships of removing state subsidies and inflation. It was used by government officials to promote digital transformation generally, and to co-opt the revolutionary Resistance Committees into the state system. Finally, the third period starts from the military coup in 2021, and the war that followed from April 2023. The *Thamarat* ended after the coup, but digitalisation rapidly accelerated during the war, and so did its use as a weapon of war, and its manipulation for political and economic purposes. Digital practices were shaped, in part, by this political context, and in part by Sudan's history of inequality, control of resources by a minority, and the manipulation of aid. Table 1 provides more information on each phase.

Several issues are relevant to what happened going forward from 2024. Control over internet services became a weapon of war. Starting with government internet shutdowns during the revolutionary protests, and then following the 2021 coup, they culminated in February 2024 when the RSF shut down the country's internet services and replaced them with Starlink in some places. This allowed them to control the flow of finances and communication, and thus control people and conduct surveillance, as well as to profit from importing and charging for the use of internet services. Another key feature of the current war is the initial collapse of the banking system, and the Bankak digital banking app being the only means of transferring money, and thus aid, to people in Sudan. In SAF-controlled areas, banks gradually recovered, but in RSF areas, merchants acted as mini-banks and could charge extortionate fees for receiving money via Bankak and providing either cash or goods. International organisations

mostly ceased operations after April 2023, and only resumed on a small scale in 2024, with some cash transfers and experimentation with new technologies.

The main digital practice in 2023–24 was the Bankak banking app, and key actors involved were Sudanese diaspora and other Sudanese donors, the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), merchants, telecoms, internet providers, the warring parties and their international backers. Key issues we identified were that ERRs were closely linked to the revolution and were seen as too political by both warring parties and so came under pressure from both. They reported various levels of intimidation, harassment, arrest and torture, with reporting demands from international organisations feeding into this. Another issue is that of digital divides. Inequality between centre and periphery, and between urban and rural areas, persists because of differences in access to ID documents, bank accounts and digital devices, or literacy and has increased during the war.

**Table 1: Summary of changes in digitalisation 2000–2024**

Period	Digital practices: context, government, business, aid organisations
<p><b>2000–2018:</b> digitalisation in an internationally isolated Sudan</p>	<p>The oil boom leads to economic growth, peace agreement with South Sudan (2005), war and humanitarian crisis in Darfur (from 2003).</p> <p>Government expands telecoms (although limited in peripheries), establishes <b>electronic banking</b> (late 1990s but fully functioning from 2013); held back by sanctions internationally and distrust locally. Emergence of fintech companies from 2010s.</p> <p>The WFP and other international organisations digitalise food assistance in the peripheries from 2015 (e.g. Darfur), including <b>vouchers, biometric IDs</b> (as part of SCOPE: a digital biometric beneficiary identification and benefit management system). Cash, mostly as '<b>cash-in-hand</b>', is distributed by banking agents.</p>
<p><b>2018–2021:</b> digitalisation during</p>	<p>After widespread protests, the fall of President Al-Bashir in April 2019. Transitional government of Prime Minister Hamdok, the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), the SAF</p>

<p>the transitional government</p>	<p>and RSF. Development aid resumes but with conditions (removing state subsidies, floating currency on international market). Expansion of digital technologies, including in banking, telecoms, fintech, creation of new digital platforms for financial service (Cashi). Also the start of politics of internet shutdowns, intensified digital surveillance and interference.</p> <p><b>Bank of Khartoum banking app (Bankak)</b> stands out as key tool for sending remittances by Sudanese diaspora.</p> <p>Introduction of <b>Thamarat</b> family social protection programme, funded by World Bank and Multi-Donor Trust Fund. Digital financial inclusion a key aim. WFP and NGOs continue vouchers and cash transfers and <b>testing mobile money transfers</b>. Hindered by limited access to electricity, internet, devices, and digital literacy, as well as bank liquidity.</p>
<p><b>2021–2024:</b> digitalisation after military coup and at start of nationwide war</p>	<p>Military coup in October 2021. World Bank funding and <i>Thamarat</i> stops, but increase in financial flows from Gulf states.</p> <p>War between SAF and RSF from April 2023: <b>collapse of state services including telecoms, connectivity and banks</b>. International aid organisations fled and/or struggled to provide aid. <b>Diaspora and other Sudanese provide the main aid</b>. Local organisations, including Resistance Committees and <b>ERRs</b> take key role in providing assistance. <b>Bankak becomes main tool for financial transfers or cash assistance</b> for people in Sudan.</p> <p>International organisations do some digital cash transfers and also transfer money (digitally) to ERRs on a small scale. <b>Internet shutdown (by RSF) in February 2024</b>, replaced by the use of Starlink internet services mainly in RSF-controlled parts of Sudan.</p>

## 2.4 Food security

Beyond high-level numbers, information on food security has been limited. The numbers of displaced and food-insecure people, and of those in need of humanitarian assistance, are reported by UN OCHA, WFP, and, sometimes,

by the IPC (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification) and Fewsnet (Famine Early Warning System Network). NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) do food security assessments, and sometimes nutritional surveys, in their areas of operation. There are obvious operational constraints in carrying out wider food security assessments in Sudan, including issues of security and mobility (also because of the need for permits, and the impossibility of crossing from RSF to SAF areas). Fewsnet, one of the main food security reporting organisations, was not able to operate for part of 2025 because funding stopped with the Trump ‘stop-work’ order. Also in 2025, WFP stopped publishing its food security assessments or monitoring reports because the Sudan government banned the IPC following its famine declarations (S64).<sup>4</sup> The IPC makes use of existing information on food security to determine whether populations, in different parts of Sudan, are experiencing various stages of food insecurity or famine. In addition, WFP carries out monthly market monitoring, so do IFPRI and IMPACT, and SPARC/CHC does in-depth market monitoring and analysis in Darfur.

The Fewsnet report from March 2026 continues to record catastrophe (or famine) in parts of North Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states due to acute conflict, displacement, and siege tactics. The risk of famine persists in Greater Darfur and other parts of Kordofan. The report also refers to problems with humanitarian access, due to bureaucratic procedures (travel permits) as well as drone strikes and road closures (Fewsnet, 2026). This and other reports raise concern about rising food prices, disrupted markets, and how production and trade is hindered by high fuel prices (IFPRI Sudan, 2026; WFP Sudan, 2026). Market research in Darfur goes further and reports reduced production (due to targeted attacks and lack of inputs), a change in cropping patterns, and disruption of trade routes between central Sudan and Darfur, and within Darfur. This creates variations in market availability and prices, with the siege of Al-Fashir creating the highest price differential and a collapse of purchasing power (see Box 1). Many traders have left Darfur, and much trade there is now controlled by the RSF or RSF-affiliated traders, with increasing numbers of women entering the market as petty traders (SPARC, 2025, 2026).

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<sup>4</sup> ‘S’ followed by a number is the speaker’s interview ID.

Much of these findings are echoed by our researchers and interviewees. Almost everywhere they told us that food is available on the market, but people have no money because there is no work. Box 1 summarises some of their information.

### **Box 1: Food security information from observations and interviews**

#### **Women in Kassala:**

The salary of a worker, shepherd or sweeper is not enough for a day. People stay in their old jobs. There are domestic workers. If you walk by the government hospitals, all the working women are from [location]. ... we don't eat meat every day. ... We were dependent on generous people for most of the things. They would bring lentils or rice. We didn't have anything. (S81, mid 2025)

We were displaced to Kassala, where I stayed for seven months outside the shelter, but I suffered greatly as I pawned my phone to the grocery store owner in exchange for taking the goods and sent messages to my brothers to support me with money to pay off my debt. (S86, early 2025)

#### **Displaced man in Khartoum:**

As the months progressed, obtaining food became more difficult because most people lacked money. ... There are no jobs or professions available for anyone to earn a living from, as all work stopped during the war. Most of them previously relied on self-employment, which stopped with the cessation of the markets, and people now depend on aid from their families. (S110, mid-2025)

#### **Researcher observations Al-Gezira:**

There is no agriculture: the high price of diesel meant most farmers could not prepare for it. Others were forcibly displaced by the RSF, and they arrived with nothing. ... Food supplies in general are available in the markets, and the markets exist. The only problem is the ability to buy! The problem is the issue of cash, as people do not have cash. (early 2025)

#### **Woman in Al-Gezira:**

The majority of the villagers are poor, and their lives are simple, relying on agriculture, which was affected by the scarcity of rain last fall, in addition to the ongoing war. The majority now rely on financial support from their children abroad. Life was already difficult here before the war, and the situation has worsened since. (S74, early 2025)

#### **Researcher observations South Darfur:**

The food situation is abundant [after good rains], and goods are available in the market, but there is no cash and the sales channel is weak... Purchasing power in the market is weak. Fear is now the primary concern of people. If an ordinary citizen is seen carrying a bag, he will be targeted. Two weeks ago, people carrying mobile phones were beaten after the Tarawih prayers. This happens on a daily basis. The security situation is deteriorating. (early 2025)

**Organisation in South Darfur:**

The general economic situation is deteriorating and inflation is rapidly increasing. This includes all materials such as food and non-food items, spare parts, and fuel – which is the biggest disaster – the price of fuel has doubled from 900 to 1,500 SDGs. (S108, late 2025)

**Researcher observations North Darfur:**

The people of North Darfur fall into two categories. First, the people in Al-Fashir city, who are completely besieged. Their humanitarian and living conditions are extremely dire, and they rely entirely on food from *takaya* and aid provided by charitable individuals, citizens, and some organisations. These *takayas* face a fundamental problem in accessing goods. ... The price of a quarter of millet is 380,000 SDGs in Al-Fashir and the same quantity of millet in Dar Es Salam locality, 70 kilometres from Al-Fashir, is 15,000 SDGs. Second, outside of Al-Fashir, mostly under the control of the RSF, are considered stable areas, and organisations can deliver humanitarian aid and relief to them. (early 2025)

## 3.

# METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Analytical framework

This research combines the concepts of ‘regimes of practices’, political economy, and food security from a structural or population-level perspective as well as that of the individual. In analysing ‘regimes of practices’, we identify the range of practices associated with digitalised food assistance, the underlying assumptions and ideologies, and the government authorities, organisations and businesses involved at the international, national and local levels. This enables us to analyse not only the intended functions of food assistance and its digitalisation but also what they actually do (Foucault, 2007; Schaffer, 1984). As such, we also look at digitalised food assistance as form of governance, and we examine aspects of surveillance and ways in which assistance affects – or aims to influence – behaviour. This is combined with a political economy analysis of how food assistance can become part of processes of maintaining power for some and creating vulnerability to food insecurity in others (see, for example, (Duffield, 1994; Keen, 1994; Mkandawire, 2005). In this case study it means, for example, looking at the effects of the destruction of the banking system and its replacement by merchants for money transfer, or the effect of connectivity becoming a weapon of war as well as being key to lifesaving money transfers. In examining the effects of digitalising food assistance on structural causes of food insecurity, we consider how political and economic processes (and ideologies), as well as inequalities in income, wealth and labour relations, contribute to food insecurity. We also explore the role of social and informal networks, and local-level food and digital access strategies.

### Definitions

There are several definitions of food security, food assistance, digital inclusion and exclusion, and digital poverty. The most common definition of **food security** is: ‘Food security exists when all people at all times have

physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 1996). Food insecurity is the lack thereof. Food security is now usually measured by examining some aspects of household food consumption (see, for example, Maxwell et al., 2014). Food assistance (as opposed to food aid) usually includes cash transfers – we use it to refer to any form of assistance or welfare that has an influence on access to food (Harvey et al., 2010).

Globally, definitions of digital inclusion and exclusion vary much more widely. We were not able to find official definitions for Sudan either from government or from international organisations. Sudan's Cash Working Group, however, shared the following reflections:<sup>5</sup>

- Digital inclusion is the ability of vulnerable communities to access and safely use digital services, including mobile money and digital financial services such as the bank apps, with equitable access across groups.
- Digital exclusion refers to the common barriers that prevent vulnerable groups from accessing or using digital services, including limited infrastructure of current technologies and access to key devices, low digital literacy, lack of trust, financial constraints, and gender disparities (women have less access to phones and smartphones).

In the UK, a group of academics and professionals developed a **digital minimum living standard**: 'A minimum digital standard of living includes, but is more than, having accessible internet, adequate equipment, and the skills and knowledge people need. It is about being able to communicate, connect and engage with opportunities safely and with confidence' (MLDS, 2025). Others have argued that the digital divide needs to be considered along a continuum with at least three levels: (1) whether or not someone has access to the internet, (2) people's skills and use of the internet, and (3) people's use of the internet in relation to tangible outcomes (Holmes and Burgess, 2022).

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<sup>5</sup> Email communication on 27 April 2026.

## 3.2 Methods

The study takes a collaborative approach, with shared project leadership between researchers in the global North and South. The Sudan research is led by the University of Khartoum/ CEDEJ Khartoum (Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales – Centre for Economic, Legal and Social Studies in Sudan) and supported by the SOAS Food Studies Centre. The research started in 2023 and was carried out in two phases. The first, exploratory phase, was carried out in 2024 and findings were analysed and reported in our first working paper (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025).

The fieldwork for this second phase of the research was divided between five researchers in Sudan, who worked in different parts of the country: South Darfur, North Darfur, Al-Gezira, Omdurman and Kassala (see the reasons for this in the next section). It was led and supervised by Tamer Abd Elkreem, from the University of Khartoum (and who has been based in Cairo), and supported by Susanne Jaspars at SOAS. Tamer and Susanne also carried out national-level interviews either together (with international organisations) or separately (Susanne for some Sudanese in the UK, and Tamer with Sudanese aid workers, experts and officials online or in Cairo).

The methods used are qualitative, providing a means of examining lived experiences, interactions between digital practices and political and economic processes, and causal linkages with food security outcomes (Bryman, 2008). It included observations by the researchers in Sudan and semi-structured interviews by all researchers. Our literature search was ongoing, and we monitor the release of new reports and policy documents by the Sudanese government (and its Humanitarian Aid Commission – HAC), the RSF (and its Sudanese Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations – SARHO), and by international and local organisations. We also monitored local news and political commentators, mainly from the Sudanese news website of Al-Rakoba, in which news from different sources is republished. The combination of observation, interviews, news and reports facilitated triangulation, enhancing the validity of the research. The reliability is maximised by having a clear research framework. Data were collected between January and December 2025. Verbal consent was taken from the respondents and interviews were recorded. Interviews in Sudan

were mostly conducted in person and the recordings sent to Cairo, where they were transcribed and translated. Interviews with international organisations were also conducted online, and were recorded and transcribed on Teams. We used NVivo to organise and analyse our data.

## Selection of field sites

We purposively selected our five field sites (and populations) based on food insecurity, and then so as to have a range of socio-economic status, ethnic diversity, migration status, markets, war dynamics, and service provision (including international aid and connectivity). Table 2 gives some information on each of the areas selected, and Maps 1 and 2 show how territorial control by the warring parties changed over time. The places reflect a continuum, ranging from the most food-insecure and digitally disconnected such as Al-Fashir to relatively stable places such as Kassala, with the others in-between but in a dynamic war situation. We also selected areas in part due to connections from earlier times. For example, Jaspars’ previous work and connections in Darfur, and Abd Elkreem’s work and connections in Al-Gezira, Omdurman and Kassala.

**Table 2: Characteristics of field sites**

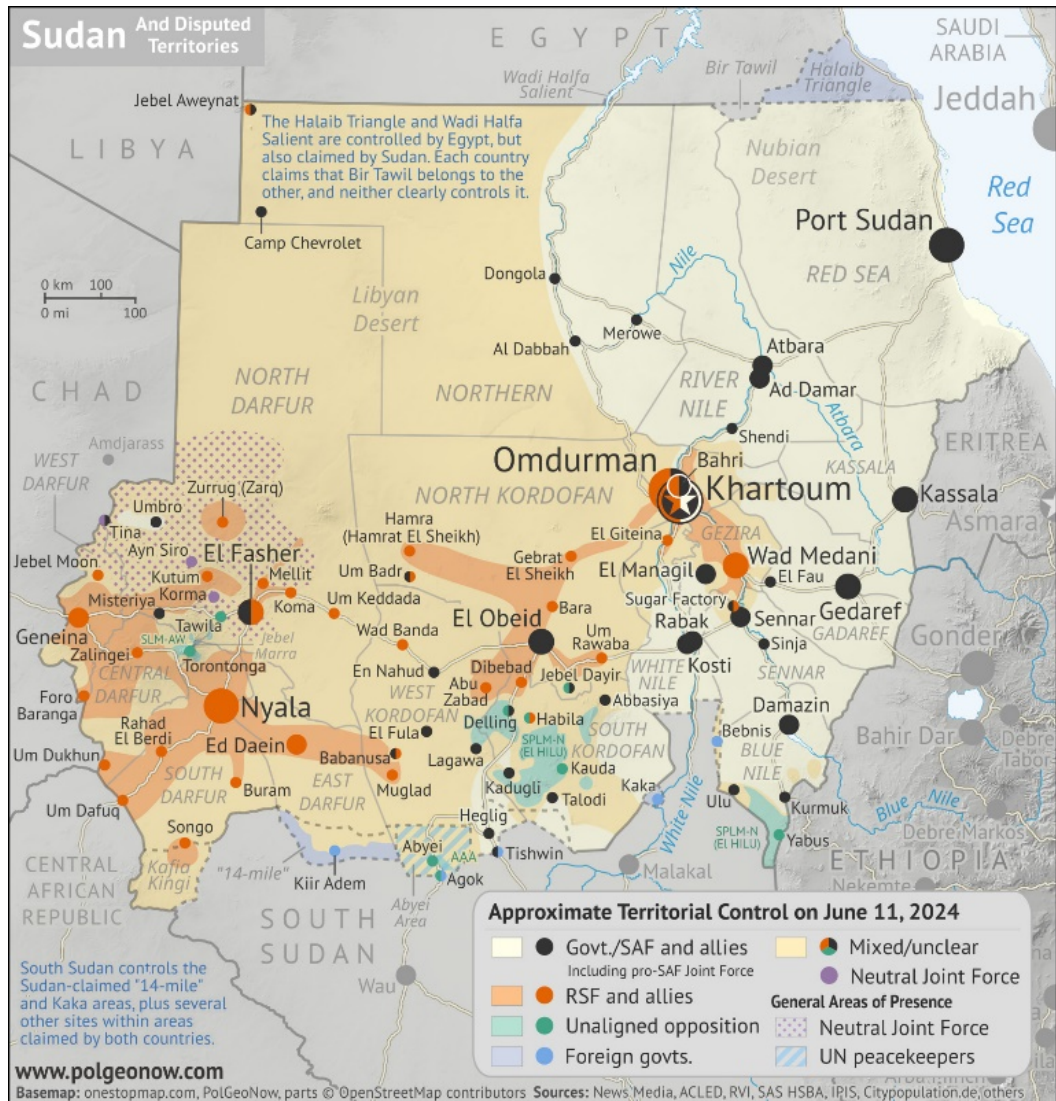
State	Characteristics
<b>North Darfur</b>	<p>North Darfur was food insecure even before war (due to drought, and political and economic marginalisation). Our research has focused mainly on the rural Dar Es Salam area, to the east of Al-Fashir (and a main area of food supply and farm labour for the city), and Al-Fashir itself.</p> <p>Dar Es Salam is mainly a rural farming area, with bigger towns such as Kalimando. The area was controlled by the SAF until February 2025, when it was taken by force by the RSF, accompanied by widespread looting, destruction and displacement (including of our researcher), and a period of internet blackout. There are few international organisations, some local organisations and initiatives (including ERRs). No banks have operated since April 2023, and major traders have left since the start of this war.</p> <p>Al-Fashir was the capital of Darfur region and was surrounded by camps of displaced persons (including Zamzam and Abou Shook camps) from 2003 onwards. Early in the 2023 war, the state was present, but security was volatile. Banks were hardly functioning,</p>

	<p>however, and soon stopped completely. The RSF siege started in May 2024, becoming tighter over time (see section 5.4).</p> <p>Connectivity remained (through Starlink) but food availability was extremely restricted and prices sky-rocketed. Al-Fashir fell to the RSF in October 2025, after which some people were able to flee to Taweila (one of the few places in North Darfur controlled by the Sudan Liberation Army, Abdulwahid faction; SLA-AW) or to Ed Dabbe in Northern State. Many were killed or detained and for some their whereabouts is still unknown.</p>
<b>South Darfur</b>	<p>Research was carried out mostly in Nyala, Sudan's second largest city. The city has been surrounded by camps of displaced persons since the war in Darfur began in 2003. The city is also surrounded by fertile farmland.</p> <p>The RSF has had fairly stable control over the city since October 2023, and for this reason few active battles have taken place during the period of fieldwork. SAF airstrikes on the city have become increasingly common in 2025, however, often carried out with drones. RSF soldiers, especially those returning from Khartoum (since it was recaptured by SAF), pose a risk as they are unpaid and add to the insecurity by through intimidation, theft and extortion.</p> <p>No banks have operated since April 2023. Connectivity has gradually improved, although through Starlink satellite dishes rather than state-approved telecom and internet providers (see section 5.6). Markets are functioning to some extent, but their number has decreased, prices are high, and there have been violent attacks within the market. Some international organisations are present.</p>
<b>Al-Gezira</b>	<p>The state previously had the country's largest agricultural scheme and good food security, although there were inequalities between the urban and rural population and between tenant farmers and labourers (many of whom were migrants or displaced persons from Darfur).</p> <p>When the war started in April 2023, many people fled to the relative safety of Wad Medani in Al-Gezira. International organisations fled as fighting between SAF and RSF followed. The RSF captured most of the state in December 2023, when many of the previously displaced fled to Kassala and Gedaref. The SAF recaptured the city of Wad Medani in January 2025, and the remainder of the state in March 2025. During the period of RSF control, the state experienced an internet blackout and, later, the introduction of Starlink satellites. After the SAF retook it, telecoms are gradually resuming but remain weak. The only bank is in Manaqil. Few international organisations were working in Al-Gezira in 2025.</p>

<p><b>Omdurman</b></p>	<p>Much of Khartoum and Omdurman was under control of the RSF in 2024 and early 2025. Many people fled the city as it was unsafe and essential infrastructure was destroyed (banks, electricity, water, connectivity). For those who remained, often the poorest, the main assistance was provided by ERRs and other local initiatives.</p> <p>Khartoum was an active battlefield between the SAF and RSF throughout 2023 and 2024. At this time, connectivity was provided through limited, heavily securitised Starlink satellite dishes in both SAF and RSF areas of control. From May 2025, the SAF recaptured the capital city.</p> <p>According to the UN, 1.2 million people returned to the city in 2025 but services were barely functioning with most essential infrastructure destroyed (<i>Al Jazeera</i>, 2026b). Telecoms companies restored networks, replacing Starlink centres. Markets are very slowly reviving.</p>
<p><b>Kassala</b></p>	<p>Kassala, in eastern Sudan, was the site of agricultural schemes and had large numbers of refugees from Ethiopia and Eritrea before the war.</p> <p>In 2024 and 2025, it had state presence (SAF controlled), good connectivity, presence of a relatively large number of humanitarian organisations, a functioning market and banks. It was one of the main destinations for people fleeing RSF-controlled areas (mainly Al-Gezira and Sennar). In November 2023, UN OCHA reported 160,000 displaced people in Kassala following the start of the war in April (UN OCHA, 2023).</p> <p>However, from early 2025, after the army recaptured Khartoum, the authorities have been encouraging people to return there, in part by dismantling displaced camps. In November 2025, there were just under 60,000 displaced people in Kassala (Radio Dabanga, 2026).</p>

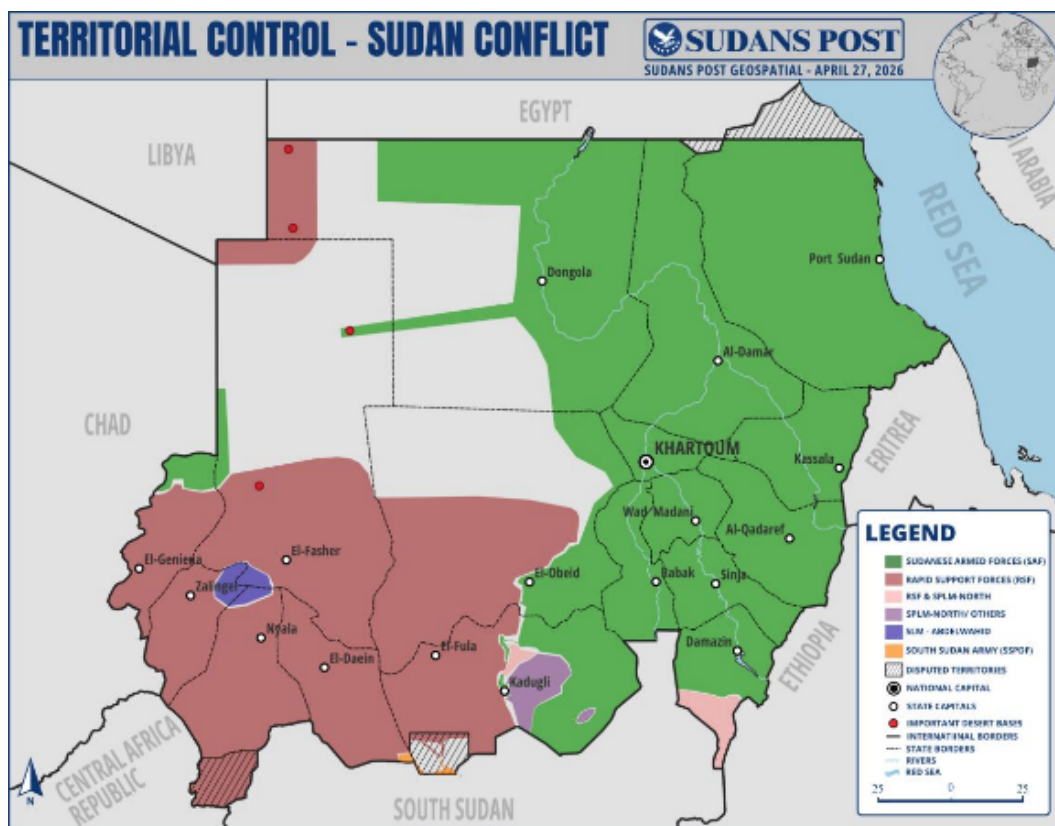
Source: Researcher local knowledge and observations, and local news reports.

**Map 1: Territorial control in Sudan in June 2024**



Source: PolGeoNow Control Map. <https://controlmaps.polgeonow.com/2024/06/sudan-war-map-2024-june-darfur-joint-force-rebels>

**Map 2: Territorial control in Sudan in April 2026**



Source: Sudans Post: <https://www.sudanspost.com/territorial-control-map-sudan-conflict-as-of-may-10-2026/>

## Observations and semi-structured interviews

The researchers recruited in Sudan were people linked to the University of Khartoum, including lecturers, PhD students, postgrads from regional universities (e.g. Darfur) and/or with experience of doing research on food security. All were known and trusted by one of the two main researchers (the Principal and Co-Investigators). Each of the researchers in Sudan was asked to provide their observations on key aspects of the area where they lived, and changes during the period of data collection. They reported their observations on:

- Their environment: displacement, the market, the functioning of mobile networks and internet connectivity, or the number of Starlink satellite centres.
- Information on the international and local organisations working there, other local initiatives to provide food or cash.

- If possible, they observed aid or cash transfers, or reported their own experience.
- Any information on who has smartphones, who is providing cash, and financial issues people are facing and what they do to survive.

These observations are referenced as ‘researcher observation’ when used in the paper. For reasons of their safety, their names are not recorded here nor as co-authors of the paper.

If possible, each researcher carried out semi-structured interviews with: international organisations (2), local organisations, ERRs or Takaya (2), government or other local authorities (1), traders (2), banks or money transfer agents (1), recipients of digital aid or representatives of marginalised populations (ideally three who received aid and three who did not). Adaptations were made according to context, as illustrated in Table 3. Interviews consisted of questions about the digital practices used, how they had changed over time, including how the authorities, businesses and organisations involved changed. Information was also gathered on the process of cash transfer and the different stages and institutions it involved. Also, how plans compared with what was actually done, challenges in terms of access or political interference and, finally, who was excluded and what they had to do to make ends meet. Abd Elkreem and Jaspars also carried out interviews with Sudanese diaspora in the UK, international organisations, and data management and financial service providers, experts on digitalisation or on aid, with similar questions. Table 3 shows the number of interviews of each type done in each field site.

## Challenges

We had to make considerable adaptations in our methods to be able to conduct research in Sudan after April 2023. As discussed in our first working paper, when we submitted the proposal for this research, in 2022, we planned to examine the effects of digitalised humanitarian food assistance and of a government social welfare programme. We selected different food-insecure areas and populations in Sudan according to migration status, socio-economic activities, connectivity, and service provision. We planned to work with researchers based in each of these areas and all meet up (including with our NGO partner) in Khartoum for planning

and analysis workshops. After April 2023, the Sudan lead (Abd Elkreem) was displaced, as were our steering group members and partner organisations. We were therefore forced to work remotely from Cairo and London, together with researchers in Sudan (see above).

**Table 3: Interviews conducted in each of the field sites**

Category	Area					
	North Darfur	South Darfur	Al-Gezira	Omdurman	Kassala	National/international
<b>International organisation</b>	2	2			3	6 (UN/INGO) 1 (data management) 2 (digital service)
<b>Local org.</b>	7	3	4	7	2	1
<b>Authority</b>	3		1		1	
<b>Trader</b>	4 (also money transfer agents)	2	1	1		
<b>Banks/money transfer/financial services provider</b>						2
<b>Internet service provider</b>		1		2		
<b>Recipient</b>	2	2	2	1	4	
<b>Marginalised/ Excluded</b>	1		3	2		
<b>Diaspora</b>						6
<b>TOTAL</b>	20	10	11	14	10	18

Despite our links with the country, it was difficult to identify researchers still in Sudan, and war dynamics, insecurity and displacement affected their work. In North Darfur, our researcher was displaced and we lost contact with them for two months. Fieldwork in Khartoum only became possible when the army retook the city in May 2025 (the researcher we identified felt it was unsafe before). In all cases, we asked researchers to ensure they used

safe ways to communicate and that they did not put themselves at risk. As such, we used a form of patchwork ethnography, combining interviews on the ground when and where possible, with online ones, and building on long-term relationships and contextual knowledge (Günel et al., 2020). When researchers were displaced, they reported on places they fled to and their own experiences (autoethnography) or observations. It is also a form of digital ethnography, in that we used digital technologies to transfer information.

We adapted the areas and populations we planned to study. For the proposal, we selected Darfur (including displaced persons' camps), Khartoum (slums), and Al-Gezira (farm labourers). We had to add Kassala, as this is one of the few areas with a high presence of NGOs, and because – for part of 2024 and 2025 – the other areas were controlled or contested by the RSF. Kassala (as seen in Table 2) was firmly held by government/SAF. The degree of statelessness therefore also became one of the selection criteria.

## 4. DIGITAL FOOD ASSISTANCE PRACTICES

### 4.1 Introduction

The use of digital technologies has proliferated enormously during the war. It is dominated by the private sector, whether banks (in particular the Bank of Khartoum), digital and financial service providers, telecommunications companies, or internet providers. Since 2024, Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), local organisations providing emergency assistance, continued to evolve, professionalise, and have been lauded internationally as the future of ‘localised’ aid, or even humanitarian aid overall. International organisations, including the UN and NGOs, continued to implement cash transfers when and where possible, sometimes with local organisations. They also experimented with new digital technologies, some of which bypassed local banks, organisations and authorities. The data collected by digital technologies is often stored outside of Sudan. At the same time, the Sudanese government has been promoting digital banking and currencies, and the websites of the Humanitarian Aid Commission – HAC (government) and of SARHO promote cash and digital humanitarian assistance as suitable for Sudan. Despite this evolution, during late 2024 and 2025, the aid provided by diaspora and Sudanese elsewhere remained the main form of assistance for Sudanese in need, using the Bank of Khartoum banking app (Bankak). Each of the aid initiatives are discussed below.

### 4.2 Diaspora and Sudanese aid

During 2024 and 2025, the Sudanese diaspora in Europe, the US and Gulf countries, and Sudanese inside Sudan, remained the main aid providers to Sudan, and the Bankak mobile banking app from the Bank of Khartoum the main way of transferring money to and within Sudan. The Bankak app has been a lifesaver, in the absence of international aid, but over time has also caused harm to the wellbeing and food security of many Sudanese donors.

In Al-Gezira, our researcher observed:

What the diaspora people provide is many times greater than what is provided by the government, foreign organisations, or national organisations, followed by charitable people in general. The charitable people also provide support and have a very large role after the diaspora countries.

The importance, compared to other aid providers, was confirmed by others in the area:

If we relied on international community completely, everyone would have died of hunger. The local community played a very significant role! (Government authority, Al-Gezira, S69)

Most of the assistance comes from host communities and charity persons. The people of Manaqil helped us a lot with shelter and security, and without them, we would have died of hunger. Thanks to the people. (Woman IDP – internally displaced person, Al-Gezira, S71)

Note that the emphasis is on local charitable people as well as Sudanese diaspora (the dynamics of local charity mechanisms are further discussed in Chapter 6). While our interviewees in Al-Gezira expressed the importance of aid provision by other Sudanese most strongly, this was evident in all places we studied (e.g. S75, S77, S91, S124). Merchants and money transfer agents in Darfur told us that ‘Most transfers come from people outside Sudan, from European countries and America, as well as from mining areas inside Sudan, and sometimes they come from other states of Sudan ...’ (S92).

We interviewed Sudanese people in the UK about the aid they provided to relatives, friends and to community projects in Sudan. We focused on the UK diaspora because this research project also includes a case study in the UK.<sup>6</sup> We are aware of course that a huge amount of support is coming from Sudanese in the Gulf states, in the US, and from other European countries, with similar dynamics (S68, S75, S110, S125, S127). A clear division was

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<sup>6</sup> Some Sudanese were interviewed for the UK case study, as well as about sending money to Sudan.

apparent between Sudanese who had been in the UK for longer (and in many cases had British citizenship) and more recently arrived refugees. For the former, we found that they provided support to those in need in Sudan in a number of ways: direct to family and friends or people from their village, being part of a group that collects money for *takaya* or other community groups, direct appeals via WhatsApp or Facebook groups (e.g. S54), or to particular projects. Depending on income, each sent between £100 to £2,000 pounds a month to Sudanese in need (e.g. in Sudan, Egypt, Uganda, Chad). The more established residents often belong to numerous WhatsApp groups, often more than a hundred. Examples of groups include: professional, family, friends, residents in same place (e.g. in London), or who originate from same place (village in Sudan), Sudanese associations in the UK, people belonging to the same ethnic group in the UK. Women and men send funds separately, and since women's income is often limited (for example, many work in the care sector, cleaning, interpreting), many were also involved in fundraising activities (e.g. organising fairs and selling cooked food) or sold their own possessions to raise money.

More recent refugees, in contrast, reported contributing much less and sometimes just to one WhatsApp group, such as their ethnic group in the UK or their immediate family (S57, S65). Sometimes, however, they found they had still been put in a group without permission because the group organiser expected them to be able to donate. This frequently happens; a Sudanese refugee in London, for example, who is chronically ill and unable to work, but still has to contribute.

The two groups also differ in how they send money. Some of those who had been in the UK for longer, told us they use 'Altras', an international money transfer company set up in Birmingham. Customers need to create an account with them, provide reasons for the transfer, give an ID and the source of money you are paying from. Others, in particular new refugees, would link with someone with a UK and a Bank of Khartoum account, using the Bankak money transfer app to get the funds to Sudan. New refugees (those recently granted asylum) may also face greater problems with issues of fraud. One informed us that he knows people who have lost their money by sending it to intermediaries who stole the money (S56). For transfers to Egypt, Western Union may be used and for Chad, Ria. Bankak, however, has been the main way of transferring money since the start of the war, although slowly other banks are also starting to develop or resume their

temporarily paralysed money transfer or mobile banking apps: Bede (Zain), Fawry (Faisal Islamic Bank), Okash (Bank of Omdurman). Bankak continued to function, even when the banking system collapsed at the start of the 2023 war, because it had developed online solutions before the war and was not dependent on the Central Bank electronic switching (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025).

On the receiving end, experience varies widely depending on the location in Sudan, who is controlling the area, and when the transaction takes place. Basically, when someone (or a currency trader) sends money (for example to someone with a Bankak account), the sender gets a receipt which needs to be sent to someone with a smartphone in Sudan and access to the internet so the intended recipient can collect the money. So recipients need access to a mobile banking app, a smartphone, and the internet. In parts of Sudan, particularly Darfur, these are severely limited. The exclusion and exploitation this creates is further explored in sections 5.4 and 6.3. Box 2 describes what is needed to set up a bank account and mobile banking: some funds, ID documents, and a functioning bank. Few people outside the big cities have these, not only because of cost, but also because, prior to the war, they were not needed (see Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025, and section 5.5).

## Box 2: Setting up a bank account

To open a bank account, there are several procedures you must go through. First and foremost, the person who wants to open the account **must have a surplus of money**<sup>7</sup> that he wants to keep in the bank. Also, for someone who wants to open a bank account, **it is required to have identity documents like ID card, national number, or passport that are valid.** The problem is that **the fees for obtaining an ID card or passport are unaffordable for many people;** besides many other requirements, such as requiring a recommendation from an existing bank customer for the new customer who wants to open an account in his name. **A specified amount is required to be deposited in the new account if it is opened.** In addition to the account-opening fee, there are ... administrative fees that the bank deducts from the customer's account periodically. (S98, organisation in North Darfur, October 2025)

**After the outbreak of the war, it became impossible to open an account in one of the banking apps, because all banks in the state stopped working, and my Zain SIM card**

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<sup>7</sup> The need to deposit funds in order to open an account is no longer required in 2026.

was looted with the phone, and an account cannot be opened without a SIM card. **Obtaining a replacement SIM card requires a person to travel to one of the stable states, and unfortunately, there is difficulty and harsh suffering if a person wants to travel.** And if I want to open an account [online], it requires me to have a valid passport. Also, obtaining a passport requires the same procedures as obtaining a replacement SIM card. For these reasons, I was unable to open an account in any banking app and could not obtain a replacement SIM card, and thus, I was excluded from digital aid. (S97, North Darfur person excluded from assistance)

**[T]hey told us that to open a bank account, you must have a passport. A passport is expensive, and we felt that money is [more] useful for our business.** However, if they provided us with national numbers, it would be better because it is expensive. They [Blue Nile Mashreg bank] were giving us small amounts of 20,000 [SDGs] each time. When I went to the manager in the bank and told her that we have projects, she said she has no way [to get the cash] because they get limited money from the Central Bank. [This means] we cannot develop a project because the 20,000 will be spent on things from the market and no savings. I must take public transportation for 1,600 daily and take a photocopy of my national ID so I can spend at least 2,000 and 18,000 would be left. (S81, cash grant beneficiaries, Kassala)

Internet access has been similarly variable and changing across Sudan. As discussed in Chapter 2, the RSF shut down the internet in February 2024 which cut off all access, disrupting financial transfers as well as communication. Following this, first the RSF (or aligned traders) brought in Starlink satellite dishes, and later SAF and international organisations did so too. Our data show that costs vary according to the availability of Starlink sites, which in turn is linked to the stability of RSF (or other) control over an area. Collecting the cash or goods (when cash is unavailable) has involved paying a fee: for the use of the Bankak account and for providing cash. All UK senders realised that a fee would be taken but felt they had no choice. This was expressed most strongly by people sending money to Al-Fashir during the RSF siege: ‘the assessment was that there were people ... who needed help urgently. ... [I]f we send £1,000, but £500 get through ... it saves people. The perpetrators will loot anyway. For us, we want to save people whatever it takes’ (S65).

In most cases, people in the UK would use channels they trust, and send to people and community projects they know and trust. This inevitably also means that some groups received less remittances than other. For example, as a group, the *Cannabi* in Al-Gezira had fewer friends and relatives outside of Sudan who could support them. Similarly, for many from Darfur, those in

the UK are often recent refugees living on social welfare or precarious and low-paid work. The huge reliance on diaspora and Sudanese refugees to provide aid also puts enormous pressure on Sudanese abroad. As can be seen in Box 3, the impact can be severe, in terms of their wellbeing and their food security. This is rarely recognised by those remarking on the success of mutual aid. Digital technologies facilitated financial transfers to Sudan, and expanded social networks, but this also led to harm for those in the UK.

### **Box 3: Effect on diaspora of sending money to Sudan**

#### **Changing social networks and expanding requests for help:**

I am now in regular contact with relatives I did not visit for a long time. Sometimes people I did not know well before ask for money. Sometimes I have to block their account as I could not afford to make that connection. (S54, Sudanese/British citizen)

Social networks have expanded but this also has been a burden. Knowing the vulnerability of people, their repetitive demanding. When you send money, people are happy, but then they tell you more. About kidnapping by RSF, people dying, what is going on in the shelter. (S59, Sudanese/British citizen)

The wider the network, the more trauma you suffer yourself. But at least you say to yourself, you are not under shelling, did not get raped. (S59)

Huge stress awaiting the next call from people they knew long ago, or don't even know, asking for help. This is often on Facebook. One of the women was contacted by one of her teachers from primary school. (S55, Sudanese/British women's group)

Sometimes I pray to God that no one will ask for money today. People don't understand that you can be in the UK and be poor, even if working, on low income. Sometimes I can't sleep at night ... it doesn't feel like enough. There is a lot of depression and mental illness in the Sudanese community. (S55)

#### **Effects on food security and livelihoods of those in the UK:**

I can see every day, ladies are selling their belongings. Gold. Every time I check Facebook group, I see someone selling a ring or something gold. (S54)

I spent all my savings. Especially during the first months of the war. I was not expecting it to take so long, so I was generous with my money. (S59)

It is difficult to plan [your finances] because you never know when you are going to be asked for money, or how much. But you have no choice, you need to send money. (S55)

Everything bought gets translated into what it could mean for people in Sudan, much more value. If you think of buying a sandwich, now you don't. This means sometimes

cutting back for ourselves and our kids ('shall we send this money to your cousin instead?'). (S55)

It has also become more acceptable for women to work. For example as carer or as cleaner. There has been a huge rise in Sudanese women working in care. Women would never have been allowed to do this kind of work before. (S55)

Overall, it is a disappointing feeling, not building the future just paying for my family. I have to send money, but it makes me depressed. I cannot buy clothes because I have to send money home. I feel guilty [for not sending more] even though it is not my fault. (S56, Sudanese refugee)

It is very difficult to send money and make ends meet. It does not feel good. I earn just about enough to buy food, pay service charge, and send some money to family. That's it, there is no money for anything else. (S57, Sudanese refugee)

### 4.3 Emergency Response Rooms, *takaya* and other local initiatives

The ERRs and other local organisations are the main organisations providing food assistance, in particular through community kitchens, since the start of the April 2023 war. The origins of the ERRs are with the Resistance Committees, which were part of the revolution from 2019, but since April 2023 their role was almost entirely to provide humanitarian relief (Abbashar, 2023). During 2024–25, their close collaboration with international organisations, ongoing harassment by warring parties, and increased reliance on digital technologies has led to a depoliticisation and technicalisation of these local groups, as we explain here.

How aid was provided to ERRs and by whom changed over time. According to ERR representatives, in the first few weeks of the war, they relied only on local people for support but shortly after they started collecting funds from diaspora.<sup>8</sup> Later in 2023, international organisations started to contribute. Like the diaspora, organisations use Bankak for these cash transfers. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), for example, provided group cash transfers to 56,128 people in 2023 (NRC, 2024), some of which were to

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<sup>8</sup> Presentation at KUNO (platform for humanitarian knowledge exchange in the Netherlands) in October 2025.

ERRs. In 2024, this number had increased to 648,037 (NRC, 2025).<sup>9</sup> While some international organisations were able to digitally transfer cash direct to ERRs (and other local organisations), others were not and worked with international and/or local NGOs. The latter included in particular donors like USAID, and UN organisations. For example, some donors have channelled their aid through Proximity2Humanity (S133) as well as through the Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition. National organisations will charge a fee for receiving and transferring the funds (5%–20%) (S133); whereas the Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition claims that 95% of funds going through them goes direct to the ERRs (S121). WFP supports ERRs only in Khartoum.

ERRs ‘professionalised’ over time as part of their reaching out to international organisations. A Localisation Coordination Council (LCC) was created at the end of 2023, to coordinate and allocate funds among ERRs. At a meeting hosted by the Overseas Development Institute in London, in November 2025, ERR representatives said the most important thing they had learnt as part of the meeting was humanitarian terminology and the humanitarian system. They had to adapt. Together with international organisations, they developed a joint system for planning, implementing and reporting directly to international donors through the ‘Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition’ (from September 2024; see CDP, 2024). Through this collaboration, and with external support, they created the F system for the project cycle: F1 is the plan or proposal (community kitchens, protection, etc.), F2: local council check and approval, F3: the contract, with information about bank transfers. F4: a financial report (using information from the banking app). F5: the narrative report, and F6 for evaluation. To facilitate the use of this system, and therefore international funding, the coalition is supporting ERRs to develop a ‘mutual aid portal’, which ‘aggregates and represents data, shares information and helps the ERRs communicate their impact to donors’. It links directly to the F system (Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition, 2025).

The financial transfers, planning, and reporting to funders are all digitally mediated. The ERRs therefore require access to the internet, smartphones (or computers), which varies across Sudan and carries risks. These risks include harassment, arrest, torture, because of their perceived political status

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<sup>9</sup> Their 2025 annual report was not available at the time of writing.

by both RSF and SAF (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025: 30–33). A recent study on the state of mutual aid in Sudan (Crisis Coordination Unit, 2026), found that about half of the ERRs used Starlink to access the internet. To reduce associated risks in RSF-controlled Nyala, ERRs may limit the time spent in centres with Starlink internet access or rely on private satellite dishes for sensitive information (Crisis Coordination Unit, 2026). In areas with active fighting, internet access for civilians is likely to be blocked altogether (see section 5.6). In a discussion on 25 March 2026 in London, ERRs expressed the need for ‘capacity building’ for safe digital transfer of data. Despite these concerns, a March 2025 report, highlights plans for a whole new range of digital technologies, including the development of stablecoin payment solutions (‘smart contracts’ and ‘stablecoin wallets’ that bypass local banking infrastructure), and the use of AI for reporting and anticipatory action (ERR, 2025). By April 2026, these were still plans and had not yet been implemented.<sup>10</sup>

In international aid circles, the ERRs and mutual aid are celebrated as the future of international aid (see, for example, Ahmed and Salmon, 2026). They have twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, in 2024 and 2025, and won the Chatham House Prize, the Rafto Prize, and the Right Livelihood Award, all in 2025 (Otim, 2025). As Pantuliano and Tracey (2026) write: ‘With the era of “big aid” drawing to a close, and debates intensifying about reform, reset, and decolonization, Sudan offers a test case’ for the future of humanitarian aid. It is also seen as a prime example of localisation.

ERR promotional tours outside of Sudan in mid to late 2025 appear to be linked to the reduction in USAID funding from the time of the Trump ‘stop-work’ orders in early 2025. A number of news articles appeared at the time about the forced closure (due to lack of funding) of ERRs – ranging from 700–1,000 ERRs closing, or roughly 80% of them (ACAPS, 2025; Nashed, 2025; Usher and Soy, 2025). While USAID provided the bulk of humanitarian funding to Sudan in 2024 (44%), it funded this mainly through the UN and INGOs, with an intention to change to the Mutual Aid Coalition channel (ACAPS, 2025). According to an ERR representative, the bulk of external support came from USAID until early 2025 (S133). According to

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<sup>10</sup> Email communication with expert developing the digital platforms.

the 2026 report on the state of mutual aid, the largest donors to local initiatives are: (1) local organisations, (2) INGOs, (3) individuals in Sudan, (4) community events, (5) the Sudanese diaspora (6) the UN, (7) the private sector (Crisis Coordination Unit, 2026). Funding through the Mutual Aid Sudan Coalition increased during 2025.

While the ERRs receive the most international attention, there are many *takaya* outside of the ERRs. In our interviews, people (in Sudan and diaspora in the UK) mainly referred to *takaya* rather than to ERRs, and – together with direct support for family – this comes out as the main form of aid in all areas we researched by those on the receiving end. International organisations, beneficiaries of *takaya*, traders, and local authorities in Darfur, Khartoum and Al-Gezira all agreed on this, most as aid for displaced populations.

One international organisation representative saw the *takaya* as a form of social solidarity as well as food (S108). A Sudanese/British woman, in contrast, told us how the normalisation of *takaya* made her sad, as it used to be for poor or homeless people and carried stigma or shame, but this is no longer the case (S54). In articles by Western researchers or practitioners, reference is often made to *Nafeer*, a centuries-old Sufi charity system, or other local customs of sharing resources. Much is made of Sudan's traditional social network and mutual systems of support in times of hardship. These are widely recognised as being quicker to respond, and, in the case of Sudan post-2023, form the bulk of the aid, with the main issue for outsiders being how they can be better supported (Buchanan-Smith, 2024; Carter and Satti, 2026).

It is important not to romanticise local support networks, however. During international aid cuts, concepts of mutual aid and resilience can also be seen as a way of normalising this practice and de-emphasising the negative consequences. Those providing aid are under extreme stress, and local groups continue to be harassed, arrested and killed.

## 4.4 UN and INGO collaboration with private digital and financial service providers

UN organisations, INGOs and the private sector have continued to experiment with new digital technologies in Sudan. Digital food assistance is seen as an efficient and accountable means of getting aid to those who need it most. Physical food assistance remains an important form of aid (in particular for WFP), but risks being looted in transit, diverted, or subjected to a range of bureaucratic processes leading to severe access constraints. With digital technologies also playing a role in warfare, aid convoys have been attacked by drones (Al Jazeera, 2026a). Digital technologies were therefore needed in part to overcome the challenges of delivering physical food aid.

In addition to security and access constraints, for international organisations limited funding plays a key role in promoting digital technologies. The UN's Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for Sudan was 51% funded for 2023, 70% for 2024, and only 39.5% for 2025 (UN OCHA, 2026b). The Trump 'stop-work' order had a major impact on the funding of many humanitarian organisations. The adoption of digital technologies has long been justified for reasons of efficiency and accountability (reducing fraud such as double registration, or corruption in local financial institutions), as well as providing dignity and choice. Arguments based on efficiency become more prominent when funding is limited.

Initiatives since mid-2024, include: a WFP self-registration cash transfer programme, the expansion of its SCOPE system<sup>11</sup> using local banks (in SAF areas), food or cash vouchers (by INGOs and UN), the Cashi digital platform, and INGO and business experimentation with blockchain and 'stablecoins' to transfer funds to people and businesses.

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<sup>11</sup> SCOPE is a digital biometric beneficiary identification and benefit management system (see Table 1).

## WFP self-registration

During 2024 and 2025, WFP provided some of its cash transfers through a self-registration system to areas it was unable to access and where it had no presence on the ground. It was used in Khartoum, Al-Gezira, North and South Darfur, and Kordofan. They advertised the programme on social media, by email, or through local leaders and reached more than half a million people in Darfur and Kordofan in 2025, including Al-Fashir. This is how the process was described by our researcher in Nyala:

The post has a link and when you click it, you get a questionnaire. You have to specify state and locality. Longitude and latitude determine whether you are eligible. Then it asks for a lot of personal information: national ID number (or of your relatives), bank account number, family members (wives, children), previous card from WFP. Then security questions: e.g. what village were you born? Your first school, etc. (5 questions). If all the information is correct, the information is sent and they send you a 20-digit code and tell you if your registration has been successful.

WFP informed us that this is basically an online version of the physical registration form they would otherwise use and contains all the fields needed to collect the personal information. The system geolocks the link, so that anybody outside of the geographically targeted location is unable to access or utilise the link. When people complete the form, it immediately checks for duplications, and cross-checks ID, bank account and phone number. The bank also does a verification, thus highlighting that a large component of the procedure is about detecting potential fraud. WFP recognises that not everyone will have a smartphone, bank account or ID document, but assume that Sudanese culture means that it will be shared (particularly mentioned for Al-Fashir). Or, if they have an ID but not a bank account, WFP can open a 'bulk account' (act as custodian). Alternatively, WFP checks their registers from before the conflict (S63).

Our interviews with people on the ground indicate a number of issues with registration for this programme, by the poorest and most food insecure.

Issues included:

- In South Darfur, there was misinformation about being able to register with someone else's bank account, and agents setting up to

assist with this – for a fee (note that those who registered with the bank accounts of others did not eventually receive cash transfers).

- In North Darfur the programme was stopped due to low coverage because few people were able to sign up.
- In Khartoum, people needed to travel to physical ID verification centres.
- Suspicion of ‘random links’ that may be scams (S125 and S129) or that it was part of the RSF war strategy to gather data to locate them. Many did not attempt to register for this reason (S123). This was when the RSF had surrounded Omdurman and was shelling and sending rockets into it indiscriminately.

This indicates that there are issues with the design of the digital technologies, and their use in the process of providing assistance, not only in terms of the requirements for certain documents or assets, but also regarding who is able and willing to use the digital interface. The design itself, in particular contexts, can create a barrier to inclusion. Systematic feedback on user experience, whether on the design or the process, is rarely sought.<sup>12</sup> The politics of these issues is discussed further in section 5.2. Some INGOs piloted self-registration on a smaller scale and for different reasons: for example in Kassala because of better connectivity, access to banks, and security (S58b). The organisation sent a link to people’s phone numbers, which connected to an online Kobo form,<sup>13</sup> where they were able to register their information and then get assistance through bank transfers.<sup>14</sup> Others mentioned the use of e-wallets for cash transfers (for example in North Darfur). ‘The e-wallet allows financial transactions to be conducted with great speed and provides multiple layers of security to protect data. It also features easy tracking in money management through spending monitoring features and transaction records’ (S113). The same organisation also praised the technology because of the possibility of ‘paying bills, topping up balance, online shopping, and discounts and rewards features’ (S113).

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with a UN organisation as part of our global analysis.

<sup>13</sup> Kobo Toolbox is a data collection, management and visualization platform.

<sup>14</sup> The organisation was not able to scale up this information because it was unable to source more funds – which donors were allocating to the most food insecure areas (e.g. Darfur).

## Banking beneficiaries and promoting business

In the east of the country, WFP aimed to distribute cash through banks. In this case, registration included the collection of biometric data, but also bank account and mobile telephone numbers. They engaged actively with banks to assist beneficiaries with registration and collecting KYC (Know Your Customer) information to support the opening of accounts, after which cash can be transferred straight into the account. According to WFP, by late 2025, all displaced beneficiaries in Port Sudan were receiving digital cash transfers (S63). In Kassala, project beneficiaries reported that organisations had brought bank people and that they had opened accounts for them (with Blue Nile Mashreg Bank in this case) and that everyone now had a card with an account number to which cash was transferred (S80). Organisations promoted digital banking in SAF/government areas because of the government change in currency (in December 2024) that forced people to deposit old currency in banks, and that limited cash withdrawals (also see Chapter 6). On the whole, despite this being a form of forced financialisation, the organisations we interviewed felt this was a positive change.

INGOs are also involved in distributing cash grants to enable people (often women) to set up small businesses. They receive training and ongoing support to become good entrepreneurs. In one case, they received cash transfers to their (sometimes newly established) bank accounts monthly over a period of six months (S81 and S85). This is discussed further in section 6.3.

## Vouchers

Vouchers link beneficiaries directly to traders and have been used in a variety of ways, including food vouchers, cash e-vouchers and vouchers to businesses. An example of the first category is a local organisation that distributed food vouchers in Darfur to be redeemed with certain selected traders. As the organisation is from the area, it has staff members on the ground who register IDPs, give them paper vouchers and form committees from the IDPs to monitor whether items are received. Local traders have been selected because they have bank accounts, and based on recommendations from local leaders and IDPs as well as on their records before the 2023 war. Traders are responsible for bringing in food items, and

IDPs come with their vouchers on an agreed date. A contrasting example is of an INGO contracting the companies LMT and Aidonic to distribute value vouchers (which are exchanged for goods at a certain cash value) in South Kordofan, with guidance about contracting a diversity of traders (S58b).

We also came across two examples where vouchers were used to support businesses to provide food. First, an international NGO supported bakeries in Darfur: the companies would give QR codes to bakeries, who would take this to a wholesaler, where it would be scanned and the baker would collect the flour. The wholesaler would be paid outside of the country, in US dollars or Euros (ibid). WFP used a similar system to distribute food in Zamzam in Darfur (which they call ‘Business-to-business’ – B2B). This was the only way that WFP was able to reach people in Zamzam camp when it was declared as a famine location. They contracted a big trader (AIGT), who worked with smaller retailers on the ground (as they were unable to work directly with many small retailers). A local organisation issued commodity vouchers to people in Zamzam, with a unique QR code to be scanned by a mobile device at the retailer site. WFP later contracted about a hundred retailers directly (S64).

## Blockchain, cryptocurrency and digital wallets

A small number of INGOs and digital service providers are experimenting with blockchain technology to bypass local banks or to be able to operate where banks are not functioning. Coalapay, for example, is a company that was established to move money quickly for humanitarian purposes, using blockchain (S66).<sup>15</sup> They use stable cryptocurrencies, or ‘stablecoins’, that move funds instantly via blockchain from funding agency to recipient. Recipients (households or organisations, including ERRs) have digital wallets that stablecoins are sent to, after which they can be converted to local currency. They work with organisations on the ground who help open the digital wallet, and with local service providers who are willing to accept digital currencies and are able to cash out (exchange cryptocurrency for cash) with this.

Surprisingly, Coalapay found a number of traders (in Sudan) who were willing to hold US digital dollars (as stablecoins) and exchange them for

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<sup>15</sup> See also: <https://coalapay.org/about>.

local currency. Recipients are given a QR code by the NGO partner on the ground, which is shared with Coalapay, and the agent – with a digital wallet – provides the cash after scanning it. This is advantageous for local organisations, Coalapay argues, because money can be kept in digital US dollars in their wallet and converted only when needed, thus holding its value better. Ultimately, Coalapay’s aim is for people to be able to pay directly with digital currencies as well (S66, S58b). The question of legality (and sovereignty) looms large with this kind of intervention (see Chapter 6). In 2025, the company considered the question of legality in Sudan to be ambiguous and not to be a big issue while the scale of the projects was so small. It is likely to become a bigger issue once cryptocurrencies are adopted on a larger scale. In January 2026, the Central Bank of Sudan, issued a statement that it was officially considering issuing a digital currency.

Other private sector initiatives include payment platforms by fintech start-ups such as Cashi. Established before the war (in 2020), it rapidly expanded during it. As for other digital transfers, a mobile phone is needed to set up a Cashi wallet, ideally a smartphone. Large transfers need an ID document but smaller ones do not (just a phone number). It is essentially a merchant network linked with an independent mobile wallet. In 2025, it had 2 million users and worked with around 100,000 merchants. While the company promotes its platform with humanitarian organisations, it is mainly used by Sudanese within the country to transfer money to community initiatives and to their friends and relatives. Out of the 2 million users, about 50,000 were NGO beneficiaries in 2025 (S67).

## **4.5 Data collection, storage and processing**

INGOs and UN organisations use digital technologies for assessment, registration and monitoring. The data gathered are often used outside the country for analysis and are stored internationally.

Food security and needs assessments use technologies ranging from satellite imagery to questionnaires sent by mobile phone (or chatbots), to tools like Kobo or specially developed digital platforms like those for the ERRs. WFP has developed a mobile Vulnerability Assessment and Monitoring method

(mVAM). While WFP Sudan used this at the start of the war because they were unable to gather any data otherwise, their experience is that this does not work very well. The people who responded (to the calls) were the better off. This makes sense, especially in areas of conflict, as they are the ones with smartphones and electricity. They had to use some of the data to inform the IPC in 2024, however, as it needs a minimum sample size. In 2025, WFP conducted a food security assessment and food security monitoring programme (for refugees and IDPs) but did this face-to-face as much as possible (working with an organisation called IMPACT). The more accurate information led to a declaration of famine and the Sudan government suspending the IPC in Sudan. Since then, WFP has not been able to publish their food security surveys (S64).

Other organisations mentioned using Kobo or ComCare both as a digital tool for assessments and for registration. Both are data collection software and apps. ComCare is a global system and is used by the Sudanese Cash Consortium for all partner organisations for their registration and monitoring. Data is uploaded and beneficiaries selected according to predetermined criteria (S85). WFP gathers extensive information on its beneficiaries through the self-registration process (see section 4.4 ) and through its SCOPE system. SCOPE is a biometric beneficiary identification and benefit management system (WFP, 2016), which can store a range of demographic and food security data as well as biometrics, and can be linked to a range of interventions (including from other actors). They argue that it removes the possibility of duplicate registrations, thus reducing fraud and corruption.

When asked about data management, international organisations would usually tell us they had data protection measures in place, for example, by adhering to European Union (EU) General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and not using personal data, and that everything is anonymised. However, about data storage, they would say either that these issues were dealt with by an entirely different department (and they were not able to talk to us about it) or reassured us that data were stored safely with Amazon Web Services or Azure (a Microsoft cloud computing platform). Such storage has different implications for the use of metadata (see Chapter 6 for more on this). A data management person informed us about the kinds of data that would be stored on their platform:

Everything needed for the projects. So the first step will be all of the beneficiaries, or at least all of the beneficiaries that are going to receive some kind of cash voucher assistance or cash-based intervention. And then the activities they're going to conduct; funds the transactions, right? What they [the organisations] are going to do with our platform is allocate assistance or a balance to each beneficiary. All of this information is safely stored in a server for each organisation. (S62)

For WFP, the personal data they collect is kept with the UN ICC – the international UN computing system in Geneva, but in early 2024 they tried to create a federal cloud with Amazon, with the data protection principles of the UN embedded.<sup>16</sup> They also have a contract with Palantir, to streamline the delivery of food and cash, using a supply chain optimisation tool about which little is known. The terms of service are subject to non-disclosure agreements. Palantir also builds AI technologies for surveillance and military purposes. As a report by Access Now suggests: 'For such a big data company, synthesising seemingly innocuous logistical data points and anonymous metadata from the world's worst combat zones with defence sector information to create actionable, lucrative intelligence would not be a heavy lift' (Access Now, 2024: 47).

## **4.6 Government policy: Sudan's accelerating digital transformation**

From the late 1990s/early 2000s, the Sudan government has encouraged the country's digital transformation. While initially limited because of international sanctions and people's mistrust of the state, digitalisation accelerated during the transitional government, and particularly during the current war (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025). As we have described, mobile banking and mobile cash transfers have become a lifeline for many people in Sudan. In late 2024 the government forced the move to digital banking by changing the currency.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted during phase 1 for global part of research.

Until late 2025/early 2026, the government had little influence over other aspects of digital transformation, such as digital IDs and cryptocurrency. In December 2025, however, a newly named Ministry of Digital Transformation and Communications announced the imminent launch of ‘SudaPass, the unified national digital identity’.<sup>17</sup> The aim of this would be to provide a single sign-on for all government and private services, secure and trusted electronic verification, legal electronic signature for transactions and documents, a modern digital infrastructure that enhances transparency and reduces time and complexity. According to the Akhbar Alsudan,<sup>18</sup> this is a ‘a step towards a modern digital state ... and an easier future for all Sudanese’. In January 2026, the Central Bank of Sudan announced it was considering issuing a digital currency to update payment system technologies, providing a unified platform for electronic payments and protection from cybersecurity risks.<sup>19</sup>

In a message from the Central Bank in January 2026, the government also declared that creating the digital currency is their highest priority for 2026. This appears to be at least in part based on the existing digital transformation occurring in Sudan, the use of cross-border digital money, and the loss of (paper) infrastructure. They justify it in terms of efficiency, reducing corruption, tax evasion and money laundering, and being able to trace the movement of money. This is of course part of a global push towards financial digitalisation: ‘Data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) indicate that more than 130 central banks worldwide are currently studying or developing central bank digital currencies (CBDCs), representing roughly 98% of the global economy’ (Al-Tayeb, 2026). It is clear that this will further marginalise the digitally excluded and has the potential for increasing exploitation and feeding into inequalities, as well as heightening people’s fear of surveillance.

The government and RSF each have their humanitarian assistance departments, HAC and SARHO respectively. While the HAC website promotes community-led assistance,<sup>20</sup> NGO representatives noted in mid-

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<sup>17</sup> <https://suna-sd.net/posts/ozar-althol-alkmy-oalatsalat-taahn-aan-krb-atlak-alhob-alkmy-alotny>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.sudanakhbar.com/1692654>

<sup>19</sup> <https://suna-sd.net/posts/digital-transformation-minister-discusses-strengthening-digital-integration-with-c-bos-governor>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.hac.gov.sd/en>

2025 that a letter from HAC in Khartoum encouraged international organisations to provide cash digitally (cash-in-hand not being acceptable). At the time, this was only in Khartoum, but they also mentioned that they are essentially dealing with at least ten different HACs in different states. SARHO's website in 2025, actively promoted cash transfers in 2025 (their website is now down):<sup>21</sup>

Technology plays a crucial role in facilitating this shift [to community-led approaches]. Mobile phone networks can bypass corrupt local governments, allowing for direct cash assistance to families in need. Similarly, remote sensing data can pinpoint areas most devastated by disasters, enabling targeted resource allocation and minimizing wasted efforts.

Humanitarian organizations are also exploring the potential of data analytics. By analysing vast datasets, aid workers can predict and prepare for potential crises. This proactive approach allows for pre-emptive resource deployment and minimizes human suffering. Imagine being able to predict an impending drought and preposition vital supplies in vulnerable areas, mitigating the devastating consequences on local communities.

An international NGO we interviewed praised SARHO's own use of digital technologies as approvals to work can be submitted electronically and quickly approved. It should be noted, however, that neither of these humanitarian departments distribute digital aid themselves.

## 4.7 Conclusions

Digitalisation continues to accelerate in Sudan (as it does everywhere). Sudanese initiatives and organisations remain the main providers of aid, but even these are being digitalised through the use of banking apps and the creation of digital platforms to facilitate the transfer of information from ERRs to external (Western) funders. International organisations are less present but also use a range of digital practices to provide humanitarian aid. Digitally mediated aid has been crucial for

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<sup>21</sup> <https://sarhoo.org/innovation-in-humanitarian-aid-meeting-the-needs-of-a-changing-world-2/>

saving lives, but the dependence on Sudanese donors has caused increasing hardship among the diaspora. At the same time, however, many of the poorest are excluded. Some do not have relatives or friends in the diaspora, do not have smartphones or bank accounts, or are in RSF-held parts of Sudan where it is impossible to set them up. Those who design and use the technologies rarely seek to get feedback from users. Fear and misinformation can play a big role in uptake. So far, the government has played little role in digitalised aid in Sudan since the war started, and the dominant role of Western or regional organisations raises questions of data protection, storage and, ultimately, sovereignty. As funding declines, digitalisation is likely to be further promoted as a cost-efficient way of providing aid. These issues are explored further in the following chapters.

## 5. EXPERIENCE OF DIGITAL ACCESS AND EXCLUSIONS

### 5.1 Introduction; types and degrees of exclusion

This chapter examines the deeper and more contextually nuanced understanding and lived experiences of digitalisation by exploring processes of exclusion and inclusion. The effect of digitalisation on food security is inextricably connected with questions of in/accessibility, and what determines this, scale of coverage, historical marginalisation, war dynamics (loss of assets and infrastructure), and – related to this – access to internet connectivity. In this chapter we will discuss each of these factors that interact to create different degrees of exclusion in different communities.

Organisations (international and local), traders and some individual Sudanese aid workers emphasised how digital technologies facilitate the aid flow with speed and accuracy in performance, and that they prevent the possibilities of manipulation and embezzlement found with aid provided in-kind (e.g. S111, S81, S91, S92, S96). Within Sudan, digital aid is less constrained by physical barriers, security checks and geographical distances compared to in-kind aid. Some interviewees, however, would suggest that only those who were already better off were able to benefit, and that some had been able to make huge profits just because they had a bank account and a smartphone. As a displaced person in North Darfur argued:

they cannot buy smartphones due to poverty and cannot deal with them due to lack of knowledge. For these reasons, the use of digital technologies has become monopolised by a specific group of people who control them according to their personal whims. And the remaining majority have become at the mercy of those who control the digital technical means. (S111)

The use of mediators, such as merchants and others with bank accounts, by people who would otherwise be excluded, will also be discussed in this chapter. We argue that, while there are variations across the country, the

people most in need of support tend to be excluded from digitalised food assistance. Variations depend on the availability of aid and who is assessed and registered, whether people have ID documents, who provides the digital aid, the type of digital transfers, the nature of war strategies and who is in control of the area. As we discuss in this chapter, forced – or coerced – inclusion, into formal citizenship or banking also comes with risks.

## 5.2 Experience of assessments and exclusion

Food assistance first and foremost requires data on the population in need, and then information on the people that have been selected for assistance. Many people we interviewed reported experiencing numerous assessments, but with very little aid provided as a result, or none. It appears that digitalisation has not made this aspect of delivering food assistance more efficient or accountable. Conversely, despite an increase in digitalised assessments, large sections of Sudan's population have still not been reached at all (for example in Al-Fashir and in Dar Zaghawa in Darfur in 2025/26). Data collection during war and ongoing displacement is hard and many people have been displaced several times. For those who have been assessed, however, their experience is that promises of aid are frequently unfulfilled; aid has either not been delivered, or has been diverted, or too little came too late.

The very act of collecting data in the very securitised active war situation is entangled with vigilant intelligence radars aiming to prevent the enemy from taking advantage. Local authorities, including military intelligence and the HAC may perceive people not only as victims in need of aid but also as infiltrators who may serve the enemy's military agenda. This means potential aid beneficiaries have to undergo security verification. A local HAC representative explained about IDPs fleeing from Khartoum to Al-Gezira:

I write a letter addressed to head of the Local Intelligence, that the person mentioned above, coming from Khartoum for example, will be housed in a school. This is the number of his family. ... This is a security check here. They have a security supervisor there to provide

assistance. The national ID number is something that concerns the security agencies. (S69)

The local first respondents, as the main aid actors, are also operating under these security constraints and authorities that are suspicious of their activities, particularly data collection. Nevertheless, they continue to conduct surveys and register the population in anticipation of national or international sources of aid, mostly announcing the emergent need on social media platforms. The time spent on assessments appears disproportionate compared to the aid actually provided.

For international organisations, experimentation with digital food assistance practices remains small scale, for example with blockchain, where numbers of beneficiaries remained in the low hundreds (S58b). With larger programmes, people were excluded as they could be not registered because assistance was not sufficient for all those in need, or because of lack of ID documents, smartphones or bank accounts. While this was true of physical aid distribution (e.g. S70 and S72 in Al-Gezira), digital aid faces similar issues, as NGOs explained to us in Kassala:

No one is intentionally excluded, but we have a specific target. The number of people in the area [in need] is greater than the number you set, so we adhere to the criteria, like you target widows, and you will work with specified group. ... [T]he reality is that most people living in the area are in need, so you must be smart in choosing who is deserving and who is not deserving according to the criteria. (S80)  
Some people see the surveys and mistake them for support at first glance, but when nothing is provided, they assume the organisation is lying. Some have also been let down by other parties in the past. (S84)

These are bigger issues during the current crises than in earlier ones, as the scale of the crisis is larger and the aid can only meet a smaller proportion of the need. We saw in Chapter 4 that all emergency appeals have been underfunded, and this problem has worsened since the Trump ‘stop-work’ order. As one organisation explains:

Trump’s decision had a significant impact on our work because we had a large project in which we had begun registration and cash

distribution, but it was terminated shortly after it started. This was very difficult because the displaced people were in dire need during a critical period. (S120)

Similar issues were reported to us in other areas. Digitalisation could not overcome these issues of differences between need and assistance and created different barriers<sup>22</sup> (such as the need for smartphones, ID documents and/or bank accounts (S100)). This resulted in people either not being able to register, or trying to register (and providing their data) but not receiving assistance. Both can be illustrated with the WFP self-registration programme, the largest digital food assistance programme in Sudan in 2025. For example, in Khartoum, a displaced person who was excluded from aid explained:

To address the issue of the lack of personal bank accounts, some people have entered account numbers that belong to their neighbours or relatives. This information is verified at a centre. When individuals go there, [the organisation's] field teams inform them that the bank accounts do not belong to them and ask them to bring the original account holder. If you can do this, and they verify it, you will receive support. However, if the account holder does not appear, your support will be dropped, and you will be excluded. (S110).

In South Darfur, people also thought they could register more than one family on the same bank account. One INGO representative explained (S100):

More than half or 80% of people do not have bank accounts. Therefore, they need to register with other people's accounts. This, of course, requires trust. ... You must know the person and he must know you. You can register with someone else's account. One account can accommodate 20–30 families. I personally did this with my own account; I registered 30 families.

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<sup>22</sup> Barriers for in-kind aid include lack of access (denial of permits, checkpoints, attacks on convoys), looting, the high cost of road transport, and the potential for contractors to be closely linked to one or other of the warring parties (Jaspars, 2018).

He also explained that there were people who opened centres to register people, sometimes more than 200, and who would charge 2,000 SDG per person registered. Ultimately, however, only those who registered with their own bank account received cash assistance – meaning that, in this case, the majority of those who registered lost out (KIS97, KIS109, KIS125).

The WFP self-registration programme was established to reach people in otherwise inaccessible areas, but in reality most were excluded (perhaps as many as 95% if one bank account holder registered another 20 families). An exception is Al-Fashir, where, according to one *takaya* manager, about 40% of the population received WFP cash transfers through self-registration (S113). Here, however, the effect was minimal because in the city under siege, food prices were astronomically high, and so were fees for money transfer. ‘Beneficiaries receive 150,000 SDGs per payment ... which is currently enough to buy a *kora* [4.5 lb] of maize, enough for a day or a day and a half’s provisions’ (S113). Even though minimal, it was the only form of aid. Sudanese also continued to transfer cash to Al-Fashir, even if it only provided one meal for their starving relatives and despite knowing that it would also feed the RSF economy.

This huge gap between collected data and actual delivery of aid is not simply a manifestation of a misguided aid policy, it also raises questions about the design of the technology. Another question is, what is the fate the data collected from the 95% who did not get supported? The extracted data, shapes national and global power relations and economic dependency (see Chapter 6).

### **5.3 Historical marginalisation and pre-war inequalities**

As we have seen in earlier sections, digitalisation of food assistance requires pre-existing assets, infrastructure and a digital environment. People need ID documents, bank accounts, smartphones and access to the internet to receive digital assistance, which in turn requires functioning banks, markets, electricity, stable connectivity and security. Each of these is determined to some extent by pre-war inequalities, war dynamics and repercussions.

The availability of banking services and people having a bank account, varied in different regions of Sudan. Pre-war distribution of banks was mainly concentrated in Khartoum, with only one or few branches in other cities or big towns, but most of the rural areas were not covered, nor did the population need it. Thus, while some upper-class neighbourhoods in Khartoum were becoming part of a cashless society using bank cards and apps (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025), in the far hinterland villages and small towns one would find only a single trader who enjoyed these services. These extremely varied pre-war populational characteristics had an immense impact on the inclusion-exclusion dynamics of digitalised assistance. These big segments of population with no access to banks and less access to digitalised services would eventually become those most in need during the war.

Overwhelmingly, rural populations in Darfur neither had access to nor saw the point of opening an account with all the documents it required (see Box 1 on setting up a bank account). This was not only because mostly they did not have cash to deposit, but for those who did have the necessary cash, it was a lack of trust of these distantly located financial institutions, with their all cultural and urban style and sophisticated procedures (see section 5.5 below). In Darfur:

It is very unfortunate that not all citizens have smart devices or bank accounts. On the contrary, those who have accounts represent a minority, and they are former city residents and have financial means and have left the state since the beginning of the conflict. As for those who live in villages, they do not have bank accounts, and if they do, they do not have the digital application of Bankak, and they do not even know how to use it. (S87)

It was only the well-to-do, such as traders and government and private sector employees, who opened bank accounts and banking apps in rural areas or towns. A trader from Darfur, who had worked for WFP before the war explained:

[A]t the end of the month, WFP would send the amount I was owed to my account. For this reason, I went to the Bank of Khartoum, Al-Fashir branch, and requested to open an account in my name. The bank employee guided me to present my valid ID (identity card or

passport), and I was also required to fill out three forms, after which an account was opened in my name. Later, I easily created an account in the Bankak app. (S92)

According to a leading digital financialisation expert (S134), the Central Bank of Sudan facilitated opening bank accounts for businesses and traders because they were the first categories targeted for digital inclusion. Despite this drive, however, even before the war unbanked money still constituted more than 90% of the economy (S134).

In 2021–22 in Darfur, few people used mobile banking and digital money because of limited internet coverage and digital literacy (for example, knowledge of mobile phone services, awareness and use of mobile internet, and of digital financial services). Only a small percentage of people owned smartphones (35% in Darfur, according to GSMA et al., 2022), mostly young men. Lack of electricity meant that few people could charge their phones at home; in West Darfur, only 25% of people were able to do this (GSMA et al., 2022). In 2025, people we interviewed still estimated widely varying smartphone access across the country, with one reporting 95% ownership in South Darfur (S100), another that only 35% of people had ‘digital means’ in North Darfur (S97), and 15% in Al-Gezira (S73). Clearly, these are not precise figures, but they do indicate the legacy of low ownership in these areas. It is important here to remember, all those who have Bankak must have a smartphone but not the other way around. The percentage of people that have a smartphone does not match the percentage who have the banking app, as they still need to set up a bank account.

Others who are excluded are those who do not have relatives in the diaspora, who are also the historically marginalised. In Chapter 4, we already discussed how people in Darfur have few relatives abroad who can send money, as they come from a historically marginalised area. While migrating to Europe, they were often kidnapped or abducted into slave labour and came there more recently so are less well-established (Jaspars and Buchanan-Smith, 2018). The labourers in Al-Gezira (the *Cannabi*) have few people in the diaspora who can send financial transfers. Even the support from local, national and international organisations is weak, including the *Zakat* chamber, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the UN, because they have no one to represent them. Field observations include that the *Cannabi* are subordinate to the tenants who rent land, and who do not

raise their voices for them. When aid arrives and the *Cannabi* themselves speak out, they may receive only a small proportion. A labourer confirmed that they received little aid, mostly from local initiatives and if the aid was from an international source, little reached villages and labourers far from the town. Even within the labourers' camps, if any aid reached them, it was focused on the displaced (S72).

## 5.4 War dynamics and degrees of exclusion

War dynamics have compounded problems of exclusion. ID documents have been lost or stolen, or are impossible to obtain. Banks have been destroyed and looted. Setting up a bank account in areas under RSF control has become impossible, as any state under their control, such as Khartoum, Al-Gezira and Sennar at certain periods (see Chapter 2), has no functioning banks. The availability of electricity and communications systems also varies widely, limiting the ability to transfer cash digitally. This is how one person described North Darfur in 2025:

There is no education, no health services, no social services, and no security services. ... since April 15, 2023, to this day, there have been no banking services in North Darfur State, and there are no other opportunities to provide financial services, whether traditional or digital, other than transfers coming to beneficiaries, whether through Bankak or Fawry applications or other methods previously developed by Sudanese banks. Even these transfers are closely linked to Starlink devices and electrical energy. The only alternative currently available for electrical energy is solar energy cells. As for the rest of the thermal generators and the like, there is no fuel for them and some of them have been looted. (S87)

Many informants stated that they have been excluded from aid because they have either lost their IDs fleeing war or through incidents where documents were burned (S86). A worker in a local organisation in South Darfur experienced situations where most documents had been burned, and more than 50% of the community lacks documents (S105). For in-kind aid or cash distribution, some organisations showed flexibility by verifying identities with local authorities, community leaders, neighbours or local organisation

(S70, S75). But this kind of flexibility cannot be adopted in digitalised assistance managed from far away, which requires bank accounts and/or IDs for registration and verification more than the human/humanitarian eye.

Poverty (either prior to or through war) and theft means some people do not have smartphones, as one displaced person in North Darfur noted: ‘I don’t have the means to buy a smartphone, and even if I were given one as a gift, I wouldn’t know how to use it’ (S96). In Box 1 we saw an example of a person in North Darfur who had had their phone and SIM card looted and who was not able to set up a bank account or register for WFP digital cash transfers (S97). ‘I did not meet the conditions for receiving digital aid because I did not have a smartphone or [bank] account number.’

A women’s organisation in North Darfur classified the excluded from any form of digital assistance as follows: ‘The first type, those who cannot be reached due to security obstacles. The second type, those who do not have means of communication (communication networks, energy, smartphones). The third type, those who are not familiar with using modern technologies like (Bankak applications)’ (S90).

To set up a bank account in an RSF area like Darfur would require travelling more than a thousand kilometres to the nearest safe cities with functioning banks. This would involve crossing active war zones, and passing through security checkpoints, all adding to the cost of travelling that most excluded communities cannot begin to imagine. Thus, only those who owned a bank account before the war, can receive digital financial transfers. What adds to the intensity of the situation is that most of those who owned digital devices were also among the first to leave these cities. For these reasons, the use of digital technologies has become monopolised by ‘a specific category of people who control them according to their personal whims. The remaining majority have become at the mercy of those who control the digital technical means’ (KIS96).

In bankless states, traders and other individuals who have bank accounts, and the Bankak app, represent mini-banks. They both provided an essential service and were able to profit from their ownership of a Bankak account. Money transfer fees ranged from 5% to 40%, depending on a spectrum of interconnected factors, such as the availability of banks, of cash, the price of

food, proximity to active war zones, degree of securitisation of connectivity and personal connections. In North Darfur:

Even when the money arrives, we face a big problem known as transfer fees, which at one point reached 50% of the transfer value, as the owner of the transfer shop takes from 20% to 30% of the amount directly. That is, if you receive a transfer worth 100,000 SDGs, you only get 70,000 SDGs. Then, under the pretext of the lack of cash, you are forced to take goods instead of money, and the beneficiary is forced to accept that. (S87)

However, in Nyala, around the same time (early 2025), the percentage had gone down to 5%, but it had been as high as 20–30% in the previous year (S100). This was largely due to the increase in the availability of cash (in old currency) (see section 4.4). In some cases, perhaps the primary beneficiary is the person in whose bank account the digital transfer was deposited' (S 93).

The worst cases of exclusion were for people in areas under siege, in particular the RSF siege on Al-Fashir, which gradually destroyed all means of survival. Its inhabitants experienced an unprecedented degree of exclusion that we define as nothingness. Meaning that nothing remained, no functioning basic infrastructure (such as banks, electricity, water), extremely limited availability of goods in the market, and high prices (including for food), few INGOs and no UN organisation present, extreme levels of exploitation (including by merchants acting as money transfer agents), and extreme physical insecurity because of continuous shelling (S91). The only thing that saved some people from starving to death was the availability of Starlink satellite dishes, some people with Bankak accounts, others organising *takaya*, and the diaspora and other Sudanese who sent money. Rising food prices and high fees for transfers, meant that financial transfers became less and less useful. In early August 2025, the price of sorghum was 25 times higher in Al-Fashir than in the surrounding areas. Over a period of just 10 days, the price increased by 100%. For money transfers, more than half the funds were deducted as fee for the transaction alone, forcing much of the population to eat *umbaz* (oil cakes), a food normally reserved for animals (S91).

Even this extreme situation proved to be better than what they went through in the aftermath of the invasion of Al-Fashir by RSF. Relatives abroad had to close the WhatsApp groups used to raise funds, for fear that phones would be taken by the RSF and the WhatsApp group used for extortion and surveillance. The WhatsApp groups turned into death traps. This is the situation of ultimate exclusion in the continuum of degrees of exclusion we have been discussing in this chapter.

In government/SAF-controlled areas, there are banks and some possibility of getting ID documents and setting up bank accounts, but this does not mean that everyone is able to do so. In states like Al-Gezira, banks are only coming back gradually since the SAF regained control, and in Kassala displaced populations may not have the means to set up a bank account. In Al-Gezira, in 2025, banks only operated in Managil, which led to overcrowding. When account-opening services were restored, their system was overloaded so they only accepted a valid passport as ID. This forced people to rely on agents who were part of the family or who lived in the area. For example, if there was group of about five or six in the neighbourhood or village, and there is a person who has the Bankak application, they authorise him to receive funds meant for them. In addition, mobile networks were not strong enough to open bank applications, and it was not possible to download material, so people still relied on transfers via Starlink (researcher observation).

In Kassala, banks are operating and the area is relatively stable under government/SAF control, but people who fled there face difficulties because they do not have bank accounts. As an IDP women in a Kassala sheltering centre explained:

We were keen to have personal accounts and Bankak but it needs passports which cost 200,000 SDGs and to have Bankak account you need smartphone which costs at least 250,000 and I have many problems ahead of me. My children need many things now. (KIS80)

Even for those selected to receive cash grants to set up small businesses, the cost was prohibitive. The 450,000 SDG was equivalent to four months' financial support and there were more immediate priorities, such as food for their children (S80). Thus, for them, digital accessibility becomes too expensive to afford, even if they realise how vital it has become for their

life. The organisation implementing this project, decided to provide food vouchers, and encouraged the Blue Mashriq Bank to help people set up accounts (S120). However, recipients complained that this bank does not have a money transfer app, nor can the bank issue the deposited money because it does not have the physical cash (S80). One fintech company expressed the opinion that organisations should buy phones for beneficiaries so that the provision of digital cash would be facilitated and argued that this would be cheaper than distributing physical cash (S67).

To conclude, intersecting factors of connectivity, ownership of smartphones, ID, access to banks and varying levels of transfer fees are compounded by conditions of war dynamics. The overall impact of these factors and conditions puts excluded categories into an inclusion-exclusion continuum.

## **5.5 Getting ID documents and becoming digital subjects**

The deeper dimension of citizens without ID documents is the background to the reasons some did not have it in first place, and thus implications of needing to acquire it to be able to be a recipient of aid. The historically rooted crisis of citizenship, extractivism, state violence and marginalisation created a deep culture of mistrust within Sudanese state–society relations (Abd Elkreem, 2018). This was particularly the case in war-torn areas such as Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile, and that were far removed from public services and a positive presence of the state. In these areas, much of the population lacked a sense of identification with the state, from which they expected nothing but violence, extraction and lack of recognition. These communities were treated as subjects – not citizens with rights (Mamdani, 1996). The current war has aggravated this mutual distrust between the state and marginalised communities.

Marginalised people, for example in Darfur, perceive and experience this mistrusted state as an enemy more than as an entity to which they belong or identify with, and from which they expect some rights, such as public services (Abd Elkreem 2018). The prevailing sense of alienation prevented them from pursuing or holding any ID documents. In some extreme cases, a person’s ID can also increase vulnerability, particularly for those who might be collectively identified as ‘social incubators of the enemy’. The state of

origin of a person's ID can also increase their vulnerability in such contexts. Having an ID card was perceived, rightfully, as meaningless because people felt nothing could be gained by having it. It would also make them more governable and increase their duties through taxation, conscription, etc. Many did not care even to have birth certificates (Farah, 2015), the first document that proves their very existence as seen by the state bureaucratic eye, which is perceived as something to be hidden from. Until very recently, a state of invisibility was widely adopted in these war-torn communities as part of the 'art of not being governed' (Scott, 2010). As one displaced person in North Darfur commented:

To be honest, I do not trust banks or other financial institutions at all, and I have never opened a personal account in a bank ever. My decision is based on the experience that others went through from their dealings with financial institutions. They said during President Gaafar Nimeiry's era, money was nationalised, including balances in banks. And during President Omar Al-Bashir's era, in May 1991 the currency was changed without notifying the clients and customers dealing with banks. The change had a profound impact on traders and everyone who had money in the bank. (S111)

For these 'postcolonial' subjects, there was a close connection between visibility, intelligibility and governability in their daily life. Most Sudanese have been alienated from modern institutions and trust and abide more by customary law. Modern financial institutions, and all other modern institutions, were hijacked and monopolised by elites and urban dwellers. As such, the issuing of ID documents by modern public institutions in distant urban centres and attempts to prove their citizenship status was not an easy process due to cultural and ethnic barriers. For many Sudanese, this encounter was unpleasant and often needed a mediator (*wasta*) to facilitate the procedures. The more marginalised the community and individual, the less accessible the state becomes. Digitalisation, whether for financial transfers generally or for aid, changed the relationship between Sudanese people and the state. Digitalisation thus makes people visible to the state, and therefore governable; reversing the postcolonial subject's aim of being ungovernable (Scott, 2010).

As communities in Darfur were beginning to realise the importance of ID documents, the national institutions responsible for issuing them were

engulfed in war, central data centres of civil registration authorities were inaccessible (as were banks). For the first few months of the war, these centres – in Khartoum – fell under the control of the RSF militia. It took a while until the system was gradually restored, starting from safer but far-distant cities such as Port Sudan. The more SAF regained control, the more these services resumed operating and some ‘lucky’ IDPs in Kassala, for example, could obtain the much-needed ID documents (S75).

‘Lucky’ because, after three years of war, this service cannot be expanded to RSF-controlled areas. In fact, the militia manipulatively used the fact that millions of needy citizens in the areas it controls do not have access to these services in order to legitimise the parallel government it established in 2025 (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2025). This parallel government is not recognised by any state or international bodies, nor has it started issuing parallel ID documents. At the same time, movement across its territories is very securitised, with people being intercepted as they try to travel from one state to another, and they may be accused of being traitors by one side or the other and imprisoned.

This crisis of ID documents is deeply intertwined with digitalised humanitarian work. In places like Kassala, people had no choice but to engage in digital banking if they wanted to receive aid or conduct any kind of financial transaction. According to our researcher there, the shortage of cash meant that from 2025, people had to pay with Bankak, which has become the main form of payment within the city and even some surrounding villages. International organisations are facilitating the opening of bank accounts, and thus ID documents, for people in government-controlled areas, and generally see this as a positive step forward (e.g. S63, S80).

The ownership of ID documents, and this being a requirement for people to receive digital cash transfers, has deeper contextual meanings. Digitalisation has a governmentalising effect, rendering postcolonial state subjects visible, so they can no longer adopt the art of being ungovernable through self-invisibilisation.

## 5.6 The real cost of the connectivity gap

With most aid, whether local, from the diaspora or from international organisations depending on internet access, connectivity becomes a key factor in inclusion or exclusion. There are numerous barriers to internet connections, including the fact that this has become a tool for power and has been instrumentalised by parties to the conflict to support their war strategies.

Access to the internet is in part determined by who controls the area, and how securely. This also determines the safety of accessing it, including both risk of attack and theft, as well as surveillance. In this deeply divided war context, connectivity is essential for aid provision but is also used to conduct the war (army and militia communications, as well as use of drones). The closer their proximity to active war the less likely it is that people will have access to stable connectivity, as war strategies may be to shut down internet services or attack digital infrastructure.

### Connectivity in war and contested areas

The primary reason for Starlink's introduction, particularly by the RSF militia, lies in the instrumentalisation of the telecommunications sector as part of war strategies. In February 2024, the RSF sabotaged telecom companies operating in areas controlled by the SAF in order to paralyse both the army and its supporting economic infrastructure, while also disabling the intelligence functions reliant on communications (Hammad, 2020; Siddig, 2024).

The total communications blackout in February–March 2024 hindered trade, financial transfers and aid operations, including the functioning of ERRs (Amnesty International, 2024; Reliefweb, 2024). One *takaya* manager told us: 'sometimes we went to far places or even outside Omdurman to find a stable connection, or used Starlink as an alternative and we succeeded. Our only concern was that meals would not be interrupted despite the difficulties' (S124). Sudani and Zain were able to restore connectivity in parts of the country by mid-March (Siddig, 2024), but large parts of Al-Gezira, and Khartoum, remained cut off until recaptured by SAF in April

and May 2025 respectively, when connectivity was gradually restored. Darfur still remains cut off.

In many parts of the country, mainly those controlled by the RSF, one of the only ways to be connected has been by using Starlink, a satellite service operated through Elon Musk's SpaceX (Siddig, 2024). This benefited the RSF economically and politically. Economically, RSF generals and connected traders brought in satellite dishes from Chad or UAE and charged people to use them, or from selling, licensing and taxing them. Politically, the RSF can control the number of sites where Starlink satellites can be used and can monitor the people using them (Abd Elkream and Jaspars, 2025). The RSF also needs them militarily to be able to operate drones. And of course, at the same time, it is also the main lifeline for people in need of assistance because it is the only internet connection in a place like Darfur. As one person explained about a contested area in North Darfur (in early 2025):

They [Starlink] are devices that can transmit information to the other parties to the conflict. The Rapid Support Forces leaders even issued a death sentence for anyone found to be in possession of Starlink devices. ... Now [after taking control of the area] a breakthrough has occurred, and Starlink devices have been licensed to some individuals. They are now available, but not in sufficient numbers to enable them to be used optimally. (S87)

A big RSF convoy (in February 2025) had been tracked, ambushed and destroyed by SAF-aligned joint forces. The next day, angry RSF fighters carried out a wide-scale revenge campaign in which all Starlink devices were confiscated, as they thought some people from the area had passed on information that led to them being ambushed (field observations). After these restrictions had been in place for a while, some traders trusted by the RSF were the first to be licensed and allowed to rent devices from them (S92). Consequently, Starlink services are not available to the general public, or only under conditions of strict monitoring and surveillance and for short periods of time (S92). Another trader in North Darfur says that the reality of internet connection in these areas is that 'you just have to wait and seize the opportunity when it is permitted again at any time, because those who impose the ban on it also need to use it' (S94). In parts of Al-Gezira, when it was under RSF control, some risk takers were operating Starlink

secretly, weighing the benefits against the potential risk of being caught by RSF fighters (S68).

In Khartoum state, when large parts of it were still controlled by the RSF, authorities in SAF-controlled areas provided a few Starlink internet centres for civilian use. While they initially declared it illegal, subsequently Starlink was made partially legal in Khartoum by opening a few centres under strict observation. However, access for civilians was difficult and unsafe. As one displaced person in Omdurman described:

Access to that area [to access the internet] became difficult due to the presence of RSF snipers who tried to target us from the direction of Bahri. The governor of Khartoum then distributed Starlink devices at several points. Security agencies, such as the Military Intelligence Service, also provided citizens with a half-hour or quarter-hour opportunity to use their Starlink device. I remember that the Military Intelligence Service also had cash, so if you received an electronic transfer, you could exchange it for paper currency. (S110)

It is not surprising that security is highly interconnected with connectivity in Khartoum as the SAF and RSF were fighting from positions in close proximity, separated by only a few neighbourhoods, in a setting of urban warfare. According to a *takaya* organiser: ‘moving around with a smartphone brought with it an unwanted security gaze and surveillance because of suspicions that people would share sensitive information or GPS coordinates to the enemy’ (S125). Even in South Darfur, where the use of Starlink has become normalised (see later in this section), moving with a smartphone posed a risk, particularly from mid-2025 when RSF soldiers returned from Khartoum after being defeated. Ownership of a smartphone signalled a higher economic status.

The biggest threat at that time, was that people stop you and tell you to give them your mobile phone because they are a security agency. They search your mobile phone, look at the messages inside it. There were many incidents where victims were forced at gunpoint to open their Bankak account and transfer all money, or they have their smartphones taken. Some people have even disappeared. (field observations)

The mass extortion cases of Al-Fashir, are an extreme case of this. Navigating these complicated situations also requires some level of digital literacy of checking the account, sending, transferring the notification that goes beyond usage of smart phone for simple calling. But as any other skills the digital literacy is unevenly distributed across communities the digital illiteracy is higher among the neediest population (S114).

In both North and South Darfur, in order to provide money transfer services, traders had to obtain their own Starlink satellite dishes. Businessmen and traders were the first to buy, as this generated lucrative business (S98, S100). They were enthusiastic about the service, and – as we have seen – they clearly also benefited.

I don't believe there are disadvantages in using digital technologies, but there are challenges and difficulties facing those dealing in the practice of digital technologies in North Darfur under these current security conditions. (S94, trader in North Darfur)

It has become a necessity for every merchant to have a Starlink in their home or shop to connect to the world. (S101, trader in South Darfur)

Those operating Starlink sites also faced risks:

when you deal with other accounts, especially outside Sudan, this may get you into trouble with security, as you may be questioned. Therefore, we do not transfer to anyone randomly. Whoever has a large amount of money should deal with the bank directly. Sometimes there are people wanted by the state who take shelter through you transferring or receiving funds on their behalf. This application is monitored by the state. As for transferring simple daily expenses, that is normal. Local permits are required for Starlink hardware. (S126)

## Normalisation of connectivity in the absence of a state

In relatively stable RSF-controlled cities like Nyala, the use of Starlink for internet connections became gradually normalised. By February 2025, the number of satellite dishes in the city had significantly increased compared to

the previous year. There were around 50 at the bus station in 2024, and by early 2025 there were more than 200. It was the same in neighbourhoods, in homes, and even on top of cars. For people who have the capabilities and security connections, it is normal to see a vehicle with this dish on its roof (field observations). According to one organisation representative, in March 2025:

In every street you find 3–4 dishes, in the market and in the neighbourhoods. In my estimation, in Nyala, the number of dishes is no less than 500. ... [T]he price has decreased. It was 3 million pounds [to buy a satellite dish], and now it's priced at 700,000–800,000 pounds – less than a million. Thus, its number has increased, and it has become an area for investment, and it brings in much money and people need it. In other words, if a hundred people visit the centre per day and each person sits for an hour, and the cost per hour is 1,000 pounds, the daily income of someone who owns a dish becomes 100,000. (S100)

In some places, as argued by a Starlink site owner in South Darfur, people quickly started to familiarise themselves with Starlink's technicalities, for example, setting up the device, and applying for a monthly subscription to provide internet access (S106). Such technicalities also included connecting to solar panels for electricity, as Starlink dishes are deployed in areas where the national electricity grid is not functioning (S68). The initial cost of setting up solar panels is very high and, unless there is some degree of stability, many do not take risk of installing them.

In early 2024, Starlink centres were simple straw huts, there were few in Nyala, and the cost to use them might be as high as 2,000 or 3,000 SDG/hour. Over time, buildings became more permanent, and the centres became social centres (with TV satellite dishes as well) as well as centres to conduct money transfers. Later in 2024, mobile Starlink services were provided in neighbourhoods, after the market closed (at about 4 p.m.). From mid- to late 2025, Starlink centres proliferated and Starlink devices also moved into people's houses, with households connecting them to antennas to strengthen their Wi-Fi signals within a radius of 500–1,000 metres. In

centres, the cost decreased further to about 500 SDG/hour (field observations).<sup>23</sup>

I/NGOs and UN organisations also operate with Starlink satellite dishes. Even in states like Kassala, with good connectivity, some organisations use Starlink to report to their headquarters from remote villages, even though SAF has made using Starlink illegal (S84). The background to this is that Starlink internet devices are difficult to control and can be used for communication about army movements to the RSF (Darfur 24, 2024). It also feeds the RSF economy, for example through charging for their use (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025). An INGO representative explained that they ‘supported emergency rooms with Starlink, distributing the device and training people in its use. They were also thinking about creating mesh networks to connect 15 to 20 households to one single Starlink device’ (S121). UN agencies have also distributed devices to their local partners such as NGOs and ERRs. ERRs have also used funds for this themselves (S121). A leading ERR member at the national level, stated: ‘we were mostly using Starlink devices during the Rapid Support Forces’ control period. Organisations purchased the devices and there was dedicated support for it, even now’ (S133). A local women’s organisation in North Darfur recommended allocating Starlink devices to enable them to freely collect, analyse, and share data with their donors (S90). Maybe the key word here is ‘freely’, as many of public Starlink centres are male-dominated spaces and also under security surveillance.

## Paying for cash even when digitally connected

Digitalised financial transactions could not entirely replace physical cash and provide solutions to the cash scarcity because digital dependency has been exploited. People pay for the digital transfer but also for withdrawing physical cash.

In areas of RSF control, people had to pay to get cash or accept goods in-kind for a lower value. In Al-Gezira, a trader applied a technique locally known as *Kasir* to solve the problem of cash scarcity: ‘*Kasir* means that when there is no cash, we buy goods, for example, sugar: and sell it for less

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<sup>23</sup> See our photo series: <https://digitalisingfood.org/the-normalisation-and-weaponisation-of-starlink-in-sudan-photo-series/>

than its original price in order to get cash. The difference is borne by the service provider. It's a difficult situation, but it also provides something' (S68). In Khartoum this exploitation of digital versus cash became normalised to the extent that even 'if you go to any police or passport office today, currency exchangers sit outside, ready to give you any value in cash in exchange for a percentage they deduct from your money' (S110).

Ironically, in Nyala this cash scarcity was not experienced, as the militia made the new banknotes illegal, forcing people under their control to use the old notes. Thus, Nyala became a reservoir of old banknotes which did not find their way to the bank. At the same time, traders who traded with the rest of the SAF-controlled areas such as Ad-Debba, in Northern State, were ready to exchange physical cash for digital money. As they would not be able to use old notes with their counterparts and wholesalers in SAF-controlled areas, digitalised money served as a great neutraliser between conflicting currencies. People across the divide send and receive digital transactions; the question of two mutually de-legitimising sets of banknotes surfaces only when they want to cash out.

Under siege, the city of Al-Fashir represented the extreme devaluation of the digital money as explained by a manager of a *takaya*:

We suffer from the problem of currency fluctuations. For example, if you have a billion SDGs in Bankak, this is equivalent to half a billion in cash. At one point, I was buying oil for 260 million pounds, which meant I had to exchange 460 million pounds from Bankak to obtain oil of this value. I then sold it to obtain 230 million pounds in cash. I also must obtain cash for some expenses, such as firewood, water, and other items, since those who sell them only deal in cash. Merchants accumulate their cash balances and sell goods at a high price. (S91)

So far, we have focused on those who out lost in a process of exploitation of digital dependency. However, there are clearly also winners who profit from these digital transactions. In the political economy chapter (Chapter 6), we will come back to how digital food assistance practices can contribute to the concentration of wealth and power.

## 5.7 What are the excluded doing?

For those who are excluded from digital assistance, local social networks stand out as the most prominent source of support, but many people also need to find some – any – kind of work.

While the humanitarian community has increasingly adopted the narrative of ‘mutual aid’, they rarely take account of the contributions of charitable people at the very local level. As we saw in Chapter 4, the diaspora and local charitable people are widely seen by people in Sudan as the main form of support. While international aid is often focused on IDPs in shelters, it is not uncommon to find more than two IDP families hosted by a single household.

People excluded from assistance need to find work or other ways of making ends meet. Even those who do receive assistance (whether through aid projects or social networks) need to supplement this, as it is never enough to live on. The kinds of work that people can do also varies by context. In besieged cities of Al-Fashir and in Al-Gezira under the RSF, paid work opportunities were much harder to find, whereas in relatively stable cities like Kassala and Nyala, displaced populations could find some precarious daily labour. Many reported working as petty traders, farm labourers, or porters in the market, loading and unloading goods (KIS11, KIS96, KIS97). Some men are involved traditional gold mining, which involves migrating far from home and hazardous conditions (Saed and Pearce, 2025). Women and children were working as domestic servants in well-to-do city dwellers’ households, and some incidents of being taken advantage of and harassment have been reported (S79).

The most excluded, and desperate, engage in theft, illegal businesses (S82) or join the army or militia. Some – excluded youth in particular – joined the army or the RSF, which turned into a big ‘looting machine’ as rightly described Alex de Waal (Democratic Underground, 2024). A woman explained how her cousin pursued this path saying:

His wife is pregnant, and he has no work and no one to stand with him. He works with RSF as a driver. His wife gave birth, and they

[the RSF] helped him, and they brought him two cows. As soon as they left, he immediately moved with them. His brothers got angry and started threatening him. He told them, when I was in need who stood with me? No one stood with me. Now, after he left Omdurman, he sent his wife and children to them, and he went west with the Janjaweed. (S79)

Further examples are shown in Box 4 below, which are just a selection of what people told us they have had to do in order to survive during the country's catastrophe. As becomes clear from reading the quotes by area, people in all areas look for work, which is mostly low-paid and precarious. The more desperate situation in Darfur and Al-Gezira leads more often to migration to gold mines or joining the militia.

#### **Box 4: Examples of actions by the excluded or marginalised**

##### **Kassala**

There are university graduates who work as carriers, some of them work for an aviation company selling cakes, and others work in homes here, washing clothes, cooking, and making a large part of the food here. There are young children who work and they too encounter many things, including harassment in the market. People are exposed to some immoral aspects. Women might get harassed by the owner of the house himself, but women are forced by circumstances. (S79, group of women in Kassala)

My son joined the police and is staying in this shelter. ... Now he's back in Khartoum. (S79, another woman in the same group)

Woman 1: I have a son who works in the market on pushcart, he is 18 years old, I tell him to come back early before 4 o'clock and not to stay late.

Woman 2: Our neighbours wash people's clothes at home but thank God we don't. I work on perfume around the neighbourhood, and I go to the market as well.

Woman 3: I also used to wash people's clothes. (S80, a women's group, Kassala)

Some people are engaged in agriculture, some people are engaged in domestic service, some people might join the military institutions, some people might turn there and become rebels ... emigrating to the gold mines, looting, stealing. This is very dangerous situation ... when a person reaches the stage of being in dire need, this gets him into trouble. (S82, local organisation, Kassala)

##### **North Darfur**

What is provided to us in the *Takayas* is not enough to sustain life. Therefore, I rely on my expertise in twisting ropes and repairing and weaving beds to cover the food shortfall for me and those I support. Similarly, people excluded from food aid, some of them rely on daily labour like working in farms, and in marginal jobs like helping butchers in the market, working in loading and unloading, and working as temporary daily guards in the market. So, people seek several ways for livelihoods, including recruitment into the ranks of the armed forces or the Rapid Support Forces, that's for the youth. (S111, displaced person in North Darfur)

At the beginning of the displacement, we suffered greatly, but now I work in a cooking oil press. I get paid 500 pounds for producing a 27-pound jerrycan. The maximum production capacity of the press per day is about (50–60) jerrycans. Therefore, I work all day, and if the press is not working, I switch to packing peanut press cake (*umbaz*) into sacks. I get 500 pounds for filling a sack as well. (S97, displaced person in North Darfur)

Some of the excluded receive digital aid through dealing with people who have accounts (Bankak or Fawry or Okash). As for others, they rely on labour (agriculture, traditional mining, brokerage, loading and unloading, firewood gathering). (S112, local NGO in North Darfur)

People excluded from assistance, especially the youth segment whose means of living have been cut off, were forced to enlist in the ranks of one of the warring parties as fighters. But, unfortunately, the goal of these youth who joined one of the warring parties is to find official cover for their criminal actions of looting, robbery, and theft. (S98, local NGO North Darfur)

The most important thing the excluded do to meet their needs is to rely on themselves: they do marginal work with very limited income, including agricultural work (ploughing, weeding, harvesting) and domestic work for a daily wage (washing clothes, house cleaning, building a straw fence [*hosh*]), or herding village animals for a fixed monthly wage per head. Some clean markets and commercial shops in return for little help from the traders in the concerned market. This besides the fact that some ask charities for help for the sake of God. (S95, trader in North Darfur)

### **Al-Gezira**

People here struggle and work, and even women go to agriculture, even for a small sum of one, two, or three thousand, to provide for their daily needs. Even for persons who go to the gold mines, the situation isn't good, but whoever has a son there can send them money. People help their relatives, and there is solidarity among people, especially in emergencies such as death or illness. Our sons in the gold mining send contributions through Bankak. Sons in the gold industry help their families, relatives, and the public. (S72, labourer in Al-Gezira)

## 5.8 Conclusions

Digital access in conflict-affected environments is not a binary condition of connected or disconnected but a continuum of degrees of inclusion or exclusion. This continuum shapes not only who can access services but also who pays the cost of connectivity. People's experiences show that digital exclusion is never neutral or merely technical. They intersect with long-standing patterns of historical marginalisation and pre-war inequalities, meaning that the areas that were least served (by banks, and regarding ID and connectivity) before the conflict, such as Darfur, are often the most digitally abandoned during war.

The most excluded are those who cannot be reached at all, followed by those who are assessed or considered in need but who cannot register because they lack the necessary documents and a digital design that does not accommodate this. The instrumentalisation of internet access during war has compounded digital divides, through the destruction of infrastructure and shutdowns, or the loss and theft of ID documents and smartphones. In areas where control by one of the warring parties is stable, for example the RSF in Nyala in 2025, internet services expand and the cost decreases. Even though this makes digital money transfers easier, most people still need to do this through merchants and pay extra to get cash (an issue that will be explored further in the next chapter).

Conversely, in SAF/government areas, the drive to obtain ID documents and become eligible digital subjects represents a powerful governmentalising effect of visibilising postcolonial subjects. RSF/SAF-controlled areas are not fixed but change as the war progresses, and accordingly digital lifelines can turn quickly into tools of destruction. The combination of limited aid, and complications of accessing digitalised aid, means that many are excluded and are having to take up precarious and sometimes dangerous income-earning activities, including joining the army or militia. The political economy of these complex and contested relationships is explored further in the next chapter

# 6. WAR AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DIGITALISED FOOD ASSISTANCE IN SUDAN

## 6.1 Introduction

Digitalisation brings together asymmetrically aligned actors and changes or amplifies power relations. In this chapter, we explore what digitalisation practices are actually doing in terms of political and economic processes and how it relates to pre-existing inequalities, power relations, and the extractive political economy of Sudan and the region.

The idea is to look at how digital practices influence and are influenced by the relations between different actors. The chapter starts by examining this at the very local level all the way up to national and international level. The range of actors involved in digital practices includes banks, other financial services providers, traders, digital service providers, local and international organisations, and authorities of various types.

The chapter examines the competing, converging and diverging digitalised aid mediators (including the actors mentioned earlier), in terms of who is benefiting from digital practices, and who is pushed aside. It will show how organisations expect digital practices to transcend power imbalances and overcome the absence of the state, or corrupt local actors. However, our research finds that the reality on the ground is different: the interests of various mediators remain and are manifested in fees, profits and political capitalisation, and digital practices compromise state sovereignty and genuine participation of communities. At a higher level, political opponents are pushed aside, legitimacies contested or reinforced, resulting in political rather than humanitarian effects.

We first discuss Sudan's past links between structural inequalities and food assistance, and how what happens to aid at the very local level is determined

by who provides it and what kinds of local networks it operates in. This is followed by the section on how digital food assistance feeds into political economies at the very local level, on the power of international organisations, and on forced digital financialisation and its wider political dynamics. We argue that the efficiency of digitalised assistance can only be fully grasped by understanding what it actually does in relation to broader and deeply rooted political economy processes.

## 6.2 Structural inequalities and food assistance in Sudan

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 enemies. Food aid can be used as a resource to buy political loyalty and feed into inequalities.

Sudan has received food aid since 1958, and experienced emergencies requiring external assistance every year since 1984. 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 as transport and procurement contracts were often awarded to those close to government (Jaspars, 2018).

In addition, food aid – and its denial – has become part of gaining economic and political power (Keen, 1994; Duffield, 1994). In the 1980s and 1990s, 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 result in displacement, for example in the 1980s and 1990s from the South and the Nuba Mountains, which provides a source of cheap and exploitable labour for Sudan's elites (African Rights, 1997; Duffield, 2002). 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 (Keen, 1994, Jaspars, 2018), and continue at the present time. From 2008 onwards, the international humanitarian community focused largely on resilience and a shift to cash transfers.

During the revolutionary period, international organisations were unable to shift away from large contractors close to the Al-Bashir regime, due to the failure of the transitional government's anti-corruption committee to bring military/security-owned or linked companies under civilian control. Despite the change in regime, many of the same transporters and traders contracted for food aid were still involved in food purchase and transport in 2021 (Jaspars and El-Tayeb, 2021).

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.

To understand the political economy of aid at the local level, it is important to understand the distinctions between social, market, and political spheres. Mutual aid support follows social networks of kinship, neighbourhoods, and other communal relations which are founded on deeply rooted values social solidarity. These networks leave very limited space for manipulation and exploitation, but this is not the case for other networks. There is a saying in Sudanese culture that illustrates the different sets of values that occupy the different spheres: '*Nākul Ikhwān Wa Nithāsab Tujjār*', which roughly translates as: 'Let us eat like brothers and settle accounts like merchants.' The proverb draws the distinction between two types of domains of human relationships. The first (eating like brothers) is based on values of family, kinship, communal compassion, solidarity, generosity, morality. The examples in Box 2 of the sacrifices that Sudanese in the UK make to support people in Sudan illustrate this well, with refugees sending money even when on limited and precarious incomes themselves, or mothers cutting down on their children's food or selling their gold to help. Second (settling accounts like merchants) is governed by strictly materialist values of profit and individualism. Furthermore, these are hierarchically ordered

spheres of action with their own underpinning guiding principles. While actors operating through social networks and values are appreciated and held to occupy a high moral position (and most of the time they meet expectations), those who operate through the network of market and political spheres and ‘local’ NGOs are subject to suspicion and mistrust. Of course, the market can play a role beyond its economic function as an arena for social interaction and trust-based exchanges, facilitating community ties and identity, although this has declined during the war (CHC, 2026). For local NGOs, there is a body of literature that argues that they should not be confused with local socio-cultural spheres, as they are frequently exogenous donor-driven structures rather than locally embedded ones (Almahdi et al., 2024). There are of course variations between the large grouping of local NGOs, with some more locally embedded than others.

Spheres of local and national politics resemble that of the market sphere; they are perceived and dealt with immorally sometimes for self-gain and exploitation. Ordinary Sudanese disdain of politics and political actors is a very prominent characteristic.<sup>24</sup> As Ekeh (1975) has pointed out, from this point of view the state is an entity that should be avoided as much as possible when it comes to fulfilling one’s duties to it. At the same time, it should be the first target for direct material gain, and the shortest way to achieve that is through members of the primordial public working in different bureaucratic positions. These members are not merely corrupted government officials but legitimate offspring of this adversarial state–society relationship (Abd Elkreem, 2018).

### **6.3. Digital assistance and inequality at the local level**

In this section we examine how digital aid practices alter, consolidate or bring new dynamics into the long-standing aid mal/practices at the very local level. The section starts with aid distribution in relation to social,

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<sup>24</sup> For deeper understanding of these dynamics the seminal work of Peter Ekeh on the ‘politics of two publics’ (1975) provides insightful theory that wrestles with this unique postcolonial political condition.

political and market spheres, and is about the manipulation and exploitation in digital food assistance.

## Interactions between social, market and political spheres in practice

We discussed in Chapter 4 how important the diaspora, or Sudanese abroad, is in providing aid, and the crucial role of local charitable people, and thus the role of social networks in the provision of aid. These forms of aid are clearly still governed by a sense of social solidarity and moral obligation. The distribution of aid by organisations, however, much of which remains in-kind aid, is different,. For this kind of aid, local people continued to talk about diversion, for example in Al-Gezira, someone who did not receive aid told us:

The committee chairman personally benefits from the resources and distributes some of them to his family. Unfortunately, those exploiting the aid are wealthy people who own shops and agricultural and pastoral resources and do not need them. As for those who cannot afford their daily food, they receive nothing. (S74)

Local people are aware of who is diverting aid and who is delivering aid diligently. Incidents of distributing aid to neighbours or those who are politically connected and excluding many of those in need are well-known in Sudan, and elsewhere when emergency (food) aid is distributed in limited amounts in communities where need is high (Jaspars, 2018; Jaspers and Shoham, 1999).

Local organisations raised similar complaints:

We worked in IDP shelter centres with the centre supervisor. People there, had no proof of identity, because they had to flee the war without their documents. The supervisor would give us a ready-made list, but we would verify the number of individuals ourselves, as some supervisors might provide us with false information that would inflate the number of people present. (S76)

People excluded from aid also criticise organisations' inability to oversee in-kind aid distribution and their heavy reliance on local corrupted actors. However, these actors present themselves as gatekeepers who represent and know the local conditions. Most organisations operate from outside Sudan, or from cities like Port Sudan, and cannot fulfil these requirements. Some international actors may be new to Sudan and not familiar with the local context or history of localised aid malpractices.

These examples illustrate that, while support from local charitable people and the diaspora is safeguarded by thick cultural and religious values, aid provided by international organisations is not. These forms of aid, and their manipulation, remain, even with a focus on digitalisation. Furthermore, the socio-cultural, market and political spheres, and their contradictory underpinning values of morality and immoralities, may operate side by side in the same local community or even embodied in the actions of a single person. The same person may host two or three IDP families in his house and be a trader in the market who is exploiting other IDPs' vulnerability. Or the person generously supporting some communities in need is also a local authority member who is diverting aid from others. Different spheres of exchange can therefore exist within the same actor, which will vary from one context to another and according to people's individual commitment to different values.

These complexities remain with digitalisation. Thick networks of trust dominate the aid provided by local charitable people and Sudanese abroad. For this reason, instances of diversion of digitally transferred funds were rare. The *takaya* may deduct funds to meet operating costs (transport, fuel, etc.), and there may be complaints from other *takaya* that the commission taken by some is too high (S123). While one of the advantages of cash transfers is overcoming diversion during transport and distribution of food, there is a much greater scope for exploitation when digital cash transfer has to go through a merchant or broker, because most people are digitally excluded. This is discussed in the section below on 'Exploitation in a largely deregulated state'. Some of the UK diaspora mentioned fake fundraisers or money transfer agents (S54, S59).

## Digital cash pulling women into the market sphere

International organisations are deeply shaping local communities by creating entrepreneurs with digital cash grants. This pulls women from the social sphere into the market and political sphere. In our fieldwork, we found cash grants to support small businesses in Kassala, where markets were functioning reasonably well. These cash grants are ‘multi-purpose’, provided mostly through banks, and we have already discussed in Chapter 5 the issues that people faced in setting up bank accounts even in places like Kassala. Of those who were selected for cash grants, some had bank accounts, others used the accounts of merchants, and a small percentage received cash. All received extensive training:

We conducted workshops to explain how to generate money from small amounts, and we monitored many success cases. If we conduct several rounds of [cash] distribution, we repeat the survey several times to make corrective actions and re-educate. (S120)

Through these trainings, beneficiaries are integrated into markets as freelancers, as buyers and sellers of food and other items. In two group interviews, people at first expressed gratitude and said they had benefited greatly from the cash programme (S80 and S81):

When I found the money, I made baked goods, jam, and Syrian dates. I take the Syrian dates to the shop, and I distribute the jam in the schools, and the bakers’ people come to buy them at home for tea. They [the organisation] have been generous with us. I have become a clothing and bedsheet trader. I have benefited greatly from them. I am selling vegetables, and I sell henna and *suratiya* at home, I am a widow and I support my children. I started a poultry project and I sell eggs and chicken from it and we eat from it, I am a mother of six children and I am separated,

Despite these positive accounts, the women also said that some people could not benefit because they could not afford an ID document or smartphone, or they were not able to read and write. This meant that the women who were included in these entrepreneurial projects were already better connected and successful cases. The ability to withdraw only little money from the bank was another issue: ‘Last time, when I withdrew from the Blue Nile Bank,

they gave me only 20,000.... Last time, we suffered. People went all week, and they told us there would be no withdrawals today. Some people got lost in Kassala and couldn't find the bank, so they went around a lot' (S80). Others also reported problems getting the money out of the bank (S81). They also commented on dealing with merchants, and the fees the merchants would take for doing the money transfer through them:

When you transfer money, merchants sometimes tell you to take commodities [instead of cash]. He gives you a small amount of money and tells you to go and come back tomorrow, and he will give you something in-kind again. He doesn't give you the whole cash. He drags you for a month or two, taking advantage of your money for themselves. They exploit you severely, and you transfer again because there is no choice. (S80)

They searched for humanity, emphasising the need for less exploitative market conditions and ways of selecting trading partners who are friendly, trustworthy, who deal based on ethics, and whom they could trust. The question is how to support women to have the agency to ameliorate these (exploitative) conditions. Just integrating them in an exploitative market is neither enough nor sustainable. Exploring whether they are giving positive narratives because they fear any failure in the market will be blamed on them and thus they will lose support is also important. They will be under particular pressure as the organisations and their training very much emphasise the need to become good entrepreneurs.

The language of markets moves women from social spheres into the market and political sphere. It profoundly shapes their actions and relations with others as now they are acting as traders, interacting with others in the market, setting up bank accounts. Another issue is the role of local NGOs, in the chain of UN organisation, INGO and then local NGO in the implementation of the project. To what extent is the local NGO adopting the international neoliberal discourse to get funded? These projects do not exist in isolation, but within a broader social and economic context and their connection with this broader context is important to understand and goes beyond immediate crisis management. The power effect of hegemonic INGOs' discourse and practices should not be underestimated. It promotes a neoliberal logic of competition in the market without regard for structural hindrances.

## Digital aid does not transcend local intermediaries

Digital transactions need to be mediated by traders, NGOs, and authorities because digital aid excludes many of those most in need. In other words, digital food assistance is mediated by actors who are operating through the realms of the market and political power. This lays those in need open for exploitation. The generally observable pattern in these realms remains that bigger businesses are involved and become more politically powerful.

As in the past, the HAC, and now also SARHO, closely control and direct humanitarian assistance for both political and economic purposes. One INGO informed us, about a new digital food assistance programme:

The insecurity, I mean, we live with the insecurity. The political part is a bit hard because there's indirect corruption, the government will not come and ask you for a bribe directly. They will force your programme design in a way that them or their friends will collect some of the money indirectly. (S58b)

Measures of control may include visas and travel permits for international organisations, which areas organisations can work in and who they will work with. The fact that INGOs continue to work under these conditions either means that this has become normalised, or they have made an assessment that the benefits outweigh the risks. The HAC often mandates the Sudanese Red Crescent to register aid beneficiaries, and they work closely together. 'Red Crescent committees accompany the commission [HAC] and the Civil Defence; all three are responsible for registering those affected. We have a director of the Emergency Department who is responsible for closely monitoring everything happening in the field, along with a representative from the Red Crescent' (S118).

This point also illustrates that, at the same time, the government's role has been diminished to being just a facilitator for aid providers. Again, this was already evidenced in the past, when responsibility for social protection programmes was essentially handed over to international organisations and the private sector. While the government actively promotes digitalisation, the *Zakat* system has not been digitalised, and in fact – as a government programme – is largely bypassed by most Sudanese (Abdalla, 2024). In our research, it was not uncommon to hear people complaining 'For an entire year, we have received only one piece of assistance from the WFP and the

*Zakat* and Social Welfare Office' (S73). None of the individual marginalised people we interviewed mentioned receiving *zakat* from the state. This deactivation of *zakat*, which is the Islamic equivalent of taxes, has a detrimental political economy effect on the social contract. It became one of the five pillars of Islam for reasons of social cohesion and building the *Umma*. Instead, people are dependent on the diaspora, local charitable people, and international organisations (in that order): practices which can be considered as de-institutionalised socio-culturally practised forms of *zakat*. Thus, it brings *zakat* from the corrupted political sphere to the socio-cultural sphere.

## Exploitation in a largely deregulated state

In a largely deregulated state, traders, businessmen and NGOs can operate according to their own rules. The lack of regulation exposes marginalised populations to varying degrees of exploitation by a range of businesses (traders, banks, fintech), as well as authorities. This section focuses on traders, or merchants. The core idea is that due to different factors of digital accessibility issues discussed in Chapter 5, a great deal of digitalised assistance cannot be directly deposited in bank accounts of the targeted individuals. These conditions necessitate intermediary actors.

The void is particularly deeply felt in RSF-controlled areas, in which the absence of the state is the main defining characteristic of the situation. In these areas, banks are no longer functioning. Recently, RSF started to establish a bank called 'Future Bank' in Nyala in their attempt to create a parallel government (Baldo, 2026). As we have seen in Al-Fashir, more than half of the 'received' assistance in 2025 was lost in different merchant fees. The state could not protect its citizens from this exploitation. Digital financial transactions can only be provided through the few people who have assets such as smartphones, bank accounts, banking apps, and access to the internet. In the absence of a market-regulating state, digitalised financial transfers and aid assistance have become a lucrative business. A number of people interviewed indicated that merchants and others with Bankak accounts have been able to accumulate vast sums of money, as the following quotes show. Field observations in early 2025 in North Darfur, for example, revealed that if someone transfers 100,000 SDGs, the beneficiary receives only 80,000. For that 80,000, if the Bankak owner does not have cash, he offers the recipient the option of taking goods in exchange for this

amount. The price of the goods through Bankak differs from the cash currency, so the price increases by another 20%. The recipient will have lost 40% of the value of the financial transfer to the trader. Similarly, a displaced person in North Darfur explained:

some individuals who own smartphones, account numbers in banking apps, and know how to deal with digital technologies have managed to achieve great wealth from their use of digital technologies. For example, one of the persons who practises digital transfer operations said that he received and transferred through his bank account an amount of 150 million SDGs over ten months. This number confirms that the owner of this account had an income of 45 million SDGs, which is the sum of transfer fees at an average of only 30%. Note that this is an income acquired without large capital and without great effort. (S97)

A trader in South Darfur justified these huge fees because of the obstacles they face transporting goods across numerous RSF checkpoints, and that the high cost of fuel leads to higher rents and increased commodity prices (S101). He also emphasised that they are navigating the quickly deteriorating value of SDG: ‘Our dealings with citizens are governed by dealings with traders who are bigger than us, and depend on foreign currency rates, because suppliers of goods from abroad rely on the currency rate compared to the dollar’ (S101). Some merchants play with time by asking beneficiaries to wait until physical cash is available, meanwhile benefiting from the digital money in their account. Others benefit from the changing exchange rates (S68). In government-controlled areas, money transfer is easier but, as we have seen in earlier sections, those without bank accounts similarly rely on merchants (who take a percentage of the transferred money) and prices of goods in the market are also high.

Traders may also benefit from contracts with international organisations, in particular those who are close to those who control the area (RSF or SAF). Similarly, in 2025, ‘only the large traders who have agreements and strong relationships with the civilian authority affiliated with the Rapid Support Forces are present in the state’ (S92). The same would also apply to the Business-to-Business approach being used by some organisations to distribute food in otherwise inaccessible areas. As we saw in Chapter 4, the organisation initially worked primarily with larger traders as these were the

only ones with the logistical capacity to deliver the food required. Particular areas are controlled by specific ethnic groups and only traders with links to the groups in control will be able to operate there (S97). Many traders in RSF-controlled Darfur have links with them (SPARC, 2025). The phenomenon of traders being closely aligned to those in control of the area is also observed to a lesser extent, and in more disguised ways, in SAF areas, particularly involving higher-level crony businesses.<sup>25</sup> These levels of control highlight that, in this stateless, market-driven form of digitalised assistance, adversarial regulations also govern who is permitted to work in the lucrative humanitarian sector. The links between political control and food assistance do not apply only to international organisations, however, as Box 5 shows.

### **Box 5: Aid provision by businessmen: the case of Ad-Debba**

The case of Ad-Debba city in Northern State, to which many people fled after the RSF capture of Al-Fashir, is a prime example of political and military actors benefiting from food distribution.

The displaced from Al-Fashir were accommodated in Al-Affad IDP camp, which was constructed, supervised and supported by a prominent SAF-associated businessman. He represents a newly emerging national bourgeoisie and is a big investor in gold mining, agricultural and animal production, but has also provided significant moral and material support to SAF during the current war. As a leading figure of the movement fighting alongside SAF to liberate cities from RSF, he was appointed by the Sovereignty Council as the head of the national committee for breaking the Al-Fashir siege, which he supported with his own funds. However, when the mission of breaking the siege failed, he emerged as a philanthropist who welcomed, accommodated and fed Al-Fashir in a great display of national solidarity.

This humanitarian moment was also a moment of great national political consciousness, closely followed by many Sudanese who had admired the resistance of the population in Al-Fashir. They followed the livestreamed massacres and later how the survivors made it to Ad-Debba and were welcomed. In contrast to traditional social support, which is done without drawing attention, social media were used to spread this politico-humanitarian message of the businessman linked to government providing aid. IDPs were even transported from Khartoum North to the Al-Affad Camp specifically to serve the political objective of the government. At the same time, other forms of aid were denied, in the first week or so, to maximise the benefactor's image. The UN and INGOs were able to operate after a few weeks, and some Al-Fashir ERRs did so too. But it was

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<sup>25</sup> Interviews in phase 1, see our first working paper (Abd Elkreem and Jaspars, 2025).

a crony-capitalist billionaire, who made his money from gold mining, agriculture, and as a provider of weapons to the army, who attracted most of the attention, thus indirectly perpetuating Sudan's violent extractive political economy.

## 6.4 The indirect rule of international organisations

This section is about the indirect rule of international organisations and how digital food assistance practices have strengthened it. We discuss how they influence the nature of aid provision and what is being done with the data collected on Sudanese populations: how it is used (and what it hides) and where it goes. We argue that the combination of digital food assistance practices and the desperation of the Sudanese means that international organisations have had a disproportionate effect on relations between organisations, between organisations and the state, and on the legitimacy of the state itself (thus affecting sovereignty). We start with the story of the ERRs and how they were co-opted and re-engineered by INGOs.

### Emergency Response Rooms: the NGO-isation of resistance

In section 4.3, we discussed the origins of the ERRs, how their funding and ways of working evolved over time to include the use of digital technologies for communicating needs, funding, transfer of funds to different rooms, and reporting back to the donor, and how they are seen by international organisations as the future of aid, not only in Sudan but globally.

While seen as a prime example of localisation, the ERR response has in reality been gradually de-localised – including with the creation of a mutual aid portal for reporting to external donors. Dwindling support from the diaspora, and the need of INGOs for volunteers on the ground led to connections between the ERRs and international organisations. For the ERRs, these organisations were the donors they urgently needed. For international organisations, the ERRs represented local, connected, trusted networks of actors on the ground they desperately needed to resume their work after the paralysis in the first months of war (see Abd Elkreem and

Jaspars, 2025). This marriage of desperation is gradually transforming ERRs into fully fledged, professionalised, bureaucratised humanitarian actors drifting away from the pre-war revolutionary political agendas they rallied behind as Resistance Committees. Digitalisation facilitated and formalised the international organisation bureaucracy within the ERRs and enabled closer external monitoring and control. Some leading ERR members benefit from connections with international organisations – travelling abroad, the chance of getting a well-paid job, being the main contact person for donors. Those who are recognised and are most likely to be rewarded are the leaders, not the doers on the ground who are struggling under extreme conditions (S133).

When ERRs professionalised through external – and digitally mediated – connections, their increasingly prominent role was unwanted by the warring parties and led to increased security scrutiny and harassment. According to an ERR member, the government requested international organisations not to work directly with the ERRs, which many accepted and started working through national NGOs, which acted as intermediaries and then benefited from hard currency, administration costs and so on (S133). At the same time, local NGOs have reported receiving threats from the authorities that they may be shut down if they act as a channel for funds to the ERRs (S133). Government scrutiny has also meant that, in some instances, international organisations have asked ERRs not to identify themselves as such. When areas are newly recaptured by SAF, INGOs have sometimes become more assertive towards ERRs after gaining access to the local communities.

Each side of the war is suspicious of the ERRs because of their political background. These same youth leaders, during their revolutionary times, were part of strong political movements with demands for deep structural transformation of the state, including the economy, governance, peace, citizenship. They are therefore seen as political actors and potential threats by both the SAF and the RSF.

This political past, and the new more formalised links between ERRs and international organisations, have led to a number of challenges. First, registration as NGOs has become a key issue of debate within the ERRs. One argument is that this would make it easier for ERRs to be funded directly, but another is that operating under the HAC's recognition and

supervision makes them more vulnerable and controllable by the Sudanese government.

Second, funding by Western donors has been accompanied by the adoption of humanitarian principles, as well as digitalisation. In contrast to their revolutionary roots, ERR representatives now widely proclaim neutrality, impartiality and independence in various international forums. The risks faced by the ERRs is another reason for adopting these principles. Terms like ‘mutual aid’ and *takaya* are used in Sudan as more neutral or traditional expressions for aid provision, and therefore less politically charged, thus reducing the risk to local aid providers. A statement issued at the Berlin Conference (convened to discuss aid to Sudan), said:

In recent days, we have received inquiries regarding the participation of certain individuals identified as leaders, managers, members, or volunteers of the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), in political events and discussions, namely Davos 2026 (January 2026) and the Berlin Conference on Sudan (April 2026).

We wish to clarify, unequivocally, that the Emergency Response Rooms are independent, grassroots-led, community-based humanitarian initiatives. Our sole mandate is to respond to urgent needs, alleviate suffering, and support vulnerable populations through principled, non-partisan action. We do not endorse, affiliate with, or participate in political activities, parties, or agendas.

In a speech made at the conference, a representative stated: ‘One of our most valuable adherence [i.e. commitments] is to neutrality and solidly resisting any pressure to be part of anything remotely political including having an opinion on how this war should end.’<sup>26</sup> As a leading ERR member told us: ‘We have problems when people ask you to write and talk about violations. This is completely forbidden, the argument is that you sit safely while others are trapped under this siege, so discussions are shut down and you’re not allowed to speak about either side of the conflict’ (S133). For ERRs, the process of NGO-isation is leading them to be more

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<sup>26</sup> See: [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/errs-lcc-sudan-ugcPost-7450265723559550977-svAX/?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=member\\_desktop&rcm=ACoAABLAekwB4eru49fqIyrNF eNGh\\_0iA7\\_6UWU](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/errs-lcc-sudan-ugcPost-7450265723559550977-svAX/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAABLAekwB4eru49fqIyrNF eNGh_0iA7_6UWU)

accountable to donors than to the broader Sudanese communities they are helping. NGO-isation is a concept we borrow from Arundhati Roy (2014), who analyses the NGO phenomenon as part and parcel of neoliberalisation, in which NGOs are instrumentalised to fill the gap left by the increased shrinking of state responsibilities. Thus, the claimed humanitarian apoliticalism is in fact deeply political and induces profound political change (Roy, 2014).

Third, many of ERRs' actions and associations are in fact still political, or seen as such, but in a different way. As in other wars, silence is exploited by the belligerents in the war, who frame it as evidence that the ERRs sympathise with the enemy and use it to justify security crackdowns against them. Furthermore, digital technologies themselves are not neutral as they are linked to national and international businesses that may have political (and economic) priorities. This includes tech companies (telecoms, internet, data management), banks and financial service providers (Devidal, 2021). Use of the mutual aid portal will require use of local telecoms companies or Starlink, cash transfers are done through Bank of Khartoum's Bankak, and the data they send is likely to be stored somewhere in the cloud (managed by corporations such as Amazon or Azure). As we saw in Chapter 4, all stages of aid provision through the ERRs are digitally mediated. Their earlier funding by USAID also raises questions about influence and independence. The role of the ERRs as part of the peace process is widely discussed at the time of writing. This is, of course, a political role. Under the pretext of youth participation, ERRs have been invited by the European Union, the African Union and IGAD to participate in discussions on peace. While youth participation in the peace process is exactly what is needed, participation of the depoliticised ERRs, is by its very nature a deeply political moment. In a silencing way, the political participation of a depoliticised body is manufacturing consent more than it is a genuine participation of youth in shaping the future of the country. Past leaders in the Resistance Committees who had clear political visions have been sidelined, and the clearly articulated transformative political visions of the Resistance Committees likewise. A Sudanese I/NGO expert commented:

The ERRs are thousand times more useful for foreigners than NGOs because they serve as a political entity, as an apolitical entity, civil society representative, democracy figure, revolution representative

or whatever they want. They are like a clay that they can shape and play with. (S135)

Sudan's ERRs are in an impossible position; they have political roots but claim neutrality as humanitarian actors, while they are still seen as political by the warring parties. Neutrality is needed for humanitarian funding (and to reduce risks to their safety), and the ERRs are desperately in need of funds given the scale of the crisis. At the same time, the introduction of digital technologies produces new political effects. Critiquing their depoliticisation does not imply encouraging their resumption of a political role in relation to the war but rather is about being sensitive to the broader political economy of international humanitarian intervention. It would not be fair to expect ERRs to act in the same way as the Resistance Committees of the past. What is needed, however, is an understanding of what triggered the process of NGO-isation and – going forward – the balance between humanitarian need and the need for political action, as this may change. The combination of NGO-isation, war, securitisation and humanitarian crisis have robbed the country of a political transformative agency.

## Turning people into data

For many international organisations, Sudanese appear only as data and statistics on dashboards from which decisions are derived. They have become objects of digitally mediated surveys, needs assessments, and data reported about them circulates and shapes the story of who they are. Any news, report or discussion about Sudan starts with those statistics and has become the single story that defines Sudan and Sudanese as mere victims.<sup>27</sup> Sudanese are not genuine contributors to sharpening perspectives, elaborating relevant questions, or shaping the theories behind this distantly aggregated, quantified knowledge about them. The current prevailing humanitarian reconceptualisation of the overwhelming majority of Sudanese as sheer victims and objects to be quantified is based on a de-historicised, depoliticised and poorly contextualised knowledge. This trend needs to be seen within the wider context of the datafication of people, behaviour and environment. As Duffield noted (2019), in humanitarianism we have seen a shift from knowledge gained from being present to remoteness and electronic data, leading to very different understandings of the world.

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<sup>27</sup> Including this working paper, but we later go beyond the numbers.

Knowledge allows for causal reasoning, theorising, and critique whereas data is more concerned with empiricism, statistical analysis, alerts, and dimensions of human behaviour.

ERRs, NGOs, and some national authorities, enjoy a relatively elevated position, moving from being objects of knowledge to being data collectors. They are the task-oriented foot soldiers for data collection and everyday implementation. In other words, the knowledge shaping interventions and decisions, if they are ever based on knowledge, is produced more about the Sudanese than by the Sudanese. This is illustrated by the F system (see section 4.3) of digitalised reporting on needs, prioritisation, distribution and evaluation. Digital technologies replace human connection with a digital interface and turn people, and their needs, safety and dignity, into data (Devidal, 2021) which do not reflect the complexity of their reality.

A well-educated, critical expert who has worked with both NGOs and INGOs, in and outside Sudan, before and after the war, helped us understand how this happens (S135). The ‘national’ organisations that collaborate with international organisations have low capacity and are under huge economic pressure. Donors put them in a position where they feel they have to implement pre-planned modalities of intervention to get funded. Her second point is about language and discourse. This includes complicated technical language and use of English, which intimidates some local junior volunteers in the presence of international experts. Decisions often have to be made quickly or also ‘negotiated’ in English with minimum interventions from local actors. These practices are often praised with terms such as localisation and partnership when these local ‘partners’ are stripped of agency in many ways. This reminds us of Chinua Achebe’s metaphor of partnership between colonisers and the colonised resembling that of the horse and its rider (Moyers, 1988).

The desperateness and sense of urgency created by the war intensified this propensity among NGOs. Most NGOs have become desperate to get their proposals accepted and funded, and thus accept these conditions. As the same expert argued:

International organisations know and exploit this by denying job offers to those who try to be independent. They can afford not working with those individuals who show agency and try to

influence. They're not worried about the ministry as much as they are scared from people like us. We are the last shield between foreigners' colonialism and Sudanese. (S135)

## Data extractivism and undermining sovereignty

International organisations tend to equate the government's legitimacy with that of the state. However, while civil society, particularly the NGO-ised version of it, is struggling, state institutions are also excluded from genuine participation in humanitarian governance. Critical questions in digitalisation are those of data privacy, storage and processing, which is directly related data sovereignty and national security. As we saw in Chapter 4, data storage with Amazon or Azure is not something that international aid workers we interviewed give a lot of thought to.<sup>28</sup> Even an established Sudanese digital security scholar concluded that digitalisation is a solution that people should embrace. He argued that national data could be protected with layers of internationally adopted security measures; starting from locations of servers, accessing authorities, codes, cameras and other technical aspects. In relation to the vulnerability of centralised digital data to politically corrupt regimes, he said 'You are a man of politics, I am talking from technical perspective' (S134).

In era of immense strategic importance of digital data and digital security Sudan is completely exposed to data and humanitarian extractivism. Data is extracted by international organisations and the tech corporations they use for storing their data, such as Amazon. Data will also be gathered by Meta, given the overwhelming use of WhatsApp by all those involved in providing aid to Sudan, and by Starlink. This data extraction by humanitarian organisations has variously been called 'technocolonialism' (Madianou, 2025), or 'humanitarian extractivism' (Bergtora-Sandvik, 2023). More data than needed for programming is often extracted from vulnerable populations, as part of experimenting with new digital technologies, and digitalisation includes a number of private companies locally and globally. Data has become one of the most valuable commodities globally and, even if personal information is protected, metadata can be used for categorising

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<sup>28</sup> Although internationally this is changing, as indicated by a recent publication by Access Now: <https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Reinventing-humanitarian-aid-procurement-for-the-age-of-AI.pdf>

and profiling populations (Thatcher et al., 2016). These actions by international organisations and corporations can be seen as undermining sovereignty, although in some contexts they cooperate with state authorities. Elon Musk's US corporation Space X, for example, as internet provider in Sudan operates unofficially in the country, with the government trying to exert nominal control in SAF areas, and outside of state control in areas controlled by the RSF.

The introduction of blockchain and cryptocurrency is another means by which Sudanese sovereignty is undermined. So far, it is being introduced on a small scale by a few enthusiastic international organisations and businesses, indicating that it may expand soon. For instance, an international staff member of an INGO (which is spearheading digitalisation of humanitarian assistance) has described their successful experimentation with cryptocurrency as a 'magic' solution (S58b). When we asked about bypassing national regulations, he referred to loopholes that made it possible for them to get a licence to work on this. Others explained the value of blockchain as a way of being able to work in places where there are no banks (or bypassing corrupt institutions), faster money transfers, and more favourable exchange rates (S66). Note that cryptocurrency companies are based primarily in four countries: the US, Switzerland, the UK and the UAE. Data is often stored by US-based global corporation Amazon. These trends are deepening the crisis of state legitimacy.

State institutions have not been able to compete with external actors in Sudan's digital transformation. War and destruction of digital infrastructure have also emboldened digital colonialist mindsets, leaving unanswered many questions, seen as irrelevant, as to whose data security matters and how data sovereignty is safeguarded. Many national organisations we interviewed almost ridiculed our question on whether digitalised assistance would jeopardise long-term national sovereignty. Their main counter-argument is: how can we talk about sovereignty when people are dying of malnutrition and hunger and getting almost zero support from the state (S88–S90, S112, S117).

## 6.5 Accelerated financial digitalisation during war

In this section, we examine the role of the state in promoting digitalisation, focusing specifically on the unprecedented policies of financial digitalisation enacted amid war. Our first working paper traced the historical evolution of digitalisation in Sudan, alongside the parallel privatisation of telecommunications and financial institutions (also see section 2.2 for a summary of these issues from our last working paper).

In 2024, the government had been losing control over its banking sector, both because banks had been looted and destroyed, and because of the destruction of the Electronic Banking Switch (EBS), so the sole way of making financial transfers was through the Bank of Khartoum's Bankak app. By the end of that year, the government had imposed unprecedented financial digitalisation measures to regain control. In December 2024, when it established a new capital in Port Sudan, the government issued new banknotes. This forced some citizens to deposit their old banknotes with banks and people who usually might have resorted to keeping their money unbanked found themselves forced to open bank accounts – with a strict deadline after which the old notes would be valueless.

This government action caused a number of difficulties. For those who already had bank accounts, it was difficult to deposit money because the Bank of Khartoum became too crowded. In some branches, they would queue up in front of it as much as three days waiting for their names to be called. For those without accounts, some had to register with other banks, such as Al-Nilain Bank, the Real State Bank, At-Tadamon Islamic Bank and others, that made it easier for new customers to deposit money (because of fewer KYC requirements – for example they would accept an ID number rather than requiring a passport to be presented). But these banks have not developed a widely used digital banking app. Some people relied on relatives or friends with bank accounts. Of course, those who were too poor to be digitally subjugated, with not much money, did not have to worry about opening a bank account at all.

Traders exploited those who could not deposit their old banknotes, asking for a 20% cut to exchange them for the new currency. Towards the deadline

for exchanging currencies, prices were almost double for old notes compared to new ones (or Bankak). Some smuggled their old notes to RSF-controlled areas and in exchange received reduced credit on their acquaintance's account.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, after depositing their money with a bank, there was limit for withdrawal of 200,000 SDG (approximately USD 100) (*Libyan Express*, 2024). The resulting cash scarcity created a digital trap and meant that people had to engage in digital banking. The government's justifications cited digital inclusion and fighting corruption. But perhaps most importantly, this move also functioned to deplete the value of cash in hands of RSF while providing the government with funds to continue the war and making citizens in areas under its control visible.

This banknote replacement initially took place in 8 of the 18 states.<sup>30</sup> The RSF de-legalised the new notes in areas under its control, describing this move by the SAF as a preparation for the country's separation. Since December 2024, the country has had two antagonistic currencies, as well as financial and telecommunications systems. Bankak, however, functioned in both parts of the country. Everywhere, citizens suddenly found themselves having to use Bankak, even for petty transactions such as paying for daily food, transportation and almost everything else in a way that they could not have imagined.

The widespread use of Bankak, and its control by the UAE, is an additional factor undermining Sudan's sovereignty. While the war is framed by the SAF as a war to preserve dignity and protect national sovereignty from a proxy invasion backed by UAE, these two intertwined forces of digitalisation and financialisation may pose the biggest threat to Sudan's sovereignty and dignity. This semi-omnipresence of Bankak in Sudanese life was challenged by some Sudanese activists, however. They criticised the Bank of Khartoum's 500% increase for transfer fees via Bankak (Sudan Events, 2024). This also led them to organise a social media campaign that brought out Bankak's connection with UAE, and hence the RSF (see section 6.6). In a statement, the bank had to confirm openly that its management

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<sup>29</sup> Field observations from different sites

<sup>30</sup> The eight states were Red Sea, Kassala, Kordofan, River Nile, Shamalia, Sinnar, White Nile, and Blue Nile states.

supports the legitimacy of the armed forces in preserving the sovereignty, unity and stability of the nation, as well as ensuring the security of the country and its people.<sup>31</sup>

Realising the risk of overdependence on a single foreign-owned digital financial system, the government started to promote diversification of financial banking tools. For instance, in April 2025, the telecom company Zain's Bede digital payment system was introduced, with a huge inauguration ceremony attended by high-level government representatives. It is worth remembering, however, that Zain is owned by Kuwaitis. This diversification, and easing of Bankak's monopoly over digital financialisation is not leading to digital sovereignty.

International organisations also had to start using digital cash, and therefore Bankak, after the currency change. Prior to this, most of the INGOs were still using cash-in-hand as a modality (S61) and the sudden cash shortage took them by surprise. Some suspended programmes temporarily, others distributed food vouchers (with which beneficiaries could go to merchants to get food) or started using Bankak. This latter even though some still had to be done by proxy (as some people still did not have bank accounts), and in the knowledge that people would have to pay a higher price for food with Bankak (compared to cash) (S60 and 61). Other organisations are actively promoting digitalised banking in the east of the country where banks are operating and where people can be assisted in setting up bank accounts (S63, S120).

the whole effort is really to digitise because it's accessible. Registration is relatively doable, for example in [LOCATION] we have converted IDPs completely to cash transfer. We transitioned them to digital cash transfer. Most of the effort is really to register. Whenever we register the beneficiaries we collect the biometrics data, but also the bank accounts, telephone numbers. It's taking us more time to collect all this data, but at the same time it's helping us for our future programming especially. So this is our strategy, to move to digital. (S63)

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.alrakoba.net/32009360/>

This analysis shows how digitalisation is eroding state legitimacy in many ways while, at the same time, the government is pushing towards unprecedented levels of financial digitalisation.

## 6.6 Wider political dimensions in war and food security

This section considers the role of regional actors in war, aid and food security, in particular that of the UAE. Section 2.1 already reviewed the role of the UAE in the war between the RSF and SAF. Here, we start by summarising what we know about its role in the Bank of Khartoum and therefore its control over Sudan's financial system, and follow this by outlining the increasing role of the UAE in aid provision and in controlling the narrative about the war in Sudan. Finally, we discuss the UAE's role in AI and data storage and processing and highlight Sudan's vulnerability. In analysing imperialist domination, it is important to consider not only extraction of natural resources and military support but also aspects of soft and hegemonic power. Financial, digital and diplomatic power are key components.

### The UAE, the Bank of Khartoum, and digital food assistance

In the previous sections, we have seen that almost all support for Sudanese in need is being transferred through Bankak. This applies to people living in both RSF- and SAF-controlled areas, and to assistance provided by diaspora, international organisations, and local organisations. Many of the people we interviewed said that the Bank of Khartoum was one of the main institutions that had become more powerful during the war (see Box 6). Since digital financialisation is used to purchase every small item that a household might need it has become a source of income or profit for many traders. A large proportion of the Bank of Khartoum is owned by UAE banks.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> <https://bankofkhartoum.com/sudan/gallery/Top%205%20Shareholders%20List%20-%20FEB-2026.pdf>

## Box 6: The dominance of Bankak in Sudan

I would say Bank of Khartoum is more than 70% of the current caseload. We are working with them to pick up the rest of the cases where they have a presence. This is true throughout the eastern part of Sudan. (S63, international organisation)

The Bank of Khartoum has become more powerful in material and moral aspects. The material power is represented in the fees for using the Bankak app that belongs to the bank, in addition to the fees for opening new accounts by new clients wishing to benefit from the app. The moral power is represented in the good reputation of the bank among clients as an innovator and keeping pace with technical modernity. (S95, trader in North Darfur)

If we talk about the war, the institution that has strengthened most is the Bank of Khartoum, as it holds all the reins of control, and all organisations deal with it and use it for digital accounts. Some financial institutions have been strengthened at the expense of others, and all international aid is tied exclusively to the Bank of Khartoum. (S110, displaced person in Omdurman)

One of defining factors of the UAE's sub-imperialism is its financial supremacy through investing in Sudan's problems for over two decades. Exploiting the isolation of the Al-Bashir regime, and US financial sanctions, the UAE gradually took control of Sudan's financial infrastructure and institutions like the Bank of Khartoum (*BInews*, 2026). Established in 1913, more than half a century before the UAE itself was established, the Bank of Khartoum once represented the financial sovereignty of a proud nation. During the 1990s, under US sanctions and with the Islamists' privatisation of financial, digital, telecom structures, the UAE was able to acquire a majority shareholding of the Bank of Khartoum (*BInews*, 2026). The almost full monopoly of Bankak over Sudan's digital financial ecosystem makes Sudan uniquely vulnerable.

The RSF itself is benefiting from digital banking. The digitalised banking networks have been a vital financial lifeline for the RSF, providing a legal facade, financial autonomy, allowing wealth extracted from gold mining to be recycled into military hardware, encrypted communication systems, and military and communication equipment such as Starlink satellite dishes (*BInews*, 2026).

The digital financial supremacy should not be delinked from the overall complex power dynamic and violent resources extractivism (see below). Nor should it be isolated from the UAE's 'long-standing [...] humanitarian supports to Sudanese people', as discussed below.

## The UAE and humanitarian aid

In February 2026, the UAE AID agency and WFP celebrated an agreement in which the UAE will provide a USD 20 million grant to accelerate emergency response efforts in Sudan, focusing on delivering food assistance to those affected by the conflict. In their celebratory zeal, they did not miss the opportunity to show that this agreement builds on the UAE's long-standing support for the Sudanese people: 'Between 2015 and 2025, the UAE provided US\$4.24 billion in assistance to Sudan. This includes US\$784 million in humanitarian aid delivered between 2023 and 2025 following the outbreak of the civil war, reflecting sustained engagement during the most critical phase of the crisis' (*Times of India*, 2026). They have also, of course, been extensively linked to the RSF (Sudan War Monitor, 2024).

In the UN Security Council hearing in the aftermath of the Al-Fashir massacre, the UAE ambassador, after thanking the house for 'bringing the attention to a crisis of unimaginable scale' stated: 'The UAE has stood in solidarity with the Sudanese people for decades and we will continue to do so. Today we are announcing an additional \$100 million USD to support lifesaving humanitarian operations in Al-Fashir' (Permanent Mission of the UAE to the UN, 2025). The fact that the UAE is emerging as one of the leading global aid providers (Cochrane, 2021) requires further exploration regarding its role in the global political economy of aid.

## The UAE, data extraction and processing

The biggest diplomatic leverage the UAE enjoys globally is tied to the multi-trillion dollars it invests in high tech, security cooperation, AI and the weapons industries in the US (UAE Embassy to the US, 2026) and other powerful countries. At the South Africa G20 summit in 2025, the UAE made a big announcement about investing a billion dollars in the AI sector in Africa. Several developmental and strategic reasons were claimed, such

as not leaving Africa behind in the AI revolution, investing in data centres, openness of trade, efficiency, AI technologies in education and agriculture, and giving a voice to people of the global South (*Arab News*, 2025).

These investments make the UAE the ‘too big to fail of the Middle East’, as brilliantly described by Mahjoub (2025). This why Sudan’s accusation of the UAE in forums like the International Court of Justice, its global campaign to hold the UAE accountable, boycotting the UAE and demanding a trade embargo or international sanctions, become far-fetched dreams. More immediately, with the UAE investment in data centres and AI, it is necessary to ask what it will do with all the data collected on the customers of the Bank of Khartoum, which will comprise most of the population in Sudan. As elsewhere, such metadata can be used to profile people, categorise them and predict their behaviour, thus potentially providing a very powerful political and economic tool.

## Controlling the narrative about the war

Sudanese voices have been effectively silenced through UAE’s digital hegemony, including in controlling the narrative about the war through social media. Digitalisation plays a powerful role through controlling narratives of war favouring the militia, focusing on fighting ‘Islamist terrorists’, and diverting attention from atrocities (Hilmi, 2025; Abbas, 2025). According to BBC data analysis, the UAE published over 47,000 posts between January 2023 and September 2025, reaching more than 215 million users. Using both real and AI-generated photos, the pages praised the UAE as a benevolent force in Somalia and Sudan, while simultaneously attacking the SAF and defending RSF. Using photos of influencers without their consent to create fake accounts and fabricate stories, they spread disinformation using UAE and RSF propaganda and to cover up their war atrocities (The Cradle, 2025). Dubai based teams also started to reinvent and promote the regional and global image of Hemedti as a public leader who is an antidote to Islamists (Mahjoub, 2025). These activities began prior to the current war and have proliferated since.

One of the glaring examples of this social media promotion of the RSF and the whitewashing of its atrocities is when UAE-based Sky News sent its broadcaster, who happened to be the wife of a leading member of the RSF government, to cover the aftermath Al-Fashir massacre after the RSF had

captured it. It included: ‘an interview with a doctor who claimed he had not seen a single dead body, even though nearly 500 people are thought to have been killed in the building where he worked’ (Barker, 2025).

Sudan is not a forgotten crisis but a misrepresented crisis thanks to this regional imperialist hegemony. It is important to remember here that only a few Western parliaments are holding their governments accountable, demanding a complete halt to discussions on an EU free trade deal with the UAE (DW, 2025). Colonialism and imperialism have always been equipped with an eraser for subjugated memories and voices, and the ability to carry out the transplantation of colonial memories, discourses and worldviews to take their place (Wa Thiongo, 1986). The current digitalised version of this capacity does the same, only more efficiently.

## 6.7 Conclusions

This chapter has shown the deeply political structure underlying digital food assistance in Sudan’s ongoing war. Digitalisation has created, replicated and, in some cases, deepened structural inequalities. Rather than providing new solutions to problems of fraud and access, digitalisation amplifies (in terms of speed and scale) existing inequalities, exclusions, discriminations and power relationships.

At the local level, food aid has long been manipulated through the interplay between the social, market and political spheres, and is captured by local elites (including businessmen) and armed actors. This has continued with digitalisation but with new actors and practices, and the scope for exploitation increases in a largely deregulated state. Digitalisation has led to the creation of businesses that transfer money and broker access for those who are otherwise excluded. At the same time, digital banking also comes with risks as it requires ID documents and bank accounts, creating visible digital subjects who can be managed by the state and/or international powers.

Digitalisation magnifies national and international inequalities through depoliticisation, datafication and data extraction. It can amplify the ability of international organisations to exert power over local organisations by providing tools for sending information via digital portals. Funding by

international organisations, alongside the harassment and attacks by warring parties, have contributed to a shift among those running ERRs from revolutionaries to humanitarians claiming independence and neutrality. Further depoliticisation occurs through the datafication of people and their interactions, thereby making politics invisible and causation hard to determine. Furthermore, the role of US-based big tech in data management and data extraction creates global inequalities reminiscent of colonial hierarchies. Regionally, the role of the UAE in supporting the RSF, in creating food insecurity, and in the Bank of Khartoum and therefore digital financial transfers reveal a troubling convergence.

## 7.

# CONCLUSIONS

Digitalised food assistance has helped feed the population while they were in a dire situation, and has positively impacted their short-term food security. However, it has also compromised their long-term food security by effectively deepening inequalities, feeding into the extractive political economy, co-opting transformative democratic forces and deepening digital dependency.

The introduction of digital practices in food assistance has continued to expand during 2024 and 2025. This ranges from the use of Bankak by both the diaspora and international organisations, via the unprecedented level of digital financialisation of banking in government-controlled areas, to the introduction of blockchain and cryptocurrencies. Starlink satellite dishes have continued to expand and have become normalised while remaining weaponised. These expansions have been driven by and are entangled with national, regional and international war dynamics.

Digital food assistance has not reached the neediest section of the population. Compounding factors include historical marginalisation and inequalities, which were difficult to overcome once the war had started. Marginalised populations had to find someone with a Bankak account and face exposure to exploitation in order to receive remittances or aid. People in different parts of the country faced a continuum of varying degrees exclusion, linked to ownership (or not) of ID documents or bank accounts, and to connectivity being available through state telecoms or Starlink centres, and the risks associated with accessing them, and finally the use of internet shutdowns as a weapon of war. The design of the digital interface itself is another factor which enables some users but excludes others who may be more needy. A good example of this is the WFP self-registration cash transfer programme, from which the most marginalised populations were excluded, while their data were effectively collected, representing a case of humanitarian extractivism.

Digital access for those otherwise excluded, required many different intermediaries, which broadened the scope for exploitation. These include traders, Starlink owners, banks, national authorities, I/NGOs, etc. This

changes the power relations between them, shaping new winners and losers, and inequalities.

Yet despite these barriers and risks, digital cash transfers were often the only form of assistance in many contexts. It was a lifesaver when Al-Fashir was under siege, and for periods of time in Al-Gezira (December 2023 to April 2025) and Khartoum (2023 to mid-2025), as well as in other cities which were not covered by this study (e.g. Al Dilinj and Kadugli). In these places, Bankak and Starlink formed the only lifeline for millions of families. While the main aid providers were local charitable people and the Sudanese diaspora, international organisations have had a disproportionate power effect compared to the aid they are actually providing. The desperation of national organisations, local groups and individuals, to receive or manage aid means they have very little choice or agency but to accept aid in the way that international organisations conceive of it. For example, women are introduced to neoliberal ideologies of entrepreneurship, moving them from the accommodative social sphere to an exploitative market space. This gives some income in the short term but has longer-term implications in terms of redefining the needy not in terms of victims of a violent extractive political economy but as failures in an entrepreneurial competition, repeating worn-out neoliberal ideas of who is deserving and who is not.

One of the key effects of digitalisation has been to amplify the power of international organisations and the NGO-isation of ERRs. As the biggest humanitarian network of actors, ERRs have successfully, effectively and courageously shouldered responsibility for humanitarian assistance. However, through the processes described, these youth, who represented and led the nationwide movement for deep economic and political transformation, have now been co-opted, restructured, professionalised and depoliticised. A very effective digitally mediated system of reporting needs, allocation and reporting on aid has been developed and encourages ERRs to proclaim neutrality and impartiality. While this may be the safest and most appropriate way for ERRs to operate in 2026, it could ultimately hinder the long-term democratisation and transformation of the country's political economy.

Digitalisation has further influenced ordinary people's lives and created new power relations through the digitalisation of banking. New banking regulations set a digital trap, with government changes in currency leading

to the forced banking of the previously unbanked. On the one hand, government and international organisations glorify this by proclaiming the benefits of financial inclusion and catching up with global development. On the other, it reveals tensions of deepening digital colonisability. Postcolonial subjects who distrusted modern institutions and adopted strategies of self-invisibilisation have now become visible and governable, not only by powerful national actors and their privatised state, but also by far-distant, more exploitative regional and global financial, digital and data management actors.

While the state is driving digitalisation, at the same time digitalisation undermines the state's digital and data sovereignty. This is due to the long-standing privatisation of the telecommunication and financial sectors, as well as to the technologies introduced by international organisations. The Bank of Khartoum, for example, is largely owned by the UAE, which is also a key actor in the war and in Sudan's extractive political economy. Corporations like Meta, Amazon, Starlink and Palantir store data gathered by international organisations and have the potential to process it for political and commercial purposes.

Issues of political economy, or sovereignty, were rarely considered by international humanitarian actors. For example, the dual use of Starlink satellite centres (including for drone warfare, as well as communication and money transfers), the potential for exploitation of the most vulnerable in providing digital food assistance, the depoliticisation of ERRs, the role of the UAE in the Bank of Khartoum and in perpetuating the war and creating food insecurity. Sudanese people have no choice but to accept aid in whatever way it is provided. Thus digital assistance cannot be considered efficient and accountable. Digital efficiency itself cannot be delinked from its mutually constitutive broader local, national and global political economy if we are to have a full and empirically grounded understanding that goes beyond hegemonic technical fixes.

Going forward, it is clear that a number of key issues need to be considered to make digitalised food assistance effective for those who most need it. Clearly, a political economy analysis needs to inform how, where and when digitalised food assistance is appropriate, including the key institutions, actors and practices involved, and the effect on inequalities and power relations. Organisations need to take care to be conflict-sensitive and not

feed into the war economy, in particular in terms of which traders they work with. In the longer term, humanitarian interventions should not undermine the development of a future responsible state. At ground level, it will be important to analyse user experience and determine how to reach the neediest (and often digitally excluded) with digital food assistance. At the international level, greater knowledge is needed of what happens to data and its links to data colonialism, data extractivism and regional imperialism. Much of this will need qualitative enquiry in addition to quantitative assessments. We hope to explore these policy-relevant issues with key actors following the publication of this paper.

## Interviews conducted in phase 2

Note: S1 to S53 were interviews carried out in phase 1. When a code includes a B, this indicates that the interview was done in Birmingham, UK, and was also part of the UK case study.

Code	Category	Date of interview	Place	Interviewers (initials)
S54	Diaspora	20 January 2025	Online	SJ and TAK
S55	Diaspora	26 January 2025	Birmingham	SJ and YH
<i>Same as B8</i>				
S56	Refugee	27 January 2025	Birmingham	SJ and YH
<i>Same as B10</i>				
S57	Refugee	28 January 2025	Birmingham	SJ and YH
<i>Same as B11</i>				
S58	INGO	26 February 2025	Online	TAK and SJ
<i>KIS4 repeat interview</i>				
S59	Diaspora	8 April 2025	Online	TAK and SJ
S60	INGO group	14 May 2025	Online	TAK and SJ
<i>KIS8 repeat interview</i>				
S61	INGO group	23 May 2025	Online	Tak and SJ
S62	Data management organisation	2 June 2025	Online	TAK and SJ
<i>KIS9 repeat interview</i>				
S63	UN organisation	30 July 2025	Online	TAK and SJ
<i>KIS11 repeat interview</i>				
S64	UN organisation	4 August 2025	Online	TAK and SJ
<i>KIS11 repeat interview</i>				
S65	Diaspora	10 August 2025	Online	TAK and SJ
S66	Financial service provider	4 September 2025	Online	SJ and TAK

S67	Financial service provider	1 October 2025	Online	SJ and TAK
<i>KIS10 repeat interview</i>				
S68	Trader	13 March 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S69	Government authority (HAC, Al-Gezira)	27 February 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S70	Beneficiary	12 April 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S71	Women, beneficiary (IDP shelter)	13 May 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S72	Marginalised (from <i>Cannabi</i> )	14 May 2025	AL Manaqil	JM
S73	Local NGO	16 May 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S74	Marginalised women	21 May 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S75	Local group rep.	16 June 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S76	Local NGO	30 May 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S77	Marginalised person	18 June 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S78	Local initiative leader	28 June 2025	Al Manaqil	JM
S79	Group of beneficiaries	24 May 2025	Kassala	EM
S80	Women beneficiaries	27 May 2025	Kassala	EM
S81	NGO + group of beneficiaries	28 May 2025	Kassala	EM
S82	Local NGO	21 May 2025	Kassala	EM
S83	UN organisation	21 August 2025	Kassala	EM
S84	Local NGO	22 July 2025	Kassala	EM
S85	INGO	10 August 2025	Kassala	EM
S86	Beneficiary groups	5 July 2025	Kassala	EM
S87	Local expert	27 February 2026	Online	TAK
S88	Local NGO	5 August 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ

S89	ERR / <i>takaya</i> )	3 August 2025	Dar Es Salam Dar Es Salam	MZ
S90	Local NGO	15 August 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S91	<i>Takaya</i> manager	23 July 2025	Online (Al-Fashir)	TAK and YE
S92	Trader	2 September 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S93	Trader	29 September 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S94	Trader	15 September 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S95	Trader	31 August 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S96	Beneficiary	19 October 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S97	IDP	29 October 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S98	Local NGO	13 October 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S99	Government authority	29 September 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S100	INGO	20 March 2025	Nyala	MI
S101	Trader/money transfer agent	16 May 2025	Nyala	IIA
S102	Beneficiary and local volunteer	16 May 2025	Nyala	IIA
S103	Beneficiary	18 May 2025	Nyala	IIA
S104	Local NGO	17 May 2025	Nyala	MI
S105	Native administration	15 May 2025	Nyala	IIA
S106	Internet service provider	13 May 2025	Nyala	MI
S107	Trader	18 May 2025	Nyala	IIA
S108	INGO	7 August 2025	Nyala	MI
S109	Marginalised	26 July 2025	Khartoum	SF
S110	Marginalised	17 July 2025	Khartoum	SF
S111	Beneficiary	19 October 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S112	Local organisation	5 August 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ

S113	UN organisation	18 November 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S114	INGO	24 November 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S115	Government authority	11 November 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S116	Government authority	6 November 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S117	<i>Takaya</i>	5 August 2025	Dar Es Salam	MZ
S118	Government authority	24 August 2025	Kassala	EM
S119	Local actor	17 May 2025	Nyala	MI
S120	INGO	15 October 2025	Kassala	EM
S121	Expert (ERR digital)	17 December 2025	Online	SJ and TAK
S122	Local organisation	29 October 2025	Khartoum	SF
S123	<i>Takaya</i>	8 September 2025	Khartoum	SF
S124	<i>Takaya</i>	27 October 2025	Khartoum	SF
S125	<i>Takaya</i>	30 December 2025	Khartoum	SF
S126	Internet service provider	4 January 2026	Khartoum	SF
S127	<i>Takaya</i>	25 December 2025	Khartoum	SF
S128	Internet service provider	3 January 2026	Khartoum	SF
S129	Beneficiary	4 January 2026	Khartoum	SF
S130	Local organisation	24 December	Khartoum	SF
S131	Local organisation	9 January 2026	Khartoum	SF
S132	Trader	29 December 2025	Khartoum	SF
S133	ERR leading member	12 December 2025	Cairo	TAK
S134	Expert, financial digitalisation	10 January 2026	Online	TAK
S135	Expert on I/NGOs	7 December 2025	Online	TAK
S136	<i>Takaya</i>	28 October 2025	Khartoum	SF

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