

UK aid to Sudan

Executive summary

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In April 2023, after decades of civil conflict and international isolation, Sudan descended once again into open war, further destabilising a fragile region and triggering the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Over 30 million people are in need of assistance within Sudan and another 4 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. This multifaceted regional crisis presents an important test of the UK's ability to combine its diplomatic, development and humanitarian tools and lead an effective international response – especially in a context of declining global aid resources.

This review by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) assesses the UK's support to Sudan in the period before the outbreak of conflict and its response to the crisis after April 2023, focusing on four questions: how the UK demonstrates responsible global leadership; how it advances its commitments to women and girls; how it forges and sustains genuine partnerships with international, regional and local actors; and how it supports an effective humanitarian response in a volatile and resource-constrained environment. The review looks back over the past six years, from the hopeful period of democratic transition that followed President Omar al-Bashir's fall in 2019, through the October 2021 military coup and open warfare since April 2023. The aim is to draw lessons that can strengthen UK engagement in Sudan and other fragile and conflict-affected settings worldwide.

Sudan's complex and rapidly evolving context has required continual reassessment and repositioning from international partners like the UK. What began in 2019 as a promising but fragile opportunity for reform and stabilisation has culminated in the near-total breakdown of the state, including the destruction of the capital, Khartoum, paralysis of government institutions and basic services, the collapse of food systems, and mass population displacement. Today, two-thirds of the population requires humanitarian assistance, with over 12 million people displaced and famine conditions in multiple areas. For humanitarian actors, Sudan presents one of the world's most difficult operating environments, given its huge size, vast needs, severe access constraints and rapidly shifting conflict dynamics. The spillover into neighbouring states and beyond has deepened instability in an already fragile region.

Over this period, the UK has shifted from an initial focus on governance and economic reform to a primarily humanitarian portfolio, doubling its annual spending to £231.3 million in the financial year 2024–25 for the humanitarian response in Sudan and the region. In 2024, Sudan was designated one of three priorities for UK humanitarian aid, alongside Ukraine and Gaza, signalling the UK's intention to play a leading role in the international response. This objective has been made more complex by the contraction in global aid flows, driving calls for urgent reform of an international humanitarian system in crisis. Despite the UK's efforts, Sudan remains one of the world's most underfunded humanitarian crises, relative to its needs.

“Many have given up on Sudan. That is wrong... We simply cannot look away.”

David Lammy, [London Sudan Conference: Foreign Secretary Opening Remarks](#), 15 April 2025

This review involved a literature review, desk reviews of UK strategies and programme documents, a perception survey among UK partners, and interviews and focus groups with more than 150 key government and non-government stakeholders and experts in the UK, Sudan and across the region. While security restrictions prevented in-person visits to Sudan, Chad and South Sudan, we held in-person consultations with UK staff, implementing partners and other donors in Ethiopia and Kenya, while local research teams engaged with Sudanese refugee and diaspora organisations in Kenya and Uganda. The review encountered a number of limitations, including participation fatigue among Sudanese actors and limited hard data on the longer-term outcomes of UK programming. While the Sudan conflict has impacted countries across the region, this review focuses only on two neighbouring countries, Chad and South Sudan.

Findings

Responsible global leadership

During the 2019–21 period, the UK played a prominent diplomatic and development role in supporting Sudan's political transition. It helped establish and strengthen international coordination platforms and align messaging among international actors. It was active in the negotiation of the Juba Peace Agreement between Sudan's transitional government and various armed groups, and in securing passage of the Security Council resolution that established the UN political mission, UNITAMS. Its economic programming helped Sudan meet the conditions for international debt relief, unlocking the country's access to international development finance. UK support for economic reforms included an £80 million contribution to the World Bank's Sudan Transition and Recovery Support Trust Fund, which provided social protection to over 3 million people before being repurposed to humanitarian assistance. Since the outbreak of conflict in 2023, the UK has intensified its international leadership through Security Council engagement, high-level diplomacy and awareness raising, including by co-hosting the April 2025 London Sudan Conference. It has also maintained leadership roles in donor coordination in Sudan, Chad and South Sudan.

The review finds that the UK has in many instances demonstrated credible political leadership and strong convening power, drawing on deep networks that are valued by stakeholders. However, its influence has been inconsistent, limited by periods of reduced ministerial engagement, budget volatility and institutional disruptions. Cross-government engagement has been underdeveloped, including on the defence and migration aspects of the crisis. UK aid budget reductions in 2021–22 sharply reduced spending and caused damage to relationships, although the 2024 designation of Sudan as a UK priority country and related funding increase have helped to restore credibility. The UK's humanitarian and governance programmes have been adaptable in a volatile environment, but delays in business case approvals have hampered agility. Regionally, the response has not been fully adapted to the cross-border nature of the conflict, which may give rise to imbalances in support between refugees and host communities. While the UK's convening role in Sudan and neighbouring countries remains strong, partners are concerned about funding predictability and the lack of an explicit regional strategy to address spillover effects in Chad and South Sudan.

Women and girls

The challenges facing women and girls in Sudan are immense. In addition to entrenched inequality and longstanding harmful cultural practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), they now face large-scale conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) – defined as acts of sexual violence that are directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. The UK has made gender equality a central objective in its response, in accordance with its commitments under the International Women and Girls Strategy (2023–2030). It has helped raise global awareness of CRSV and contributed to support services for survivors. Before the outbreak of conflict, the UK played a leading role in efforts to tackle harmful social norms through flagship programmes on FGM. These helped to promote legal reforms, strengthen services, encourage social change and reduce prevalence rates, although continued donor investment combined with sustained national and local commitment would be needed if FGM is to be eliminated in Sudan. Since the conflict broke out in 2023, the programme has pivoted to also provide medical and psychosocial support to victims and survivors of CRSV, which is a pervasive feature of Sudan's brutal war. However, the UK opted not to pursue a more ambitious approach towards the protection of civilians, including from sexual violence, given political obstacles and administrative resource constraints.

The UK actively promoted women's participation in political and peace processes during the transition period, shifting to subnational initiatives after the coup and supporting women's inclusion in the pro-democracy movement. However, many Sudanese women interviewed for this review felt that advocacy from the UK and other international partners had not been matched by sustained support, and suggested that opportunities to strengthen women's participation in peace negotiations had been missed. UK support for women-led organisations is mostly through intermediaries. While this support has helped build the capacity of women-led organisations, the model the UK uses has also positioned these organisations as downstream partners, delivering activities chosen by others, thereby limiting their ability to shape priorities and programme design.

Spending on gender equality-focused programming fell sharply between 2020 and 2022 as a result of wider UK aid budget reductions, before recovering in 2023. However, the proportion of funding going to gender equality-focused programming has remained consistently above 80%. The review found that consideration of gender equality objectives has been mainstreamed across the UK's governance, economic empowerment and humanitarian programming, and that vulnerable women and girls have been consistently prioritised in UK humanitarian support. The UK has also supported a range of other activities, such as data collection. However, there is no robust indication of how effective this mainstreaming has been in supporting better outcomes for women and girls, partly due to the volatile context making measurement of impact difficult. Direct, targeted programming to support women and girls with improved access to sexual and reproductive health services and increased economic opportunities is relatively limited. Given the highly gendered nature of the conflict, and structural barriers to achieving lasting outcomes for Sudanese women and girls, the overall international support from the UK and other donors is inadequate, as noted by many stakeholders interviewed for this review.

Genuine partnership

The UK has adapted its approach to partnership across the transition (2019–21), coup (2021–April 2023) and conflict (April 2023 onwards) periods. It backed Sudan's civilian-led institutions during the transition, supported trade union and civil society reform, and facilitated public dialogue between citizens and government. After the coup, it suspended direct support to the de facto authorities while deepening engagement with civil society, including through constitutional workshops and support for pro-democracy coalitions. The UK has consistently worked through multilateral channels, backing African Union (AU) and subregional mediation efforts and helping shape UN mandates, while working closely with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), the World Bank and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In its humanitarian response, it has supported a diverse network of actors, including UN agencies, INGOs and, indirectly, local organisations. This includes the UK's contribution to the UN-managed Sudan Humanitarian Fund, which in 2024 channelled 37.5% of funds through local responders.

The review finds that UK partnerships have been enhanced by the calibre of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) personnel, whose expertise and networks have enabled constructive dialogue and coherent international messaging. However, in the period after the UK was forced in 2023 to evacuate Khartoum and shift its operations to neighbouring countries, it terminated most of its key Sudanese staff in advisory and programme roles. The government informed us that attempts at finding ways of continuing their employment were unsuccessful for various legal and operational reasons. This significantly weakened its capacity to engage with Sudanese actors at national and subnational levels, as well as its institutional memory and programme management capacity. Operating from Addis Ababa and Nairobi, British Office Sudan remains under-resourced for such a complex response, with short postings leading to high staff turnover and stress-related wellbeing concerns. Furthermore, FCDO's surge mechanisms for crisis situations – rosters for business-critical roles such as Temporary Deployments Overseas – have not proved adequate given the scale of response. The UK has played an active role in donor coordination, and now has an opportunity to show leadership in collective donor action to respond together, not only at an operational level but also at a strategic level, to the new funding context, given the significant shortfall in international support for the humanitarian response.

Partnerships with the AU and UN have generally been strong, with a range of UK efforts to strengthen their capacity. However, influence by the UK and other donors has not succeeded in overcoming UN performance gaps, many of which are a result of restrictions and delays imposed by the parties to the conflict. ICAI was told that the UK is actively working with partners to address these issues. Implementing partners value the UK's flexibility and technical expertise as a funder, but point to short funding cycles, delayed approvals and limited transparency over resource allocation as constraints on predictability and effectiveness. FCDO told us that there are plans to introduce some multiyear funding which, if confirmed, would improve this situation. The UK supports the international commitment to 'localisation', which FCDO understands as supporting local leadership of the response, for example through the transfer of power, including control of resources. However, this commitment is yet to translate into major shifts in funding practice. Complicated funding

rules and limited UK programme management capacity limit the scale and quality of funding that can be allocated to local organisations, and there is little evidence of the UK involving local partners in priority setting. Engagement with Sudanese diaspora organisations has been ad hoc, which is a missed opportunity to use the diaspora’s contextual knowledge and community networks to strengthen the UK’s approach.

Effective humanitarian response

The UK is a significant humanitarian actor in Sudan and neighbouring countries, having adapted its funding and delivery mechanisms since April 2023 to respond to the unprecedented scale of displacement, food insecurity and protection needs. Inside Sudan, support has focused on food security, malnutrition treatment, protection and cash transfers, channelled through multilateral agencies, INGOs and the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, plus funding for an ‘Enabling Facility’ to strengthen data collection and coordination. In South Sudan, the UK has integrated its response to the Sudan crisis into established humanitarian and resilience programmes such as the South Sudan Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Programme (SSHARP) and in its health and education programming which supports internally displaced people, refugees and host communities. In Chad it has scaled up rapidly, using flexible instruments like the Sahel Regional Fund to become a key donor to the refugee response in eastern Chad, bordering Sudan’s Darfur region. Across all three countries, the UK has leveraged its flexibility, technical expertise and partnerships to deliver timely assistance, advocate for protection and access, and elevate the crisis internationally, doubling aid to the humanitarian crisis to £231.3 million in financial year 2024–25.

The review finds that the UK has demonstrated political and operational leadership in the humanitarian response, through strong technical analysis, evidence-based planning and close coordination with key UN agencies. It has responded rapidly and flexibly to the refugee emergency in Chad and ensured that Sudan-related needs were integrated into existing South Sudan programmes. However, in both these neighbouring countries, it is essential that the UK’s prioritisation of the Sudan crisis does not divert resources and attention in politically fragile contexts from other, pre-existing humanitarian needs. The UK’s strong technical capacity on famine prevention is recognised by partners. However, its prevention work in Sudan has been undermined by limited programme management capacity and access constraints. Flexible UK funding instruments have the potential to bridge humanitarian and development efforts, but short funding cycles, disbursements late in the calendar year and limited predictability have hampered effectiveness. The UK’s use of flexible business cases has contributed to adaptability in an evolving crisis. However, overstretched teams and complex approval processes have slowed decision making and hindered learning and innovation. Finally, FCDO’s cautious security stance has curtailed staff access to field locations, limiting their ability to oversee partners and engage with affected communities.

Recommendations

For the UK government

- **Recommendation 1:** Ensure sustained high-level political attention to the Sudan conflict and humanitarian crisis, including by strengthening cross-government ownership and coordination.
- **Recommendation 2:** Develop and implement a clear regional approach to the Sudan conflict, aligning strategies across Sudan and neighbouring countries.
- **Recommendation 3:** Align delivery capacity with ministerial ambition by backing Sudan’s priority country status with multi-year, protected funding and by adequate capacity to deliver effectively.

For FCDO

- **Recommendation 4:** Adopt a more flexible and coherent delivery model for fragile and conflict-affected environments, to maximise agility in dynamic contexts.
- **Recommendation 5:** Support the UK's localisation commitment by increasing direct funding to local organisations, simplifying compliance procedures, fostering long-term partnerships and strengthening local leadership of humanitarian response and resilience building.
- **Recommendation 6:** Address the need for more targeted programming for priority gender-related challenges in Sudan, and assess how well the current mainstreaming approach is delivering results for women and girls.
- **Recommendation 7:** Use learning from the Sudan conflict as an opportunity to rethink and adapt UK international leadership on mobilising and coordinating the international response to major crises, given severe global funding pressures, a shifting donor landscape and rising humanitarian need.



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