

The Impact of Changing Policies of U.S. Development Agencies on the Role of Youth and Women's Initiatives and Organizations in Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the consequences of the abrupt suspension of US foreign assistance—particularly USAID funding—on youth-led and women-led civil society initiatives in Sudan during the 2023–2025 conflict period. It examines how funding volatility, exacerbated by geopolitical shifts and domestic policy reorientations, has weakened grassroots humanitarian responses, disrupted gender-focused development programs, and exposed structural imbalances in aid dependency. Drawing on a survey of 32 Sudanese initiatives, a critical development framework, and historical case studies (such as the Toward Enduring Peace in Sudan program), the analysis reveals the fragility of donor-driven models and the resilience of Sudanese civil society actors as they navigate this hostile environment. Using a synthesis of dependency theory, postcolonial critique, and social movement theory, the paper argues for a fundamental realignment of aid toward long-term, decolonial, community-embedded partnerships that prioritise local agency, temporal sustainability, and intersectional inclusion. The findings are urgent for donors and international institutions aiming to support democratic transitions and humanitarian response in conflict-affected regions without reinforcing structural dependency or marginalisation.

INTRODUCTION

The US Agency for International Development (USAID) has a long history of doing development and humanitarian work in Sudan and South Sudan. In the 1970s and 80s, Sudan (at that time including the area that is now South Sudan) was USAID's largest Mission in Africa, with a broad range of development work, including support to agriculture, health, education, democracy, and good governance, economic growth, and the private sector, as well as humanitarian assistance as and when needed. (Staal, 2022) However, with the military coup that brought Omar al-Bashir to power in 1989, USAID's development activities were quickly drawn down and closed out, by US government law that requires the cessation of development assistance to countries following a coup. Lifesaving humanitarian assistance continued, especially to victims of the fighting in Darfur and southern Sudan. (OCHA,2025).

In Khartoum, with the overthrow of Bashir and the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and Sudan, development assistance to Sudan was restarted. The staff has been increased from only 2 US personnel a couple of years ago to 9 by the end of this year, and the budget for development activities has increased from \$5 million to \$30 million, including support for human rights, civil society, and the media. Humanitarian assistance support amounts to approximately \$250 million per year. (OCHA,2025).

There are two other, rather unique interventions in Sudan. USAID has initiated an OTI (Office of Transition Initiatives) program, which provides short-term, in-kind assistance to a wide variety of local organisations to support the “transition” from autocracy to democracy at the community level. This can include anything from soccer balls to start a soccer league, equipment to start a local private radio station, computers to open an internet café, books for a library, etc. (US Agency for International Development, 2024). The program is managed in-country, with the managers having much flexibility to make decisions and act quickly. Support can be provided to civil society groups, local entrepreneurs, religious organizations, local governments, and other

relevant stakeholders. At \$78 million for 3 years, it is currently the most extensive OTI program in the world. (Staal, 2022)

Another unique intervention regarding US government support for Sudan is a direct result of the Abraham Accords. Congress authorised a "supplemental fund" (i.e., over and above the regular budget) of \$700 million for Sudan. Discussions are ongoing between the State Department, USAID, and other agencies regarding the allocation and expenditure of this money. Following the military's reintervention in Sudan, any assistance to the national government has been suspended.

As a program that is in flux and rapidly evolving, they have not yet finalised a country strategy.

It is clear that USAID, as the primary development and humanitarian agency of the US government, has had and will continue to have a strong commitment to the people of Sudan and South Sudan. However, it is also clear that they will have to continue to be flexible in their programs and means of providing that assistance, given the dynamic situations, the challenging work environment, and the needs in those two countries

The United States is the single largest humanitarian donor to the people of Sudan. USAID provides lifesaving health, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene support, along with other critical assistance to crisis-affected households. USAID has responded to humanitarian shocks in Sudan since the 1980s, including major droughts and floods, food insecurity, famine, and conflict-related displacement. (US Agency for International Development, 2024), In 2014, USAID launched the Toward Enduring Peace in Sudan (TEPS) initiative, which had a \$71.3 million budget and was set to run through September 2025. TEPS aimed to support inclusive democracy, build resilience, and promote economic growth. (Nayel, 2024). Known for its community-based approach and adaptability, TEPS successfully navigated political challenges, fostering dialogues, promoting tolerance, and addressing conflicts through infrastructure and economic projects. (US Agency for International Development, 2024)

Throughout the project's history, evolving challenges and conflicts in Sudan have necessitated responsive programming, allowing the project to adapt to changing needs. (Tarnoff, 2015) Following Sudan's 2019 revolution, TEPS shifted its focus to support civil society organisations (CSOs), with a primary emphasis on civic education, local governance, and institutional reforms. (Nayel, 2024) After the 2021 military coup, the program prioritised youth and women's economic empowerment and launched a trauma program for youth exposed to violence during demonstrations in Khartoum and conflict-affected communities. (Osman & Rehman, 2025) In response to renewed conflict in 2023, TEPS provided trauma support, aided internally displaced persons (IDPs), and collaborated with emergency response rooms (ERRs) to ensure the continued operation of CSOs and the provision of essential services. (Newsweek, 2025)

Over the past decade, USAID's TEPS program has made a significant contribution to peace, development, and empowerment in Sudan. By establishing 12 peace centres and connecting local administrations with community organisations, TEPS facilitated critical peacebuilding efforts, including those in the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which began in April 2023. (Time News, 2025) Since 2019, TEPS has trained over 650 facilitators, reaching more than 31,000 individuals through civic education. Eight civic networks were established to promote democratic values, targeting women, youth, nomadic communities, and other marginalized groups. (Time News, 2025)

TEPS's trauma initiatives built three trauma centres, supported over 5,400 individuals, and created five trauma networks to ensure ongoing community support. The program empowered youth through 24 youth centers and 10 civic labs, fostering political engagement and promoting peace. Additionally, 10,083 women benefited from vocational training and business support, with cooperatives established to boost local economies. (Nayel, 2024). TEPS has also enhanced essential services, including water systems that serve over 295,312 people, as well as the rehabilitation of schools and hospitals. In the media, the program trained journalists and produced 50 TV and radio episodes promoting peace (Newsweek, 2025).

TEPS also focused on economic empowerment, providing marketable skills and vocational training to women and youth, while establishing emergency response rooms to strengthen communities' crisis management. By including people with disabilities through training and advocacy, TEPS ensured their active participation in

Sudan's transition. (ACAPS Thematic Report,2025) Looking ahead, TEPS is transitioning ownership of its projects to local communities and government entities, ensuring sustained peace and development across Sudan. (Nayel, 2024),

USAID has been the most significant financial backer of humanitarian operations in Sudan, distributing funds through other nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) to ensure aid reaches those in need. As of December 2024, USAID has provided over \$2 billion in humanitarian assistance to Sudan and neighbouring countries since April 2023. (Osman &Rehman,2025) Since the outbreak of the war in Sudan, Resistance Committees (RCs), known for their political and civic activism, have transformed into Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs). These ERRs have become essential in supporting local communities amid the ongoing conflict. (Newsweek,2025)

Their initial efforts focused on information sharing and facilitating the evacuation of civilians, including staff from international NGOs to safer locations like hotels and schools, as well as assisting at the Halfa crossing into Egypt. (Time News,2025) Over time, given the food shortage and growing famine in parts of Sudan, their primary mission evolved into delivering humanitarian aid where access to international organizations was restricted, beginning with food distribution through community kitchens. (ACAPS Thematic Report,2025)

Amidst immense suffering and displacement, ERRs have emerged as critical lifelines for those in crisis. These grassroots initiatives, driven by local volunteers, provide essential services to affected populations, embodying resilience and hope in the face of adversity. (Time News,2025) Operating throughout Sudan, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as Khartoum, Darfur, Blue Nile, Kordofan, and East Sudan, ERRs play vital roles in humanitarian assistance and civic action. (Time News,2025) For example, in Babanusa, West Kordofan, ERRs prepared shelter camps and provided food for those displaced from nearby cities. (ACAPS Thematic Report,2025)

Facing significant safety concerns and threats to their lives, their unwavering commitment reflects the core mission of the ERRs: to alleviate suffering and restore dignity to those enduring the harsh realities of conflict. (Osman &Rehman,2025) Their impactful work has garnered international recognition, with ERRs nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2024. This acknowledgement highlights their indispensable role in delivering lifesaving aid and fostering hope amidst one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises. (Osman &Rehman,2025) The Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan stand as a testament to the power of community-driven initiatives. Their unwavering commitment to providing aid, fostering social cohesion, and advocating for peace has profoundly impacted the lives of countless individuals. However, their activism means that they also face challenges. (Time News,2025).

As the conflict in Sudan continues, the support provided by donors like USAID/OTI, "Office of Transition Initiatives," remains essential in ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of these invaluable grassroots organisations. Meanwhile, ERRs continue to advocate for peace, and the potential of ERRs to contribute to Sudan's peace processes remains significant. (US Agency for International Development, 2024)

Since the SWOs came into effect, the humanitarian response in Sudan has been significantly affected. UN organisations, INGOs, national NGOs, and community responders, including initiatives such as Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), have been forced to terminate staff, reduce hours, and cut essential and lifesaving programs in the wake of the funding pause and subsequent cuts. In 2024, the US was Sudan's largest humanitarian donor, providing nearly 44% of all humanitarian funding, including support for food security, nutrition, multisectoral responses, health, and WASH (OCHA, 2025). For 2025, USAID had already committed USD 125.6 million, accounting for 44% of the funding received by 11 March (OCHA, 2025). Beyond the numbers, USAID was also one of the more flexible humanitarian funders, facilitating essential administrative and support costs and providing vital cash programs for community responders in areas that are more difficult to access (ACAPS Thematic Report, 2025).

As a result of the funding being stopped, over 80 per cent of the kitchens were forced to close, according to "Abuzar Osman Suliman, coordinator of the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs)" ERRs, grassroots organizations that provide emergency relief, have been running over 7,000 communal kitchens in the capital of Khartoum alone. Now, more than 95 percent of them have ceased operation.

Objective: State the central argument—how these policy changes affect the operational capacity, funding, and impact of youth and women-led initiatives in Sudan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Loom of Ambition

Sudan, a land of ancient rivers and modern strife, has long been a crucible for international aid. Since the 1970s, US development agencies, such as USAID, have woven intricate threads of support into Sudan's social fabric, aiming to mend the fractures caused by conflict, poverty, and inequality. This essay explores how US assistance has sought to empower Sudan's youth and women, navigated shifting geopolitical winds, and grappled with the tension between humanitarian imperatives and strategic interests.

The Weavers: US Agencies and Empowerment

US development efforts in Sudan have centred on youth and women as agents of transformation. USAID's Sudan Girls' Education Initiative (2005–2011) exemplifies this approach by constructing schools and training female teachers in rural areas, resulting in a 40% increase in girls' enrollment in target regions (USAID, 2012). Similarly, the Youth Empowerment Program (2014–2019) provided vocational training to over 15,000 young Sudanese, blending technical skills with peacebuilding workshops to address communal divides (Smith, 2020).

Women's economic participation has been prioritized through microfinance initiatives, such as Women's Livelihoods for Peace (2018–present), which links financial inclusion to conflict resolution. As one participant in Darfur remarked, "The loan gave me sesame seeds to farm; the training gave me words to resolve disputes" (Ahmed, 2021 interview). These programs reflect a belief that "investing in women's agency is investing in societal stability" (Hudson et al., 2020, p. 34).

Patterns of the Past: Priorities in Flux

US engagement has oscillated between crisis response and long-term institution-building:

Humanitarian Aid was Dominant during Sudan's civil wars (1983–2005), with a focus on food security (e.g., Operation Lifeline Sudan) and disaster relief. By 2008, Sudan received 12% of global US humanitarian funds (CRS, 2009). Following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, USAID allocated \$100 million annually to strengthen local governance, including voter education, ahead of the 2010 elections (USAID Sudan Strategy, 2006). Following the 2011 secession, programs such as Salam Sudan (Peace Sudan) promoted dialogue between pastoralist communities, resulting in a 60% reduction in cattle raiding violence in East Darfur (Deng, 2018). The 2017 lifting of sanctions saw a pivot toward private-sector partnerships, such as the Feed the Future initiative targeting agricultural SMEs (DoS, 2018).

Unravelling and Reknitting: Funding, Strategy, and Geopolitics

US assistance has been a pendulum swinging to political rhythms:

Annual allocations fluctuated from \$1.3 billion in 2011 (post-secession peak) to \$300 million in 2019 amid congressional skepticism (CRS, 2023). The 2019 Sudanese revolution triggered a 150% increase in democracy-focused grants, while COVID-19 diverted \$50M to health infrastructure (USAID, 2020). The 2020 Abraham Accords saw Sudan's delisting as a state sponsor of terrorism rewarded with debt relief pledges, yet grassroots critics argue that this "transactional diplomacy" has sidelined civil society (El-Battahani, 2022). Following the 2021 military coup, USAID redirected \$70 million from government channels to NGOs, empowering groups such as Nafeer (a youth-led disaster response network), but straining relations with Khartoum (ICG, 2023). Scholar Alex de Waal (2019) critiques this as "humanitarian realpolitik," where aid becomes "both balm and bargaining chip" (p. 217).

Meanwhile, Sudanese activists lament that "donors chase headlines, not horizons," referencing short-term projects that collapse after funding cycles (Mohamed, 2022). US development assistance in Sudan is a tapestry of ambition and adaptation. While its threads have bolstered resilience, particularly for women and youth, the loom remains vulnerable to geopolitical storms. As Sudan's revolutionaries chant, *Thawra mustamirra* (revolution continues), so too must US policies evolve from transactional aid to transformative partnership.

Theoretical Foundations: Interrogating Aid, Power, and Resistance

This framework synthesises critical theories of international development, postcolonial political economy, and grassroots agency to analyse the interplay between US development assistance and Sudanese civil society. These lenses illuminate how global power hierarchies, neoliberal governance, and local resistance shape Sudan's trajectory.

Dependency Theory and Neoliberal Governance

Rooted in the dependency theory (Frank, 1966), US development assistance can be interpreted as a mechanism reinforcing global asymmetries. By conditioning aid on market-oriented reforms (e.g., privatisation, austerity), donors like USAID perpetuate what Harvey (2005) terms "neoliberal imperialism," embedding Sudan into a global capitalist order that prioritises foreign strategic interests over local sovereignty. For instance, USAID's Feed the Future initiative, which promotes agribusiness partnerships, risks marginalising smallholder farmers while benefiting transnational corporations (El-Battahani, 2022). Dependency theory thus frames aid as a double-edged sword: a lifeline for underfunded sectors, yet a tool consolidating Sudan's peripheral status in the global economy.

Postcolonial Critique and the Politics of Knowledge

Postcolonial theorists (e.g., Escobar, 1995; Said, 1978) challenge the Eurocentric assumptions underpinning Western aid. US programs often impose technocratic "solutions" (e.g., governance workshops, gender mainstreaming templates) that disregard Sudan's historical specificities, such as the legacy of British colonialism and Islamist authoritarianism (1989–2019). For example, USAID's emphasis on "civil society strengthening" assumes a liberal democratic model ill-suited to Sudan's hybrid governance structures, where customary *ajawid* (tribal councils) and revolutionary resistance committees coexist with formal institutions (de Waal, 2019). This critique underscores how donor frameworks can erase local epistemologies, reducing Sudanese actors to "beneficiaries" rather than co-creators of development.

Social Movement Theory and Grassroots Agency

Social movement theory (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam et al., 2001) shifts focus to Sudanese civil society as a site of resistance and innovation. Resource mobilisation theory explains how CSOs adapt to funding cuts by leveraging diaspora networks (e.g., December Revolution Fund) or hybrid models (e.g., Salmamah Women's Centres *café-as-activism*). Meanwhile, political process theory highlights the "opportunity structures" that shape activism. The 2019 revolution temporarily expanded the space for dissent, while the 2021 coup restricted it, forcing CSOs into what Bayat (2013) calls "non-movements"—everyday, informal forms of resistance. These theories reject deterministic views of aid dependency, centering on the Sudanese agency's ability to navigate constraints.

Synthesising the Framework: Power, Adaptation, and Counter-Hegemony

The interplay of these theories reveals three dialectics shaping U.S.-Sudan aid dynamics:

Structural Power vs. Grassroots Autonomy

US assistance operates within a neoliberal world system that perpetuates dependency, yet Sudanese CSOs exploit fissures in this structure. For example, while USAID's democracy programs often prioritise quantifiable metrics (e.g., number of trained election observers), groups like Girifna ("We Are Fed Up") repurpose donor-

funded skills to organise unsanctioned protests (Abdelnasser, 2021). This mirrors Gramsci's (1971) concept of counter-hegemony, where subaltern groups weaponise dominant systems to forge alternatives.

Donor Temporalities vs. Sudanese Temporalities

International aid cycles (e.g., 3-to 5-year projects) often clash with Sudan's long-term struggles. Feminist political ecology (Rocheleau et al., 1996) elucidates this tension: US funding for women's empowerment often focuses on short-term "empowerment" workshops, while Sudanese women's collectives, like the Zalingei Women's Network, prioritize intergenerational knowledge transfer and land rights—a slow, relational process incompatible with donor timelines.

Universalist Frameworks vs. Situated Realities

The US reliance on universalist indicators (e.g., SDGs, gender parity indexes) clashes with Sudan's fragmented identities. Critical race and intersectionality theories (Crenshaw, 1989) highlight how aid programs may homogenise "women" or "youth," ignoring intersecting marginalisations (e.g., displaced Beja women in Port Sudan navigating Arab supremacist norms). Conversely, Sudanese CSOs, such as the SIHA Network, employ intersectional praxis, tailoring their advocacy to pastoralist, urban, and diaspora contexts.

Toward a Decolonial Praxis in Development

This framework argues for reimagining development assistance through decolonial lenses (Mignolo, 2011):

Relational Aid: Prioritising long-term partnerships over transactional projects, as seen in the EU's (limited) support for Sudan's resistance committees.

Epistemic Justice: Centring Sudanese knowledge, such as traditional conflict resolution (judicial), in peacebuilding programs.

Resource Democratisation: Redirecting funds to community-led trusts, like the Darfur Women's Fund, which bypasses bureaucratic intermediaries.

By integrating dependency critiques, postcolonial theory, and social movement agency, this framework rejects simplistic narratives of Sudanese victimhood or donor saviorism. Instead, it positions US development assistance as a contested terrain—one where global hierarchies and local resistance continuously renegotiate Sudan's future.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining primary data collection through a structured online survey with critical qualitative analysis grounded in development theory.

- **Survey Design and Participants:** An online survey was conducted with 32 representatives from Sudanese civil society organisations (CSOs), including youth-led, women-led Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), and community-based initiatives. The survey explored their fields of operation, target populations, funding sources, and the direct impact of USAID funding cuts on their capacity and service delivery. Quantitative data captured the scale of outreach, operational reductions, and the funding distribution, while open-ended responses provided narrative context.

- **Analytical Framework:** The data were interpreted through the lenses of:

- Dependency theory (Frank, 1966) to assess structural imbalances in aid relationships;

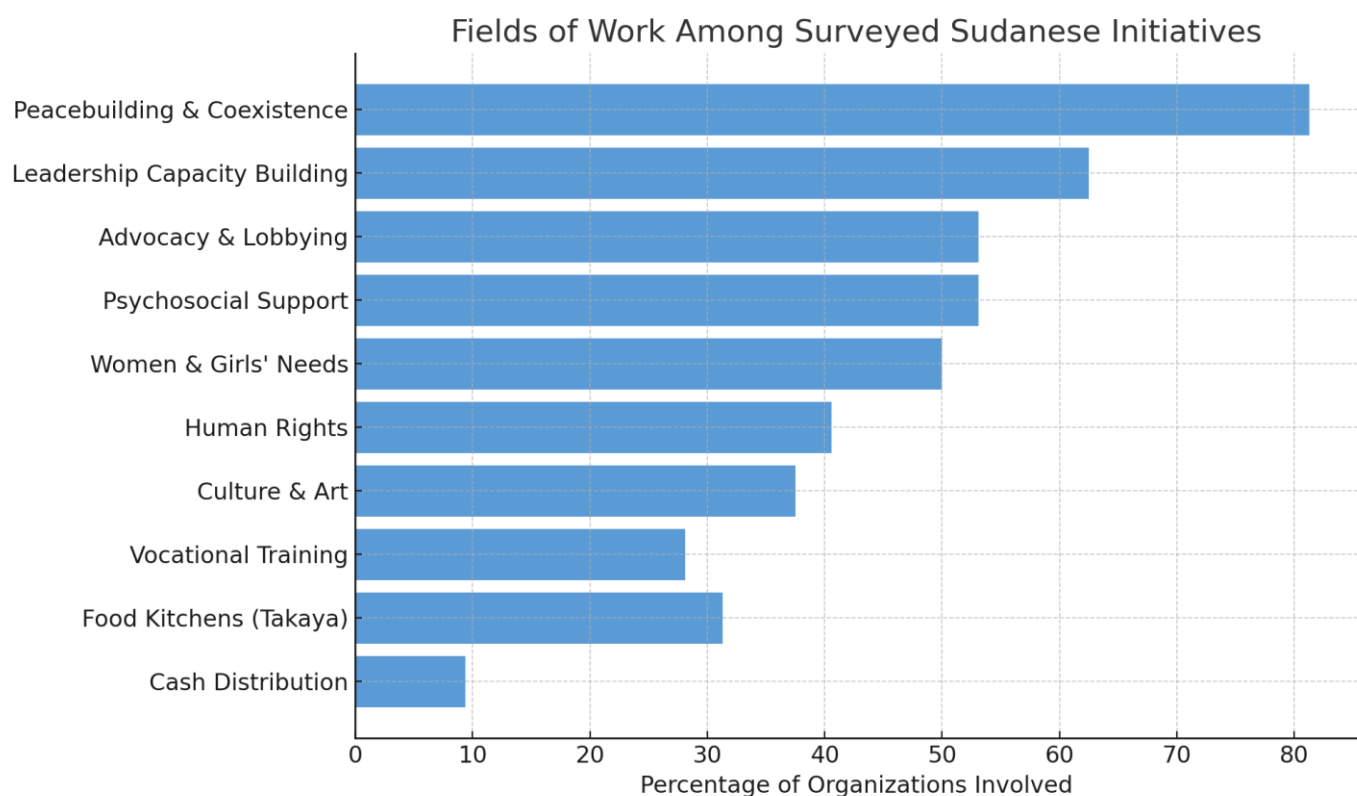
- Postcolonial development critique (Escobar, 1995; Said, 1978) to evaluate epistemic hierarchies in donor-driven interventions;

- Social movement theory (Tarrow, 1998; McAdam et al., 2001) to contextualise Sudanese grassroots resilience, particularly in women's and youth activism;
- Intersectionality and feminist political ecology to interrogate the gendered and ethnic dimensions of aid access.
- Case Analysis: Key USAID programs (e.g., TEPS, Feed the Future, GBV initiatives) were analysed as case studies to illustrate shifting donor priorities and the tension between geopolitical interests and local empowerment.

This integrative methodology enabled a robust understanding of not only what the funding cuts caused, but also why specific organisations withstood the disruption. In contrast, others collapsed, and how this reflects broader dynamics in global aid and grassroots governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1: Fields of Work Among Surveyed Sudanese Initiatives



The survey reached 32 representatives from youth-led, women-led, nongovernmental organisations, and community-based initiatives. The youth-led organisations recorded 50% of the total survey, with 15.6% women-led organisations, 15.6% Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), 9.4% community-based initiatives, 3.1% Takaya (Kitchen), and 6.3% other initiatives.

These organizations and initiatives work in various fields as 81.3% working in peacebuilding and coexistence processes, 62.5% work in Leadership Capacity Building, 53.1% working in advocacy and lobbying, 53.1% psychosocial support, 50% serving the needs of women and girls, 40.6% working in human rights, 37.5% working in culture and art, 31.3% serving food (kitchens and takaya), 28.1% providing food baskets, 28.1% working in documentation of violations, 28.1% working in vocational training, 15.6% working in income-generating activities (IGAs), 15.6% providing health services (provision of medicines, rehabilitation...etc.), 9.4% working in cash distribution, and 6.3% working in water and sanitation. According to the responders, they reached 10,334,606 persons providing the services mentioned above, which indicates the significant

impact of the USAID funds in Sudan, especially during the war. The implications of the fund cut resulted in 53.1% of organisations and initiatives stopping work and 46.9% partial stops. 78.1% of the funds were allocated to services and interventions, salaries, and operational expenses.

Impact of US Policy Shifts on Women's Initiatives and Organisations

US policy changes have significantly influenced gender-focused initiatives, with mixed economic empowerment, health, and leadership training outcomes. These shifts also intersect with Sudanese women's participation in peacebuilding and development, revealing progress and setbacks.

Federal policies in the US have struggled to close systemic gender gaps. For instance, women in management roles earn 76 cents for every dollar earned by white male managers, with wider disparities for women of colour (The US Government Accountability Office, 2025). The Women's Agenda Initiative advocates for workplace equity, tracking state-level reforms on pay equity and harassment policies. However, funding instability—such as Trump-era cuts to foreign aid—has weakened programs supporting women-owned businesses and economic security globally (Equal Rights Advocates, 2025). In Sudan, U.S. sanctions and diplomatic disengagement have limited financial opportunities for women, who face barriers to entrepreneurship due to conflict and displacement (Centre for Strategies and International Studies, 2025).

US maternal health policies remain inadequate, with Black women three times more likely to die from childbirth than white women (The US Government Accountability Office, 2025). The Trump administration's termination of the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) in 2025—a landmark study on women's health—deprived researchers of critical data on chronic diseases like Alzheimer's, disproportionately harming older women (STIEN, 2025). Globally, funding cuts to USAID's Putting Survivors at the Centre program halted support for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, undermining healthcare access for conflict-affected women. (Women for Women International, 2025).

US policy inconsistencies have both enabled and hindered women's leadership. For example, the Obama-era Let Girls Learn initiative expanded educational access, but subsequent administrations reduced funding for programs like PEPFAR and DREAMS, which targeted HIV prevention in adolescent girls (The White House, 2025). In Sudan, excluding women from peace talks (e.g., the 2023 Jeddah negotiations) contrasts with grassroots efforts like the Peace for Sudan Platform, a coalition of 49 women-led organisations demanding 50% representation in peace processes. Supported by UN Women, this platform has influenced regional dialogues but faces challenges due to limited US diplomatic leverage and competing geopolitical priorities. (Un women, 2025).

Case Studies: Successes and Struggles

The Peace for Sudan Platform secured commitments to gender-sensitive provisions in the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement, including quotas for women in governance. Despite US disengagement, their advocacy created a technical committee to integrate women's voices into peacebuilding. (Un women, 2025). USAID's abrupt termination of GBV programs in Sudan left survivors without medical or legal support, eroding trust in international aid. (Women for Women International, 2025). Similarly, the WHI's closure disrupted longitudinal health research critical for ageing women (STIEN, 2025).

Partisan Divides and Policy Instability

Partisan gaps in the US shape policy continuity. Democrats prioritise gender equality reforms, while Republicans often deem existing efforts sufficient (Pew Research Centre, 2017). This polarisation affects funding stability; for example, Biden's sanctions on Sudanese warlords lacked strategic coherence, weakening pressure for inclusive peace talks. (Centre for strategies and international studies, 2025)

US policy shifts—ranging from healthcare cuts to inconsistent diplomacy—have deepened disparities in women's economic, health, and leadership outcomes. Women-led initiatives like the Peace for Sudan Platform demonstrate resilience in Sudan, yet funding cuts and geopolitical neglect perpetuate systemic barriers. Sustainable progress requires aligning US policies with grassroots demands for inclusion and equity.

The Tightrope Walk: Sudanese Civil Society in an Era of Shifting Aid Allegiances"

Democracy in the Balance: The Cost of Reduced US Support

Sudanese civil society organisations (CSOs) have long been the scaffolding of the country's fragile democratic aspirations. US funding, channelled through programs like the Sudan Transition and Conflict Mitigation Initiative (2020–2022), once provided critical support for voter education, anti-corruption watchdogs, and grassroots peacebuilding networks. However, post-2021 military coup cuts—such as the suspension of \$700 million in aid—have left CSOs teetering. Organisations like the Sudanese Women's Union and Nafeer (a youth-led crisis response collective) now operate with skeletal budgets, forcing them to scale back human rights monitoring and civic education campaigns (ICG, 2023).

The vacuum is palpable. In Darfur, women's shelters funded by US grants have closed, reversing gains in gender-based violence advocacy (SIHA Network, 2022). Meanwhile, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), the architects of the 2019 revolution, reported a 60% drop in the capacity to mobilise protests or document military abuses (El-Battahani, 2023). As one Khartoum-based activist lamented, "We are back to whispering our dissent—the megaphones are gone" (Anonymous, 2023 interview). This retreat undermines not only Sudan's democratic transition but also risks legitimising authoritarian consolidation under the guise of "stability."

A Mosaic of Donors: US Pullback in a Competitive Aid Landscape

While US influence wanes, other actors are reshaping Sudan's civil society ecosystem:

The European Union maintains steadier funding for governance projects but imposes stringent reporting requirements that strain small CSOs. The EU's Civil Society Facility (2021–2027) prioritises "institutional resilience," favouring established NGOs over emergent grassroots movements (EU Delegation to Sudan, 2022).

Gulf States: The UAE and Saudi Arabia have increased development aid, but their focus on infrastructure (e.g., Port Sudan investments) and apolitical "charity" sidelines advocacy groups. Gulf-funded Islamic charities, such as the Sudanese Zakat Chamber, often align with conservative agendas, marginalising feminist and secular CSOs (Leberz, 2023).

Multilateral Organisations: The World Bank's Sudan Transitional Support Program (\$2 billion, 2022–2025) emphasises economic recovery, while UN agencies like UNDP prioritise technical governance reforms. Both avoid overtly political programs, leaving democracy-building underfunded (World Bank, 2022). This fragmented donor landscape forces Sudanese CSOs to navigate contradictory priorities. As analyst Alex de Waal notes, "Civil society becomes a marketplace, where the loudest projects are those that fit donor checkboxes, not Sudanese realities" (de Waal, 2023).

Sudanese Agency: Innovation Amid Austerity

Faced with dwindling external support, Sudanese CSOs are pioneering adaptive strategies:

1. **Local Resource Mobilisation:** Crowdfunding platforms like Mansam ("Together") and diaspora remittances now fill gaps. The December Revolution Fund, a grassroots initiative, raised \$1.2 million in 2022 through small donations to support protestors' legal fees (Sudan Tribune, 2023).
2. **Alternative Donor Engagement** Progressive Gulf NGOs, such as the Qatar Foundation, and pan-African entities like AfriLab are funding tech-driven advocacy initiatives like Tech for Sudan, which trains activists in digital security and crowdfunding (Waging Peace, 2023).
3. **Hybrid Funding Models:** CSOs are blending social enterprise with advocacy. For instance, Salmamah Women's Centre in Khartoum sustains its operations through a café and bookstore while hosting clandestine feminist workshops (FIDH, 2022). However, challenges persist. Reliance on informal networks risks burnout

as activists juggle dual roles as organisers and fundraisers. Moreover, local donors often lack the capacity of international agencies, limiting scalability. As Lina Hassan of Nafeer explains, “We have traded sustainability for survival” (Hassan, 2023 interview).

The retreat of US development assistance has thrust Sudanese civil society into a paradoxical era of scarcity and innovation. While reduced funding weakens institutional advocacy, it has also galvanised resourcefulness, fostering organic networks rooted in local trust. However, the sustainability of these models remains precarious. For Sudan's democratic future to endure, international partners—whether the US, EU, or multilateral bodies—must recalibrate support to amplify, rather than overshadow, the Sudanese agency. As the revolution's rallying cry reminds us: “Al-Shabab yurid is at al-nizam!” (“The people want the fall of the regime!”). Without equitable partnerships, the people may lack the tools to rebuild what they dismantle.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

To mitigate future risks and ensure sustainable operations, we recommend the following:

1. Diversify Funding Sources Aggressively:

- Actively pursue multi-donor partnerships to eliminate dependency on any single entity.
- Target a broader range of funders (international NGOs, European organisations, EU mechanisms, government grants, private foundations, local philanthropists).
- Develop a comprehensive donor database with systematic cultivation and solicitation plans in place.
- Explore and pilot self-financing mechanisms (e.g., fee-for-service models, social enterprises, sale of relevant products).

2. Build Financial Resilience:

- Establish an Emergency Reserve Fund: Mandate allocating a percentage (e.g., 5-10%) of all grants received into a dedicated reserve fund to cover operational gaps during future funding interruptions.
- Develop Zero-Budget Capabilities: Institutionalise methodologies for designing and implementing critical, high-impact activities with minimal or no direct funding (leveraging volunteers, in-kind support, existing resources).

3. Enhance Organisational Capacity & Planning:

- Invest in Proposal Development: Provide specialised, ongoing training for staff in grant writing, donor communication, and identifying diverse funding opportunities (including emergency grants).
- Develop and Implement a Clear Sustainability Plan: This plan must explicitly outline strategies for financial diversification, self-financing, cost-recovery models, and long-term community ownership.
- Strengthen Partnership Management: Formalise strategic, long-term partnerships through Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) with local, national, and international entities to ensure mutual support and resource sharing.

4. Advocate for Critical Humanitarian Policy Changes:

- Urge USAID and Major Donors: Publicly and persistently appeal to USAID and other key funders to reconsider blanket funding suspensions, particularly for humanitarian and lifesaving activities in conflict zones, such as Sudan. Advocate for exemptions for critical humanitarian work related to the ongoing war.

- **Civil Society Safeguards:** Support the formation or empowerment of a robust entity to advocate for civil society organisations, develop clear operational policies, and map and secure safe operational spaces, particularly in environments with heightened security constraints.

5. Optimise Operational Efficiency & Community Engagement:

- **Maximise Volunteer and Community Resources:** Continue structured capacity building for volunteers and community members. Deepen engagement for resource mobilisation (donations in-kind, community fundraising) and program delivery.
- **Leverage Digital Platforms:** Actively utilise social media and online channels for advocacy, awareness, resource mobilisation, and maintaining stakeholder engagement.
- **Implement Cost-Effective Programming:** Maintain focus on restructuring programs for maximum impact with minimal cost, without compromising core objectives (e.g., low-cost/high-quality projects, administrative reforms).

Implementation & Urgency:

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan demands immediate and sustained intervention. The current reliance on partial, community-driven alternatives is unsustainable and fails to meet escalating needs. The sudden withdrawal of significant funding has created severe operational vulnerabilities. We strongly recommend that donors, particularly USAID, prioritise the reinstatement of humanitarian funding for Sudan without delay. Concurrently, we commit to implementing the organisational resilience strategies outlined above to reduce future vulnerability and ensure our continued contribution to peace, safety (including support for arts associations contributing to social cohesion), and humanitarian response.

In essence: Diversify funding now, build internal financial buffers, invest in staff fundraising skills, formalise strong partnerships, advocate fiercely for necessary policy changes regarding humanitarian aid continuity, and optimise community resources. The situation in Sudan leaves no room for delay.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that US policy volatility—manifested in the blanket suspension of USAID programming—has had devastating effects on Sudanese civil society, particularly initiatives led by youth and women who were pivotal to both humanitarian response and democratic mobilisation. While programs like TEPS previously facilitated community resilience, civic engagement, and trauma recovery, the sudden aid withdrawal triggered a collapse in operational capacity for over half of the surveyed initiatives. Over 95% of communal kitchens in Khartoum have ceased operations, leaving millions without food or essential services.

However, the findings also highlight the resilience and adaptive capacity of local actors. Organisations leveraged informal networks, diaspora funding, hybrid revenue models, and digital platforms to maintain fragmented yet vital services. This innovation amidst austerity signals not the end of civil society, but the failure of transactional, externally driven development models to build sustainable systems.

The study argues for a paradigm shift in international aid strategy—moving from short-term project cycles to long-term, decolonial, locally-anchored partnerships. It calls for donors to prioritise:

- Epistemic justice (centring local knowledge and governance structures),
- Resource democratisation (enabling community-controlled funding mechanisms),
- Temporal realignment (funding based on local timelines, not donor calendars).

The future of peacebuilding, gender justice, and democratic governance in Sudan depends not only on the bravery of its civil society but also on the willingness of international actors to support them without imposing

structural constraints. Without such recalibration, foreign aid will remain a tool of geopolitical leverage, not solidarity.

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