

FROM CHARITY TO SOLIDARITY: SUPPORTING FIRST RESPONDERS IN SUDAN

A CLOSER LOOK



Emergency Response Rooms. © Stichting Vluchteling

The Netherlands Refugee Foundation, or Stichting Vluchteling (SV), was founded in 1976 to provide life-saving assistance to people displaced by conflict, violence, and natural disasters. With our partners, we provided support to 1.2 million people in 30 countries thanks to 89 different humanitarian aid programmes in the previous year.

It's been 2,5 years since the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) erupted in Khartoum. It marked an unprecedented turning point, descending Sudan into a full-scale civil war. It has become the largest humanitarian and displacement crisis on record, with famine declared in several localities and close to 12 million people uprooted since the start of the conflict.

The people of Sudan suffer the consequences of unspeakable atrocities: cities are besieged, essential services have collapsed, communities at large are trapped between armed groups and suffer direct attacks which include mass murder, abductions and rape. The capture of El Fasher is but a recent example.

Whilst millions need humanitarian assistance, humanitarian access has never been more constrained. International aid organizations are navigating a shrinking operational space. Yet, life-saving aid continues to reach people, in large part due to Sudanese communities who organized themselves into so called mutual aid groups such as the *Emergency Response Rooms* (ERRs).

Rooted in the Sudanese tradition of Nafeer - an Arabic word meaning "a call to mobilize" - the ERRs are decentralised, informal networks of volunteers that utilise expertise and resources that are available within their communities. Without being hindered by bureaucratic and administrative delays or restrictions placed on them by de-facto authorities, they are one of the very first to respond to the most urgent needs, far before international organizations have kickstarted their operations.

In addition to their adaptability, their real strength lays in the fact that their accountability is grounded in lived experiences, values and aspirations of the communities themselves, rather than accountability to remote institutions or donors.

Recognising mutual aid groups are a strong embodiment of the core humanitarian principle of humanity and of solidarity, we wanted to support these groups.

PARADIGM CHANGE

To do so requires us to rethink the concept of partnership itself. Over time, humanitarian donors and organizations have increasingly grown to protect institutions more than people themselves. Humanitarian partnerships have come to rely on strict compliance and accountability standards. While these frameworks aim to ensure safety, accountability and quality, the Sudan context exposed their limitations. Applying conventional due diligence would make collaboration with informal, volunteer-led structures of first responders impossible.

For us at SV, this shift required more than procedural adjustments; it demanded a paradigm change. Instead of prioritizing institutional compliance, we reframed

“Whilst millions need humanitarian assistance, humanitarian access has never been more constrained.”

accountability around community trust and tangible humanitarian outcomes. This meant revisiting policies, adapting programme cycles, and encouraging staff to move from a risk-based to a trust-based mindset. We introduced flexibility in documentation, allowing for alternative forms of evidence and nuanced risk assessments rather than standardized decision-making.

This approach encouraged us to ask different questions. Instead of asking “what do they lack?” we now look at what strengths already exist, and how we can support without disruption. It also meant dismantling the institutional reflex to control and replacing it with openness, humility, and a willingness to learn from local actors. These changes did not weaken our standards; they repositioned them to reflect realities on the ground, bolstering community-led action and resilience while preserving dignity and humanity.

We also came to realise that in the global landscape of mutual aid, the ERRs in Sudan are uniquely well organized. They set up local and regional representing

bodies responsible for real-time prioritization and developed the so-called “F-system” for tracking microgrants - a structured process to ensure effective planning, approval, and documentation for all the ERRs and their partners. The reciprocal accountability towards their communities and the applied transparency within each emergency room, means that funding is spent very rationally.

With guidance from pioneers such as Local2Global and Proximity2Humanity, we proceeded with our first grant to the ERRs through the pooled funding mechanism of their Local Coordination Council (LCC). The LCC is a growing coordination entity that includes representatives from 13 state ERRs. Through the LCC, member organizations triage priorities and direct finite resources to those locations in Sudan where the needs are the most urgent.

➤ CASE BOX

In November 2025, SV visited the ERR of Tawila in North Darfur. A team of six people was waiting to welcome us and tell us about the work they’ve been doing since the group was established in 2024. At that time, displaced families started arriving to Tawila. “There was not a single organization here at that time, and there was a lack of nearly everything. We wanted to support our brothers and sisters” - Abdulhamid told us. So, with the risk of their own life, those who still had private vehicle started driving up and down from El Fasher to Tawila, transferring people in need. Sometimes they would bring stock of water bottles in the vehicles which they bought from their own savings. “When there was shooting, we would leave the bottles and focus on picking patients and get out as fast as we could”. As the needs grew, they started buying supplies from their own savings, collecting donations and asking market vendors for discounts on large quantities. Since then, they started to provide shelter NFIs, offering protection services for women and children and started a number of community kitchens, which the ERR is still doing in coordination with the NGOs. “We have no relation with the political or military side. We coordinate with NGOs and with HAC for ease, nothing more” said a lady who’d



© Stichting Vluchteling

just came in, apologizing. “I work as nurse, and just finished my shift”. At the back of the office, some men were stacking a car with blankets and mats, so high that we were afraid the car would tip over. “We will distribute these to the people who arrived today from El Fasher”, a man explained while wiping the sweat of his forehead.

SV is now exploring other ways to assist other mutual aid groups in Myanmar, Gaza and Syria.

“We urge the EU to significantly scale up diplomatic efforts coupled with political consequences for states supporting warring parties who violate international humanitarian law.”

COMPLEMENTARY PARTNERSHIPS

While we argue mutual aid deserves increased visibility and funding, this does not mean it should replace traditional humanitarian assistance all together, rather it should be one element of a complementary response. For us, partnerships with larger, more formal humanitarian organisations will remain crucial for now, to scale interventions, provide specialised technical expertise, and for offering operational support when needed.

Regardless of the type of partner we support, it remains unmistakably clear our support cannot be limited to funding alone. The same communities and partners who are holding the humanitarian response together cannot - and should not- be expected to withstand a crisis fuelled by deliberate political choices that put them at significant risk. Since the start of the war, more than a 100 volunteers have been killed. This means we need to collectively confront the drivers of risk: the deliberate denial of access, the targeted attacks on civilians and aid workers, the obstruction of aid, and the support from external states that enable the conflict.

Due to the influential role of the EU and its strong bilateral economic and diplomatic relations with countries that play a proven role in the conflict, it can make an effective contribution to ending the large-scale violence and atrocities committed by the warring parties.

We urge the EU to significantly scale up diplomatic efforts coupled with political consequences for states supporting warring parties who violate international humanitarian law to uphold its credibility and call for urgent action to secure principled access, protection of civilians and aid workers and safe passage for people trapped in besieged cities such as El Fasher.

The Netherlands Refugee Foundation
Stichting Vluchteling