



An Update on the Humanitarian Situation and Response in Sudan

Expert meeting

10 September 2024 | 15:30 CET | The Hague (hybrid)

Summary report

April last year marked the eruption of the power struggle between the SAF and the RSF into a large-scale conflict. Since then, the war in Sudan has forced millions of people to flee their homes and has claimed at least 15.000 lives, resulting in one of the world's largest humanitarian and displacement crises. Apart from that, the conflict has had an enormous impact on the country's food system and the ability of Sudanese people to cope with, amongst others, food shortages.

The main objective of this expert meeting was to facilitate knowledge exchange and constructive dialogue between practitioners actively engaged in the Sudanese context, allowing them to share their perspectives on the challenges and potential opportunities for delivering humanitarian aid in Sudan. Participants were international and local NGO staff, policy officers from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and academics working in humanitarian studies.

Short introductions by:

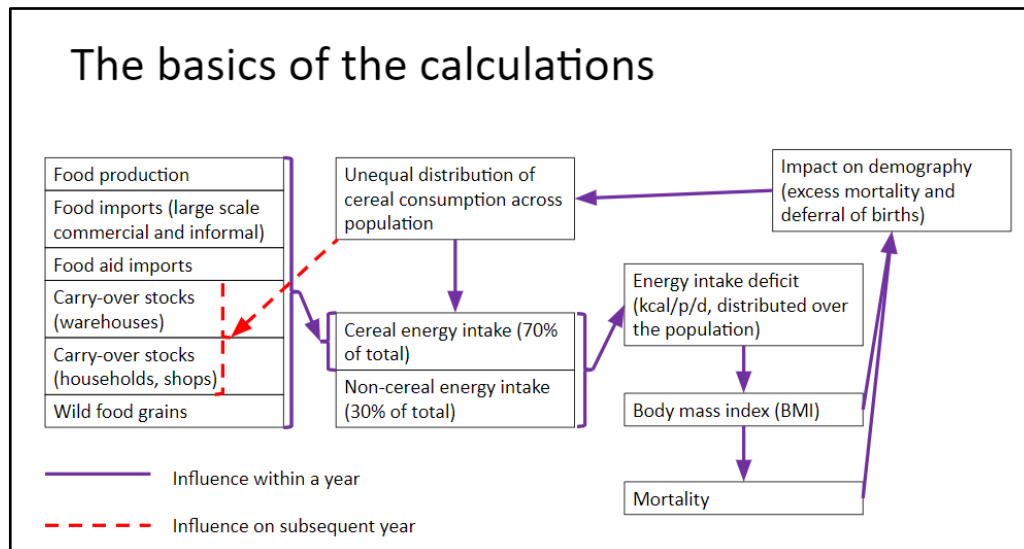
- **Timmo Gaasbeek**, Independent Researcher, PhD in anthropology of conflict and irrigation engineer by training.
- **Anette Hoffmann**, Senior Research Fellow at the Conflict Research Unit for the Clingendael Institute.
- **Hisham Abdulrahman**, DRA Sudan Acute Crisis Joint Response, Darfur Programme Area Manager for Plan International.

This meeting took place under the Chatham House Rule. The discussion was moderated by **Suying Lai**, Chair of KUNO and Manager of the SAFE Unit at Oxfam Novib.

Timmo Gaasbeek, who worked in Sudan from 2014 to 2018, started the session by reflecting on the findings of his most recent research about food security and mortality in Sudan, which is a follow-up of his [study: From Hunger to Death published by Clingendael in May](#). He discussed his model (see image below) that projects food availability and mortality rates in Sudan until 2027, based on data on food (aid) imports, food production, carry-over stocks, and wild food grains. He analysed the distribution of available food across the population, particularly cereal as Sudanese consume about 70% of their energy from cereals, accounting for the country's inequalities in wealth, (political/economic) access, and location. This analysis highlighted energy intake deficits linked to BMI, with a dangerously low BMI leading to increased mortality. Gaasbeek also discussed how prolonged

hunger affects population demographics through excess mortality, outmigration and lower birth rates, affecting future food distribution.

“The more people [in Sudan] get hungry, the more important cereal gets, which is important since people need calories to survive.”



Furthermore, Gaasbeek asserted that Sudan’s current famine and food insecurity are worrying, to say the least, emphasising the need for timely interventions, as effective responses require foresight of at least six months. His findings revealed a mortality range of 1 to 4 million for 2023-24, with total deaths projected between 10 and 13 million by September 2025. He stressed that mortality rates would only increase, especially as populations adjust to declining food availability without significant additional food imports of at least 1 million metric tons (MT) (either through aid or commercial imports). He noted, however, that it is not just a crisis of food affordability. Even if food were affordable, there is not enough available. On top of that, there are challenges with logistical capacity. While nothing can be done about the current harvest as the planting season has already ended, he urges prioritising contributions to the harvest of upcoming years and scaling up food aid.

“There is this narrative that there is a problem of food availability, but it is clear: even if food would be available, it would not be enough. This famine is different from other famines. We need to focus on what produces the most food.”

Anette Hoffmann, Senior Research Fellow at the Conflict Research Unit for the Clingendael Institute and author of a Sudan policy brief earlier this year, gave a short update about the current crisis and implications for aid delivery, embedding Gaasbeek’s presentation in the broader context of the politics of hunger and aid in Sudan. She gave an update on the current situation, emphasising the recent intensification of fighting fuelled by the support of external actors (e.g. the United Arab Emirates and others) to both sides. The war is expected to worsen after the rainy season when it will be easier again for troops and military vehicles to move around and prepare ground offensives. She also underscored the international system’s failure to effectively respond. Despite a devastated economy, some exports - namely livestock and gold - continue, as well as the inflow of weapons, with proceeds primarily reaching the Gulf states. Hoffmann highlighted a stark lack of international attention and

action in addressing the crisis, which is now the largest and fastest-growing humanitarian crisis worldwide. According to Hoffmann, the international system is broken due to multiple factors, including a failed early warning system, unsuccessful ceasefire negotiations and humanitarian access with limited progress. Other causes of this broken international system include a limited supply of aid, a lack of political process to solve the conflict, and no high-level pressure on regional sponsors of the conflict. Hoffmann then underlined how politics are clearly the main driver of hunger in this conflict, as food and hunger have been used as a weapon by both parties. This manifested in the destruction and looting of agricultural infrastructure, hindering of aid logistics, obstructing farmers, attacks on soup kitchens, blocking of aid, and manipulation of data collection meant to monitor and assess the level of food insecurity across the country. She noted that aid diversion and manipulation occur by the warring factions - directly (e.g. food looting and resale) and indirectly (e.g. road taxation, internet fees) - and even [alleged collusions with aid agencies](#). Hoffmann explained other challenges, such as navigating the need for international political engagement and unconditional aid. Another dilemma in Sudan is that for humanitarian organisations keeping agency space (keeping agencies operational) sometimes requires compromises, such as engaging with government forces or militias to allow access. However, this can risk undermining the neutrality of humanitarian operations and therefore further shrinking the humanitarian space¹. Lastly, another balancing act is negotiating humanitarian access, while avoiding financing the war. To explain, these negotiations may involve concessions or payments by humanitarian organisations or institutions to different armed factions - which control different regions - for safe passage. Armed groups may impose unofficial taxes on goods, transportation, and aid convoys passing through their territories.

She concluded her presentation by addressing recommendations for navigating aid amidst politics and conflict in Sudan, including:

1. High-level diplomacy by donors is needed to secure better access;
2. Leveraging local structures is necessary to enhance aid effectiveness, including cash transfers, strengthening protection and resilience, and supporting core operations;
3. Disincentivizing aid diversion and manipulation is possible through the diversification of suppliers, prioritising smaller contracts with Sudanese partners and contractors/suppliers, involving trusted Sudanese partners in due diligence, exchanging white lists among agencies, and jointly negotiating access.

“This is the largest and fastest-growing humanitarian crisis worldwide.”

¹ Two examples were given here:

- UN is recognizing Burhan as head of state (UNGA, Adre border): The United Nations General Assembly and the international community are faced with the question of who to recognize as Sudan's legitimate authority. By recognizing Burhan as Sudan's head of state at the UNGA, the UN may signal a level of legitimacy to his leadership, despite the ongoing internal conflict.
- UN agencies and INGO hinting that more funding can contain or even prevent famine: By hinting that more funding can contain or prevent famine, these agencies are emphasizing that timely and sufficient financial support can help avoid a full-scale humanitarian catastrophe, but without a resolution to the conflict, delivering aid will continue to be difficult.

Hisham Abdulrahman, Darfur Programme Area Manager for Plan International, shared examples of obstacles and opportunities for ongoing response efforts in Darfur States. As he is based in North Darfur, he first offered a short overview of the current context of humanitarian aid in Darfur. He emphasised that the humanitarian crisis has reached a critical point. Since 2023, nearly 25.6 million Sudanese have been affected by the conflict and need assistance. 5.4 million people have been displaced, including 4.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), while the remainder sought refuge in neighbouring countries. He pointed out that in Darfur alone, 6.2 million people will require aid in the coming year, and that ongoing violence is especially targeting women and girls. Consequently, Hisham Abdulrahman discussed the recent obstacles that complicated aid delivery, including humanitarian access, displacement, ongoing violence, food insecurity, lack of goods and services, the ongoing rainy season, non-functioning banks, lack of cash liquidity, high increase in inflation and cash transfer fees, and a delayed process of local approvals in some states. Opportunities for the improvement of the response can be derived from the present Sudan Acute Crisis Joint Response supported by the DRA, including cross-border aid initiatives, its acknowledged network of local partners, and innovative solutions that improve aid efficiency (e.g. the use of technology to improve humanitarian logistics and services).

“Internal collaboration, community engagement, and innovative solutions in tackling the challenges can help in reaching a more sustainable humanitarian response in the region.”

Discussion

After the introductions, the room was opened for dialogue and questions. With regards to localisation, one of the participants noted that, although there are already partnerships in place, such as the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), there is a demand for working with less conventional and small partners. Another attendee stressed the spillover of the crisis to other countries, such as Chad, implying that it is starting to become a regional crisis. Thereafter in the discussion, the humanitarian role of the Netherlands was highlighted. This role was explained as being ‘twofold’, indicating the two roles of the Dutch-based sector in the response in Sudan; humanitarian diplomacy and the provision of aid. Regarding food provision, it was highlighted that even when food is available, distribution and affordability remain a major challenge, for which additional funding is required. This was also endorsed by Timmo Gaasbeek, as he emphasises that this famine is different from other famines, and an adequate response should focus on what produces the most food. Consequently, a question about Gaasbeek’s research was raised, and if he could also provide more information about the mitigation of meat consumption in Sudan. He responded that meat prices have skyrocketed, and that high meat consumption is mainly seen among those who can afford food. Additionally, he explained that meat provides significantly fewer calories compared to cereals and therefore would not be an effective alternative. Finally, Hisham Abdulrahman and Anette Hoffmann advocated for more cash transfers to local actors, especially farmers and women, to access necessary resources.

Concluding remarks: recommendations and opportunities

While nothing can be done about the current harvest due to the ending of the planting season, experts urge attention to look at what produces the most food and ensure prioritisation by humanitarian organisations engaging in response action to support the harvest of 2025. High-level diplomacy remains needed to increase access by also engaging non-conventional donors, as there is a demand for more international political engagement to end conflict, as well as ensuring safe access and

enabling cross-border aid initiatives. The challenging context in which hunger is used as a weapon of war amidst aid diversion requires an exploration of measures that can disincentivize this. Meanwhile, working with local structures and community engagement remains critical as a part of response efforts, as well as direct Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA). One of the many challenges is the lack of goods and services in the market, especially for food and related supplies, and limited logistical capacity. In some cases, it is possible to replace cash with food, but this varies and is unpredictable. Amidst high inflation and cash transfer fees, lacking cash liquidity, and non-functioning banks, continued efforts are required to map alternative service providers and diversify suppliers. Response efforts in Sudan merit continued attention, but the current context also calls for an increase in response efforts in neighbouring countries, as the crisis affects other countries in the region. Lastly, given limited connectivity and travel restrictions, it is critical to consider that information is not always accurate or updated. This can impact response efforts, as the situation is complex and dynamically changing.