



Sudan's Internal Displacement Crisis: Cyclical Uprooting, Humanitarian Access, and Local Coping

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Abstract

Sudan is currently experiencing the world's largest internal displacement crisis, with more than 11 million people uprooted across all 18 states by early 2025. This paper conceptualizes displacement in Sudan as a *cycle of debilitation*, in which repeated uprooting, destruction of livelihoods, denial of humanitarian access, and psychosocial trauma reinforce one another across household, community, and national scales. Drawing on secondary data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), and World Health Organization (WHO), as well as operational reports and Sudanese field narratives, the study synthesizes evidence of displacement dynamics between April 2023 and mid-2025.

The paper concludes that durable solutions must be reconceptualized in contexts of cyclical displacement. Breaking Sudan's cycle of debilitation requires not only humanitarian access and protection guarantees but also legal reform, investment in local actors, and adaptive monitoring systems capable of capturing the realities of repeated uprooting.

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1. Introduction and Background

The conflict that erupted on 15 April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) rapidly escalated into a nationwide humanitarian emergency. What began as localized clashes in Khartoum evolved into urban warfare, indiscriminate shelling, and systematic attacks on civilians (OCHA, 2024) ^[16]. Entire neighborhoods were destroyed, hospitals and schools were targeted, and essential services collapsed, forcing millions to flee.

Displacement in Sudan is not a one-time event but a recurrent process. Families often move several times, initially within Khartoum, later to states such as Gezira, White Nile, Gedaref, River Nile, and Red Sea, only to be uprooted again as violence spreads (IOM, 2024). This cycle demonstrates that displacement in Sudan is iterative and destabilizing, not linear.

By July 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that there were around 10.7 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Sudan, with an additional 2.1 fleeing to neighboring countries. By March 2025, the number of IDPs rose to 11.3 million, meaning nearly one in five Sudanese citizens were uprooted (IOM, 2025) ^[11]. Internal displacement on this scale reflects broader regional dynamics of protracted crises in the Horn of Africa (Ferris, 2012; IDMC, 2023) ^[5, 8]. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2025) ^[9] identified Sudan as the world's largest internal displacement crisis, surpassing Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ukraine.

The humanitarian consequences are profound. Urban centers have been hollowed out, with large parts of Khartoum, Omdurman, and El-Fasher depopulated. Host communities, already resource-constrained, face massive inflows of IDPs, straining schools, hospitals, and water systems. Informal settlements have expanded, often with little access to sanitation or healthcare, creating conditions for epidemics such as cholera, which by 2025 reached emergency levels (WHO, 2025) [30].

At the same time, food insecurity has worsened dramatically. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC, 2025) projected that 24.6 million Sudanese faced Crisis (Phase 3) or worse levels of food insecurity, with 637,000 in Catastrophe (Phase 5), primarily in Darfur. For displaced populations, this is compounded by the loss of agricultural land and livelihoods, deepening dependence on humanitarian assistance (WFP, 2025) [29].

Beyond humanitarian impacts, displacement has macro-economic consequences. The World Bank (2025) [28] projects GDP could contract by 32–42% if conflict persists, with agricultural output declining by one-third and poverty rising sharply. Skilled professionals (e.g., teachers, doctors, engineers) have fled or been displaced, contributing to labor shortages and brain drain.

This paper conceptualizes Sudan's crisis through the lens of a cycle of debilitation. Each episode of displacement erodes household assets, weakens social networks, and compounds trauma, while community and national systems strain under cumulative pressure. Unlike linear displacement models, Sudan demonstrates how repeated uprooting becomes a structural condition of life.

Building on field narratives, operational reports, and international monitoring data, the paper asks:

How do recurrent displacement, access blockages, and local coping mechanisms interact to shape Sudan's internal displacement dynamics in 2024–2025, and what pathways exist for durable solutions?

By addressing this question, the paper contributes to both scholarly debate and policy design. It integrates humanitarian data (IOM-DTM, IDMC, IPC, WHO), academic studies, and policy frameworks including the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998), the IASC Framework on Durable Solutions (2010) [10], and the Kampala Convention (2009). The aim is to demonstrate that breaking Sudan's displacement cycle requires both immediate humanitarians guarantees and structural legal reforms, with recognition of local actors as essential agents of resilience.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Traditional models often frame displacement as a linear process: people are uprooted, settle temporarily, and either return, integrate, or resettle. This framing fails to capture Sudan's reality, where families are displaced multiple times, attempt short-lived returns, and are uprooted again when conflict resumes. Instead, Sudan illustrates a cyclical and protracted pattern of displacement.

The concept of a cycle of debilitation is central to this paper. Each episode of flight erodes household assets, fragments social networks, and compounds trauma, while communities and the national economy also weaken. Research on cyclical or "pendular" displacement shows that repeated uprooting

accelerates poverty and psychosocial stress (Williams & El-Hassan, 2025) [27]. This aligns with comparative analyses of cyclical displacement in Syria and the DRC, which emphasize recurrence and institutional erosion (Ferris & Zetter, 2019) [6]. Sudanese experiences reflect this: families often move between Khartoum neighborhoods, rural villages, and host states such as White Nile or Red Sea, rarely achieving stability before being forced to flee again.

Accurate analysis also requires moving beyond national-level statistics. Aggregated figures risk masking local realities, creating ecological fallacies. A sub-national lens is critical: conflict tactics, governance arrangements, and geography shape displacement decisions in different ways. For example, in El-Fasher, siege tactics, including blocked markets and targeted shelling, directly caused mass displacement in 2025. Conversely, some rural families attempted temporary returns despite insecurity because they needed access to agricultural land. Linking event-based conflict data with displacement flows clarifies such causal mechanisms.

International protection frameworks provide a normative lens for Sudan's displacement:

- The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) affirm state responsibility to protect IDPs and prohibit discrimination (Kälin, 2008) [13]. In Sudan, state and non-state actors have actively undermined these principles through violence and aid obstruction.
- The IASC Framework on Durable Solutions (2010) [10] sets eight criteria, including safety, housing, livelihoods, and access to services among them. By these standards, Sudan is far from achieving durable solutions.
- The African Union's Kampala Convention (2009) [2], the only binding regional treaty, obliges states to prevent arbitrary displacement and facilitate assistance. Sudan has not ratified it, leaving IDPs without enforceable regional protections.

These frameworks reveal a clear gap between international norms and Sudan's practice. Displacement persists not only because of conflict but also because structural protections are absent or unenforced.

Finally, Sudan's crisis illustrates broader theories of structural violence (Galtung, 1969) [7]. Displacement is not only the product of direct attacks but also of systemic denial of aid, services, and rights. Siege tactics, asset looting, and bureaucratic obstruction convert mobility into a mechanism of control. For displaced households, this means survival strategies are shaped less by choice than by structural coercion.

In short, Sudan demonstrates the need to reconceptualize displacement as cyclical, multi-scalar, and structurally reinforced. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for designing monitoring systems, humanitarian interventions, and policy reforms that address not just displacement events but the loop of vulnerabilities that sustains them.

3. Methods

This paper is based on a desk-based narrative synthesis covering April 2023 to mid-2025. Because insecurity and access restrictions made fieldwork impossible, the analysis relies on secondary data and triangulation across multiple independent sources to reconstruct Sudan's displacement dynamics.

The core evidence comes from operational and humanitarian datasets. These include the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) mobility updates (2023–2025), which provide estimates of IDP totals and movements by state; OCHA Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs), which outline evolving humanitarian needs and access constraints; and World Food Programme (WFP) appeals for famine prevention and response. Together, these sources offer a quantitative foundation for understanding displacement flows, humanitarian requirements, and access barriers.

To capture the convergence of displacement with hunger and public health emergencies, the study also draws on food security and health data. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projections for 2024–2025 identified 24.6 million Sudanese facing IPC Phase 3 or worse, with nearly 637,000 in Phase 5 famine-like conditions. The World Health Organization (WHO) published cholera updates during 2025, documenting widespread outbreaks in displacement-affected states.

In addition, the analysis engages with academic literature to provide conceptual and theoretical grounding. Williams and El-Hassan (2025)^[27] explore subnational conflict–migration linkages; Taylor, Osman, and Rahman (2025)^[21] assess the humanitarian access crisis in Sudan; and World Bank (2025)^[28] reports project the macroeconomic impacts of displacement on GDP and poverty. These studies complement operational data by situating Sudan within broader debates on displacement measurement and protracted crises.

Finally, the paper incorporates field narratives and testimonies gathered by Sudanese civil society organizations and humanitarian actors. These accounts describe recurrent displacement, risks along flight routes, and household coping mechanisms. Though anecdotal, they provide critical insight into lived experiences often absent from aggregated datasets. The analytical approach is interpretive and multi-scalar. At the micro level, it examines household losses of assets, education, and health. At the meso level, it explores how displacement affects community services and cohesion. At the macro level, it links displacement to national economic contraction and famine. By cross-checking qualitative testimonies against quantitative estimates, and pairing conflict events (such as sieges) with mobility flows, the study seeks to clarify both patterns and drivers of displacement.

This design has limitations. Reliance on secondary data creates coverage gaps: informal settlements and urban IDPs are often undercounted, and figures from Darfur are especially incomplete. Political sensitivities mean that conflict actors may under-report or exaggerate numbers, while access restrictions delay verification. To mitigate these issues, the study triangulated across multiple sources and prioritized convergence over single-source accuracy. Ethical considerations also shaped the analysis, with granular geolocation of testimonies avoided to protect vulnerable communities.

4. Findings

4.1. Scale and Geography of Displacement

The conflict has displaced people across all of Sudan's 18 states, but the scale and geography of this movement reveal clear patterns. Families rarely move only once; rather, they experience secondary and tertiary displacement as violence

spreads or temporary havens become unsafe.

By July 2024, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that around 10.7 million people had been displaced within Sudan, while another 2.1 million had fled to neighboring countries (IOM, 2024). By March 2025, the number of IDPs rose to 11.3 million (IOM, 2025)^[11]. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2025)^[9] identified Sudan as the world's largest internal displacement crisis, surpassing Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Ukraine.

Displacement is unevenly distributed. The Darfur region continues to host millions of IDPs, with El-Fasher at the center of siege-induced displacement. Khartoum state, despite destruction, still contains displaced families cycling between urban neighborhoods and peri-urban settlements. White Nile and Gezira have absorbed large flows from Khartoum, while Red Sea and Northern states serve as transit zones toward Port Sudan and international borders.

Table 1: Estimated IDPs by State (June-July 2025)

State/Region	IDPs (millions)	Share (%)
North Darfur	2.2	19%
Khartoum	1.9	17%
White Nile	1.6	14%
Gezira	1.3	12%
Red Sea	1.0	9%
South Darfur	0.9	8%
West Darfur	0.7	6%
River Nile	0.5	4%
Northern State	0.5	4%
Central Darfur	0.4	4%
East Darfur	0.3	3%
Total	11.3	100%

Source: IOM-DTM, 2025^[11].

Most displacement is short and repetitive. Families often relocate first within their state before moving further, and some attempt returns only to be uprooted again. Cross-border flight into Chad, South Sudan, and Egypt is significant but smaller than internal reshuffling.

The result is a layered geography of displacement: depopulated cities, overstretched rural hosts, and congested transit hubs. This instability reinforces the central argument of a cycle of debilitation, where each round of movement compounds vulnerability.

4.2. Protection and Access Challenges

Displacement in Sudan is driven not only by violence but by profound protection risks and denial of humanitarian access. These factors deepen vulnerability and perpetuate the cycle of debilitation.

Nowhere is this clearer than El-Fasher in North Darfur, where RSF forces have imposed siege conditions since early 2025. Markets are blocked, aid convoys looted, and water infrastructure sabotaged, producing famine-like conditions. Hospitals and schools have been shelled, with civilians trapped between frontlines. OCHA (2025)^[17] describes this as a deliberate use of siege tactics to “weaponize hunger.”

In Khartoum, warehouses holding food and medicine were looted during fighting. In Darfur, humanitarian convoys are blocked or taxed at checkpoints. Even where aid reaches IDPs, distribution is inconsistent and politicized, with armed actors diverting supplies to supporters. These practices

directly contravene the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and international humanitarian law, which prohibit targeting civilians or obstructing relief.

Protection concerns extend beyond hunger. Women and girls face heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV) during displacement. At informal WASH facilities, women report harassment and assault when collecting water or using communal latrines. Testimonies from Khartoum and Nyala further describe sexual violence during house raids and at checkpoints, with some survivors assaulted in front of children (OHCHR, 2025) ^[18]. Similar patterns of gendered risk have been documented in other protracted conflicts, underscoring how displacement magnifies pre-existing inequalities (UNFPA, 2024; IRC, 2023) ^[24, 12]. These acts serve as tools of humiliation and control, reinforcing fear and limiting mobility. Stigma and lack of services mean that most cases remain unreported.

Children face layered risks. Many are recruited by armed groups, particularly adolescent boys, who are targeted at checkpoints or in camps. Education disruption is widespread; in White Nile camps, dropout rates exceed 70 percent (UNICEF, 2025) ^[25]. Loss of schooling not only harms individual futures but undermines community resilience. Young children also face acute malnutrition, with long-term developmental impacts.

Health services are systematically undermined. Hospitals in Khartoum, Nyala, and El-Fasher have been occupied or destroyed, leaving IDPs without care. Humanitarian health workers report harassment, arrests, and in some cases killings. MSF (2025) documented attacks on clinics in Zamzam camp, forcing closures amid cholera outbreaks. Such actions exacerbate mortality from preventable diseases and violate international humanitarian law.

For those attempting to flee Sudan, border crossings present further risks. Refugees moving toward Chad or South Sudan report extortion and violence by both state and non-state actors. Women in particular face harassment during long waits at crossings. Even after crossing, refugee camps remain underfunded, with limited food and protection services.

These protection and access challenges demonstrate that displacement in Sudan is not simply a byproduct of conflict but an active strategy of war. By weaponizing hunger, health, and fear, armed actors transform mobility into a condition of precarity. The persistence of these practices underscores the gap between Sudan's obligations under international law and the lived reality of its displaced citizens.

4.3. Health and Food Security

The intersection of food insecurity and health collapse is central to Sudan's displacement crisis. Repeated uprooting not only strips families of livelihoods but also exposes them to epidemic disease and malnutrition, reinforcing the cycle of debilitation.

By mid-2025, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projected 24.6 million Sudanese in IPC Phase 3 or worse, including 637,000 in Phase 5 Catastrophe concentrated primarily in Darfur (IPC, 2025). Conflict has disrupted harvests, with planting seasons missed and farmland abandoned. Displaced families often flee during planting or harvesting, eroding both household food stocks and national supply.

Market disruption compounds scarcity. Siege conditions in El-Fasher and other urban centers block trade, driving prices

beyond reach. In Red Sea state, displaced families arriving in Port Sudan reported sorghum prices rising more than fivefold (WFP, 2025) ^[29]. Those without remittances or aid are forced into negative coping strategies, including selling assets or reducing meals to once per day.

The consequences are visible in alarming malnutrition rates. UNICEF (2025) ^[25] estimates that over 3 million children under five are acutely malnourished. In White Nile camps, screening shows Global Acute Malnutrition rates exceeding 30%, far above emergency thresholds. Pregnant and lactating women are especially vulnerable, with high rates of anemia and micronutrient deficiency.

Displacement interrupts food assistance, as mobile households may be registered in one location but forced to move before distributions occur. As a result, nutrition support often fails to reach those in greatest need.

Health systems have been systematically dismantled. In Khartoum, more than 70% of hospitals ceased functioning by late 2024 (WHO, 2025) ^[30]. Facilities in Darfur have been looted, occupied, or destroyed. Where clinics remain open, supplies are minimal, and health workers face harassment or arrest.

The collapse is most evident in infectious disease outbreaks. Cholera spread nationwide in 2025, with confirmed cases in 14 states (WHO, 2025) ^[30]. Transmission is driven by unsafe water, overcrowding in IDP camps, and collapsed sanitation infrastructure. Displaced families report relying on untreated river water or shallow wells, while latrine shortages leave camps with open defecation.

Other diseases, including measles and malaria, are rising. MSF (2025) documented malaria treatment shortages in Zamzam camp, coinciding with cholera outbreaks. The convergence of multiple epidemics in malnourished populations significantly raises mortality. Beyond physical illness, prolonged displacement produces significant mental-health burdens, including post-traumatic stress and depression among conflict-affected civilians (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017) ^[15].

Displacement directly amplifies health risks. Overcrowding is widespread: in White Nile and Gezira, dozens of families often share single classrooms as shelters. Many chronic patients with tuberculosis, diabetes, or HIV are cut off from care when fleeing. Families attempting to escape sieges report walking for days without food or water, leading to exhaustion and deaths from dehydration. These experiences demonstrate how forced mobility interacts with health collapse in a feedback loop, where worsening health weakens coping capacity and increases the likelihood of further displacement.

Sudan demonstrates how food and health insecurity are weaponized in conflict. Siege tactics, denial of aid, and destruction of health facilities are not collateral damage but deliberate strategies. For displaced populations, this produces cumulative vulnerability as famine, disease, and displacement reinforce one another in a cycle that erodes resilience at every level.

4.4. Coping and Local Response

Despite extreme deprivation, displaced communities in Sudan continue to demonstrate resilience through diverse coping mechanisms. These strategies range from improvised household adjustments to the emergence of organized grassroots initiatives. While they sustain lives in the short

term, they remain fragile, under-resourced, and cannot substitute for a comprehensive humanitarian response (OCHA, 2025) ^[17].

At the household level, families rely on familiar yet erosive strategies. Many reduce meals to once per day or substitute sorghum porridge for more diverse diets, heightening the risk of malnutrition (WFP, 2025) ^[29]. Jewelry, household goods, and remaining livestock are sold to purchase food or pay for transport to safer areas (IOM, 2025) ^[11]. In urban centers, displaced families often occupy unfinished buildings or schools, paying rent in kind or offering labor (UNDP, 2024) ^[23]. These tactics provide temporary relief but accelerate long-term impoverishment.

Displacement also reshapes gender roles. In Khartoum and White Nile, women increasingly serve as heads of household while men remain near conflict zones to protect property or seek income (UNICEF, 2025) ^[25]. Women generate income through informal markets, petty trade, or cooking for neighbors, though at considerable personal risk. Girls are frequently pulled from school to help with domestic work or income generation. These strategies reveal both the adaptability and vulnerability of displaced families (Taylor, Osman, & Rahman, 2025) ^[21].

At the community level, displaced populations organize collective solutions. In Gezira and White Nile, community kitchens provide shared meals, funded by local contributions or diaspora remittances (Refugees International, 2025) ^[20]. Informal committees allocate shelters in schools or mosques, attempting to prevent overcrowding. In Port Sudan, neighborhood groups coordinate housing for new arrivals from Khartoum, though rising rents limit capacity (IOM, 2025) ^[11].

While these initiatives sustain survival, they also strain host communities, many of which are already impoverished. Shared water points, latrines, and schools become overwhelmed, heightening the risk of tension between residents and newcomers (OCHA, 2025) ^[17]. In Darfur, these tensions occasionally escalate into localized clashes over access to resources.

The most notable grassroots innovation is the rise of Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), a network of volunteers formed in 2023 to organize food distributions, evacuation transport, and community kitchens. ERRs also document rights abuses and disseminate verified updates via social media, often more rapidly than formal agencies (Refugees International, 2025) ^[20].

However, ERRs operate under severe constraints. Volunteers depend on personal funds and diaspora donations and are vulnerable to harassment or arrest by armed groups (OHCHR, 2025) ^[18]. The prominence of locally led responses in Sudan echoes wider humanitarian debates on localization, which call for power-sharing between international and community actors (Barbelet, 2019) ^[3]. Lacking formal recognition within the humanitarian coordination system, they remain excluded from funding streams and protection mechanisms despite their frontline role.

Sudanese diaspora networks play an important complementary role. Remittances sustain community kitchens, cover medical bills, and finance evacuations (World Bank, 2025) ^[28]. In Port Sudan, diaspora contributions have been critical in subsidizing transport for displaced families (IOM, 2025) ^[11]. Yet reliance on diaspora support reinforces inequality, as families without international connections are

often left behind.

While households, communities, ERRs, and diaspora networks sustain survival, these coping mechanisms are inherently unsustainable. Selling assets erodes future resilience, community kitchens cannot meet dietary needs, and volunteer networks face burnout and repression. Coping in this context is less adaptation than delayed collapse in the absence of institutional protection (UNDP, 2024) ^[23].

Sudan's displaced communities show remarkable resilience, but their strategies reveal the limits of self-reliance under siege conditions. The international system must shift from viewing local coping as a substitute for aid to recognizing grassroots actors as central to durable solutions (Refugees International, 2025) ^[20].

5. Impacts of Cyclical Displacement

Sudan's displacement crisis is not simply humanitarian; it is transformational, reshaping the country's social, economic, and demographic landscape. The cumulative impacts occur across three interlocking levels: household, community, and national. Together these levels reinforce the cycle of debilitation that defines protracted displacement.

At the household level, displacement erodes livelihoods, education, and health. Families lose access to land, livestock, and income sources; savings are depleted; and social support networks fracture (IOM, 2025) ^[11]. Repeated uprooting destroys continuity in employment and schooling, producing what the World Bank (2025) ^[28] describes as a "cascade of asset depletion."

Health and nutrition outcomes decline with each displacement. Households forced to move repeatedly have higher rates of acute malnutrition and untreated illness (WHO, 2025) ^[30]. Women face elevated caregiving burdens as health systems collapse, often forgoing their own treatment to prioritize children (UNICEF, 2025) ^[25]. Psychosocial trauma is pervasive but rarely documented; many displaced adults report chronic stress and depression after multiple cycles of flight (Taylor, Osman, & Rahman, 2025) ^[21].

At the community level, displacement strains infrastructure and social cohesion. Host communities face sudden population surges that overwhelm water systems, schools, and healthcare facilities (OCHA, 2025) ^[17]. In Gezira and White Nile, classrooms double as shelters, forcing the suspension of education. Local authorities struggle to manage sanitation and waste, increasing disease risk.

Competition for resources intensifies between displaced and resident populations. In Darfur, tensions over water points and firewood collection have led to localized violence, echoing earlier conflict triggers (ACAPS, 2025) ^[1]. In some towns, landlords raise rents sharply, pushing IDPs into informal settlements or collective shelters. These pressures feed new grievances, perpetuating instability.

Communities also experience social fragmentation. Traditional coping institutions such as neighborhood committees, tribal councils, and religious networks become stretched beyond capacity. Their authority weakens as displacement becomes prolonged, replaced by ad hoc survival arrangements. UNDP (2024) ^[23] notes that social trust erodes rapidly when humanitarian delivery fails, undermining collective resilience.

At the macro level, displacement has contributed to the collapse of Sudan's development trajectory. The World Bank (2025) ^[28] projects that GDP could contract by up to 40

percent if the conflict persists. Agricultural output has fallen dramatically, particularly in Gezira and Darfur, once major production zones. Labor shortages in key sectors such as health, education, and civil service reflect the exodus of skilled professionals.

Public finances have also deteriorated. With tax bases eroded and humanitarian dependence rising, the state struggles to maintain even minimal services (OCHA, 2025) ^[17]. Similar economic degradation has been observed in Yemen and South Sudan, where displacement accelerates poverty traps and state fragmentation (UNDP, 2023; De Waal, 2018) ^[22, 4]. Inflation and currency devaluation further reduce purchasing power, worsening poverty. Meanwhile, internal displacement has created new demographic imbalances: urban depopulation in Khartoum and Darfur coincides with population surges in White Nile and Red Sea states, straining already fragile economies.

These multi-level impacts reinforce one another in a self-perpetuating loop. Household impoverishment weakens communities' capacity to absorb new arrivals; strained communities undermine local economies and governance; national collapse reduces public investment, triggering renewed displacement. The result is a recursive process with each wave of displacement deepening the conditions for the next.

The cumulative outcome is a national humanitarian economy in which displacement, aid dependency, and conflict form an integrated system. As livelihoods collapse, people depend on external assistance, which in turn becomes a target for control by armed actors, perpetuating both conflict and vulnerability. Addressing Sudan's displacement crisis requires recognizing this structural dimension. Interventions limited to short-term relief cannot interrupt the cycle; they must be linked to policies that rebuild livelihoods, strengthen local governance, and protect social infrastructure. Otherwise, Sudan risks institutionalizing displacement as a permanent socioeconomic condition, rather than a temporary humanitarian emergency.

6. Law and Policy Context

Sudan's displacement crisis exposes a profound gap between international protection norms and domestic implementation. Although successive governments have endorsed many humanitarian standards, none have been effectively translated into enforceable national policy.

The UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) remain the foundational normative instrument. They affirm that IDPs retain the same rights as all citizens and place the primary duty of protection on the state (Kälin, 2008) ^[13]. In Sudan, both state and non-state actors have routinely violated these principles through indiscriminate violence, forced displacement, and denial of humanitarian access (OHCHR, 2025; OCHA, 2025) ^[18, 17].

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Framework on Durable Solutions (2010) ^[10] offers operational guidance for governments and agencies seeking to help IDPs rebuild their lives. It defines eight criteria, including safety, access to livelihoods, housing, and justice, as indicators of durable solutions (IASC, 2010) ^[10]. Measured against these benchmarks, Sudan's conditions remain far from compliance as IDPs continue to face insecurity, land disputes, and loss of documentation, with no mechanism to monitor progress (IDMC, 2025) ^[9].

At the regional level, the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention, 2009) provides a legally binding standard. It requires states to prevent arbitrary displacement, protect IDPs, and allocate national resources for their assistance (African Union, 2009) ^[21]. Sudan has signed but not ratified the Convention, leaving its provisions unenforceable. Without ratification, IDPs lack recourse to regional legal mechanisms, and international agencies have limited leverage to ensure compliance (Williams & El-Hassan, 2025) ^[27].

Domestically, Sudan adopted a National Policy on Internally Displaced Persons in 2009. The policy affirms state responsibility for protection and durable solutions but lacks an enforcement mechanism or dedicated budget (OCHA, 2024) ^[16]. Implementation was stalled by political instability following the 2019 revolution and later dismantled during renewed conflict. Subsequent transitional authorities prioritized short-term humanitarian coordination over legislative reform, leaving IDPs dependent on ad hoc international assistance (Taylor, Osman, & Rahman, 2025) ^[21].

The absence of land-tenure legislation compounds this vacuum. Many displaced families cannot reclaim property, and returnees often face new contestation over agricultural plots in Darfur and Gezira (UNDP, 2024) ^[23]. With judicial institutions weakened and archives destroyed, documentation of ownership is nearly impossible, blocking durable return. Legal accountability for displacement-related abuses remains minimal. Neither the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) nor the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have faced prosecution for violations such as forced displacement or the targeting of civilians (OHCHR, 2025) ^[18]. International efforts to establish investigative mechanisms are hampered by limited access and political obstruction.

Civil-society actors, including ERRs and Sudanese legal aid groups, have attempted to document abuses and advocate for victims, but they lack protection and recognition (Refugees International, 2025) ^[20]. Incorporating these actors into national and regional accountability frameworks could enhance transparency and strengthen legal follow-through.

The legal and policy architecture for IDP protection in Sudan exists largely on paper. The country's failure to ratify the Kampala Convention, implement its 2009 IDP policy, or operationalize durable-solution benchmarks has left millions without enforceable rights. Rebuilding Sudan's legal framework will require ratification of regional instruments, revision of national law, and inclusion of civil-society mechanisms to monitor compliance. Until such reforms occur, international humanitarian principles will remain aspirational rather than protective.

7. Discussion

Sudan's displacement crisis demonstrates how repeated, overlapping shocks transform displacement from a temporary emergency into a structural condition of national life. The evidence presented reveals a recursive system in which conflict, deprivation, and policy failure reinforce one another, forming what this paper terms a cycle of debilitation.

Classical displacement frameworks often treat movement as linear: people flee, stabilize, and either return or resettle. Yet Sudan's case aligns more closely with emerging theories of cyclical and protracted displacement (Williams & El-Hassan,

2025; IDMC, 2025)^[27, 9]. Each episode of flight destroys the assets and institutions needed for recovery. The findings show that most families experience multiple displacements while state collapse prevents stabilization. Rather than ending displacement, humanitarian assistance merely sustains populations within it (OCHA, 2025)^[17].

This pattern challenges the assumption that durable solutions are achievable through short-term recovery projects. As Taylor, Osman, and Rahman (2025)^[21] argue, in protracted conflicts “durability itself becomes unstable,” because the conditions required for return or integration continually erode. Sudan illustrates this instability vividly: returnees to Khartoum or Darfur often become newly displaced when fighting resumes, creating re-displacement loops.

Galtung’s (1969)^[7] concept of structural violence helps explain why Sudan’s displacement persists beyond the battlefield. Denial of aid, siege tactics, bureaucratic obstruction, and economic collapse constitute systemic forms of violence that reproduce vulnerability. These mechanisms target access to food, water, and mobility, weaponizing deprivation rather than direct assault. The collapse of governance thus functions as a deliberate instrument of control.

Structural violence also explains the erosion of social capital observed in displaced communities. Recent scholarship on “chronic crisis systems” reinforces this link between structural violence and cyclical displacement, framing protracted crises as feedback loops of governance failure (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2021)^[14]. As UNDP (2024)^[23] notes, displacement destroys the trust and reciprocity that underpin collective coping. Once those networks are weakened, communities lose the ability to manage conflict peacefully, deepening both humanitarian need and insecurity.

The rise of ERRs and other community initiatives demonstrates that displaced people are not passive recipients of aid (Refugees International, 2025)^[20]. However, their success highlights a paradox: local responders carry the bulk of humanitarian responsibility yet operate without protection or funding. The international system’s tendency to sideline these actors reflects a persistent north-south asymmetry in humanitarian governance (OCHA, 2024)^[16]. Recognizing ERRs within coordination mechanisms could bridge the gap between immediate relief and long-term resilience.

The analysis underscores the inadequacy of existing legal frameworks when state authority itself is fragmented. Non-ratification of the Kampala Convention and the collapse of Sudan’s 2009 IDP Policy mean that normative commitments remain unenforceable (African Union, 2009; OCHA, 2024)^[2, 16]. As long as national institutions are unable or unwilling to guarantee rights, international actors must treat protection as both a humanitarian and political imperative. Linking assistance with accountability, including sanctions for obstruction of aid, would align humanitarian response with the preventive intent of the Guiding Principles (Kälin, 2008)^[13].

Sudan’s case calls for a new conceptual model of durable solutions. Rather than defining success as physical return or integration, policymakers should focus on *degrees of stability*: secure access to food, healthcare, and mobility regardless of location. This incremental, rights-based interpretation aligns with the IASC (2010)^[10] framework while recognizing that “normalcy” may remain unattainable in the near term.

Taken together, these insights show that Sudan’s crisis is not a humanitarian anomaly but a lens through which to understand twenty-first-century displacement. The interdependence of conflict, famine, and institutional collapse illustrates how modern displacement operates as an ecosystem of fragility. Interrupting the cycle of debilitation therefore requires multi-level reform in the humanitarian, economic, and legal spheres, grounded in both protection and accountability. Without these, displacement will continue to reproduce itself faster than the systems designed to resolve it.

8. Recommendations

Addressing Sudan’s displacement crisis requires a paradigm shift from short-term humanitarian response to structural reform rooted in protection, rights, and local empowerment. The following recommendations emerge from the evidence presented across this study.

Humanitarian actors and diplomatic partners must prioritize unimpeded access to conflict-affected areas. The siege of El-Fasher and systematic obstruction of aid highlight how access denial functions as a weapon of war (OCHA, 2025)^[17]. Sanctions and conditionality mechanisms should target those obstructing humanitarian corridors or diverting assistance. This would align with the preventive intent of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (Kälin, 2008)^[13] and the accountability emphasis of the Kampala Convention (African Union, 2009)^[2].

At the operational level, protection efforts must include mobile response teams capable of reaching dispersed populations. Partnerships between UN agencies, local responders, and regional organizations could enable flexible delivery of food, health, and water services. In parallel, human rights monitoring should be institutionalized through collaboration between Sudanese civil-society networks and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR, 2025)^[18] to document violations and deter abuse. Local responders such as ERRs have demonstrated capacity to mobilize rapidly, distribute aid, and gather data under siege conditions (Refugees International, 2025)^[20]. Yet they remain marginalized within formal coordination mechanisms. Integrating ERRs into OCHA-led cluster systems would bridge local knowledge with international logistics. Donor states and UN agencies should establish direct funding windows for vetted local organizations, with transparent oversight to mitigate diversion risks.

Community-driven protection programs, particularly those led by women’s groups, should receive dedicated support. These initiatives often provide psychosocial care, education continuity, and livelihood recovery far more efficiently than external actors (UNICEF, 2025)^[25]. Recognition of such local agency is essential to move beyond an extractive aid model toward genuine partnership.

Sustainable recovery depends on restoring livelihoods, health, and education systems alongside emergency assistance. Integrating early recovery with humanitarian response follows the triple-nexus approach increasingly advocated across protracted crises (OECD, 2023)^[19]. Food aid alone cannot offset the collapse of production; investment in smallholder agriculture, irrigation repair, and seed distribution is critical (WFP, 2025)^[29]. Health-sector stabilization should focus on re-equipping destroyed facilities, securing medical supply chains, and protecting personnel from attack (WHO, 2025)^[30].

Education, particularly for displaced girls, must be prioritized as a protection tool. Temporary learning centers in White Nile and Gezira demonstrate that even limited schooling improves psychosocial wellbeing and community stability (UNICEF, 2025)^[25]. Such programs should be integrated into national recovery plans, not treated as optional humanitarian add-ons.

Finally, durable protection requires a functioning legal architecture. Sudan should ratify the Kampala Convention, revalidate its 2009 National IDP Policy, and establish an inter-ministerial body to monitor compliance (OCHA, 2024)^[16]. International partners can provide technical support to align domestic law with the IASC (2010)^[10] Durable Solutions Framework, ensuring that rights to safety, property, and livelihood are embedded in post-conflict reconstruction. Legal reform must also include mechanisms for restitution and compensation, particularly for land and housing lost through forced displacement (UNDP, 2024)^[23]. Establishing local adjudication panels, supported by civil-society monitors, would strengthen legitimacy and reduce the risk of renewed conflict over property.

These recommendations share a common goal: to interrupt the cycle of debilitation by linking immediate humanitarian priorities with long-term governance reform. Protection, empowerment, and accountability must operate in tandem. Without legal ratification, livelihood recovery, and local inclusion, humanitarian aid will continue to treat symptoms while leaving structural drivers intact.

9. Limitations

While this study offers an integrated picture of Sudan's displacement crisis, several methodological and contextual limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the analysis relies almost entirely on secondary data due to restricted field access. Active conflict, insecurity, and communication blackouts prevented direct observation or primary interviews. As a result, the study depends on triangulated sources such as IOM-DTM, OCHA, WFP, UNICEF, WHO, and independent humanitarian reports. Although these datasets are among the most comprehensive available, they remain subject to under-reporting and time lags. Figures for internally displaced persons, food insecurity, and mortality are therefore best interpreted as conservative estimates rather than precise counts (IOM, 2025; OCHA, 2025)^[11, 17].

Second, humanitarian data in Sudan exhibit geographic and political bias. Access is heavily concentrated in government-controlled zones, leaving areas under siege or militia influence under-represented (ACAPS, 2025)^[1]. This asymmetry may obscure localized patterns of displacement and protection risk. The study mitigated this by cross-checking multiple sources and incorporating qualitative testimonies from Sudanese civil-society networks, but information gaps persist.

Third, the paper synthesizes data produced for operational rather than analytical purposes. Agency situation reports often employ differing methodologies and temporal baselines, making longitudinal comparison difficult (Taylor, Osman, & Rahman, 2025)^[21]. Triangulation improves validity but cannot eliminate inconsistencies between datasets.

Fourth, ethical constraints limited the inclusion of sensitive testimonies. To protect informants, granular geographic

identifiers were removed, and firsthand accounts were paraphrased rather than quoted directly. This approach prioritizes safety but reduces narrative vividness.

Finally, as with most desk-based studies, interpretation inevitably reflects the author's positionality and dependence on publicly available information. The findings should therefore be read as an informed synthesis rather than a definitive measurement of Sudan's displacement dynamics. Future field-based and participatory research, especially studies led by Sudanese scholars and community organizations, will be essential to validate and extend these conclusions.

10. Conclusion

Sudan's displacement crisis represents the convergence of armed conflict, governance collapse, and humanitarian failure. It is not a temporary disruption but a structural condition of national life, where repeated uprooting, institutional decay, and deprivation reinforce one another. This study has conceptualized that dynamic as a cycle of debilitation, a self-perpetuating process through which displacement both results from and reproduces systemic fragility.

Across all findings, displacement emerges as cyclical rather than linear. Families flee, resettle briefly, and are displaced again when violence or scarcity resumes. This recurrence destroys livelihoods and erodes social capital. Health systems collapse under strain, food insecurity reaches catastrophic levels, and education remains paralyzed. Each of these effects deepens the conditions that make further displacement inevitable.

The paper has also shown that displacement in Sudan is sustained by structural violence. Siege tactics, aid obstruction, and the politicization of humanitarian access convert deprivation into an instrument of control. Civilians are forced into movement not solely by active fighting, but by the deliberate engineering of unlivable conditions. Such practices directly contravene the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and the Kampala Convention, which impose clear obligations on state and non-state actors to prevent and address displacement (Kälin, 2008; African Union, 2009)^[13, 2].

Yet amid systemic collapse, local resilience persists. ERRs, community kitchens, and women-led initiatives demonstrate the capacity of Sudanese society to self-organize when institutions fail (Refugees International, 2025)^[20]. However, without structural support and legal protection, these efforts remain precarious. International agencies must treat such local initiatives not as peripheral partners but as integral components of response and recovery.

The persistence of Sudan's crisis underscores the inadequacy of current humanitarian models. Conventional relief frameworks, designed for discrete emergencies, cannot address crises that are both chronic and systemic. Breaking the cycle of debilitation therefore requires more than humanitarian access, it demands institutional reconstruction, rights enforcement, and sustained investment in livelihoods. Durable solutions should be redefined around continuity of rights and services rather than fixed notions of return or reintegration.

Ultimately, Sudan's internal displacement crisis is both a national tragedy and a global warning. It illustrates how protracted crises blur the boundaries between humanitarian

relief, development, and peacebuilding. Unless addressed through coordinated legal, political, and economic reform, Sudan risks normalizing displacement as a permanent feature of its social order. Confronting that trajectory is not only a moral and legal imperative, but also a test of the international community's capacity to respond to a new era of cyclical crises.

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