

REQUEST RESPONSE

Reflective Review of Sudan's Secondary School Examinations

REQUEST SUBMISSION

War erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 15 April 2023, and the education landscape in Sudan has changed substantially since the outbreak of the war. Current figures estimate a total of 17 million out of 19 million school aged children remain out of school as of December 2024, with over 3.8 million children displaced internally or cross-border, and 18% of schools reportedly used as shelters for the displaced population (Education Cluster, 2024).

On 27 October 2024 the Sudanese Federal Ministry of Education (FMOE) formally announced the decision to administer secondary school examinations for the 2022/23 cohort, with intent to hold examinations announced as early as July 2024. Members of the Local Education Group and Education Cluster encouraged the Federal Ministry of Education to pursue alternative options; however, the FMOE ultimately chose to proceed with examinations in December 2024, offering optional deferral to later cycles for those students unable to take the examinations in December. As a result, members of the international and Sudanese community coordinated a response to address the educational and protection needs of students sitting for the December 2024 examination cycle.

ERICC Helpdesk has been requested to conduct a rapid review of events leading up to and during the administration of examinations, an analysis of the coordinated response during the examinations themselves, and the identification of lessons learnt to inform the approach of the education community to future examination cycles.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The postponed Sudan Secondary Certificate examination for the 2023 cohort, conducted from December 2024 to January 2025, took place amid ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In a context where over 17 million children were out of school and millions of students and teachers displaced, the Federal Ministry of Education's (FMOE) decision to proceed with the exams sparked mixed reactions. While some viewed it as a critical opportunity to preserve educational continuity, others warned that it risked deepening inequities by excluding the most marginalised students, including those in RSF-controlled and conflict-affected areas.

This reflective review draws on 21 interviews with UN agencies, NGOs, local actors, and donors, complemented by desk research. It assesses the advocacy and response efforts surrounding the December exams and offers forward-looking recommendations to inform future examination cycles.

While the intent to hold exams before the end of the year was announced in July 2024¹, interviews indicate that the earliest international engagement was recorded in November, leaving limited time and wide gaps in the capacity of the response. Stakeholders urged for stronger protection and equity standards, yet no dedicated humanitarian funding was allocated. Stakeholders also highlighted that secondary school examinations are typically within the remit of government and beyond the traditional mandate of the Education cluster and UN system. As a result, implementing partners relied on ad hoc, under-resourced interventions. Community-led initiatives, including efforts to negotiate safe passage and provide shelter, played a critical role, but remained uneven, undocumented, and unsupported in many areas. Ultimately, the majority of stakeholders characterised the response as reactive and fragmented, constrained by limited funding and coordination.

There was no centralised system to track attendance, monitor protection incidents, or manage resources in real time within the response. Displaced students, girls, and children with disabilities were especially underserved, and exam centre conditions were not systematically monitored. These gaps reflect a shortcoming in planning inclusively and engaging a sufficient diversity of stakeholders across conflict lines.

Overall, the response was shaped by constrained timelines, political limitations, divergent stakeholder positions, and substantial capacity constraints. The review highlights the urgent need for a conflict-sensitive, equity-driven approach to future exam cycles. It presents twelve concrete recommendations, including pre-negotiated safe passage, inclusive coordination mechanisms, integration of local responders, targeted support for marginalised learners, and transparent, pooled funding. Without meaningful reform, future exams risk reinforcing exclusion rather than advancing educational opportunity.

¹ Radio Dabanga. الحوري: امتحانات الشهادة السودانية ستبدأ في 28 ديسمبر وتستمر حتى 9 يناير. [AI-Houri: Sudanese Certificate Examinations Will Begin on December 28 and Continue Until January 9], published 27 September 2024. Available at: <https://www.dabangasudan.org/ar/all-news/article/الحوري-امتحانات-الشهادة-السودانية-ست>

1. INTRODUCTION

Since April 2023, Sudan has been engulfed in a violent conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), generating one of the fastest-growing humanitarian crises globally. Over 11.5 million people, half of whom are children, have been displaced inside Sudan since the onset of the conflict, and 30.4 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.² The conflict has caused widespread violence and insecurity, where frontlines shift rapidly, humanitarian aid has been used as a weapon by the warring parties, and protection risks such as arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, and gender-based violence are prevalent. Movement across conflict lines remains dangerous and unpredictable, severely impacting the safety and mobility of students, families, and humanitarian actors. The conflict has devastated Sudan's education system, with more than 17 million school-aged children out of school since the onset of the war.³

On 28 September 2024, the Federal Ministry of Education (FMOE) confirmed that the Sudan Secondary Certificate Examinations for the postponed 2023 cohort would take place from 28 December 2024, to 9 January 2025, in areas under the control of the SAF.⁴ Notably, the intent to hold exams before the end of the year was announced as early as July 2024.⁵ Traditionally, these national exams are centrally administered by the Federal Ministry of Education each June, with coordination across all 18 states. They serve as a gateway to higher education and employment, and their nationwide rollout has historically symbolised a functioning, unified education system. Following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, the exams were postponed indefinitely due to insecurity, displacement, and the collapse of administrative structures in several states.

The decision to host the examinations created vital pathways for some students to preserve academic progression, although the viability of those pathways has been extremely limited given the impact of the conflict on post-secondary education and formal employment. Ultimately, the fragile and fractured context in which exams were to be held created substantial concerns about potential inequity and child safety and protection. As a result, members of the international community attempted advocacy efforts, urging the Federal Ministry of Education to postpone the exams, offer automatic conferral, or ensure equitable access across all territories. Ultimately, advocacy activities were unsuccessful, and some members of the international community shifted to a focus on organising a response to support the needs of the nearly 350,000 children who registered to sit for the examinations.

This reflective review provides a brief analysis of advocacy activities and the scope and nature of the response with the aim of generating research-based lessons and providing recommendations to members of the Local Education Group and Education and Protection Cluster ahead of future cycles of the examination.

² OCHA, 2024; Education Cluster, 2024

³ UNICEF. *An entire generation of children in Sudan faces catastrophe as war enters its second year*. 12 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/entire-generation-children-sudan-faces-catastrophe-war-enters-its-second-year>. See also United Nations Sudan, *Safety amid uncertainty in Sudan: Secondary school students sit final exams despite conflict*, published 3 February 2024. Available at: <https://sudan.un.org/en/289000-safety-amid-uncertainty-sudan>

⁴ Sudan Independent. "وزارة التربية والتعليم السودانية تعلن موعد امتحانات الشهادة الثانوية للدفعة الموحدة لعام 2023" [Sudanese Ministry of Education announces the date of secondary certificate exams for the postponed 2023 cohort]. *Sudan Independent*, 28 September 2024. <https://www.sudanindependent.com/news/politics/2024/09/28/وزارة-التربية-والتعليم-السود>. See also; Al Arabiya Sudan. *Instagram video post*. Instagram, 18 March 2024. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/alarabiya.sudan/reel/DAIpYq9NIBD/>

⁵ Radio Dabanga. "الحوري: امتحانات الشهادة السودانية ستبدأ في 28 ديسمبر وتستمر حتى 9 يناير" [Al-Houri: Sudanese Certificate Examinations Will Begin on December 28 and Continue Until January 9], published 27 September 2024. Available at: <https://www.dabangasudan.org/ar/all-news/article/الحوري-امتحانات-الشهادة-السودانية-ست>

2. METHODOLOGY

This reflective review analyses the advocacy and response to the administration of the secondary school examination from 28 December 2024– 9 January 2025. Data utilised to inform this review was gathered through a desk review and primary research activities. The desk review included documents shared by stakeholders and publicly available information including news articles. Primary research was gathered through 17 semi-structured interviews with 22 individuals (from UN agencies 7, donor agencies 5, international NGOs 8, local NGO 1, and local civil society organisations 1). A full list of coded stakeholders is provided in the annex. Data analysis followed a thematic coding approach based on the research questions. All data was coded using NVivo, with triangulation across interviews and documents to validate insights and surface areas of convergence and divergence.

There are several limitations to this reflective review. Due to time and capacity constraints, this review does not include information about the administration of examinations to students outside of Sudan. This review also does not include analysis of the data gathered during the response through Kobo Forms, a Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM), and daily briefings, as none of the associated data, including meeting minutes, were shared with the researcher to inform the desk review. Finally, the review does not include direct engagement with students, communities, teachers, or education authorities, limiting first hand perspectives to those responsible for coordinating the response and members of the international community.

3. REVIEW FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Pre-Examination Events and Advocacy

The following section provides an overview of the perspectives and approaches of different stakeholder groups, commencing with community perspectives, understood here through secondary accounts reported by stakeholders and media coverage, before delving into UN and Local Education Group advocacy efforts, donor engagement, implementing partner activities and perspectives, and advocacy supported by civil society organisations. It concludes by describing the response and indicative priorities of the warring parties, noting that while the exams were seen by some stakeholders as fulfilling children's right to education, the actions of authorities were shaped by a combination of political considerations and logistical constraints, rather than a consistent focus on equitable education access.⁶

Community Perspectives and Public Demand: While no formal, community-led advocacy campaigns were documented during this period, strong community pressure to proceed with exams emerged as a central feature of this examination cycle. Although no direct community consultations were conducted for this review, interviewees from UN agencies, INGOs, and CSOs consistently cited parental, student, and local authority demand for certification as a key driver. One donor noted: "These exams were strongly demanded by the Sudanese people themselves. For a year or more, communities were pushing for a formal exam cycle." Instances of student advocacy also emerged. In South Kordofan, students mobilised and held a protest when the arrival of their exam seat numbers from Kadugli was delayed.⁷ Student groups were also recorded to use social media to advocate for equal

⁶ Noting the limitation of not having authorities included in this reflective review as mentioned in the Methodology section.

⁷ Sudan Peace Tracker. "Sudan's Secondary School Exams: A Step Towards Higher Education or the Beginning of Geographic Division?" *Sudan Peace Tracker*, 12 January 2025. <https://sudanpeacetracker.com/archives/706>.

access to examinations across states.

These insights were triangulated across actors with field access, lending credibility to the claim that public demand contributed to shaping both government and humanitarian responses. Importantly, the inequitable approach to the administration of examinations, which did not enable access for those in RSF-controlled areas nor for marginalised groups, diverges substantially from the community demand for equitable access to recognised certification nationwide.

Local Education Group Advocacy: UNICEF and UNESCO, through their leadership in the Local Education Group (LEG), played a leading role in convening stakeholders and advancing advocacy. In October, the Education Cluster called for a joint meeting with the LEG to discuss the examinations and the potential humanitarian crisis created in its wake. The result of the meeting was a decision to advocate to postpone the examinations. The Cluster and the LEG held meetings on the 6th and 12th of November. On 13 November 2024 UNICEF and UNESCO, as leads of the Cluster and the LEG, attended a meeting with the Federal Minister of Education, during which four mitigation options developed by LEG subgroup members were presented:

- Option 1: Automatic Degree Conferral. Grant students an automatic degree conferral, recognising the learning loss due to school closures, where students are awarded their secondary education certificates without the need to complete the exam.
- Option 2: Exam Postponement (Q2 2025). Advocate for postponing the exams to a later date (Q2 2025) to allow sufficient time to prepare protection measures, and to address financial, logistical, and personnel considerations.
- Option 3: Exam Deferral. Extend eligibility for students unable to take the exam due to unsafe conditions, allowing them to sit for the exams at a later date (2025).
- Option 4: Coordination with State and Local Ministry Officials. Support FMoE in coordinating with local and state-level Ministry officials to administer exams at the locality level.

The Ministry acknowledged the proposals but did not accept any of the presented options, reaffirming its plan to proceed. The outcomes of advocacy efforts were disclosed to the wider LEG membership during the in-person meeting of the LEG on 6 December 2024.

While advocacy efforts were coordinated within the Local Education Group and with support from the Education Cluster, they began mid-November, at a point when the Ministry had already set key parameters for the exams, limiting the potential for substantive influence on the timeline, scope, or implementation approach. This analysis further indicates that given time and resource constraints as well as limited capacity among engaged parties, it is unlikely that advocacy messages delivered through members of the Local Education Group were sufficiently tailored to the priorities and objectives of the warring parties.

UN: In addition to UN contributions to advocacy efforts through the Local Education Group and Education Cluster, the UN Resident Coordinator (RC) in coordination with the UNICEF Education team organised a high-level bilateral meeting in mid-December 2024 with the Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Education, and the Assistant Commander-in-Chief of the SAF. During this meeting the RC proposed that the Federal Ministry of Education postpone exams until March 2025 to enable adequate preparation. During this meeting the RC also highlighted the importance of enabling flexible options for students and the prioritisation of internally displaced students. However, no consensus was reached, and the government upheld its original exam schedule.

Donor Engagement: Through the month of November, donor engagement was limited to participation in the LEG Subgroup detailed above. Several informants noted that some donors

leveraged UN agencies as a mechanism to relay concerns to the Federal Ministry of Education, opting to work behind the scenes rather than engage directly. Implementing partners participating in this study expressed that this indirect approach placed them in difficult positions, which could jeopardise humanitarian access with local authorities.

On 18 December 2024, the Embassy of Canada, the Embassy of Germany to Sudan, and the British Office in Sudan issued a joint public statement. The statement commended the Ministry's efforts to advance education objectives through examinations while expressing concern that limiting exams to SAF-held areas would result in the unsafe movement of students and widening inequality.⁸

Not all donors within the Donor Education Working Group signed the statement; one donor who opted out explained: "We shared the same protection concerns and the dangers for students travelling amid conflict. Nonetheless, these exams were strongly demanded by the Sudanese people themselves ... In such an imperfect context, it was better to hold exams where it was safe, and then hopefully expand later. We also believed that RSF and SAF shared equal responsibility for ensuring safe exam access. It should not be pinned solely on SAF or its limitations." Another donor who did not sign the statement noted bureaucratic impediments, stating that while they agreed with the content of the statement, the short timeframe for clearance prevented them from publicly endorsing it.

Donors limited their formal public advocacy to this single joint statement, issued just days before the start of the exam cycle, with no visible impact, or response from the Federal Ministry of Education.

Implementing partners: Implementing partner positions varied, with some advocating for postponement and others for cancellation. Recognising communities' overwhelming desire for education continuity, some implementing partners emphasised that cancelling exams was not considered viable given the prolonged disruption and learning loss already experienced. Another implementing partner explained: "We did not lead major advocacy calling for postponement or cancellation. Internally, we felt the exams were necessary." Conversely, another partner advocated for local exam administration and strongly opposed organised student movement, highlighting risks such as gender-based violence, detentions, and armed group confrontations at checkpoints. Without agreement on advocacy narrative or purpose, implementing partners were unable to establish a coherent or impactful advocacy initiative.

Civil Society: The Sudanese Teachers' Committee played a role in public advocacy, calling for equitable exams, ceasefires to ensure safe access, and recognition of existing educational structures in all states.⁹ Their advocacy pre-dated all other efforts, with their first statement on the exams published on 30 September.¹⁰ In an interview, a Sudanese Teachers' Committee representative shared: "We consistently emphasised the necessity of holding secondary certificate examinations with fairness and inclusivity, advocating for exams to be organised in a manner allowing all students, including those in conflict zones, to participate safely. Our strongest contribution was highlighting the

⁸ Government of Canada. "Joint Donor Statement on Protection Concerns Related to the Upcoming Secondary School Examinations in Sudan." *Global Affairs Canada*, 18 December 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2024/12/joint-donor-statement-on-protection-concerns-related-to-the-upcoming-secondary-school-examinations-in-sudan.html>.

⁹ Sudan Tribune. (2024, December 26). *Sudanese teachers committee criticizes timing and organization of secondary school exams*. Retrieved from <https://sudantribune.com/article295178>

¹⁰ Sudanese Teachers' Committee. "#٢٠٢٣م" [Statement Regarding the Announcement of the Sudanese Secondary Certificate Examinations for the 2023 Cohort]. *Facebook*, 30 September 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1XftnK6za9/>

potential mass exclusion of students if exams were restricted to certain areas only.”

Other civil society actors echoed these concerns¹¹, though their influence on federal decision-making did not manifest. While some supported decentralised models to expand access, the absence of formal negotiation frameworks and recognised interlocutors severely restricted their impact. The Civil Democratic Forces Coordination, a broad coalition of civilian political groups, professional associations, and trade unions, publicly warned that proceeding with exams under conflict conditions could further fracture national unity and deepen geographic and political divides.¹²

Position of the RSF: The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) rejected the federal exam process. Despite informal assurances obtained by humanitarian stakeholders, RSF-affiliated local authorities obstructed operations, refused to recognise exam legitimacy, and restricted student movement. For instance, in Central Darfur no students were permitted to travel to sit for exams in other states. The Minister of Education in the Civil Administration of Central Darfur threatened “anyone who cooperates with the Port Sudan government regarding the Sudanese certificate examinations without the knowledge of the Education Administration in Central Darfur exposes themselves to legal accountability.”¹³

As a result, participation from RSF-held areas was packed with security and protection challenges. In a statement the RSF states, “The government’s declared position to launch the secondary certificate exams in certain areas without the rest of Sudan’s states reveals the extent of the conspiracy, irresponsibility, and disregard for the future of hundreds of thousands of students across the country.”¹⁴

Federal Ministry of Education Response and Advocacy Influence: Despite advocacy efforts, spanning UN, donor, and civil society actors, the FMOE proceeded with examinations as planned.

The first round of exams was held for the 2023 cohort, while the second round, originally envisioned for the 2024 cohort, was subsequently extended to include 2023 students who were unable to sit for the December examinations. While some stakeholders interpreted the second cycle as a planned provision, others indicated that this adjustment reflected responsiveness to advocacy efforts calling for inclusive access, particularly for students affected by conflict and displacement during the first cycle.

Interviewees reflected frustration at FMOE’s rigidity: “We continuously advocated for alternative venues and safe passage ... but the FMOE remained steadfast in its position,” a UN staff member shared. Another shared that “despite clearly articulated humanitarian considerations, we saw very limited flexibility or genuine engagement from the Ministry.” Stakeholders highlighted the exams’ symbolic importance in projecting state continuity. As one INGO staff member explained, “FMOE had strong reasons to push ahead. Students had already missed prior exam cycles. Without completing exams, these adolescents could not graduate or continue to tertiary education, undermining the national education system’s credibility.” Similarly, a Sudanese Teachers’ Committee member shared: “Many of these advocacy messages were overshadowed by the government’s determination to move forward with exams, largely to project stability, and as a response to community and student pressures.” This

¹¹ See also statement from Alliance of Lawyers mentioned in Radio Dabanga. “امتحانات الشهادة تعزز حالة الانقسام.” *Radio Dabanga*, 12 January 2025. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/ar/>

¹² Sudan Peace Tracker. “Sudan’s Secondary School Exams: A Step Towards Higher Education or the Beginning of Geographic Division?” *Sudan Peace Tracker*, 12 January 2025. <https://sudanpeacetracker.com/archives/706>.

¹³ Al Gous, “امتحانات الشهادة الثانوية [Central Darfur Prevents State Students from Traveling to Sit for Secondary Certificate Examinations], published 1 October 2024. Available at: <https://alalous.online/10462/>

¹⁴ “امتحانات-الثانوية-تتحول-إلى-ورقة-ضغط-جديدة-في-السودان” [Secondary School Exams Turn into a New Pressure Card in Sudan], *Al Jazeera*, December 16, 2024. <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/12/16/امتحانات-الثانوية-تتحول-إلى-ورقة-ضغط-جديدة-في-السودان>

is well captured in a statement by the Acting Minister of Education in River Nile State, who stated that holding the exams is no less significant than the victories achieved by SAF soldiers in battles. This, he said, contributed to stabilising the pillars and presence of the state.¹⁵

The FMOE rejected the possibility of coordinating with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) regarding the administration of the national secondary school exams. In a public interview, the Minister of Education stated that the Ministry "will never coordinate with [the RSF] at all," citing their deliberate obstruction of exam access and alleged harm to students. The Minister emphasised that the Ministry did not permit organisations to liaise with RSF on its behalf due to concerns over exam security and national sovereignty.¹⁶

Ultimately, despite efforts by UN agencies, donors, implementing partners and civil society, including active engagement with senior government officials, the Federal Ministry of Education upheld its original decision to administer the examinations in government-controlled areas.

Scope and Nature of the Response

As a result of the decision by the Federal Ministry of Education to administer examinations in SAF-controlled areas in December 2024 to January 2025, the education cluster, with support from the Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CP AoR) coordinated a joint response among its partners. While the Cluster liaised with partners to provide critical support, these efforts were constrained by limited funding and the absence of a clear mandate to coordinate exam implementation. Unlike the Local Education Group, which includes both humanitarian and development partners, giving it space to engage in policy dialogue, the Education Cluster's role is largely humanitarian, complementing state functions in emergency contexts.

There is no holistic mapping of the response, nor a comprehensive evaluation of service availability, quality, or coverage. As a result, conclusions in the following sections are drawn primarily from qualitative insights from KIIs. Noting that while the Education Cluster instituted three primary mechanisms for monitoring the response and recording incidents, including Kobo forms, Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM), and daily briefings, the resulting documentation was not shared for the preparation of this reflective review.

The Child Protection Risk Mitigation Matrix developed by the Protection Area of Responsibility identified a diversity of protection risks including arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, extortion, and gender-based violence (GBV) for students attempting to reach SAF-controlled exam centres. Notably, the matrix was circulated the second week of January, indicating that it was not widely available until the examination cycle was nearing completion. The risks were intended to be identified through both Kobo forms and one-on-one consultations with child protection sub-national coordinators at the state level. To mitigate the risk, the matrix recommended several actions including negotiating protection for exam centres and engaging local actors to facilitate student movement. However, these measures were not implemented in any coordinated or documented way. Instead, scattered accounts described students attempting to cross frontlines informally. The absence of incident reports,

¹⁵ Sudan News Agency (SUNA). "والي نهر النيل ووزير التربية والتعليم يتفقدا مراكز امتحانات الشهادة الثانوية بعبطيرة". [Governor of River Nile and Minister of Education Inspect Secondary Certificate Exam Centers in Atbara]. SUNA, 3 January 2025. <https://suna-sd.net/posts/oaly-nhr-ainyl-oozyr-altrby-oaltaalym-ytfkda-mrkz-amthanat-alshhad-althanoy-baatbr>.

¹⁶ Al Jazeera. "وزير التعليم السوداني للجزيرة نت: هذه رؤية الوزارة للامتحانات وموقفنا من الدعم السريع". [Sudanese Minister of Education to Al Jazeera: This Is the Ministry's Vision for Exams and Our Position on the RSF]. Al Jazeera Net, 13 January 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2025/1/13/وزير-التعليم-السوداني-للجزيرة-نت-هذه-رؤية-الوزارة-للإمتحانات-وموقفنا-من-الدعم-السريع>

attendance records, or verification systems made it impossible to assess how many students successfully travelled from non-SAF areas to SAF-controlled areas to sit for examinations. There is also no data on the actual risks students encountered. This lack of documentation is a critical gap in the response, undermining attempts through this review to characterise its efficacy.

The following subsections outline the specific components of the response, divided into four core sections: Security, Logistics, Financial, and Education and Protection elements of the response.

3.1 Security Elements of the Response

Safe Passageways

Safe passageways, defined as pre-negotiated, protected routes for civilians to move safely across conflict lines¹⁷, were not established for the December 2024 examination cycle. Their absence significantly shaped the scope and safety of the response. For students living in RSF-controlled or contested areas, reaching exam centres in SAF-held territory meant undertaking high-risk, informal journeys without protection guarantees, coordination with humanitarian actors, or systems to track student movement and ensure accountability.

While some local authorities facilitated safe passage for students, explored in section 3.5 below, these efforts remained inconsistent and largely dependent on localised negotiations rather than a structured national framework. A key limitation was the Federal Government's clear stance that it was not willing to engage with RSF authorities, further restricting the potential for coordinated, cross-line access, and protected transit for students.

Estimates of student movement varied widely. The Minister of Education stated that 120,721 students arrived from different states to sit exams across 49 centres.¹⁸ However, unionists and education experts expressed scepticism about this figure, suggesting that more students were unable to sit the exams than those who did, particularly those in both SAF- and RSF-controlled areas in the western and southern regions of the country.¹⁹ Some estimates suggest even higher levels of exclusion, particularly among students in RSF-controlled areas.²⁰

In response to these access limitations, the Ministry of Education announced that the second round of examinations, originally intended for the 2024 cohort, would also accommodate 2023 cohort students who were unable to sit the first round due to conflict-related constraints. Humanitarian actors, including UNICEF and its partners, actively disseminated this message through the Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM) and other platforms, aiming to reduce distress and maintain engagement among affected students and families.

Safety at Examination Centres

Education and child protection actors established a presence at selected exam centres to monitor

¹⁷ See ICRC (2022). How humanitarian corridors work to help people in conflict zones. ICRC. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/how-humanitarian-corridors-work>

¹⁸ Sudan Daily News. "وزير التربية: نجاح امتحانات الشهادة السودانية رغم التحديات" [Minister of Education: Sudan Certificate Exams Successful Despite Challenges]. *Sudan Daily News*, 8 January 2025. <https://sudan-dailynews.com/60719/>.

¹⁹ Sudan Peace Tracker. "Sudan's Secondary School Exams: A Step Towards Higher Education or the Beginning of Geographic Division?" *Sudan Peace Tracker*, 12 January 2025. <https://sudanpeacetracker.com/archives/706>.

²⁰ See Plan International. "Time Running Out for Sudan Students to Sit December Exams." Plan International, 21 January 2025. <https://plan-international.org/middle-east-e-s-africa/news/2025/01/21/time-running-out-sudan-students-sit-december-exams/>.

safety, provide basic psychosocial support, and manage referrals. Interviewees indicated that this support was concentrated in areas where high numbers of displaced students had relocated; however, no mapping of interventions was provided for this review. Staff from the Family and Child Protection Unit (FCPU), alongside NGO social workers, played a visible role in some locations.

Despite attempts, the protection footprint remained limited, with an estimated two to three social workers per state. This left large gaps in coverage, particularly in rural or newly established exam sites. Coordination structures did not establish a common monitoring framework across exam centres, and actors lacked a clear system for tracking violations or responding to protection incidents. The limited footprint was largely attributed to inadequate funding and limited field-based human resources. This constraint significantly hindered the scale and consistency of protection efforts across states. Financial limitations not only affected deployment but also restricted the ability to establish and operationalise monitoring systems.

Although some interviewees raised concerns about possible instances of GBV, harassment, or forced recruitment near exam venues, these accounts could not be verified. No consolidated incident data or protection reports were shared, and most humanitarian actors operated with limited visibility beyond the sites where they were physically present. It is worth noting that in some interviews implementing partners shared that they had not heard of protection incidents from their staff or through the community. Where protection staff were deployed, they were able to respond to MHPSS immediate needs, offer emotional support, and liaise with referral services. However, these efforts were highly localised, under-resourced, and inconsistent across the broader geography of the response. Additional information on psychosocial support can be viewed in section 3.4 below.

3.2 Logistics Elements of the Response

The following sub-section provide an overview of the scope of the response for accommodation and food, WASH, and transportation. It remains unclear whether any stakeholders provided support to government in the printing and dissemination of examination materials themselves. UNICEF has clarified that neither they nor the partners they supported engaged in this aspect of the examinations.

Accommodation and Food

To support students who were displaced or who had travelled long distances, humanitarian actors worked to support temporary accommodation facilities set up by the state. These shelters were often set up in schools or as informal settlements and aimed to provide a safe environment for students during the exam period. However, no consolidated data was made available on how many accommodation sites were established or how many students were served. This lack of reporting limits the ability to assess the scale and adequacy of the support provided, highlighting a key gap in the documentation and coordination of the response.

WASH

Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) support was provided at select exam centres and dormitories, mainly in locations where partners were already operational. Services included distribution of hygiene kits, dignity kits, clean water provision, and installation of temporary latrines and handwashing stations.

This support did not reach all students. WASH interventions were concentrated in urban areas and larger centres, with minimal coverage in rural or newly established sites. The absence of a unified WASH plan for the exam cycle meant that delivery relied heavily on existing humanitarian footprints rather than systematic planning. This further contributed to geographic inequities in student safety,

dignity, and comfort during the exam period. No consolidated data was made available on the number or proportion of exam centres that received WASH support, limiting the ability to assess overall coverage or identify gaps.

Transport

The response focused on the capacity to meet students' needs upon arrival at examination centres. It did not include an effort to enable organised and safer transportation to or from examination centres, with few actors able or willing to manage the protection risks inherent in facilitating crossline or cross state movement. There was a notable dilemma of providing transport under unsafe conditions. Had it been provided in the absence of wider safe passageway agreements, it may have given a misleading impression of safety, thereby encouraging the movement of additional students. While safe transit is ultimately the responsibility of national authorities, the Federal Ministry of Education did not establish a mechanism to support this function. In contexts where governments lack such capacity, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement may support safe movement, but this was not feasible in Sudan, where the Sudanese Red Crescent itself had been targeted in previous incidents. As such, the response was unable to mitigate the protection risks faced by students in transit.

3.3 Financial and Cash Elements of the Response

Financial Support and Associated Costs

Families incurred significant out-of-pocket expenses to enable their children's participation in the exams. Common costs included transportation to examination centres, accommodation, meals, and to varying extents, exam registration fees. These expenses were particularly prohibitive for displaced families or those in remote or RSF-controlled areas.

Some local organisations provided financial support; however, this research concluded that coverage was limited, unevenly distributed, and reliant on informal networks. This was attributed to the lack of dedicated funding and resourcing for this response. In a few areas, civil society groups helped cover transport or housing for small numbers of students, though these efforts were not systematically documented. There were no national cash transfer programmes targeting exam access. Humanitarian response plans did not incorporate financial barriers, beyond provision of accommodation and meals to those at examination centres, and no coordinated system was established to identify or support students at risk of exclusion due to cost. Many students who were otherwise eligible and academically prepared were unable to participate due to financial barriers.

Exam Fees

Exam fees emerged as a major barrier to access in some locations. The Federal Ministry of Education did not issue clear guidance on waivers or standardised rates, resulting in wide discrepancies across states. Whether fees were charged became one of the most contested issues raised in this research, indicating the limited, sector-wide data on a key barrier to participation. Interviewees provided conflicting accounts: some reported that fees were fully waived, others cited partial or location-specific charges. Some stakeholders noted that students had already paid fees during the postponed 2023 exam cycle, while others stated that only IDPs received waivers.

3.4 Education and Child Protection Elements of the Response

Psychosocial Support

Psychosocial support (PSS) was integrated into the exam response primarily through the deployment

of social workers at exam centres. Social workers were responsible for offering emotional support, managing stress-related incidents, and referring students to services when needed. Notably, no official mapping of referral mechanisms was documented, and it remains unclear what referral services were available. The Family and Child Protection Unit (FCPU)²¹, supported by humanitarian partners, played a central role in this effort. While the deployment of social workers and protection officers provided crucial mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), coverage was limited and uneven. The Child Protection Cluster reported that it was able to serve 13,543 children in 165 accommodation centres. In some states, only two to three social workers were available to serve dozens of centres, often spread across large areas. One estimate suggested a ratio of 1 social worker to 140 students, though it remains unclear whether this figure referred to all registered students or only those who reached exam centres. Critically, there is no verified data on the total number of social workers deployed, the geographic distribution of support, or the number of MHPSS cases managed. This lack of systematic data collection is a major finding in itself, undermining attempts within this research to assess the reach, quality, and equity of this essential element of the response.

Academic Preparedness

Academic preparedness among students varied significantly and was shaped by more than a year and a half of disrupted schooling due to conflict, displacement, and prolonged closures of public education systems. Many students had not attended formal classes for months, some since before the war began in April 2023, and lacked access to teachers, textbooks, or catch-up classes. Stakeholders expressed concern that students entered the exam under-prepared, with high levels of anxiety and limited familiarity with the test content or format. As one INGO staff explained, “These were students who had been out of school for a year. There was no bridging support. Many just showed up hoping for the best.” The absence of structured academic support was particularly acute for displaced students. In this context, academic preparedness became another layer of inequity. Notably, at the time of preparing this review, results from the examinations have not yet been publicised by authorities.

3.5 Emergence of Grassroots Initiatives

In the absence of a coordinated national mechanism to ensure access to the December 2024 exams, grassroots and community-based organisations played a critical role in filling operational and financial gaps. These included national NGOs, emergency response rooms, local youth groups, volunteer teachers, community leaders, and informal solidarity networks, many of which mobilised rapidly to support students, particularly displaced learners, with information, logistics, and basic services.

This grassroots mobilisation often filled critical gaps left by formal structures including transport, coordinating temporary housing, and delivering meals. Communities organised by volunteer teachers were also reported to host informal study groups to support exam preparation. Multiple informants underscored that such community-led responses also influenced safety perceptions. In certain communities, local “emergency rooms” and youth committees reportedly negotiated informal agreements with local authorities or, in some cases, armed factions to enable students’ travel.

These grassroots efforts operated almost entirely outside of the formal education response

²¹ The Family and Child Protection Unit is a specialised division within the Sudan Police Force tasked with handling cases involving children and families, particularly those related to child protection, gender-based violence, abuse, exploitation, and family-related disputes.

architecture. There was no coordination with UN agencies, the Education Cluster, or state education authorities. Most initiatives were self-organised and reliant on local networks. Students in areas with active civil society networks were far more likely to benefit. As a result, community mobilisation and social capital became key determinants of whether a child could access the exams. The absence of a coordinated mechanism to document or support community-led interventions also meant that successful local approaches went unrecorded and unsupported.

This bottom-up mobilisation reflected the commitment of Sudanese communities to protect children's right to education, even amidst war and displacement. But it also underscored a broader shortcoming: without a unified national plan or inclusive operating framework, community efforts, while vital, could not meaningfully compensate for systemic gaps and underscore widening gaps between better resourced communities and the most marginalised.

3.6 Monitoring and Reporting Mechanisms

The Education Cluster's daily briefings and the Child Protection AoR's monitoring tools formed the exam response's monitoring, reporting, and risk detection efforts. Multiple modalities were deployed to monitor student safety and track protection incidents, including Kobo forms, Community Feedback Mechanisms (CFM), daily coordination calls, and informal incident tracking via local communities and social media. However, none of the underlying datasets were shared for this review, limiting the ability to assess coverage, quality, or outcomes.

Kobo tools were developed by the CP AoR to support monitoring at the field level. Two forms were shared with partners: one for documenting observed protection incidents (e.g., GBV, arbitrary detention, forced recruitment) and a second for mapping organisational response capacity, such as the presence of social workers. While useful, data entry was uneven and the tools were not deployed systematically across all regions. Respondents noted that limited training time and connectivity issues further constrained uptake.

Daily cluster briefings, led by the Education Cluster and with attendance by members of the Protection Cluster, served as the primary coordination forum. These meetings allowed for rapid sharing of field-level updates, including student movement, incidents, and logistical progress. CP focal points contributed updates on protection risks and response status. However, the utility of these briefings was limited by inconsistent inputs from subnational partners, with some regions underreporting due to weak information flows, staff shortages, or access issues. Several stakeholders also noted that the briefings were largely transactional, rather than shaping broader strategic decisions. As one donor noted, "There was no system in place to escalate or respond beyond what the briefings could absorb." There is limited documentation on how concerns raised during briefings were tracked or actioned.

The Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM) for grave violations against children in armed conflict was also mentioned by partners. While it remained active during the exam period, it was not designed for real-time incident detection. Reports through the MRM undergo a multi-step verification process and are typically submitted long after incidents occurred. Despite this, the MRM was used to monitor violations, particularly student detentions. However, no verified exam-related grave violations were recorded at the time of review.

Additional field-level monitoring was carried out by Family and Child Protection Units (FCPU) in coordination with the Ministry of Social Welfare and State Councils for Child Welfare. These local structures tracked student arrivals and supported referral pathways. According to multiple informants, FCPUs helped verify safe arrivals of students in key exam hubs, although they lacked resources to comprehensively monitor across all sites. No data was available on the percentage of exam sites

supported by FCPU presence, making it difficult to assess the consistency or coverage of their involvement.

UNICEF, in collaboration with the Education Cluster, actively monitored implementation at the field level through daily oversight, media monitoring, and the Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM). However, while the CFM and accountability tools had potential for systematic tracking, they were not fully integrated into an exam monitoring framework, a key gap noted in interviews.

Informal channels also played a role. One UN organisation actor reflected: “Regarding protection incidents, we actively monitored social media, local calls, and IDP networks. We got zero credible reports of serious child harm specifically tied to these exams. If something major had happened, it would likely have shown up on social media. We think we’d know.” However, there was no formal assessment of the reliability or coverage of these methods, and other informants cautioned that underreporting, especially in high-risk areas, was likely. Fear of retaliation, lack of awareness on reporting channels, and limited staff presence were identified as contributing factors.

Crucially, no centralised data system was established to consolidate monitoring results, document protection incidents, or evaluate quality of services provided. Data management was fragmented, and there was no unified protocol for escalating issues. Protection gaps were often resolved informally at the local level, without cluster oversight. The absence of shared attendance data from the Ministry of Education also prevented a full understanding of how many students were able, or unable, to participate safely.

No data was made available to assess the cost-effectiveness of the exam response. UNICEF reportedly spent approximately USD 600,000, but this only covered basic humanitarian support. Where UNICEF supported 702 exam centres and 165 accommodations, ensuring equitable access and safety for over 114,779 students by providing essential materials, clean water, meals, and psychosocial support while addressing logistical and safety challenges with education authorities and protection partners. Government expenditures on printing, logistics, and security remain undisclosed. Families themselves covered major expenses, transport, accommodation, food, none of which were systematically tracked or mitigated. As one actor put it: “We only had about \$600,000 for the entire exam response, about 40 cents per child over 10 days. Most of it went to immediate needs like water, shelter, or dignity kits.”

Mechanism/Tool	Purpose	Limitations
Kobo Forms	Track protection risks (e.g., GBV, detention) and organisational presence	Uneven deployment, limited training, and poor connectivity
Community Feedback Mechanism (CFM)	Collect real-time feedback from communities on access and protection concerns	Not fully integrated into the main monitoring framework
Daily Cluster Briefings	Share field-level updates, coordinate logistics, raise emerging issues	Inconsistent inputs, mostly transactional and lacked strategic follow-up
Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)	Track grave violations against children in armed conflict (long-term)	Not designed for real-time use; delays in reporting and verification
Family and Child Protection Units (FCPU)	Track student arrivals and support child protection referrals at state level	Limited coverage, lacked resources for full monitoring
UNICEF Oversight & Media Monitoring	Monitor implementation of exams, ensure safety/equity, and coordinate logistics	Lacked integration with national systems, informal issue escalation
Informal Communications (Social Media, Local Calls)	Detect incidents via social media and informal local networks	Unverified coverage, may have missed serious incidents

3.7 Discussion

While 343,644 students registered for the exams, historical figures suggest that this represents only two-thirds of those who likely completed secondary school in the 2022/23 academic year and still fewer in terms of age-eligible students who were not able to access secondary education at all. Ultimately, it is estimated that less than 250,000 students sat for the examinations in the December cycle. Girls, children with disabilities, those located outside of SAF controlled areas, and displaced youth faced compounded challenges. These figures underscore the legitimacy of concerns about the implications of the examination cycle for equitability.

Despite these concerns, the FMOE's choice to proceed with the examinations in SAF controlled areas demanded a humanitarian response. Yet, the response was shaped by constrained timelines, political limitations, divergent stakeholder positions, and substantial capacity constraints. While the exams offered a symbolic opportunity for educational continuity, the response was largely reactive, described by stakeholders as a firefighting approach, and lacked a unified strategy or adequate preparedness. Planning and coordination efforts unfolded under pressure, with humanitarian actors forced to respond in real-time to political decisions and evolving security risks.

Although stakeholders almost unanimously cited the delayed announcement by the Federal Ministry of Education as one of the biggest challenges to the response, often pointing to 27 October as the date the exams were first confirmed, documents reviewed for this report indicate that the government's intent to proceed with the exams was publicly stated as early as May 2024²², with formal confirmation and exact dates announced on 28 September.²³ Despite this lead time, education and protection actors, responsible for managing multiple crises, noted that serious planning and funding mobilisation commenced as late as November 2024.

Engagement with the Ministry of Education remained largely symbolic, with authorities prioritising political imperatives over equitable access to examinations for all Sudanese students. This lack of political buy-in for an equitable approach undermined the viability of humanitarian or technical solutions, such as safe passage proposals or decentralised access, underscoring the reality that no response can be sufficient until political drivers are addressed.

Many actors were hesitant to directly contribute to or facilitate the exam process, citing concerns over safety, equity, and implications for wider conflict dynamics. Donors engaged to some extent in shaping the response, voicing expectations around protection standards and inclusivity. This influence was not matched with financial commitment. Interviews confirmed that no dedicated emergency funding was allocated by donors to support the exam response, resulting in a response gap where expectations exceeded available resources.

The response was constrained by a limited capacity for coordination. There was no unified plan to reach the most marginalised students, and protection services were often deployed only where humanitarian organisations already had a footprint. Sector actors lacked a shared operational plan, and key functions such as data management, protection oversight, and fee guidance were

²² Sudan: As schools re-open, displaced shelters face uncertain future. ReliefWeb, 22 May 2024 Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-schools-re-open-displaced-shelters-face-uncertain-future>

²³ Sudan Independent. "وزارة التربية والتعليم السودانية تعلن موعد امتحانات الشهادة الثانوية للدفعة المؤجلة لعام 2023" [Sudanese Ministry of Education announces the date of secondary certificate exams for the postponed 2023 cohort]. *Sudan Independent*, 28 September 2024. <https://www.sudanindependent.com/news/politics/2024/09/28/وزارة-التربية-والتعليم-السود>. See also; Al Arabiya Sudan. *Instagram video post*. Instagram, 18 March 2024. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/alarabiya.sudan/reel/DAIpYq9NIBD/>

inconsistently reported and implemented. In this ecosystem, the most vulnerable populations were further marginalised. A cluster actor observed, “We had no centralised guidelines on how to handle marginalised children’s needs, like disabilities, and we hoped each partner would do their best in their coverage area.” In some locations, local authorities and civil society actors helped to fill gaps, organising transport, securing venues, and mobilising resources, but these efforts were uneven and undocumented, leaving vast disparities in support and outcomes.

The December 2024 exam cycle highlights a difficult tension between enabling hope and reinforcing inequity. For students in SAF-controlled areas, the exams represented a critical opportunity to continue their education and plan for the future. Yet for those in RSF-held or contested areas, and for those most marginalised, the lack of access further entrenched educational exclusion. In seeking to preserve academic pathways for some, the system inadvertently widened existing disparities, linking exam participation not to student need or achievement, but to geography, political control, and access to resources. This outcome underscores the urgent need for solutions that advance continuity without compromising equity.

4. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Lessons Learned

- 1. Structural Inequities and Political Fragmentation Undermined Equity:** The centralisation of the December 2024 examinations in SAF-controlled areas structurally excluded students from RSF-held territories. Political fragmentation, lack of crossline coordination, and refusal of warring parties to negotiate alternative administration models reinforced access disparities. These inequities have most likely widened the gap in certification and will have a ripple effect on post-secondary education and employment.
- 2. Advocacy was limited, late, and unable to adapt messages to authority priorities:** This research indicates the advocacy process did not sufficiently engage with the political realities underpinning decision-making. There was limited time and capacity to assess whether proposed alternatives, such as postponement, decentralised administration, or automatic certification, were politically or operationally viable within Sudan’s fragmented governance structures and the context of long overdue examinations. While the messages themselves were coherent, the advocacy approach lacked the adaptation and political economy analysis necessary to maximise their influence.
- 3. The Response Was Reactive and Crisis-Driven:** The overall response resembled a firefighting effort more than a coherent emergency plan. While engagement with direct stakeholders had been ongoing, the response was shaped by significant constraints, particularly limited resources and the absence of a clearly defined mandate for examination coordination. These challenges contributed to delays in mobilisation, which in turn resulted in rushed coordination, short-term workarounds, and fragmented service delivery. Planning delays, coupled with limited budget and undefined responsibilities, led to improvised solutions.
- 4. Risk Appetite, Not Strategy, Drove the Scope of the Response:** While some protection measures were implemented at exam centres, few actors engaged in crossline facilitation due to security concerns and lack of guarantees. The absence of formal safe passage corridors left students to travel through high-risk states without coordinated oversight. It is unclear whether this was due to an intentional strategy to not encourage movement, or due to a reluctance among actors to assume political and security risks associated with crossline movement.

5. **Child Protection Coverage Was Limited and Uneven:** Protection actors were mobilised late in the response in some areas, exacerbating uneven and limited coverage across states, already a prominent feature of the response. Students travelling long distances faced risks including forced recruitment, arbitrary detention, gender-based violence, and exposure to explosive remnants of war. The lack of systematic protection monitoring and formal protocols meant these incidents were inconsistently documented and responded to, undermining the safety of travelling learners. While protection concerns were the principal reason for actors' engagement in the exam response, the absence of a coordinated, cross-line protection framework, limited funding, and the fact that exams fell outside the traditional humanitarian mandate of many organisations, constrained the scale and reach of that response.
6. **Coordination Gaps Across Sectors and Levels Persisted:** Despite the daily cluster briefings led by the Education and Child Protection Clusters, the response lacked an overarching coordination framework. Key issues like transportation, child protection, data sharing, and exam fee management were addressed inconsistently, reflecting the absence of a shared response plan.
7. **Community-Led Efforts Were Critical, but Poorly Documented:** Local youth groups, education committees, and community leaders played a key role in supporting exam access by negotiating local safe passage, providing accommodation, and covering transport costs. However, these contributions were largely undocumented, with no formal mechanism to record, support, or replicate successful models. As a result, students in areas without strong local mobilisation were often excluded.
8. **Financial and Access Barriers Restricted Participation:** Historical figures for examination registration indicate that approximately one-third of students eligible to sit for examinations did not register. Although 343,644 students registered for the exams, over a quarter did not sit. Financial costs, including exam fees, transport, accommodation, proved prohibitive. There was no coordinated funding strategy, no harmonised fee waiver policy, and no mechanism to address cost nor access disparities across states.
9. **Lack of Monitoring and Data Systems Hindered Risk Management:** Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) mechanisms were fragmented and delayed. No centralised data system existed to track student movement, exam attendance, or protection incidents. The response relied heavily on informal updates, daily calls, and anecdotal reports. The absence of real-time data limited the ability to identify emerging threats or reallocate resources efficiently. While the nature of national certification exams places primary responsibility on the government, the absence of real-time data nonetheless limited the capacity of the response actors to identify emerging threats or reallocate resources efficiently.
10. **Academic Preparedness was not within the Capacity of the Response:** Many students arrived unprepared to sit for exams due to school closures, displacement, or limited access to study materials. While some actors offered last-minute revision classes, this was not systematic or scalable. The failure to address learning loss jeopardised both the fairness and validity of the examination process and reinforced exclusion for students with disrupted education trajectories.
11. **Operational and Safety Standards at Exam Centres Were Inconsistent and Underreported:** Key issues such as the handling and security of exam materials, examiner qualifications, and students' and teachers' welfare remain insufficiently documented. These gaps limit accountability and risk perpetuating inequalities in the next exam cycle.

Key Recommendations for Future Exam Cycles

1. **Establish a Clear Strategy for Advocacy and Appropriately Tailor Messaging to Key Stakeholders Responsible for Decision Making:** Initiate advocacy planning, considering key objectives and the evidence, messaging, adaptations given priorities of specific stakeholders, and potential possible unintended consequences. This workstream may benefit from learning from wider humanitarian diplomacy efforts currently taking place in Sudan.
2. **Negotiate Safe Passage Agreements Early:** Initiate formal safe passage negotiations with all parties well in advance of announced exam dates. These agreements should be written, publicly endorsed, and include commitments to non-interference with students. Where crossline access is not possible, contingency models such as remote administration or catch-up windows should be planned.
3. **Strengthen Multi-Actor Coordination Mechanisms:** Establish a dedicated inter-sectoral task force with leadership from both protection and education stakeholders and inclusive of stakeholders working in logistics, shelter, health, and cash to oversee exam response planning. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined across national and subnational levels.
4. **Document and Support Community-Led Responses:** Establish mechanisms to systematically document the contributions of local committees and youth groups during exam responses. Create space to enable these actors to be integrated into coordination structures and decision-making processes, so that effective local practices can be scaled and replicated.
5. **Develop a Comprehensive Child Protection Blueprint:** Prepare context-specific protection protocols for student travel, exam centre safety, and referral mechanisms. Deploy social workers and protection liaisons to all exam sites. Identify hotspots in advance and assign focal points to monitor high-risk corridors, including GBV risks and forced recruitment.
6. **Design Inclusive Strategies for Marginalised Groups:** Develop tailored interventions for girls, children with disabilities, displaced learners, and other underserved groups. This includes identifying specific access barriers, allocating dedicated resources, and ensuring their needs are reflected in planning, logistics, exam centre design, and protection protocols. Inclusive planning should be informed by disaggregated data and conducted in consultation with affected communities.
7. **Introduce Academic Preparedness:** Launch refresher programmes in the months leading up to the exams. Ensure access to past papers, study guides, and revision classes, particularly for candidates from conflict-affected or remote areas.
8. **Improve Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning:** Develop and deploy a unified data management system to track student registration, attendance, protection incidents, and resource use in real time. Standardise monitoring tools such as Kobo forms and community feedback mechanisms, and ensure training and connectivity are available in all regions. This includes negotiating data-sharing agreement on students' registration, attendance, and performance with the FMoE.
9. **Ensure Transparent and Equitable Financing:** Conduct a cost analysis disaggregated by state, student group, and support type. Develop a joint financing plan that defines cost-sharing responsibilities between the government, donors, and implementing partners. Advocate to harmonise exam fee policies to ensure students are not disproportionately burdened.

10. **Provide Adequate Funding and Political Backing:** Should future examination responses be deemed a priority within the humanitarian response, allocate emergency education funding to support exam preparedness, child protection, and logistics. Donors should align funding with advocacy goals to avoid pushing for higher standards without resourcing implementation.
11. **Ensure Exam Centre Preparedness and Equity:** Support the establishment of minimum operational standards for all exam centres, including safety, examiner qualifications, psychosocial support, availability of meals and shelter, and non-discrimination protocols for displaced students, noting that this is the mandate of the FMoE. Include a formal process for documenting exam centre conditions and student feedback.
12. **Promote Inclusive and Conflict-Sensitive Exam Administration:** Engage all relevant authorities in discussions around certification options. Explore models that reflect the political and geographical realities of conflict. Certification must be accessible to all eligible students, regardless of location.

ANNEXES

ANNEX 1: CODED LIST OF STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

An anonymised, categorised list of interview participants, reflecting the range of actors consulted across sectors and regions.

Code	Stakeholder Type	Code	Stakeholder Type
J.1	UN body staff	J.10	International NGO staff
J.2	Local NGO	J.11	International NGO staff
J.3	Sudanese Teachers Committee	J.12	UN body staff
J.4	International NGO staff	J.13	UN body staff
J.5	UN body staff	J.14	Bilateral donor staff
J.6	International NGO staff	J.15	Bilateral donor staff
J.7	Bilateral donor staff	J.16	International NGO staff
J.8	Bilateral donor staff	J.17	UN body staff
J.9	UN body staff		

ANNEX 2: JOINT DONOR STATEMENT

Official statement issued by donor agencies regarding the December 2024 examination cycle, outlining concerns and recommendations.

Donor Statement

Statement by the Embassy of Canada to Sudan, Embassy of Germany to Sudan, FCDO British Office Sudan, on protection concerns related to the upcoming Secondary School Examinations in Sudan

Members of the international donor community strongly believe that every child in Sudan has the right to access safe and equitable education opportunities.

We note that on 27 October 2024 the Sudanese Federal Ministry of Education announced the decision to administer examinations for the 2022/23 cohort exclusively in areas controlled by the Sudanese Armed Forces on 28 December 2024.

While we commend the Ministry's efforts to advance education objectives through the scheduled examinations, we express significant concern that this decision could result in the unsafe movement of students across lines of conflict. This will place their safety and well-being at serious risk. We also note that allowing exams to be conducted only in certain parts of the country could widen education gaps and inequities between children in Sudan.

We are particularly concerned by the risks associated with the movement of children for these examinations. Given that students are already on the move to access examinations in SAF-controlled areas, we urgently call on all parties to the conflict to actively enable and facilitate the safe passage of students for the 28 December 2024 examinations.

Given the recurrent nature of examinations, we strongly encourage relevant stakeholders to transparently develop a comprehensive strategy for future examination cycles. The greatest priority should be given to the safety of children, particularly to the heightened risks faced by girls and young people across Sudan.

ANNEX 3: TABLE: OVERVIEW OF JOINT HUMANITARIAN SUPPORT TO THE DECEMBER 2024 EXAMS

Summary of services provided by humanitarian actors across states, including psychosocial support, transportation, meals, and accommodation. **Presented at the Education Cluster meeting on Recap on Sudan's National Exams on 27 January 2025.**

Organisation	Locations	Students Supported	Support Provided
UNICEF	White Nile, Northern, North Kordofan, River Nile, Blue Nile, Red Sea, Sennar, Kassala, Gedaref	115,000	702 exam centres, 165 accommodation centres, food support, mental health & psychosocial support (MHPSS)
Save the Children	White Nile, North Kordofan, River Nile, Blue Nile	4,500	Meals & food items, transportation logistics, mobile clinic services, learning materials, drinking water
Plan International	White Nile, North Kordofan, Kassala	1,300	Meals & food items, transportation logistics, mobile medical team, winter supplies (for 1,000 students), deployment of social workers and MHPSS support
Sadagaat	Khartoum	5,000	Meals & refreshments, winter supplies, counselling sessions, stress management workshops, peer support groups, health checkups (MHPSS)
Child Development Foundation (CDF)	River Nile	500	Provision of dignity kits
NORD	Blue Nile	Not specified	Counselling sessions (MHPSS)
Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)	West Darfur (during preparation)	1,200	Implementation of Better Learning Programme (BLP)
Depth Action Organisation	North Darfur (during preparation)	Not specified	Coordination and hosting of MoE staff to facilitate student registration

ANNEX 5: TABLE: OVERVIEW OF ACTIONS BY THE LOCAL EDUCATION GROUP (LEG), EDUCATION CLUSTER, AND UNICEF

Mapping of key advocacy efforts, coordination meetings, and operational activities undertaken before and during the examination period to promote safe and equitable access. *Presented at the Education Cluster meeting on Recap on Sudan's National Exams on 27 January 2025.*

Timeline	Key Actions and Engagements	Outcomes and Observations
October 2024	Acting Minister of Education confirmed the Sudanese Secondary Certificate Examinations for the postponed 2023 and 2024 cohort would be held on 28 December 2024. UNICEF and Save the Children (SC) called for a joint LEG and Education Cluster meeting.	No consensus on postponement; government decided to proceed with December exams.
October – December 2024	Advocacy efforts by LEG, UNICEF, and partners included proposals to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postpone or cancel exams. • Hold exams in all states, including non-SAF-controlled areas. • Engage humanitarian agencies to support exams in non-SAF-controlled areas. 	A second exam round was scheduled for April 2025. UNICEF, UNHCR, and other agencies engaged with the Chadian government on alternatives for Grade 12 students, highlighting the difficulty of students adapting to a new language quickly.
13 November 2024	High-level meeting coordinated by UNESCO with the Acting Minister, focused on equitable access and establishing safe exam centres in conflict zones.	Meeting did not alter government position; exams remained scheduled as planned.
4 – 6 December 2024	Transitional Education Plan (TEP) workshop in Cairo facilitated by UNESCO as GPE Coordinating Agency, updating stakeholders on proposed approaches, priorities, and strategies.	Enhanced stakeholder awareness and coordination and led to substantive dialogue between LEG members on the implications of the examination response.
Mid-December 2024	RC and UNICEF held a high-level meeting with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and General Jabir, proposing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Postponement to March 2025 for better preparation. • Flexible exam options if exams proceed in December. 	Government remained firm on the original December exam schedule despite acknowledging the complexity of the situation.
18 December 2024	Issuance of a donor statement acknowledging concerns around the complexity of the examination situation.	Increased visibility of international concerns; however, minimal immediate impact on government decisions.

28 December 2024 – 8 January 2025	Daily situation reports and stakeholder coordination meetings held throughout the examination period to monitor and address emerging challenges.	Real-time monitoring allowed prompt identification and response to immediate protection concerns, though constrained by logistical limitations.
October 2024 – Ongoing	Continuous coordination, risk monitoring, and mitigation planning efforts focused on student safety, protection risks, and political implications, including ICCG discussions.	Ongoing emphasis on enhancing preparedness and addressing protection issues systematically; active coordination across humanitarian sectors.
Preparations for April 2025	Advocacy for equitable access and logistical preparations in coordination with the Ministry of Education and other sectors for the second exam round in April 2025.	Forward-looking emphasis to address shortcomings from the December cycle; prioritising holistic support and equitable access.

ANNEX 6: UPDATED RISK MATRIX

Consolidated matrix highlighting key protection, logistical, and operational risks identified during the exam period, with notes on mitigation efforts and remaining gaps. Adapted from the Child Protection Area of Responsibility (CP AoR) risk matrix.

Risk Category	Description	Potential Triggers	Severity	Mitigation Measures
Conflict & Security Risks	Children travelling from or through non-SAF zones faced forced recruitment, intimidation, detentions, or stray gunfire. The absence of formal safe-passage agreements left families to negotiate ad hoc routes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ongoing clashes near exam routes - Suspicion at checkpoints or forced conscription - Fragmented control within armed groups (RSF in particular) - No negotiated ceasefire during the exam period 	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Government-led cross-line dialogue for safe passage, supported by neutral humanitarian actors - Mapping and public dissemination of accessible and secure exam routes, where feasible - Engagement with protection actors to advocate for monitored checkpoints and non-targeting of students
Gaps in Logistical & Resource Availability	Some exam centres had limited basic supplies. Conflict-affected areas lacked viable exam sites. Late announcements hindered planning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Short notice of final exam sites - Poor cross-line supply due to insecurity - Displaced and overstretched local staff - Inflation and disrupted supply chains 	Medium-High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initiate early planning with state-level MoEs for site readiness - Document service availability and gaps to inform future exam rounds
Financial Barriers & Exam Fees	Despite central policy, some states imposed local fees. Transport and accommodation costs also created barriers, especially for displaced students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No enforcement of a national no-fee policy - Informal or uneven local cost recovery - High transport and lodging costs 	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Advocate for clear national policy on free exams and related costs, with transparent enforcement - Allocated funding for financial support for vulnerable students - Establish reporting mechanisms for fee complaints at school or community level

Real-Time Data Limitations & M&E Gaps	No centralised system to track student movement, protection risks, or attendance. Heavy reliance on informal reports limited situational awareness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No pre-designed M&E framework - Fear of reprisal limiting reporting - MoE reluctance to share data - Weak verification of rumours and social media claims 	Medium-High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establish a monitoring and incident-reporting framework as part of pre-exam planning - Encourage cross-sectoral data-sharing between Education and Protection actors - Design flexible funding tools that can respond to evolving needs informed by real-time data
Gender-Specific & GBV Risks	Adolescent girls risked GBV during travel; boys risked forced recruitment. Services like female staff and safe latrines were limited. GBV referrals were inconsistent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unmonitored checkpoints - Lack of female social workers - Cultural stigma around GBV reporting - Inconsistent NGO coverage 	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase female staff presence at exam centres and accommodation facilities - Ensure safe WASH facilities and gender-sensitive lodging standards - Strengthen referral pathways and psychosocial support services for GBV survivors
Operational Overlap & Coordination	Cluster roles overlapped; donors sometimes bypassed coordination channels, leading to mixed messaging and duplicated efforts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diverging cluster mandates - Direct donor-to-authority communication - Fragmented data sharing 	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarify roles and responsibilities across coordination platforms (LEG, Education Cluster, Protection AoR) - Develop a standardised guidance note on roles in exam response - Strengthen joint planning and feedback loops through regular multi-sectoral meetings
Legitimacy & Political Tensions	Partial exam access reinforced SAF legitimacy while sidelining RSF regions, deepening geographic divides.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MoE use of exams as political signal - RSF rejection of federal exam legitimacy - Donor concerns about appearing politically biased 	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Frame all exam-related advocacy in terms of children's rights and non-discrimination - Monitor and transparently report access disparities without assigning blame - Encourage future planning that anticipates and addresses territorial exclusion