

REQUEST RESPONSE

Learning through crisis: Community-driven education in Sudan

REQUEST SUBMISSION

Amid conflict and state collapse, communities are driving efforts to support education continuity through both formal and non-formal systems. Despite the importance of community-driven education efforts, there is limited information on how communities are supporting local education systems and how these community-driven initiatives are financed including at the household and community level. Further, there is little evidence related to how these hyper-local financing arrangements shape who can access schooling, the quality of learning, and the continuity of education amidst conflict.

Several factors underscore the need for this analysis: (1) The collapse of public education financing and its implications for the growing role of community-driven initiatives and religiously affiliated education provision in maintaining access to learning amid conflict; (2) The lack of systematic evidence on how community-driven initiatives are financed, governed and sustained; (3) The demand from national and international stakeholders for research to understand these systems better as a first step so that considerations can be made on how to potentially support these systems in ways that promote equity, learning and continuity of education in Sudan.

The purpose of addressing this evidence gap is to shed light on how best to provide external or state support that safeguards and expands education access and quality particularly for groups of children who are not reached by the formal system.

About the ERICC Helpdesk

The ERICC Helpdesk provides an expert, demand-driven, high quality, and agile call-down mechanism for technical assistance to FCDO country offices, implementation partners, and in-country partners. This provides rapid research, evidence synthesis and analysis, and expert advice, as well as the provision of small-scale research linked to program design or evaluation (including replication and implementation science studies). Through this mechanism, we support a strengthened uptake of evidence-based policies and improve value for money in FCDO-supported education programming in key FCDO areas of operation.

This mechanism links to existing and forthcoming FCDO technical assistance resources for education. In addition, with FCDO clients, the Helpdesk seeks to proactively identify areas of interest and collaborate on design and early identification of technical support needs. The Helpdesk roster comprises over 50 highly skilled technical experts and senior researcher specialists from the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and partner organisations, with extensive experience in education in conflict-affected contexts.

Disclaimer

The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed here are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of ERICC partner organisations, the International Rescue Committee, or the UK government's official policies.

Authors

Dr. Rebecca Glade (Makerere University) and Dr. Arianna Pacifico (International Rescue Committee)

Suggested citation

Glade, R. and Pacifico, A. (May 2026). Learning through crisis: Community-driven education in Sudan. ERICC.

Rebecca Glade served as lead author and led the data collection and manuscript development. Arianna Pacifico contributed to the conceptualisation of the study and supported drafting and revision of the manuscript.

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ACRONYMS

Emergency Response Room	ERR
Rapid Support Forces	RSF
Sudanese Armed Forces	SAF
Sudan Liberation Army	SLA
Sudan People’s Liberation Movement–North	SPLM–N
World Food Programme	WFP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the outbreak of war in 2023, Sudan's education system has been severely disrupted by insecurity, displacement, fiscal collapse, and political fragmentation. Large areas of the country have experienced near-total school closures during the first year of the conflict, while millions of children and youth lost access to formal learning. In this context, community-driven education initiatives have become a critical lifeline for children who would otherwise remain entirely out of school. Although the scale and quality of these initiatives are not yet systematically documented, this report shows that they are increasingly central to education access and continuity in conflict-affected areas.

This report draws on semi-structured interviews (n=10) with individuals involved in community-led education initiatives across six conflict-affected states, alongside a review of Sudanese civil society, academic, and grey literature, as well as media sources. This study identifies recurring patterns in how community initiatives emerge, organise, mobilise resources, interact with authorities, and sustain education under conditions of extreme scarcity.

This study finds community education initiatives have become central to sustaining education access and continuity in conflict-affected areas of Sudan. Two main forms of community-driven education provision are especially prominent: (1) Community-supported reopening of previously existing government schools; and (2) the expansion or revival of *khalawi*, religious education institutions that traditionally have a residential and work component to sustain the school. Although these initiatives are often severely under-resourced, they are rooted in community trust, local legitimacy, and existing traditions of mutual aid.

Community education initiatives operate in an intensely politicised environment where functioning schools have become symbols of legitimacy for rival authorities, even as those authorities provide little material support. Teachers and organisers may be accused of collaboration depending on who controls an area. Accreditation and secondary examinations have become especially divisive, with students in RSF-controlled areas often unable to access recognised exams.

Teachers are central to the functioning of these initiatives, both as organisers and as volunteer educators. Yet teacher compensation, retention, and support remain central challenges across all forms of community-led education. Other challenges identified include disruption due to conflict, lack of learning materials, and the politicisation of education.

International support has the potential to strengthen these critical education initiatives, but only if support is flexible, conflict-sensitive, and designed around community priorities rather than externally imposed models. Because initiatives vary significantly across political, social, and security contexts, support should not follow a uniform national approach. Larger networks, such as those connected to emergency response rooms (ERRs) or regional education coordination structures, may be able to manage and distribute resources, while smaller initiatives may require support through trusted local actors with strong community knowledge.

Key recommendations include:

Adopt flexible, context-specific support models. Donors and international organisations should adopt funding approaches that reflect local operating conditions, including differences between SAF-controlled areas, RSF-controlled areas, marginalised regions, and areas where community organising capacity is weaker.

Assess initiatives based on community involvement and legitimacy. The viability of initiatives should be judged by the strength of community participation, activities accomplished, and the level of trust they hold locally, rather than by formal organisational structures alone. External assistance should not require initiatives to shift their goals toward donor preferences such as scale, efficiency, or cost-effectiveness if these do not reflect local priorities.

Localise decision-making over resources. Community actors should be treated as decision-makers, not merely as implementers. Support should allow initiatives to determine how funds and materials are used in response to locally-identified needs. Many initiatives already use informal reporting systems to maintain accountability to their communities. Donor reporting should build on these downward accountability practices rather than impose NGO-style systems that consume scarce time and capacity.

Provide microgrants to initiatives rather than only cash assistance to individuals. Since education provision is organised collectively through schools, committees, ERRs, and community projects, direct support to initiatives can strengthen collective capacity and sustain local organising.

Advocate for state responsibility for education. Community initiatives are filling critical gaps, but without intentional and strategic advocacy, donor support runs the risk of normalising state neglect of education. International actors should advocate for state support for education systems.

Use conflict-sensitive and politically informed approaches. Community education actors may face accusations of collaboration, restrictions from authorities, or pressure to formalise in ways that undermine their autonomy. International actors should recognise these risks and defend initiatives against politicisation.

Support inclusive examination and certification pathways. Community-based education will remain limited if students cannot sit recognised exams or have their learning formally acknowledged.

Invest in women's leadership. Women play central roles as teachers, PTA members, ERR organisers, and community leaders. Dedicated support for women's leadership, organisational capacity, and decision-making power can strengthen both education provision and broader community resilience.

INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of war in 2023, education prospects for children and youth in Sudan have become increasingly dire. Save the Children estimates that more than 8 million children, roughly half of Sudan's 17 million school-aged children, have missed almost 500 days of learning in what is now one of the world's longest school closures (Save the Children, 2026). Rival Sudanese authorities have demonstrated limited commitment in their support to education while at the same time politicising education infrastructure and accreditation at the expense of both teachers and students (Glade and Elbashir, 2025). In the absence of meaningful public provision, communities have faced an absence of viable education options for their children.

Macroeconomic deterioration has intensified Sudan's education crisis by shrinking public resources and eroding limited teacher salaries. Public revenues have collapsed, with GDP falling by 40% between 2022 and 2024, while public spending as a share of GDP declined by roughly 25% over the same period (World Bank, 2025). Rising prices have severely eroded the real value of teacher salaries. World Food Programme (WFP) market monitoring shows that, by April 2025, the local food basket cost has risen by 365% compared with pre-conflict levels, while some basic commodities increased even more sharply (WFP, 2025). Current monthly salaries for novice teachers are as low as USD 3.50, with the highest salaries barely reaching USD 30 (Abdelhai, 2025). This has led to widespread teacher attrition, with estimates suggesting that one-third of Sudan's teachers have left the country and even more the profession (TEP, 2025).

The collapse in education financing has further weakened the system's capacity to sustain education access. Recent accounts suggest that education's share of public spending has plummeted to 1-2% of total expenditure in 2023, a stark decline from the 11% allocation seen between 2009 and 2017 (Glade and Elbashir, 2025). This collapse in financing threatens not only teacher retention and motivation but also the continuity of schooling in conflict settings.

In this context, community-led education initiatives have become an increasingly important means for providing education for children who would otherwise be out of school. Although there are no reliable estimates on the extent of these initiatives or the number of children reached, their prominence has been pronounced, particularly through the Emergency Response Room (ERR) networks and the revival of traditional education forms such as *khalawi*. Despite the importance of community-driven education efforts, there is limited information on how communities are supporting local education systems and how these community-driven initiatives are financed including at the household and community level. Further, there is little evidence related to how these hyper-local financing arrangements shape who can access schooling, the quality of learning, and the continuity of education amidst conflict.

This study examines how community-led education initiatives in Sudan function during the current conflict, with particular attention to how they mobilise labour and resources to provide access to education, asking:

- How do community-driven education initiatives in Sudan mobilise resources and organise service delivery during conflict, and what do these arrangements mean for education access, quality, and continuity?

- How are community-driven education initiatives in Sudan resourced at the community level? (e.g. Who contributes what? Through which mechanisms? And with what degree of reliability and accountability?)
- To what extent, and in what ways, do these initiatives connect to current or previously existing state education systems (e.g. Curriculum, certification, teachers, governance?)
- How do these hyper-local resourcing arrangements shape who can access schooling and patterns of exclusion?
- How do these arrangements influence the quality of teaching and learning?
- How do these community-driven education efforts adapt and continue in different circumstances and phases of the conflict? (e.g. What factors enable or constrain continuity?)

In responding to these questions, this report points to how small, localised initiatives function and how they connect to the prominent mutual aid networks that have been documented widely. It identifies important similarities across community-led education initiatives. Almost all initiatives work through existing community institutions, whether by reviving existing schools or organising learning through existing religious institutions or other local structures. All initiatives studied have been established and maintained through a volunteerist culture steeped in a long tradition of community organising and mutual aid founded and maintained through community trust. It is this trust that has facilitated the expansion of education and volunteer networks and the collaboration of local initiatives with larger state and regional networks.

Rather than focusing on one or two case studies, this study identifies patterns and key aspects across initiatives. First, this report examines the historical roots of community organising in education. The report then explores how initiatives make decisions, coordinate, and mobilise resources and labour, as well as highlights issues around political polarization, challenges to initiatives, and regional inequities. It concludes with practical recommendations for donors and international organisations on how to support these initiatives in ways that strengthen, rather than erode, the community trust on which they depend.

METHODS AND ORIENTATION

This study draws on semi-structured key informant interviews with individuals who have participated in–or are currently participating in–community-led education initiatives in areas of Sudan that have been impacted by active conflict. These initiatives are organised by community members concerned with sustaining education, including many teachers, youth, parents, and former students from the community. Roughly half of those interviewed were current or former teachers. Their level of involvement with initiatives varied; some, particularly those working on the ground in Darfur, volunteered with community initiatives full-time, deriving whatever sustenance they had from this work alongside informal jobs they had taken on in war conditions. Other participants had been involved with community education initiatives previously but had since moved and currently held unrelated jobs. Those that were not currently directly engaged still related to these initiatives through their social connections and contributing material resources to them.

Interviews were necessarily multi-site due to the nature of the conflict, the scale of displacement, and the location of the researcher. All interviews were held remotely primarily through WhatsApp and Signal calls and, in some cases, Google Meet. Informants were identified through the researcher's

professional network and snowball methods were employed. Interviews focused on education initiatives in states either currently engaged in the conflict or where significant conflict has occurred since the outbreak of the 2023 war. The study included 10 interviews with 14 individuals regarding current and past community initiatives in six states: North and East Darfur, West and South Kordofan, Sennar, and Blue Nile.

Primary data collection was complemented by a review of secondary literature on community initiatives, including not only academic and grey literature produced by international NGOs and UN agencies, but also a rich body of literature produced by Sudanese civil society. Sudanese activists, academics, and community members have played an important role in documenting and representing their own work and that of their colleagues. The secondary material also includes journalism, particularly Arabic-language reporting, which has tended to highlight education initiatives to a larger extent than English-language journalism on Sudan both due to greater access as well as concern for education in a Sudanese, Arabic speaking audience.

The nature of this study as a rapid study meant to be completed in a short timeframe and the remote nature of the interviews constrained the ability of this study to delve into questions of access, quality, and continuity. This proved to be a key limitation in addressing the central research questions of this paper. While key themes on these issues are highlighted, particularly in sections regarding challenges for initiatives and regional inequalities, further, on-site research will be necessary to better evaluate these questions in detail.

One major limitation concerns the participation of women in this study and the inclusion of their priorities within these initiatives. Numerous anecdotes and the admission of key informants indicate that women make up the vast majority of teachers and volunteers in many community education initiatives, as they made up the majority of teachers before the war (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). Yet, only 2 of the 14 individuals interviewed were women. This imbalance reflects a dynamic that predates the current war, where men, although far fewer in number within teaching roles, are more likely to take on leadership positions and logistical positions in schools than women. This dynamic has meant that relatively more men than women have taken on coordinating roles in cross-initiative coordinating bodies and are more frequently recommended as initial points of contact for researchers. While all interlocutors have spoken freely of gendered dynamics and the importance of women in community initiatives, this dynamic has meant that some gendered concerns may have been missed, particularly in initiatives like ERR school feeding programmes run by women within ERRs.

HISTORY OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION

Both education and community organising have long histories in Sudan, beginning in the colonial period. When the British-led Condominium rule began in Sudan in 1902, the colonial government sought to build up an education system to train low-level employees of the colonial state and established a system of basic schools, eventually adding intermediate, then secondary education, with the bulk of its efforts focused in northern, riverain Sudan. In southern Sudan, by contrast, education was largely delegated to missionaries, who established mission schools that served mostly boys and young men at the basic, and later intermediate, level (Seri-Hersch, 2017).

These formal education institutions, however, did not exist in isolation. They co-existed and interacted heavily with pre-existing education systems as well as newer locally organised forms of provision designed to spread critical skills to individuals without education access. In northern Sudan, Quranic schools, or *khalawi*, had long existed, with further expansion after the Turco-Egyptian conquest of Sudan in 1821. Colonial condominium policy towards *khalawi* varied over time, with some receiving state funding at certain points, even as the colonial state sought to replace them with secular basic schools (Seri-Hersch, 2017). In practice, it was not uncommon for students to attend a *khalwa* prior to continuing into government schools for the rest of their education (Abu Shok, 2023).

Alongside these systems, new community-led initiatives were established in the 1920s and 30s. In northern Sudan, this took the form of “native’s schools” or *ahlia* schools, which emerged in the late 1920s as community initiatives that “at once claimed to be based on indigenous tradition and modeled [their] curricula and organization upon the government system” (Seri-Hersch, 2017). In southern Sudan, students studied in “bush schools” far from mission stations, where they attained vernacular literacy, with some later entering mission schools for basic education (Kindersley and Wawa, 2025). These initiatives were run by communities with no regulation by the state, serving communities education based on local staff capacity and the priorities and needs of the communities themselves.

Following independence in 1956, many of these institutions continued or even expanded, subject to state regulation. *Khalawi* no longer received state funds, but began operating in coordination with the Ministry of Education and were subject to curriculum-related regulation. *Ahlia* schools also continued operation, eventually expanding to include university education, while remaining subject to Ministry of Education (and Ministry of Higher Education) regulation and coordination (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019).

When the Ingaz regime came to power in 1989, it instituted a series of sweeping reforms to the education system at large, enforcing ideological changes to Islamise and Arabise the curriculum, while simultaneously localising education governance, and in the process, defunding and semi-privatising it. As this occurred, parent-teacher associations (PTAs) proliferated and took on an increasingly important role in financing and managing individual schools to fill gaps left by local and state authorities (Glade and Elbashir, 2025). In the late Ingaz period, these associations were complemented by online initiatives and CSOs focused on education, which organised to raise supplies and funds for schools (Glade, 2015).

The 2019 revolution which ousted President Omar Elbashir brought with it an intense period of political organising and community initiatives. This organising was concentrated in local level “Resistance Committees,” which initially organised neighbourhood-level protests. Between 2019–2021, these committees moved briefly into service provision, helping to distribute limited gas and wheat supplies before returning their focus to demonstrations following the October 2021 military coup (El-Battahani, 2021). Following the outbreak of war in 2023, many members of these resistance committees turned their focus towards community survival, establishing “Emergency Response Rooms” focused on humanitarian service delivery while continuing to maintain a “grassroots civic-space that is people centered” (Jafar, 2025).

Understanding the long history of community organising in and around education is essential to interpreting current community systems in Sudan. Today’s community-driven education systems did

not emerge as an improvised response to the current conflict but instead are built on longstanding traditions of self organisation. This historical perspective helps explain why communities are able to mobilise resources and labour around local forms of education provision relatively quickly amid conflict and crisis.

COMMUNITY-LED EDUCATION INITIATIVES SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF WAR

The outbreak of war in 2023 caused serious strain on the structures for education provision across Sudan, effectively halting education provision in many parts of the country for the first year to year and a half of the conflict. The Federal Ministry of Education's activities were severely disrupted at the outset when Khartoum became a combat zone, forcing the Ministry's relocation to safer areas under SAF control. Complicated relations between federal and state governments and the massive disruptions of the war delayed provision of teachers' salaries in large areas of Sudan under SAF control, meaning that teachers went without pay for long stretches of time. In areas affected by the conflict and displacement, IDPs found shelter in schools. Meanwhile, in areas under RSF control, state and local governments were completely defunded and ministry staff and teachers were expected to relocate to SAF-controlled areas in order to retain a salary. Private schools in areas controlled by the RSF have reopened; however, these are largely confined to cities and towns and are unaffordable for most families. Combat areas and areas under RSF control faced large-scale insecurity and arbitrary violence directed at civilians, including ethnic targeting and mass looting (Glade and Elbashir 2025).

In this context of serious disruption, there has been a proliferation of grassroots community education initiatives across Sudan, as well as the continuation of existing education initiatives. These initiatives have taken very similar forms across Sudan, typically operating out of existing social institutions, including former government schools or religious institutions such as mosques and churches. While some initiatives, such as those in areas controlled by armed movements, existed prior to the outbreak of war, new initiatives were developed in areas facing prolonged conflict. The findings below highlight several recurring conditions that shaped when, where, and how community-driven education initiatives emerged including patterns of insecurity, territorial control, political risk, and existing educational systems.

Education initiatives emerge more strongly when communities judge insecurity to be manageable. These initiatives are rarely active during periods of active combat. In those moments, when soldiers are present in large numbers and fighting is ongoing, education is largely discontinued due to security concerns. This means that for the first months of the war, and even the first year, schooling came to a near-complete halt in large areas of Sudan. By late 2024, however, communities across Sudan began to consider that the war would last for far longer and began to consider the criteria under which education could resume.

Patterns of reopening differ across RSF- and SAF-controlled areas due to insecurity and political risk. In areas under RSF control, community organising occurred when areas faced less active combat and soldier presence, with threats from bombing campaigns assessed to be of less danger. In areas that changed hands and were controlled by both the RSF and SAF, community education efforts typically began after SAF took control of an area. This was in part because these areas, while under RSF control, were typically heavily contested, creating large combat areas and insecurity that prompted families to keep their children home. This may also reflect the highly polarised political

climate, in which community activists and civilians who stayed in areas under RSF control have faced serious risk of being detained as RSF “collaborators” and the possibility of trial carrying the death penalty (Atar, 2026).

Government employed teachers in RSF-controlled areas have been expected not to teach if they wish to continue collecting salaries from the Port Sudan government (Damba, 2025), even as they face risks of retaliation and harassment from RSF authorities when they do not appear in schools or a perceived to be aligned with the Port Sudan (Abdelhai, 2025). The scale of this phenomenon is unclear, though reports note dynamics of this sort across Kordofan and Darfur. More broadly, this highlights the extent to which the provision of education services has become tied to political legitimacy, with functioning schools serving as evidence of territorial authority and administrative capacity, discussed in the political polarisation section below.

These conditions have, in some respects, reversed established patterns of education opportunities in Sudan. Typically, prior to the outbreak of the 2023 war, access to education was far greater in cities and urban areas, where schools were more prevalent and teachers were more available (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). This war, however, has been predominantly urban, with the vast majority of conflict centred around control over state infrastructure, towns, and cities; both Khartoum as well as other major cities, like Elfashir, were under siege for 18 months prior the perpetuation of a massacre killing between 10,000 and 50,000 people (Townsend, 2026). As a result, community-maintained education has been far more extensive and continuous in rural areas, where schools are less frequently threatened by combat operations or aerial bombardments.

One prominent form of community education initiative is the revival of previously existing government schools. These community supported schools functioned as government schools prior to the outbreak of the war. Since then, these schools often hosted IDPs and faced damage from looting, as well as damage due to military operations. Community efforts to reopen schools usually involved finding alternative housing for those sheltering in the school and convincing them to relocate. This process has not always been conducted in ways that respect human dignity and, particularly in SAF-controlled areas, often occurred in coordination with government authorities. Once a school was vacant, the next step has typically been to restore the school (discussed as performing “maintenance”) and to organise teachers to resume instruction. Once reopened, these schools continue to serve the same age groups and grade levels as prior to the war, mostly using the government curriculum from before the outbreak of the war, though with minimal books at their disposal, with reports of teachers having the only copies of textbooks or students sharing books between many students. Some schools ask students to pay a fee that varies in size, from 5,000-10,000 SDG a month.¹ For many families, especially those with more children, these fees are cost prohibitive. In some cases, families pay in-kind (e.g. by bringing water or breakfast for the teacher) and volunteer networks have been able to waive fees for displaced students, although the prevalence of these practices is unclear. This study encountered this most often in areas where displacement occurred within the same state, suggesting that similar social background and strong social cohesion between

¹ This amounts to a little less than three dollars on the black market, which will buy roughly 2 kilos of sugar in Nyala and Da’in, Darfur, and roughly 2 lbs of oil in Port Sudan (Atar Price Bulletin, 2026).

IDP and host communities may facilitate more inclusive arrangements.

Efforts to revive government schools or to manage community-run schools have varied their focus depending on the regions in which they have occurred. In areas under SAF control, these efforts have focused on all levels of education, from basic to secondary education, varying primarily depending on the availability of schools in an area prior to the war. In areas under armed movement control and in areas where secondary education has historically been less accessible, efforts have focused on basic education in part due to the lack of available teachers as well as the higher demand for basic education. In areas under RSF control, particularly in Darfur and Kordofan, focus has similarly been on reviving basic education schools. This reflects not only the greater availability of such schools but also the growing uncertainty surrounding secondary school examinations, which have not been held in RSF-controlled territory in three years (Ayin Network, 2026).

***Khalawi* have remained an important and adaptable form of community-supported education provision in Sudan.** The scope and timeframe of this study has not allowed for in-depth research on more traditional *khalawi*. These institutions are typically attached to a *masjid*, or mosque that manages the *khalwa*, or a *masid*, a farm or work site with an economic apparatus to sustain the study of Quran and provides a residential area for the *khalwa* to function. At these *khalawi*, students typically reside at the *khalwa* and work to earn their place while studying with a sheikh, gathering around him and writing their lessons on traditional wooden boards (Ahmed, 2023). Traditional *khalawi* typically teach boys and girls separately and can operate from the basic level up to the university level on issues related to *Fiqh*, or Islamic religious law. *Khalawi* have a long history, and in certain regions of Sudan, including in Darfur, they have been more prevalent, and at times held higher prestige among communities, than government schools.

Since the outbreak of war, reports suggest *khalawi* have not only persisted in areas stable enough to permit continued study, but in some cases have expanded operations. Some have begun admitting students who attend classes during the day while residing at home and pay fees for instruction (Alhaj, 2024). *Khalawi* have been particularly prominent in northern Darfur, where even in Elfashir, students continued their study while the city was under siege (Ibid.). At the same time, traditional *khalawi* have also been subject to violence and destruction over the course of the war, with those located in areas under dispute often needing to close operations and seeing the displacement of both students and teachers (Ahmed, 2025).

Smaller, community-based *khalawi* have emerged as a more flexible local model, especially in North Darfur. In addition to these larger scale and pre-existing *khalawi*, North Darfur in particular has seen the revival of *khalawi* at the grassroots level in towns and villages across the state. These are usually attached to a town or village *masjid* or operate standalone and receive students on a daily rather than residential basis. They typically operate five days a week and rely on volunteer teachers who receive small incentives from student fees, usually ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 SDG a month. The prevalence of these initiatives reflects the widespread availability of mosques and associated teaching spaces, as well as the general familiarity and social acceptance of *khalawi* as a means of educating children.

As in more traditional *khalawi*, students memorise the Quran, as well as study Arabic and Mathematics. Interlocutors have noted that the *sheikhs* teaching Quran had clear qualifications standardised for religious education prior to the war, and it seems their instruction approach has

remained consistent. Unlike traditional *khalawi*, however, these newer local initiatives typically teach boys and girls together in mixed classes and have hired teachers from regular school systems to teach Arabic and Mathematics. Classes on these subjects attempt to follow government curriculum, but teachers make note that these classes are usually larger groupings including multiple levels, as these *khalawi* serve students ages 5 through 15 and typically have large class sizes and few classes, teaching roughly 200 students in two groupings with classes two hours in length at a time.

Teacher compensation, retention, and support remains one of the central challenges across all forms of community-led education. Teachers in both community-managed government schools and *khalawi* are described as volunteers regardless of whether they receive a government salary. While the Port Sudan government is sending teacher salaries more consistently now in areas under its control, these salaries are extremely low, amounting to between 3 and 30 dollars a month depending on length of public service (Abdelhai, 2025). Student fees may provide a small additional incentive; however, the fees are kept deliberately low to assure access for children whose families cannot afford higher costs. In practice, these fees are often only enough to cover basics like drinking water and soap for teachers each month. As a result, community initiatives need to mobilise additional resources to support teachers regardless of whether the teachers receive a salary or whether students are paying fees. In this sense, community education initiatives, whether in RSF, SAF, or armed movement territory have been forced to make up for the lack of resources paid to teachers through the mobilisation of volunteers. This has in turn shaped the composition of the teachers working in schools, as discussed below. It also contributes to what some have termed volunteer burnout (Musa, 2026), when teachers are forced to withdraw from their work in order to find sufficient income for themselves and their families.

Decision making and coordination

Community education initiatives operate within a broader ecosystem of volunteer networks. Localised education initiatives exist in the context of a rich volunteer-led environment in which activists and social figures work to provide food, medical care, and other essential life services for communities facing mass displacement and extreme hardship. This broader ecosystem includes Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), which have grown in prominence for their role in running collective kitchens, organising medical care, and reporting on threats to the rights and safety of the communities they serve (Jafar, 2025). It also includes other volunteer networks focused on particular issues which may work to support schools as key sites for providing social services to the communities they serve.

One tangible benefit of the broader ecosystem of community action can be seen in the ways that local community education initiatives very quickly joined together across areas and even whole states. As individuals started organising to revive schools, they often connected with nearby communities interested in doing the same. In the process, they formed WhatsApp groups that coordinate with state-wide WhatsApp groups that can have hundreds of members. These networks place community initiatives in dialogue and coordination with a powerful constellation of individuals interested in supporting education in their area. Through these networks, local initiatives can procure resources, as well as field challenges across larger areas. Many initiatives describe themselves as coordinating closely with schools in neighbouring towns, including to coordinate education access for displaced students.

ERRs have played an important role in areas controlled by the RSF, as well as in areas that have changed hands between armed parties and where populations have faced extended periods of combat. While ERRs have generally not led efforts to reopen schools directly, they have been instrumental in supporting and coordinating with community-led education initiatives, including revived schools and *khalawi*. This has taken place through ERR coordinators on education, generally one or two individuals in a town or individual ERR who take lead on education-related activities and regional coordination. In some cases, these coordinators have helped to organise volunteer teachers. They have also coordinated activities supporting communities that take place alongside education such as assuring drinking water for students. Women's rooms within ERRs have been particularly important, at times overseeing efforts to place kitchens in schools to provide meals in areas facing extreme food insecurity.

The networked nature of these initiatives creates overlap between local and regional forms of organisation. Since all of these initiatives are networks-based, they have benefitted from overlaps, with individuals working with school initiatives communicating and coordinating with those in other initiatives through more formal channels (such as WhatsApp groups or in-person meetings) as well as informal channels rooted in ongoing social relationships. While different initiatives at the local and regional level all have core members known for doing significant work, their less formalised nature has meant that individuals might be added to different WhatsApp groups or see announcements or requests for help on social media and offer assistance or provide useful information. As a result, the boundary between a localised initiative and a regional initiative can become blurred as initiatives gain success and reach.

Decision making is defined by ongoing coordination and discussion at the local level, but shaped most strongly by those who contribute the most labour. While localised initiatives often have a president or headmaster who ostensibly makes decisions, the decisions are made in discussion with other participants—volunteers and community members. This has been described by some as creating hierarchy, as decisions must be reached quickly in an evolving environment (Musa, 2026). This is true, in that not all decisions are made through consultative discussions. At the same time, divisive unilateral decisions risk alienating volunteers and those who contribute to the initiative, leading to lower involvement and thus a weakening of the initiative itself. In practice, this means that those who put the most work into initiatives shape the decisions made on the local level the most, with others deferring to those making those decisions because they are also those carrying out a large portion of the work to see them through.

Coordination networks facilitate communication and mutual support rather than centralised control. As local initiatives coordinate across towns and even states, they often form coordinating bodies, either through regular meetings or WhatsApp groups. These forums can be used to coordinate across initiatives; however, members in those groups function as representatives of local efforts rather than as authorities empowered to make or change policy for them. This means that these coordinating bodies, including those of ERRs in Darfur as well as networks of schools, might coordinate to discuss the allocation of resources across different initiatives to support existing initiatives on the local level. Yet they are not able to tell those localised initiatives what to work on or how to approach work. Their role instead is to share information, examples of how other initiatives are functioning, and to identify opportunities for how they might work together or support each other. This keeps local initiatives responsive to the communities in which they operate, but also limits their regional coherence, as each initiative maintains its own decision-making processes, local dynamics, and priorities.

Moreover, in times of great scarcity and devastation, these coordinating bodies have been relatively untested with regards to resource distribution, in contrast with knowledge pooling and mutual support. This distinction is significant since decisions about resource allocation depend heavily on trust. Resources, particularly education-related resources, have been extremely scarce across Sudan, especially in areas controlled by the RSF such as in Darfur and parts of Kordofan. This has meant that these coordinating bodies have not facilitated the transfer or management of resources or manpower gathered in one area to another area. One exception is that East Darfur state ERRs have received small grants from international NGOs which they have then divided among different local ERRs based on need. Yet crucially, “need” is not determined only by the absolute needs of the communities they serve (since all communities are facing great need) but the capacity and preparation of a local ERR to use these resources immediately to address those needs. These decisions rely on multiple levels of trust: trust among state-level ERR coordinators that ERRs from other areas are accurately representing their community’s needs, as well as trust by the local ERRs that those in state-level coordinating roles are considering their needs and activities adequately. In practice, this trust is fostered by ongoing social relations which place limits on how geographically broad coordination can be while remaining effective.

Mobilising resources and labour

Local education initiatives typically start as a response to widespread consensus on a particular need or problem. Organisers then gather people interested in addressing the issue together to plan a response. On issues of education, multiple KIs noted the problem or issue they responded to was seeing how protracted war had impacted children around them while leaving them with no venue to learn or play and gain critical life skills. Similar patterns have been noted in research in other areas facing the violent realities of the war. One interlocutor of a study on a neighbourhood in Khartoum noted that “We noticed a shift in the children’s mindset towards the reality of war,” and it was this issue that prompted them to organise a makeshift learning centre in the neighbourhood (Elhessen, 2026).

Volunteer and material support are mobilised around the identified needs rather than existing resources. After finding community consensus on an issue and connecting individuals interested in working to address the issue, communities typically agree first on what they seek to do. This might be to reopen a school or *khalwa*, create a summer camp, or organise a learning centre. Only after agreeing on the aim, those participating typically determine what the necessary resources and labour to carry out that aim are, and communicate those needs to the group to address as they seek to mobilise the necessary materials and promises of labour from the group. In that sense, mobilisation of resources comes after determining concrete goals rather than determining goals based on available resources. Those participating generally have a clear understanding of what sorts of resources are available and what scale of project is too ambitious given their community’s resources; however, the initial efforts are meant first to make a plan that addresses needs, then determine the minimum amount of resources necessary to meet that goal.

After coming to these agreements, effort is made by the core team of organisers to reach out to people in order to mobilise the necessary labour as well as the resources. A recurring norm across these initiatives is that organisers first contribute what they can before asking others to do the same. This shapes how initiatives communicate with the wider community. Community initiatives tend to

deemphasise fundraising and need, focusing their communications instead on their success in carrying out their promised tasks, demonstrating commitment and progress. This form of organising tends to mirror existing communication pathways. In areas with telecommunication blackouts, organisers tend to meet more regularly in person in order to address contingencies and make critical decisions. When internet and data networks are easier to access, discussions also move to venues such as Facebook for announcements as well as WhatsApp for larger group discussions.

Teachers are central to these initiatives both as organisers and volunteer labour. In order to secure labour, initiatives have typically reached out to teachers in the area as well as others who may have sufficient educational background to teach if trained teachers are unavailable. In many communities, the core team creating and organising education initiatives are former teachers, taking on the logistical tasks while also committing to teach as volunteers. Those approached often agree to participate to the extent that they can, based on a shared understanding of the value of the initiative and the expectation that those who support it should contribute whatever time, skills, or resources they can spare so the initiative may succeed. Volunteers are generally expected to work without compensation, or if some are offered, they are usually minimal.

As noted above, teachers working in SAF-controlled states may still receive a salary, but these salaries were poverty wages before the war and are no longer sufficient to meet basic subsistence needs. This highlights the central role that community values and social commitment play in sustaining teacher participation. In addition to most teachers working other jobs, some communities have devised additional coping strategies. In some schools, teachers rotate across the week, each working two or three days so that students can attend five days a week while teachers have time to seek income elsewhere. Other schools use student fees as a means of providing support for teachers, though teachers note that this support is often irregular and inadequate. Coordinators note that students are usually allowed to attend prior to their families paying fees, and that at times school organisers have needed to delay classes until sufficient families had paid to continue their activities.

Displacement and livelihood pressures narrow who is able to volunteer in education initiatives. Since the outbreak of war, large-scale displacement has reduced and reshaped the pool of teachers available in a given area. This has limited the labour force for education initiatives and has at times limited the scope of what education initiatives are able to provide (Damba, 2025). It has also meant that not all teachers (or others interested in contributing) have been able to do so—those with families to support or who have been displaced and are dealing with the effects of dispossession and higher living costs cannot afford to work without assurances of income adequate to meeting their survival needs. Volunteers tend to be overwhelmingly youth without families, elders who are not the primary breadwinner for their households, and women whose husbands are able to support their families alongside them. In this respect, the conflict has further exacerbated pre-existing trends in educational labour, which has become increasingly feminised in Sudan over the preceding decades with the majority of teachers being women even prior to the outbreak of war (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019).

A similar approach is taken in terms of mobilising material resources for educational initiatives. After determining the materials required for a particular step—for instance, restoring a school's classrooms and equipping it to hold class—the members of the initiative check what they themselves can provide. After that, initiatives announce their needs in wider groups and approach community members that may be in positions to support materially. Who is included in this outreach depends on the community

composition and its immediate circumstances. Depending on needs and composition of the community this may include traders and businessmen in their community, traditional leaders (including members of the native administration, who typically have connections to government), professionals, and members of their community who work outside of Sudan. At times, this occurs through the use of WhatsApp groups, where organisers and members of the initiative will report on progress as well as the contributions of individuals within the community.

Community resource mobilisation works due to shared values, trust, and community self-knowledge. Education initiatives function based on a shared understanding of their value and widespread consensus on the resources necessary to accomplish it. Those participating in the initiative not only know each other, but also know those who they approach for support. Contributors, whether in the form of money or in the form of resources (such as chalk, chairs, food for school feedings), in turn know those working on the initiative either personally or through reputation and trust that the material they provide will serve a valued community purpose. Being embedded in local networks also create social pressure to contribute. One interlocutor noted that in the WhatsApp group for their community school initiative, supporting four schools, members sometimes comment when individuals perceived to have more resources contribute less than expected when the contributions for the month are announced.

Regular reporting helps foster and maintain trust by reporting back to the community on a regular basis. Members of the initiative typically announce their needs in specific terms, report when they have procured the necessary items, and what they have done with them. These reports are typically informal such as photographs of handwritten invoices for materials. Follow-up reports on activities typically include photographs of work done, participants working, and short messages often listing the details of what has been provided and distributed and what work has been accomplished. Updates are distributed on social media and via existing communication networks including those same WhatsApp groups. While communications blackouts often plague areas under the control of the RSF (Musa, 2026), these forms of communication persist for community organising because they are less time sensitive, meaning that even those who only get internet from time to time due to its cost and limited availability see these reports when they have access. They also prove a vital link with supporters and community members located outside of the area.

Resource scarcity places limits on what community initiatives can sustain over time. Education opportunities are necessarily limited by the resources available to the community, which are limited across Sudan and particularly limited in areas where combat occurs and those controlled by the RSF. Other researchers have similarly noted how community initiatives of all sorts struggle with a significant lack of resources and how volunteerism itself is strained by volunteers' own need for income and resources (Musa, 2026). At times, this lack of resources slows or disrupts education initiatives' activities, with activities stopping temporarily when resources run out.

One community organiser explained that when they begin an initiative or need something, they announce it to the community with a goal of gathering the required material to pursue work by the following Friday. If they get to Friday and have not gathered sufficient material, they delay the work until the following Friday and make a note to the community with an eye towards gathering the material in the meantime. Similarly, two interlocutors in different regions described schools may close temporarily when resources are insufficient to sustain education initiatives or to provide even basic support for volunteer teachers. These closures are communicated and coordinated with parents and

the community so the school or initiative can resume operations when resources become available. These sorts of closures seem to vary in duration but generally amount to a week or so at a time, though interlocutors were vague on details, only noting their occurrence as a disruption.

Political polarisation

Community education initiatives exist in an extremely polarised political environment. Many analysts have described the current conflict as a counterrevolutionary war (Khalafallah, 2025). In this context, community initiatives contend with pressures created by the armed parties' combat and competition for legitimacy both domestically and abroad. They also contend with hostility from both armed parties, who perceive community organising as a potential threat to their legitimacy. In this context, local conditions vary widely, and particular risks and challenges are dependent on context—whether the area is controlled by SAF, RSF, Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), or Sudan Liberation Army (SLA)-Abdel Wahid (Musa, 2026). In the context of education, both the SAF and RSF have sought to use the presence of education, particularly education accreditation and infrastructure, as a means of emphasising their sovereignty in areas under their own control, even as neither has provided resources for maintaining schools and ongoing education activities (Glade and Elbashir, 2025).

Community education initiatives are subject to the control of—and forced to coordinate with—whatever armed force controls the area. Although community-led initiatives are providing education at a time when none of the armed parties are supplying meaningful support to the sector, they are compelled to coordinate with the authority that controls the territory in which they operate. In practice, "coordination" comes with minimal resources, but assures ability to undertake activities without being stopped by authorities.

The particular institutions interfacing with initiatives varies significantly. SAF inherited the state infrastructure at the outbreak of the war, and schools in those areas (and the initiatives supporting them) are thus expected to coordinate and work under the oversight of the locality and state governments, which are responsible for basic and secondary education respectively. RSF controlled areas fall under the oversight of the Tasis government's "civil administration," whose activity is extremely limited and hindered by a lack of clear banking and economic management systems as well as an inability to effectively mobilise and then harness state revenue (Insights Sudan Data Program, 2025). In practice, this administration has set up some local councils and has worked closely with the "native administration," a set of traditional authorities designated along ethnic lines who have been appointed by the state in Sudan since the 1990s. Areas under SPLM-N control in South Kordofan fall under the SPLM-N's Secretariat of Education, which also oversees questions of education such as curriculum, currently using the curriculum of South Sudan.

Functioning schools have become powerful symbols of political legitimacy. In all areas, the presence of active schools teaching children has served as a legitimiser for the movement they fall under. The presence of working schools proves both to the Sudanese public as well as to the international community that the state and its government are functioning "as normal" and fulfilling their duties to the public. The RSF has used the presence of concerted initiatives in education in East Darfur in particular as a source of propaganda proving the success of its civil administration. While propaganda on this point is less concerted, the SAF-controlled Port Sudan government, too has derived legitimacy from the successful maintenance of the state education system and the

reopening of schools in areas formerly under RSF control, particularly in Khartoum (Abdelhai and Al-Tijani, 2026).

The politicisation of education has harmed both teachers and students. Because proof of working schools serves as a legitimiser of the sovereignty of these armed parties, issues of education accreditation and even the provision of salaries have become extremely polarised, leading to policies harming students and teachers. This has been most evident in the weaponisation of salaries in the context of the war. There is evidence the Port Sudan government has provided salaries to teachers in RSF-controlled areas under the condition that they not teach or work with the RSF civil administration (Damba, 2025). This policy runs counter to standard federal education provision, since financing of education is theoretically tied to state revenues and only topped up by the federal government. Salaries provided to teachers in states controlled by the RSF are coming entirely from federal funds, with the provision of these salaries seemingly a deliberate tactic to undermine education activities in RSF-controlled areas. The RSF, in turn, seems to understand the collection of these salaries in the same terms, having targeted teachers collecting salaries (Abdelhai, 2025). In this way, teachers have been placed in a highly precarious position, caught between competing authorities whose policies put them at risk. Should they teach in community-led schools, they risk losing the salary as well as risk an accusation of collaboration with the RSF should the area be retaken by SAF, while if they refrain from teaching, they risk detention and violence by RSF authorities.

Secondary school examinations have become a major site of inequity and political division. Since the outbreak of war, the Port Sudan government's Ministry of Education has conducted three rounds of secondary school examinations. In the first round of examination (and all subsequent examinations), no coordination occurred between the armed forces to allow for students to travel from RSF-controlled areas to sit for exams (Glade and Elbashir, 2025; ERICC Helpdesk, 2025). This has become a major concern for education initiatives in RSF-controlled areas, particularly in Darfur. Interlocutors have noted that the lack of examinations has hindered efforts to reopen and maintain secondary schools in RSF-controlled territory, since students are unsure whether or how their studies will lead to graduation.

Proposals for parallel accreditation systems risk exacerbating educational and political fragmentation. The RSF has announced that it intends to hold its own secondary school certificate exams in 2026 and has convened a technical committee to carry this out; however, it has not explained how it will do so and the logistics of it seem extremely prohibitive. Moreover, academics and educational professionals on both sides see this possibility as dangerous and unnecessary; one interlocutor noted that prior to the outbreak of this war, students in areas under the control of the SLA-Abdel Wahid were permitted to travel safely into government controlled areas to sit for exams. Sudanese academics and educators have pointed out that education is a prerogative for all children and that by not providing for those in RSF-controlled territories, the Port Sudan government is effectively facilitating a further division of Sudan, leading to the creation of two rival curriculums and examinations.

In February 2026, a number of academics, educators, and civil society actors founded the National Initiative to Support the Sudan National Secondary School Examinations and released a memorandum calling for the postponement of the national secondary school exams and for the rival Port Sudan and Tasis governments to facilitate inclusion of all children in accessing these exams and the attendant accreditation they provide. While neither the Tasis or Port Sudan governments have

replied and the Port Sudan government's exams have proceeded, the committee continues to engage all parties calling for a unified means of addressing education accreditation in Sudan (Hamad et al., 2026). This initiative shows potential for bridging the political polarisation between the armed parties and should be supported as it engages key stakeholders.

Community-driven education initiatives are viewed by warring parties as politically suspect.

Despite the fact that these initiatives have been essential to education provision for communities massively affected by war, they also are viewed by the armed parties as potentially subversive, especially when they are unable to be co-opted. In West Kordofan, reports indicate both a strong network of community education initiatives to reopen schools as well as a competing initiative led by the Tasis' civil administration (Damba, 2025). In areas under SAF control, this suspicion is even more severe and has manifested in the restriction of efforts labelled "Emergency Rooms," leading many community efforts to class themselves as "youth initiatives" instead. Efforts have been underway by the SAF-controlled state to restrict community initiatives in education and other basic services by mandating that they register as NGOs in order to operate, creating a greater burden on initiatives and restricting their ability to function freely (Musa, 2026). These restrictions and the forced "NGOification" of initiatives have the effect of inordinately burdening initiatives in areas with fewer secondary school and university graduates, as their lack of capacity makes it more difficult for them to meet the legal requirements for such registration.

Barriers to education access and inequities

Demand for education in Sudan remains high, and families are working extremely hard to ensure education access for their children.

Even prior to the outbreak of war, studies showed a fairly high rate of initial student registration by families even in rural areas, indicating that families prioritise education for their children even if material or social circumstances later led children to drop out (Federal Ministry of Education, 2019). This is consistent with arguments by academics that education in Sudan is a key marker of social authority and a means to engage with the state (Kindersley and Wawa, 2025). In this context, children's exclusion from schooling in most areas of Sudan does not reflect a deprioritisation of education but the severity of material circumstances that make participation in schools and education initiatives prohibitive. This is particularly pronounced in many areas of Sudan controlled by the RSF, where all schools have been effectively shut down other than those opened by community-led initiatives.

Living conditions created by the war, which include mass displacement, dispossession, and food insecurity are serious impediments for children's participation in school activities.

Interlocutors in areas affected by the war note that children, including those attending school, are expected to participate in finding sufficient income or food for their family to meet immediate needs. This has meant that some children are less able to attend school than others. In this context, boys are facing greater pressure to participate in income generating activities, leading to a higher prevalence of girls in schools than boys in some areas.

Difficult conditions and the limitations of community initiatives have impacted the quality of education available across the board.

Those participating in community initiatives acknowledge that education quality has declined in schools that have been revived due to their reliance on a volunteer workforce and the limited resources available to support students and teachers. KIs particularly noted that *khalawi* struggle with teaching along a set curriculum for Arabic and

mathematics due to the large class size and the presence of a mix of levels in one classroom. At the same time, all noted that students had few alternatives, as these initiatives are a key lifeline for receiving any education at all. They affirm that all those involved are doing their best with the resources and labour available to them.

Regional variation in community capacity, educational histories, and levels of social engagement shapes the scope and ambition of education initiatives. Community education initiatives across Sudan face different challenges and approach their work with different levels of capacity and community interest. Studies of community humanitarian initiatives note that education initiatives occur at a greater rate in areas in northern and eastern Sudan where conditions are stable and food insecurity is less severe (Musa, 2026). Regions and communities with greater numbers of school and university graduates have seen a boost to their community initiatives since the war, with many who had worked in Khartoum going back to their home villages and participating in community efforts. These individuals come to the work with experience managing complicated work efforts and dealing with the state, equipping the initiatives they take part in with skills that make them particularly capable in the face of adversity (Mohamed, 2026). This point was echoed by one interlocutor discussing an education initiative in Sennar state and how they not only were able to support four schools (two basic and two secondary schools in the village) but began to develop larger plans including the use of solar panels to maintain electricity at the schools. With the support of graduates from the village, the initiative eventually registered with the state government as a CSO and has continued to develop its activities, with similar developments reportedly occurring in other villages in the state.

This thick network of university graduates and the depth of experience it represents does not exist in all regions of Sudan. In South Kordofan, one interlocutor noted that secondary school graduates are so limited that their community-run school hires teachers that have graduated primary four, since those with secondary school diplomas are so rare that they either take up better paid positions or leave the area. In Blue Nile, access to secondary and higher education is also significantly limited. These educational inequalities shape not only the availability of teachers but also the knowledge and experience to organise complicated education projects.

Darfur represents a distinct case, because it combines a high degree of community organising capacity with a long history of educational marginalisation. Education in Darfur has long been a salient political issue linked to the outbreak of war in the region in the 2000s given its close connection with access to government jobs. As such, the Darfur peace agreements in 2006 and 2011 both had provisions regarding expansion of education and admission and access to university (Glade and Elbashir, 2025). Since the outbreak of the current conflict, community initiatives in Darfur have been particularly active despite a difficult working environment. However, due to the dire conditions in large parts of the region they have focused primarily on issues of food and medical provision (Musa, 2026). Nonetheless, the presence of larger scale coordinating bodies, such as the coordinating bodies at the state and regional level for ERRs and the wide-scale coordination of community education initiatives, points to high capacity in community organising and a widely shared community value on the need for education. Interlocutors note that as community efforts developed in both East and North Darfur, coordination began soon after through large scale WhatsApp groups and coordination with ERRs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Community education initiatives have proven to be a key lifeline on education in areas of Sudan facing conflict and extremely difficult conditions. They are resource strapped, however, well placed, strategic, and optimally timed support from the international community has the potential to reinforce these local initiatives. Given the similarities between initiatives across Sudan and their social profile, it is best for the international community to consider questions of the strength of community involvement, evaluated through the number of participating members or activities accomplished, when assessing the viability of individual initiatives. Support to initiatives should be strategic, localised, and in keeping with the principles laid out by Bashair Ahmed in her Sussex Centre for Migration Research Working Paper (Ahmed, 2026). Large networks of initiatives, such as those in West Darfur and East Darfur as well as networks like Darfur ERRs, are generally easy to locate and identify. Smaller local initiatives will require communication with those with community connections and knowledge who are able to identify the presence of these initiatives and assess their size and relative strength. With that in mind, we provide the following recommendations:

1. Community education initiatives in Sudan are vital in supporting education access and continuity, but they cannot be supported through one-size-fits all models. These initiatives operate in highly varied political, social, and security environments. Their relationships with armed actors, organisational capacity, and levels of coordination differ significantly across locations. In areas where larger networks of community initiatives have been created, these regional initiatives are well placed to manage and distribute funds. Areas under SAF control face great restrictions and may benefit from receiving support through local NGOs trusted both by the initiatives and the international community. Local education initiatives in historically marginalised areas, where community organising capacity and trust may be more limited, are likely to require greater investment in support in terms of capacity building and coordination. To date, grants from donors and IOs for these initiatives have been fairly small scale, largely taking the form of microgrants to Parent-Teacher Associations in SAF-controlled areas and ERR networks in RSF-controlled areas, channelled through INGOs. Building on these efforts:
 - **Donors and IOs should adopt flexible, context specific support models rather than uniform state- or national- approaches.** Funding modalities should be adapted to local operating conditions, with greater investment in capacity strengthening and coordination for initiatives in historically marginalised areas, where community organising and initiatives are often weaker.
 - **Support for community education initiatives should not be conditioned on altering local priorities to receive the support.** These objectives may not always be directed with typical aid values such as efficiency, cost-effectiveness, or scale. Since these initiatives function through community trust and local legitimacy, support must be carefully designed so that it does not undermine the very foundations that make them possible.
 - **Financial and material support should be accompanied by ongoing dialog, potential mentorship, logistical support, and potential connections** with other local initiatives, particularly in places where education organising has limited capacity and

community consensus, as is the case in some marginalised regions. This will require project planning that assumes additional organisational time and labour to support initiatives. In remote areas, consider remote support and monitoring or working through other sectors that may be present including WASH, health and nutrition, or protection to distribute resources, provide assistance, or support monitoring.

2. **Effective support requires localising decision-making over prioritising resource use.** Community education initiatives typically define their goals in response to consensus on community needs before mobilising resources. In order for initiatives to maintain the trust of the community with which they operate, they must retain authority over how resources are used. External actors should avoid imposing rigid programme designs that disconnect support from local networks.
 - **Support for community-driven initiatives should be flexible to allow communities to determine how resources are allocated based on community-identified needs.** Community actors must be treated as decision-makers rather than implementers.
 - **Consider microgrants to individual local initiatives rather than cash assistance to individual families or students.** Collective action on education comes at the level of initiatives and projects, with student fees being only one of a number of ways that communities have mobilised resources. By supporting the initiatives themselves rather than individual families, support may encourage local organising and strengthen collective capacity. Small grants for discrete education activities prioritised by the community may also be a way to productively engage while minimising risk.
3. **International support for community initiatives must be aligned with community-based practice and prioritise downward accountability (to the community) alongside or beyond upward accountability (to donors).** Community education initiatives already document and report on their activities and use of resources. These reports are basic and often informal, but they are systems designed to ensure accountability towards the communities they serve, to promote community trust, and to foster continued community engagement.
 - **Support and make use of existing community-led reporting practices to document these initiatives,** rather than imposing formal reporting systems designed for international agencies. Reporting requirements should be proportionate, flexible, and minimally burdensome, recognising that time, administrative capacity, and technical resources are already scarce. Where additional information is needed, donors should build on the formats, rhythms, and communication channels already used by local actors.
4. **Support for community initiatives must be accompanied by advocacy for state responsibility for education.** Education is a responsibility of the state, and the international community should continue to advocate for material investment in education by Sudanese authorities. Community initiatives are filling critical gaps, but without intentional and strategic advocacy, donor support runs the risk of normalising state neglect of education. Such advocacy has the potential to link to education-related labour actions. The Committee of Sudanese University Lecturers, Lajso, a labour union representing university lecturers at government universities, has already announced its entry into a labour strike demanding better salaries and working conditions (Awad, 2026). The Teachers Union has an ongoing campaign to demand better salaries from the Port Sudan government (Abdelhai, 2025). These efforts make demands of the state that should be augmented through international

advocacy and strategic support. In spite of the armed parties gaining legitimisation from ongoing community-driven education activities, no government is currently providing adequate material support to education.

- **Donors and international organisations should pair support to community initiatives with strong advocacy and support for state responsibility for education.**
 - Support for local initiatives should come in the form of recurring grants or payments to the initiative without a particular portion earmarked for teacher remuneration. Decisions on what support is given to teachers should remain at the discretion of the initiative itself. This will prevent an attempt to create parallel salary structures while also ensuring that necessary support for teachers allows activities to continue.
5. **The international community should advocate for and defend community education initiatives under attack by rival governments.** In Sudan's highly politicised and fragmented conflict setting, engagement with community education initiatives must be grounded in local political realities and protection risks. Community members involved in education initiatives are at risk of being accused of "collaboration" with armed parties whenever the area they work in is taken by a different armed party. At times when armed parties are unable to co-opt community initiatives, they have attempted to stop their activity entirely. This is most prominent in the forced NGOification of initiatives in SAF-controlled territory. These dynamics mean that support for community education cannot be approached as a neutral technical exercise, but must be designed with a clear understanding of how education is entangled in struggles over authority, legitimacy, and control.
- International organisations should adopt conflict-sensitive and politically-informed approaches to supporting community education initiatives. This includes recognising and mitigating the risks faced by community actors, defending communities against efforts to politicise or delegitimise their work, and pushing back on restrictions put in place by governments designed to stop them from operating.
6. **International support for community education initiatives should advocate for inclusive education policies, especially around examinations and accreditation systems.** In Sudan, passing exams and obtaining recognised certification are critically important to students and their future opportunities. Community-driven education initiatives may succeed in providing meaningful learning opportunities, but their value is significantly constrained if students cannot access formal examinations and certification. There are also considerable social and political costs related to holding national secondary school examinations exclusively for children residing in areas under the control of one armed party. Sudanese educators are already advocating against these policies (both the holding of exclusive examinations and the prohibition of children traveling to take exams) and they should be supported by the international community.
- **Support for community-based education provision should be coupled with support for recognised pathways that allow students to sit exams and have their learning formally recognised.** Otherwise, even strong community-based education provision will remain limited in its ability to secure meaningful futures for students.
7. **Ensure support to community-driven education includes dedicated investments in women's leadership, organisational capacity, and decision-making power.** Community education initiatives create opportunities to strengthen women's leadership. Women are central to many community education responses, including as teachers, leaders in parent-teacher associations, and members of ERR women's rooms organising school feedings. The

presence of so many women in these initiatives provides a key opportunity to support women's leadership and their managerial capacity.

- Make dedicated investments in women's leadership within community-driven initiatives, including support for organisational capacity, management skills, and meaningful participation in decision-making. This should build on women's existing roles in community initiatives while expanding their leadership opportunities and influence over education responses.

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