

UK aid to Sudan

A review

October 2025

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Executive summary

In April 2023, after decades of civil conflict and international isolation, Sudan descended once again into open war, further destabilising a fragile region and triggering the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Over 30 million people are in need of assistance within Sudan and another 4 million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries. This multifaceted regional crisis presents an important test of the UK's ability to combine its diplomatic, development and humanitarian tools and lead an effective international response – especially in a context of declining global aid resources.

This review by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) assesses the UK's support to Sudan in the period before the outbreak of conflict and its response to the crisis after April 2023, focusing on four questions: how the UK demonstrates responsible global leadership; how it advances its commitments to women and girls; how it forges and sustains genuine partnerships with international, regional and local actors; and how it supports an effective humanitarian response in a volatile and resource-constrained environment. The review looks back over the past six years, from the hopeful period of democratic transition that followed President Omar al-Bashir's fall in 2019, through the October 2021 military coup and open warfare since April 2023. The aim is to draw lessons that can strengthen UK engagement in Sudan and other fragile and conflict-affected settings worldwide.

Sudan's complex and rapidly evolving context has required continual reassessment and repositioning from international partners like the UK. What began in 2019 as a promising but fragile opportunity for reform and stabilisation has culminated in the near-total breakdown of the state, including the destruction of the capital, Khartoum, paralysis of government institutions and basic services, the collapse of food systems, and mass population displacement. Today, two-thirds of the population requires humanitarian assistance, with over 12 million people displaced and famine conditions in multiple areas. For humanitarian actors, Sudan presents one of the world's most difficult operating environments, given its huge size, vast needs, severe access constraints and rapidly shifting conflict dynamics. The spillover into neighbouring states and beyond has deepened instability in an already fragile region.

Over this period, the UK has shifted from an initial focus on governance and economic reform to a primarily humanitarian portfolio, doubling its annual spending to £231.3 million in the financial year 2024–25 for the humanitarian response in Sudan and the region. In 2024, Sudan was designated one of three priorities for UK humanitarian aid, alongside Ukraine and Gaza, signalling the UK's intention to play a leading role in the international response. This objective has been made more complex by the contraction in global aid flows, driving calls for urgent reform of an international humanitarian system in crisis. Despite the UK's efforts, Sudan remains one of the world's most underfunded humanitarian crises, relative to its needs.

“Many have given up on Sudan. That is wrong... We simply cannot look away.”

David Lammy, [London Sudan Conference: Foreign Secretary Opening Remarks](#), 15 April 2025

This review involved a literature review, desk reviews of UK strategies and programme documents, a perception survey among UK partners, and interviews and focus groups with more than 150 key government and non-government stakeholders and experts in the UK, Sudan and across the region. While security restrictions prevented in-person visits to Sudan, Chad and South Sudan, we held in-person consultations with UK staff, implementing partners and other donors in Ethiopia and Kenya, while local research teams engaged with Sudanese refugee and diaspora organisations in Kenya and Uganda. The review encountered a number of limitations, including participation fatigue among Sudanese actors and limited hard data on the longer-term outcomes of UK programming. While the Sudan conflict has impacted countries across the region, this review focuses only on two neighbouring countries, Chad and South Sudan.

Findings

Responsible global leadership

During the 2019–21 period, the UK played a prominent diplomatic and development role in supporting Sudan's political transition. It helped establish and strengthen international coordination platforms and align messaging among international actors. It was active in the negotiation of the Juba Peace Agreement between Sudan's transitional government and various armed groups, and in securing passage of the Security Council resolution that established the UN political mission, UNITAMS. Its economic programming helped Sudan meet the conditions for international debt relief, unlocking the country's access to international development finance. UK support for economic reforms included an £80 million contribution to the World Bank's Sudan Transition and Recovery Support Trust Fund, which provided social protection to over 3 million people before being repurposed to humanitarian assistance. Since the outbreak of conflict in 2023, the UK has intensified its international leadership through Security Council engagement, high-level diplomacy and awareness raising, including by co-hosting the April 2025 London Sudan Conference. It has also maintained leadership roles in donor coordination in Sudan, Chad and South Sudan.

The review finds that the UK has in many instances demonstrated credible political leadership and strong convening power, drawing on deep networks that are valued by stakeholders. However, its influence has been inconsistent, limited by periods of reduced ministerial engagement, budget volatility and institutional disruptions. Cross-government engagement has been underdeveloped, including on the defence and migration aspects of the crisis. UK aid budget reductions in 2021–22 sharply reduced spending and caused damage to relationships, although the 2024 designation of Sudan as a UK priority country and related funding increase have helped to restore credibility. The UK's humanitarian and governance programmes have been adaptable in a volatile environment, but delays in business case approvals have hampered agility. Regionally, the response has not been fully adapted to the cross-border nature of the conflict, which may give rise to imbalances in support between refugees and host communities. While the UK's convening role in Sudan and neighbouring countries remains strong, partners are concerned about funding predictability and the lack of an explicit regional strategy to address spillover effects in Chad and South Sudan.

Women and girls

The challenges facing women and girls in Sudan are immense. In addition to entrenched inequality and long-standing harmful cultural practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM), they now face large-scale conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) – defined as acts of sexual violence that are directly or indirectly linked to a conflict. The UK has made gender equality a central objective in its response, in accordance with its commitments under the International Women and Girls Strategy (2023–2030). It has helped raise global awareness of CRSV and contributed to support services for survivors. Before the outbreak of conflict, the UK played a leading role in efforts to tackle harmful social norms through flagship programmes on FGM. These helped to promote legal reforms, strengthen services, encourage social change and reduce prevalence rates, although continued donor investment combined with sustained national and local commitment would be needed if FGM is to be eliminated in Sudan. Since the conflict broke out in 2023, the programme has pivoted to also provide medical and psychosocial support to victims and survivors of CRSV, which is a pervasive feature of Sudan's brutal war. However, the UK opted not to pursue a more ambitious approach towards the protection of civilians, including from sexual violence, given political obstacles and administrative resource constraints.

The UK actively promoted women's participation in political and peace processes during the transition period, shifting to subnational initiatives after the coup and supporting women's inclusion in the pro-democracy movement. However, many Sudanese women interviewed for this review felt that advocacy from the UK and other international partners had not been matched by sustained support, and suggested that opportunities to strengthen women's participation in peace negotiations had been missed. UK support for women-led organisations is mostly through intermediaries. While this support has helped build the capacity of women-led organisations, the model the UK uses has also positioned these organisations as downstream partners, delivering activities chosen by others, thereby limiting their ability to shape priorities and programme design.

Spending on gender equality-focused programming fell sharply between 2020 and 2022 as a result of wider UK aid budget reductions, before recovering in 2023. However, the proportion of funding going to gender equality-focused programming has remained consistently above 80%. The review found that consideration of gender equality objectives has been mainstreamed across the UK's governance, economic empowerment and humanitarian programming, and that vulnerable women and girls have been consistently prioritised in UK humanitarian support. The UK has also supported a range of other activities, such as data collection. However, there is no robust indication of how effective this mainstreaming has been in supporting better outcomes for women and girls, partly due to the volatile context making measurement of impact difficult. Direct, targeted programming to support women and girls with improved access to sexual and reproductive health services and increased economic opportunities is relatively limited. Given the highly gendered nature of the conflict, and structural barriers to achieving lasting outcomes for Sudanese women and girls, the overall international support from the UK and other donors is inadequate, as noted by many stakeholders interviewed for this review.

Genuine partnership

The UK has adapted its approach to partnership across the transition (2019–21), coup (2021–April 2023) and conflict (April 2023 onwards) periods. It backed Sudan's civilian-led institutions during the transition, supported trade union and civil society reform, and facilitated public dialogue between citizens and government. After the coup, it suspended direct support to the de facto authorities while deepening engagement with civil society, including through constitutional workshops and support for pro-democracy coalitions. The UK has consistently worked through multilateral channels, backing African Union (AU) and subregional mediation efforts and helping shape UN mandates, while working closely with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), the World Bank and the International Committee of the Red Cross. In its humanitarian response, it has supported a diverse network of actors, including UN agencies, INGOs and, indirectly, local organisations. This includes the UK's contribution to the UN-managed Sudan Humanitarian Fund, which in 2024 channelled 37.5% of funds through local responders.

The review finds that UK partnerships have been enhanced by the calibre of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) personnel, whose expertise and networks have enabled constructive dialogue and coherent international messaging. However, in the period after the UK was forced in 2023 to evacuate Khartoum and shift its operations to neighbouring countries, it terminated most of its key Sudanese staff in advisory and programme roles. The government informed us that attempts at finding ways of continuing their employment were unsuccessful for various legal and operational reasons. This significantly weakened its capacity to engage with Sudanese actors at national and subnational levels, as well as its institutional memory and programme management capacity. Operating from Addis Ababa and Nairobi, British Office Sudan remains under-resourced for such a complex response, with short postings leading to high staff turnover and stress-related wellbeing concerns. Furthermore, FCDO's surge mechanisms for crisis situations – rosters for business-critical roles such as Temporary Deployments Overseas – have not proved adequate given the scale of response. The UK has played an active role in donor coordination, and now has an opportunity to show leadership in collective donor action to respond together, not only at an operational level but also at a strategic level, to the new funding context, given the significant shortfall in international support for the humanitarian response.

Partnerships with the AU and UN have generally been strong, with a range of UK efforts to strengthen their capacity. However, influence by the UK and other donors has not succeeded in overcoming UN performance gaps, many of which are a result of restrictions and delays imposed by the parties to the conflict. ICAI was told that the UK is actively working with partners to address these issues. Implementing partners value the UK's flexibility and technical expertise as a funder, but point to short funding cycles, delayed approvals and limited transparency over resource allocation as constraints on predictability and effectiveness. FCDO told us that there are plans to introduce some multiyear funding which, if confirmed, would improve this situation. The UK supports the international commitment to 'localisation', which FCDO understands as supporting local leadership of the response, for example through the transfer of power, including control of resources. However, this commitment is yet to translate into major shifts in funding practice. Complicated funding

rules and limited UK programme management capacity limit the scale and quality of funding that can be allocated to local organisations, and there is little evidence of the UK involving local partners in priority setting. Engagement with Sudanese diaspora organisations has been ad hoc, which is a missed opportunity to use the diaspora's contextual knowledge and community networks to strengthen the UK's approach.

Effective humanitarian response

The UK is a significant humanitarian actor in Sudan and neighbouring countries, having adapted its funding and delivery mechanisms since April 2023 to respond to the unprecedented scale of displacement, food insecurity and protection needs. Inside Sudan, support has focused on food security, malnutrition treatment, protection and cash transfers, channelled through multilateral agencies, INGOs and the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, plus funding for an 'Enabling Facility' to strengthen data collection and coordination. In South Sudan, the UK has integrated its response to the Sudan crisis into established humanitarian and resilience programmes such as the South Sudan Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Programme (SSHARP) and in its health and education programming which supports internally displaced people, refugees and host communities. In Chad it has scaled up rapidly, using flexible instruments like the Sahel Regional Fund to become a key donor to the refugee response in eastern Chad, bordering Sudan's Darfur region. Across all three countries, the UK has leveraged its flexibility, technical expertise and partnerships to deliver timely assistance, advocate for protection and access, and elevate the crisis internationally, doubling aid to the humanitarian crisis to £231.3 million in financial year 2024–25.

The review finds that the UK has demonstrated political and operational leadership in the humanitarian response, through strong technical analysis, evidence-based planning and close coordination with key UN agencies. It has responded rapidly and flexibly to the refugee emergency in Chad and ensured that Sudan-related needs were integrated into existing South Sudan programmes. However, in both these neighbouring countries, it is essential that the UK's prioritisation of the Sudan crisis does not divert resources and attention in politically fragile contexts from other, pre-existing humanitarian needs. The UK's strong technical capacity on famine prevention is recognised by partners. However, its prevention work in Sudan has been undermined by limited programme management capacity and access constraints. Flexible UK funding instruments have the potential to bridge humanitarian and development efforts, but short funding cycles, disbursements late in the calendar year and limited predictability have hampered effectiveness. The UK's use of flexible business cases has contributed to adaptability in an evolving crisis. However, overstretched teams and complex approval processes have slowed decision making and hindered learning and innovation. Finally, FCDO's cautious security stance has curtailed staff access to field locations, limiting their ability to oversee partners and engage with affected communities.

Recommendations

For the UK government

- **Recommendation 1:** Ensure sustained high-level political attention to the Sudan conflict and humanitarian crisis, including by strengthening cross-government ownership and coordination.
- **Recommendation 2:** Develop and implement a clear regional approach to the Sudan conflict, aligning strategies across Sudan and neighbouring countries.
- **Recommendation 3:** Align delivery capacity with ministerial ambition by backing Sudan's priority country status with multi-year, protected funding and by adequate capacity to deliver effectively.

For FCDO

- **Recommendation 4:** Adopt a more flexible and coherent delivery model for fragile and conflict-affected environments, to maximise agility in dynamic contexts.
- **Recommendation 5:** Support the UK's localisation commitment by increasing direct funding to local organisations, simplifying compliance procedures, fostering long-term partnerships and strengthening local leadership of humanitarian response and resilience building.
- **Recommendation 6:** Address the need for more targeted programming for priority gender-related challenges in Sudan, and assess how well the current mainstreaming approach is delivering results for women and girls.
- **Recommendation 7:** Use learning from the Sudan conflict as an opportunity to rethink and adapt UK international leadership on mobilising and coordinating the international response to major crises, given severe global funding pressures, a shifting donor landscape and rising humanitarian need.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) is undertaking this review of UK aid to Sudan in light of the scale and urgency of the crisis facing Sudan and the UK's significant role and stated ambition in the international response. Sudan is one of the world's largest and fastest-growing humanitarian emergencies, with over 30 million people - nearly two-thirds of the population – in need of assistance within Sudan¹ and another 4 million seeking refuge across the border in neighbouring countries.² The UK has longstanding historical ties with Sudan, together with deep country expertise and an extensive programming history. In 2024, it designated Sudan as one of three priorities for UK humanitarian aid, alongside Ukraine and Gaza.³
- 1.2 This review assesses the UK's aid to Sudan between 2019 and mid-2025, and to neighbouring countries since the outbreak of large-scale conflict in Sudan in April 2023 led to a regional humanitarian crisis. It examines how well UK support – diplomatic, developmental and humanitarian – has responded to the fast-evolving situation, and whether resources have been used strategically to deliver results. The review draws lessons to inform future UK engagement in Sudan, as well as the UK's broader approach to conflict and insecurity – especially in fragile, highly interconnected regions where conflict and insecurity spill over national borders.
- 1.3 The review questions guiding this report reflect commitments that the current UK government has made for its international aid and related diplomatic engagement, including in Sudan (see [Table 1](#)). These commitments include:
- a renewed ambition for responsible global leadership
 - a legal duty to consider providing aid in a way which is likely to contribute to reducing gender inequality and, in humanitarian assistance, takes account of any gender-related differences in the needs of those affected by the disaster or emergency⁴
 - a pledge to build genuine partnerships based on mutual respect
 - a determination to work towards a future peace in Sudan while responding to what the Prime Minister has called “the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today”.⁵
- These high-level commitments form the basis against which ICAI has assessed the effectiveness, impact and value for money of the UK's approach to Sudan, with the aim of informing both current and future conflict and crisis responses.
- 1.4 The review assesses the UK's aid response across three distinct periods in Sudan's recent history, each marked by major political shifts and corresponding changes in UK approach and programming. Findings are located within these specific phases to reflect the evolving context and the UK's adaptation over time:
- **Transition (2019–21):** Following the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir, Sudan embarked on a fragile shift towards democracy under a joint civilian-military transitional government.
 - **Coup (2021–April 2023):** The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) jointly staged a military coup in October 2021, halting the transition and seizing power.
 - **Conflict (April 2023 onwards):** Tensions between SAF and RSF escalated into open conflict, characterised by atrocities against civilian populations and famine conditions, triggering one of the world's largest and fastest-growing humanitarian emergencies.

1 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, '[Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2025](#)', December 2024

2 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, '[Operational Data Portal](#)' (accessed on 14 July 2025)

3 House of Commons Library, '[UK to reduce aid to 0.3% of gross national income from 2027](#)', Philip Loft and Philip Brien, February 2025 (viewed on 22 July 2025)

4 UK Government, '[International Development \(Gender Equality\) Act 2014](#)', March 2014

5 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[Statement by Prime Minister Keir Starmer at the UN Security Council meeting on leadership for peace](#)', September 2024

Table 1: Review questions

Review question	Timeframe
Has the UK demonstrated responsible global leadership through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding the impact on neighbouring countries?	Transition, coup, conflict
Has the UK acted for and with women and girls through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding refugee flows into neighbouring countries?	Transition, coup, conflict
Has the UK demonstrated genuine partnership through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding the impact on neighbouring countries?	Transition, coup, conflict
Has the UK delivered, contributed to and supported an effective humanitarian response post-April 2023 both in Sudan and regarding refugee flows into neighbouring countries?	Conflict

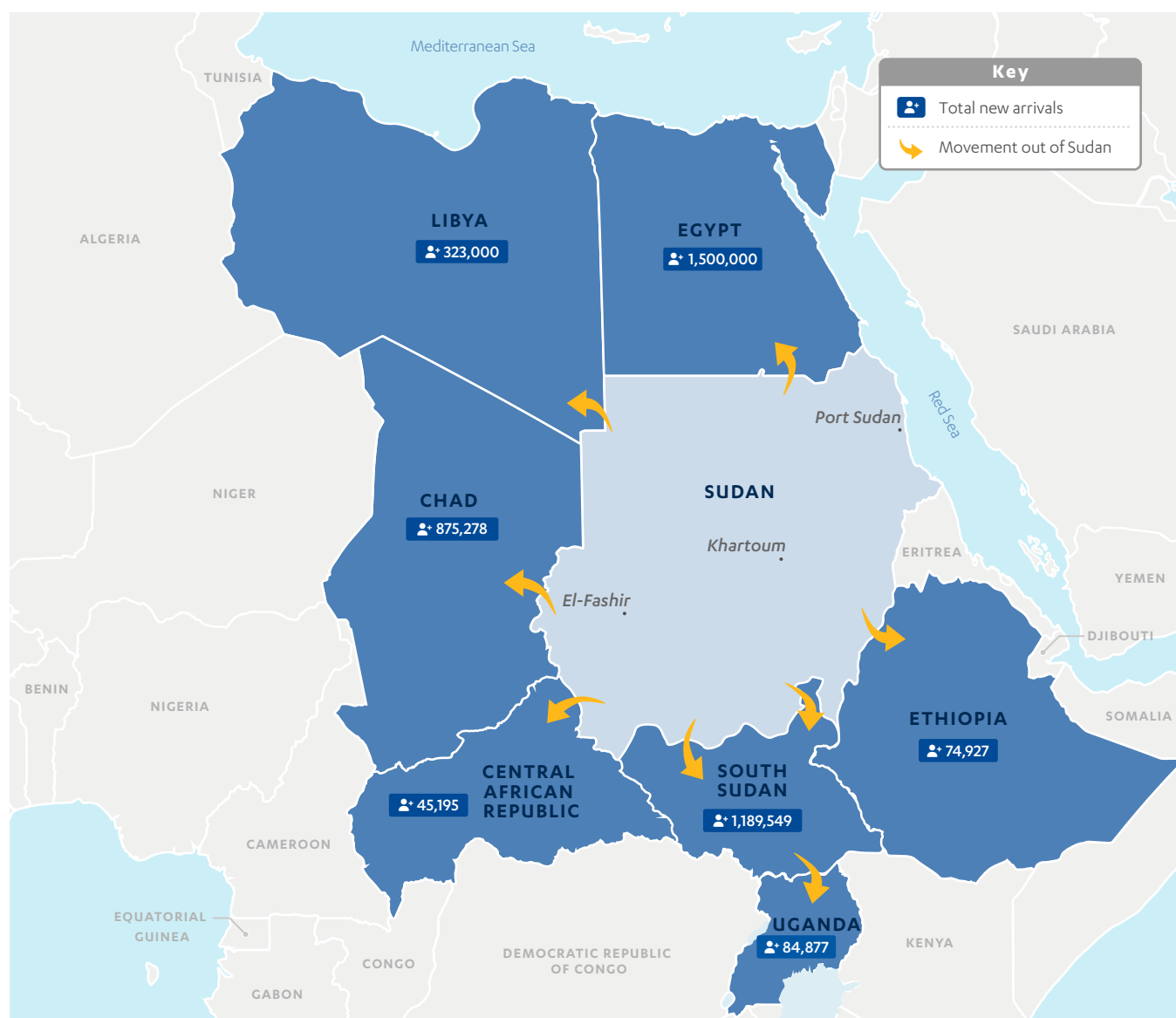
- 1.5 The methodology involved eight components, including a strategic review of UK policies and coherence over time, a literature review aligned with the four review questions, and desk reviews of active UK aid programmes. A deep dive on famine provided focused analysis of the humanitarian and diplomatic response. The review also incorporated extensive stakeholder consultation through interviews, focus groups and expert roundtables, along with in-person visits in Kenya and Ethiopia, and virtual visits in Chad and South Sudan. A perception survey gathered views from partners and experts, while locally led research in Kenya and Uganda engaged Sudanese diaspora, refugee-led and women-led organisations. Limitations included travel restrictions and participant fatigue, which affected engagement in some research components. The methodology is set out in more detail in [Annex 2](#).
- 1.6 The review faced several limitations that affected the scope and depth of evidence gathering, and in particular the ability to reach firm conclusions about the impact of UK aid to Sudan. While initial plans included in-person consultations in South Sudan and Chad, an escalation in the security situation during the data collection phase required a shift to virtual visits. Access to Sudan itself was also not possible due to security risks. Participation challenges also reduced the breadth of perspectives: a significant number of invitees to the locally led research component declined or did not respond, and signs of consultation fatigue were evident. These factors inevitably limited the review's ability to capture the full range of experiences and views from across Sudan and the region. Finally, the review has been able to identify only limited evidence on impact. Some of the areas we have reviewed (leadership and partnership) are not usually the subject of monitoring and reporting, while UK programmes have limited resources available for tracking longer-term results in the midst of an ongoing conflict and crisis.
- 1.7 To help signpost for the reader, this report presents ICAI's findings across the four review questions. The discussion of findings for each of the questions is introduced by a short description of relevant context and an overview of the UK's evolving response. The report ends with a set of overall conclusions, followed by recommendations to enhance the impact and value for money of the UK's engagement in Sudan and to inform future responses to complex, fast-moving, cross-border crises.

2. Background

- 2.1 This review covers the period since 2019, when Sudan entered a political transition following the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir after three decades in power. After mass protests led to his removal in April 2019, a transitional government was established, involving civilian and military leaders, to guide the country towards democracy. This fragile progress was disrupted in October 2021 when the military seized full control in a coup, dissolving the transitional government. This deepened political instability and set the stage for the violent conflict that erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).
- 2.2 Sudan now sits at the centre of a deepening regional crisis (see [Figure 1](#)). Since large-scale conflict erupted in April 2023, over 12 million people have been displaced, including more than 4 million across borders.⁶ Chad, South Sudan and Egypt have seen the largest influx, together receiving more than 87% of new arrivals. Chad and South Sudan are under particular strain, as both countries have their own significant humanitarian needs. Chad hosts over 1.2 million Sudanese refugees, of whom around 875,000 have arrived since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April 2023.⁷ Almost 1.2 million people have fled to South Sudan since April 2023, of whom around 800,000 are South Sudanese refugees returning from Sudan and the rest are Sudanese refugees. In total, South Sudan is currently dealing with almost 2 million internally displaced people, 584,000 registered refugees (of whom 95% come from Sudan), 1.7 million returned refugees, and worsening humanitarian conditions for large numbers of the country's non-displaced population.⁸
- 2.3 Inside Sudan, over 30 million people – nearly two-thirds of Sudan's population – now require humanitarian assistance, including 16 million children.⁹ Women and girls are particularly vulnerable, facing heightened risks of gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence. Famine conditions are confirmed in multiple locations, with 8.1 million people facing emergency food insecurity and more than 600,000 at risk of starvation.¹⁰ Health systems have collapsed in many areas, with rising deaths from disease outbreaks such as cholera and measles.¹¹ Humanitarian access in Sudan is extremely limited, relying heavily on local networks, with few international actors able to operate across complex and rapidly shifting frontlines.
- 2.4 A number of states in the region and beyond have deep strategic interests in Sudan and are providing support to the warring parties, which heightens risks of escalation and complicates conflict resolution efforts.¹² The conflict is also exacerbating fragility in neighbouring countries. People, weapons and smuggled natural resources flow easily across porous national borders, while disruptions to trade and rising food insecurity have regional impacts.

- 6 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Operational Data Portal, '[Sudan Situation](#)' (accessed 19 August 2025)
- 7 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, '[Operational Data Portal Chad](#)' (accessed 14 July 2025); UNHCR, '[Operational Data Portal: Sudan Situation](#)' (accessed 14 August 2025). In addition to the arrival of Sudanese refugees, the International Organisation for Migration reports that an estimated 330,000 Chadian nationals have returned to eastern Chad from Sudan since April 2023. See International Organisation for Migration, '[Displacement Tracking Matrix: IOM Chad: Sudan Crisis Response](#)', Update 56, August 2025 (viewed on 13 October 2025)
- 8 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, '[Operational Data Portal South Sudan](#)' (accessed 14 August 2025); UNHCR, '[Operational Data Portal: Sudan Situation](#)' (accessed 14 August 2025)
- 9 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, '[Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan](#)' (accessed 11 August 2025)
- 10 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, '[Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation – Updated Projections and FRC Conclusions for October 2024 to May 2025](#)', December 2024; Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, '[IPC Alert: Famine – Affected Areas in Sudan](#)', July 2025
- 11 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, '[Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan](#)' (accessed 11 August 2025)
- 12 European Council on Foreign Relations, '[The falcons and the secretary bird: Arab Gulf states in Sudan's war](#)' (viewed on 15 August 2025)

Figure 1: Map of population movements from Sudan into neighbouring countries since the outbreak of conflict



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [‘Sudan Emergency: Population movements from Sudan’](#), 11 August 2025

Description: Map showing population movements from Sudan into neighbouring countries since the outbreak of conflict on 15 April 2023, as of August 2025. Since the outbreak of the conflict, there are 4.1 million displaced persons in neighbouring countries – 1,189,549 in South Sudan; 1,500,00 in Egypt; 875,278 in Chad; 323,000 in Libya; 84,877 in Uganda; 74,927 in Ethiopia and 45,195 in Central African Republic.

2.5 Between 2019 and 2025, the UK’s aid portfolio in Sudan has evolved markedly in scale and focus. Initially geared towards supporting Sudan’s democratic transition through diplomatic engagement, economic reform and peacebuilding, the UK pivoted towards humanitarian aid and regional stabilisation following the 2021 coup and the April 2023 outbreak of conflict (see [Figure 2](#)). By the end of 2024, the UK had become the fourth-largest donor to the Sudan crisis, after an additional £113 million pledge in November 2024 brought its total commitment to the Sudan response to £226.5 million for financial year 2024–25 (see [Box 1](#)).¹³ The UK has also taken on a prominent role in the coordination of the international humanitarian response, underpinned by high-level country visits and active diplomacy within the UN Security Council.

¹³ UK Parliament, [‘Sudan and Eastern DRC: Volume 761: debated on Tuesday 28 January 2025’](#) (viewed on 15 August 2025)

Box 1: The UK is a major donor to the Sudan crisis

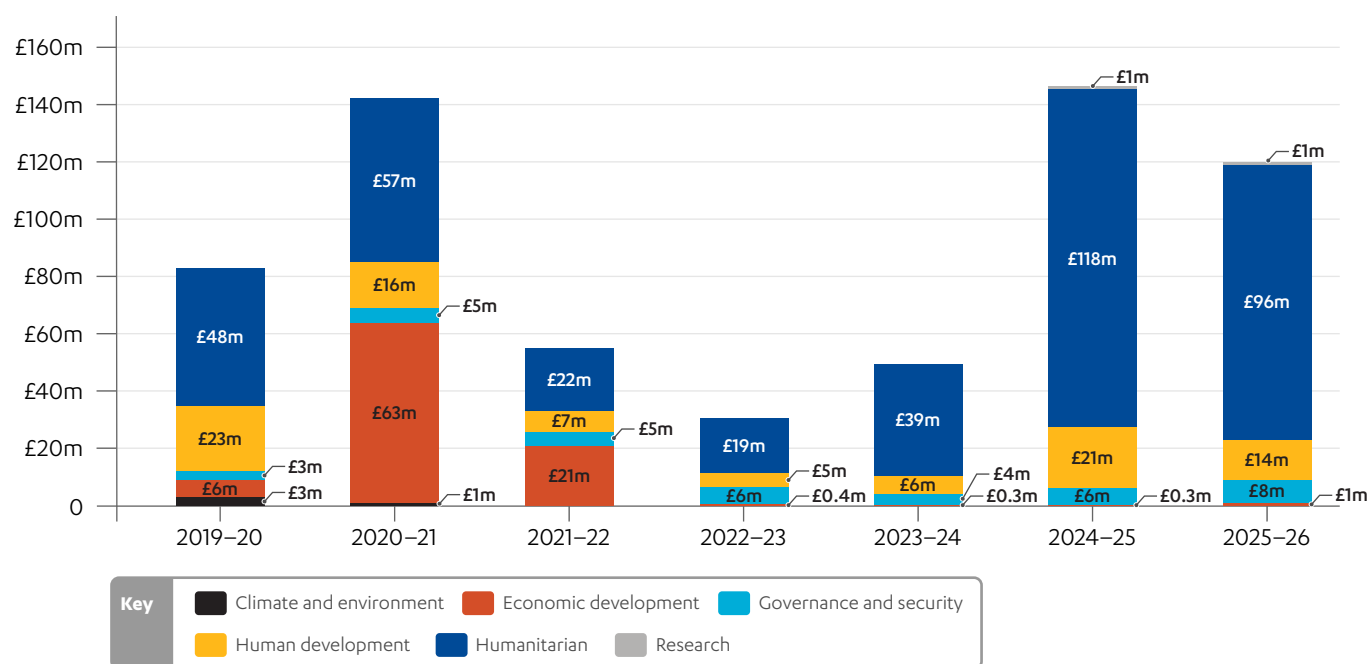
By November 2024, the UK pledged an additional £113 million to the Sudan crisis, bringing its total commitment to £226.5 million for the 2024–25 period. This made the UK the fourth-largest donor to the Sudan crisis, including the response in Sudan and for Sudanese seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. This commitment was exceeded by £4.8 million, bringing the UK's total spending on the Sudan response to £231.3 million for the 2024–25 financial year.

The humanitarian response consists of support for internally displaced people and war-affected communities within Sudan, as well as a regional refugee response that supports host countries, including Chad and South Sudan. The latter provides life-saving protection and humanitarian assistance for the over 4 million people who have fled Sudan, as well as strengthening local capacity to include refugees in national systems and services.

With nearly \$1.8 billion in support in 2024, this humanitarian response reached over 15.6 million people across Sudan. Assistance included food and livelihoods support to more than 13 million people, as well as water, sanitation, health, nutrition, and shelter services.¹⁴ By 22 September 2025, a further \$1.44 billion of humanitarian financing had been received, supporting efforts to tackle food insecurity, scale up protection services, restore basic services and address other acute needs – prioritising the most affected areas including Darfur, Kordofan and Khartoum.¹⁵

Figure 2: Since the outbreak of conflict in 2023, UK bilateral aid to Sudan has increasingly been allocated to support the humanitarian response

Stacked bar chart showing UK bilateral expenditure to Sudan by sector*



Source: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Sudan spend 2019–2025', September 2025, unpublished

* Bilateral spend for education is not included in the chart, since it represents too small a proportion of overall spend to be visible (£6,264 in 2024–25 and £39,600 forecasted for 2025–26). Figures for 2025–2026 are forecasted.

Description: The chart shows annual UK bilateral expenditure in Sudan for financial years 2019–20 to 2024–25 disaggregated by sectors. In the last three financial years (2022–23 to 2024–25), the majority of UK official development assistance in Sudan has been on humanitarian spend, increasing from £19 million in 2022–23 to £118 million in 2024–25.

14 United Nations Sudan, 'Annual Results Report 2024', June 2025

15 United Nations, 'Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan Financials 2025' (accessed 22 September 2025)

- 2.6 The speed, scale and complexity of Sudan's escalating conflict has posed a major challenge for international partners such as the UK. Across the three phases covered by this review, the UK has operated in contexts that bring very different challenges (see [Figure 3](#)). During the 2019–21 transition, optimism following the ousting of President Bashir led to a wave of international support, with programming heavily focused on economic stabilisation as the pathway to democratic transition. The 2021 coup shattered this optimism, requiring rapid reorientation to a more restrictive and uncertain operating space, with international partners shifting away from direct support for government in favour of working with civil society partners and pro-democracy activists.
- 2.7 The outbreak of war in April 2023 marked a profound rupture, coming as a surprise even to many Sudanese observers. The UK, like other international actors, was forced to evacuate Khartoum, relocating first to the UK before establishing a renewed British Office Sudan (BOS) in Ethiopia and Kenya (see [Box 2](#)), reinforced by an upgraded Sudan Unit in London. This meant managing the evacuation of UK staff and nationals in an increasingly volatile environment. Since then, the situation has continued to deteriorate, with mass atrocities and growing famine conditions. International humanitarian actors have faced severe access restrictions, limiting their ability to mount a response at the scale required. Both the SAF and RSF, as well as other armed groups, have hindered the humanitarian response through the destruction of critical infrastructure and through bureaucratic impediments that deliberately limit humanitarian access, such as refusing or delaying the grant of travel permits for humanitarian actors.¹⁶

Box 2: British Office Sudan

British Office Sudan (BOS) was established in Addis Ababa and Nairobi following the withdrawal of the British Embassy Khartoum in April 2023. In addition to overseeing UK aid programmes in Sudan, BOS supports UK policy and advocacy related to the Sudan response, engaging with the UK mission to the UN in New York, UK-based policy and research teams, and other UK embassies in the region. The two locations also offer different platforms for coordinating with other international partners: Nairobi-based staff lead engagement with the Humanitarian Donor Working Group, as well as various UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations, while Addis Ababa is the headquarters of the African Union.

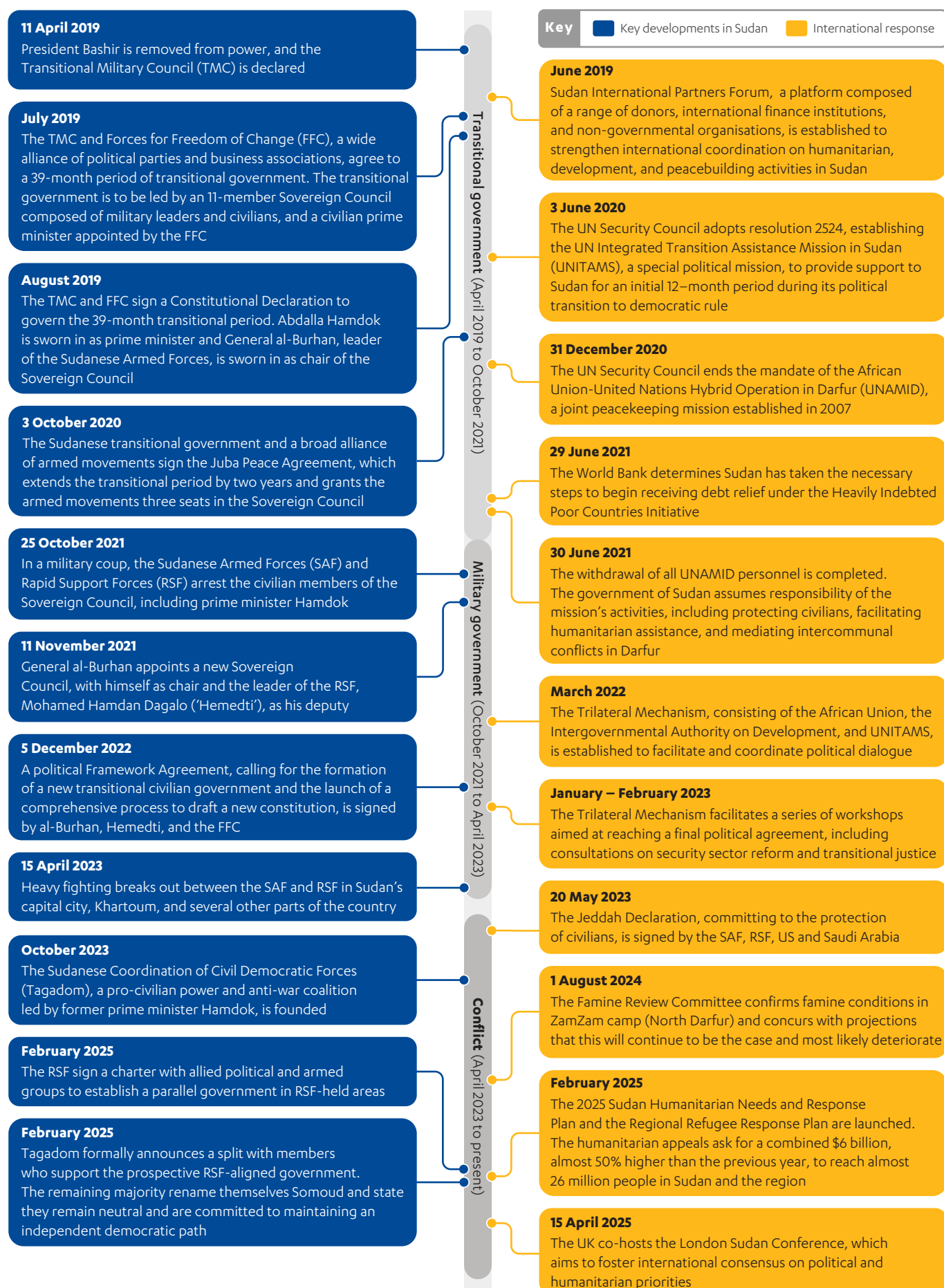
- 2.8 Sudan's conflict is unfolding amid a crisis in the international humanitarian system. Demand for humanitarian assistance is at record levels – over 305 million people worldwide now need support – driven by overlapping crises including in Gaza, Ukraine, the Sahel, Yemen and the Horn of Africa.¹⁷ However, major donors, including the US, the UK and a number of other European donors, have significantly reduced their aid budgets, causing global aid flows to fall by up to 17% in 2025, with a highly uncertain outlook in future years.¹⁸ This makes for a complex backdrop to the UK's commitment to play a leading role in the international response to one of the world's most urgent and underfunded crises.

16 ACAPS, '[Thematic Report: Sudan – Humanitarian access developments \(October 2024 to March 2025\)](#)', April 2025

17 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, '[Global Humanitarian Needs Overview 2025](#)', December 2024

18 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, '[Cuts in official development assistance: OECD projections for 2025 and the near term](#)', 26 June 2025

Figure 3: Timeline of key events in Sudan and the international response



3. Findings

- 3.1 The findings of this review are structured around the four review questions set out in [Table 1](#), which assess the quality of the UK's global leadership on Sudan; its efforts to support women and girls; the quality of its partnerships; and the effectiveness of its humanitarian response. Each section begins with a descriptive account setting the scene, before it presents a set of findings that assess performance against the UK's stated objectives, drawing out key lessons for future engagement in Sudan and other complex crises.

Has the UK demonstrated responsible global leadership through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding the impact on neighbouring countries?

"We are returning the UK to responsible global leadership... This is the moment to reassert fundamental principles and our willingness to defend them. To recommit to the UN, to internationalism, to the rule of law."

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, [United Nations General Assembly Speech](#), 26 September 2024

Setting the scene

- 3.2 The 2023 white paper on international development set out the UK's aspirations for responsible leadership on global challenges. It states: "The United Kingdom is uniquely placed to help address these challenges at source, using our science and technology expertise, our position as a global financial centre and our extensive diplomatic network."¹⁹ The document outlines broad principles for the UK's leadership approach, including building partnerships based on mutual respect, listening to and championing the needs of developing countries, modelling good behaviours, promoting global collective action, mobilising international finance, and helping strengthen and reform the international system. In the case of Sudan, the UK has pledged to use its diplomatic influence and UN Security Council membership to exert collective pressure on the warring parties to remove barriers to humanitarian action, enable accountability for atrocities, support African-led solutions through the African Union (AU), and promote inclusive dialogue on restoring civil government.²⁰ In this section, we look at how these aspirations have shaped the UK's response to the Sudan crisis.
- 3.3 After the ousting of President Omar al-Bashir (2019–21), UK aid and diplomatic engagement were directed towards supporting a successful democratic transition. This included playing an active role in international coordination platforms and funding a range of economic and governance reforms (see [Boxes 3 and 4](#)). The UK also worked to align diplomatic messaging with other international actors through platforms such as the Troika, Quad and the [Juba Peace Agreement](#), to facilitate the formation of multilateral groups such as the Friends of Sudan (see [Box 5](#)), and secure passage of the June 2020 Security Council resolution establishing the [UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan \(UNITAMS\)](#) political mission.

19 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[International development in a contested world: ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change, a white paper on international development](#)', November 2023, page 3

20 House of Commons, '[UK Leadership on Sudan: Volume 841: debated on Monday 2 December 2024](#)' (viewed on 15 September 2025)

Box 3: UK support to economic resilience through the World Bank Sudan Transition and Recovery Support (STARS) Trust Fund

UK support for Sudan's economic development in the transition period was primarily in the form of an £80 million contribution to a \$1 billion World Bank-managed multi-donor trust fund. The UK contribution funded cash transfers to 3.2 million Sudanese civilians through the Sudan Family Support Programme (SFSP), to mitigate the adverse impacts of macroeconomic reforms on poor households. The SFSP delivered \$100 million in cash transfers before the programme was halted following the 2021 coup, leaving \$443 million in unspent donor contributions and \$354 million in unspent World Bank funds.

In May 2022, in response to escalating humanitarian need and a lack of progress in restoring civilian government, the trust fund donors agreed to repurpose \$100 million in unspent funds for an emergency cash and food transfer programme implemented by the World Food Programme, which eventually supported 2.4 million people.

Following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, the trust fund pivoted once again, launching a new programme, Somoud, which became active in mid-2024. The Somoud programme has funded basic services, prioritising urban and peri-urban areas with high inflows of internally displaced people (IDPs). Reported results include establishing 90 primary health centres, the provision of essential medical and nutrition supplies, and distributing 'school-in-a-box' kits, which facilitate the rapid establishment of temporary learning centres in crisis settings. To enhance food security, the programme has supported 84 farmer cooperatives, with expected increases in yields that will meet the food needs of approximately 250,000 people. It has also launched a matching grant programme aiming to support 80 small and medium-sized enterprises in agricultural value chains.

Source: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, [‘Sudan Economic Impact and Reform Programme Annual Review 2024’](#), May 2025

Box 4: Unlocking debt relief: the UK's role in Sudan's HIPC milestone

The UK helped Sudan regain access to support from international financial institutions under the [Heavily Indebted Poor Countries \(HIPC\) Initiative](#). HIPC is an international process that allows the world's poorest and most indebted countries to qualify for debt relief once they meet specific reform and economic management conditions.

The UK provided diplomatic and technical support to Sudan's transitional government, including efforts to clear arrears at the World Bank and African Development Bank, mobilise donor backing and coordinate with international financial institutions. Sudan progressed through the early stages of the HIPC process at record speed – within about two years of its transition – unlocking initial access to concessional finance and laying the groundwork for economic recovery. However, this process was interrupted by the coup. Further steps will be required to reactivate debt relief and enable Sudan to benefit from concessional finance once stability returns.

Box 5: The UK's participation in international platforms: Troika, the Quad and Friends of Sudan

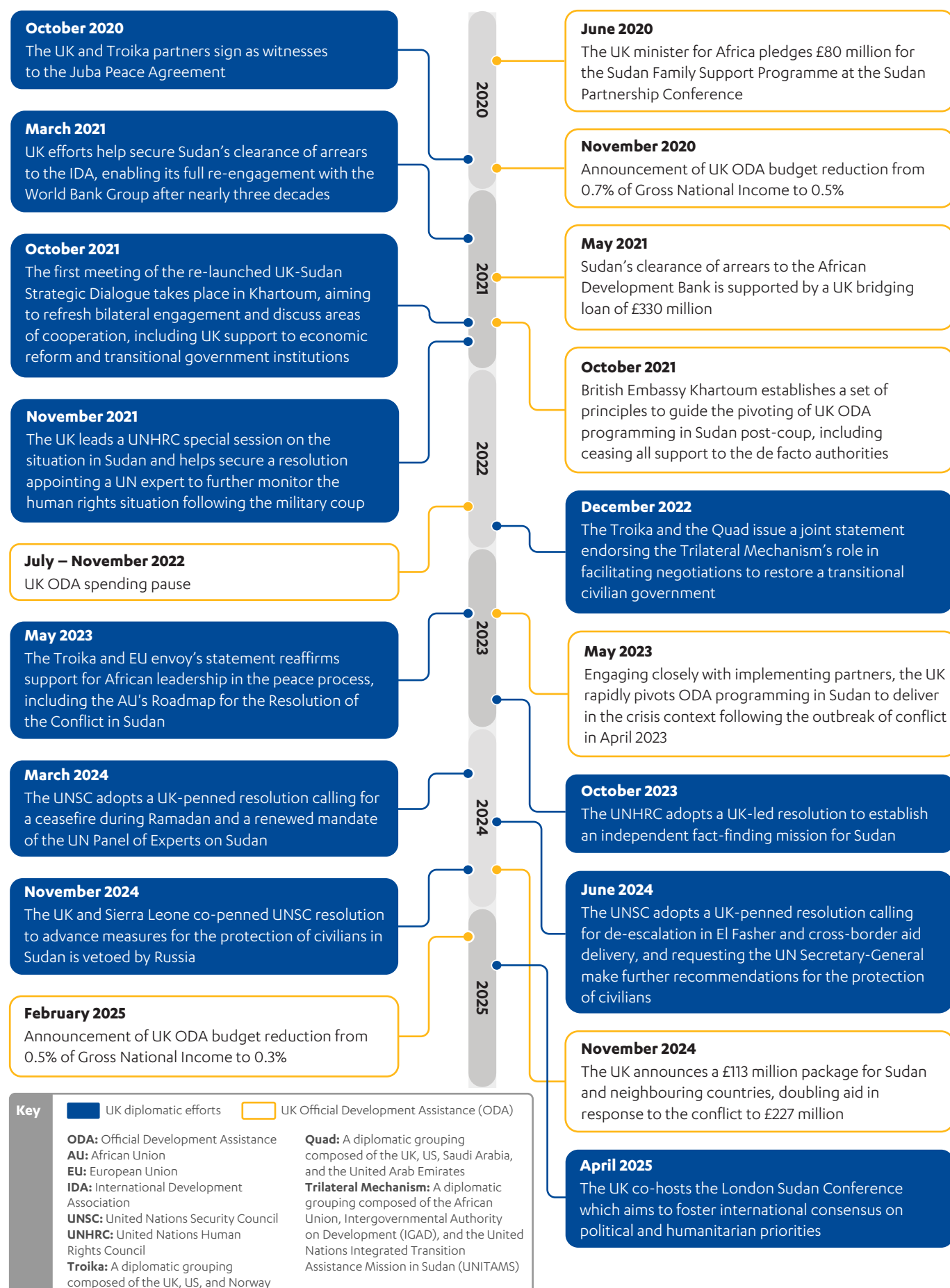
The **Troika** is an informal diplomatic grouping of the UK, the US and Norway, which has been central to the diplomatic work to support peace, democratic transition and conflict resolution efforts in Sudan since the early 2000s.

The **Quad** is a diplomatic grouping originally comprising the UK, the US, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, formed to coordinate international efforts in supporting Sudan's political transition and resolving its ongoing conflict. By 2025, the Quad had evolved to become the US, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

The **Friends of Sudan** consists of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, the United Arab Emirates, the UK, the US and the European Union. It works to support Sudan's civilian-led political transition, back multilateral mediation efforts and coordinate diplomatic and financial support.

- 3.4 In October 2021, Sudan's military forces seized power in a coup, dissolving the transitional government and halting progress towards civilian rule. The UK condemned the military takeover and shifted its approach towards backing the political process jointly facilitated by the UN, the AU and the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), aimed at restoring a civilian-led transition. The UK continued its engagement with non-government actors, while promoting international human rights monitoring mechanisms to ensure accountability during this period.
- 3.5 Conflict erupted in 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) - a paramilitary group formerly aligned with the army. What began as a power struggle between rival generals quickly escalated into a full-scale civil war, devastating communities and displacing millions. At this point, the UK approach included using its role as 'penholder' (see **Box 8**) on the Sudan conflict and crisis in the UN Security Council, sanctions on warring parties and high-level diplomacy, while adapting its aid portfolio to support the humanitarian response in Sudan and neighbouring countries.

Figure 4: Timeline of selected diplomatic events, and the UK's role in these, related to Sudan, 2020–25



Key findings

The UK has shown credible political leadership and strong convening power on Sudan, but its impact has been constrained by inconsistent political attention

- 3.6 The review finds that, during the early transition period (2019–21), the UK exercised strong political leadership and convening power on development assistance and diplomatic engagement. It played a leading role in donor coordination platforms and political forums, including the Troika and Quad, and supported the [Juba Peace Agreement](#). These efforts helped align international actors behind the transition. UK engagement with the World Bank helped shape international support for economic reform and stabilisation. Coupled with a bridging loan of £330 million via the African Development Bank, it helped Sudan achieve a key milestone in the international debt clearance process (HIPC – see [Box 4](#)) in a record time of around 18 months, compared to an average of 4–7 years – a strong example of the influence the UK can wield by working through multilateral channels.
- 3.7 After the October 2021 coup, UK ministerial attention to Sudan diminished. The coup brought to an end the civilian-led transition that had been the focus of engagement, leaving the UK with limited diplomatic leverage and fewer options for support. This was compounded by competing global crises, including the August 2021 fall of Kabul in Afghanistan and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which drew senior attention elsewhere, and the UK’s COVID-19-related aid budget reductions, which forced difficult reprioritisation decisions. Institutional disruptions, including the merger of the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 2020, also drew ministerial attention away from events in Sudan. During this period, UK influence was sustained more through in-country political leadership, as well as technical participation in international forums and continued support for a civilian transition, rather than through visible ministerial leadership.
- 3.8 Since the outbreak of full-scale conflict in April 2023, the UK has played a more active leadership role through high-profile engagement by ministers, senior officials and dignitaries. Visits to the Chad-Sudan border by the Duchess of Edinburgh, the former Foreign Secretary and the Minister for Development helped raise international awareness of the conflict and its humanitarian toll and were highly valued by stakeholders. The UK’s support for AU co-chairmanship at the April 2025 London Sudan conference (see [Box 6](#)) was also well received by the AU and aligned with the UK’s stated commitment to African-led solutions.

Box 6: The UK as convenor: the April 2025 London Sudan Conference

The London Sudan Conference, held on 15 April 2025 at Lancaster House, was co-hosted by the UK, Germany, France, the African Union and the European Union. The conference brought together foreign ministers and key international stakeholders to reaffirm shared commitments to pursuing a ceasefire, protecting civilians, humanitarian relief and support for a civilian-led peace process.

- 3.9 The UK has continued to pursue active leadership at country level. In Sudan, it plays a prominent role among donors in the Heads of Mission group and co-chairs both the Core Donor Working Group and the Humanitarian Donor Working Group. It has continued with longstanding leadership roles in South Sudan and taken up new positions of influence in Chad, including as chair of the Chad Climate Working Group. Sudanese stakeholders interviewed for this review consistently emphasised the value of the UK’s deep networks and longstanding support for a civilian-led transition.
- 3.10 However, there are also some limitations in the UK’s influencing efforts towards sustainable peace. While the UK continues to engage a range of partners, including Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, in interviews, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) staff stated that, as with all UK diplomatic engagement, their approach had to accommodate wider foreign policy considerations, such as commercial relationships, regional security cooperation and other bilateral interests. This and broader geopolitical considerations have constrained the UK’s political stance in a region that is central to Sudan’s political trajectory and a sustainable peace.

- 3.11 On contentious issues such as violations of international humanitarian law²¹ and the use of famine as a weapon of war,²² the UK has supported international accountability processes, including evidence collection for the International Criminal Court and the UN Human Rights Council's [fact-finding mission](#). However, these international initiatives are yet to yield any change in the behaviour of perpetrators. This review encountered perceptions of international inaction, including by the UK, both on atrocities and in relation to improving humanitarian access to populations most affected by the conflict. Given the complexity and political sensitivities around these issues in Sudan, there are no easy choices for the UK. However, it could review a range of options – including stronger public messaging, more visible support for accountability mechanisms, and integrating atrocity prevention in conflict analysis and programming decisions – to assess if it might be possible to do and achieve more.

Cross-government collaboration on Sudan is underdeveloped, affecting strategic coherence on key cross-cutting issues

- 3.12 UK cross-government collaboration on Sudan has varied by department and over time. During the transition period (2019–21), the Defence section at the Embassy enabled regular engagement with Sudanese authorities. However, the section closed in autumn 2022. This limited involvement from the UK Ministry of Defence restricted the UK's ability to influence discussions on security sector reform – a central issue at the time. The lack of a sustained defence attaché presence in-country also curtailed access to key officials in the SAF and RSF, diminishing UK influence on security and access matters.
- 3.13 FCDO has acknowledged that its analysis in the transition phase (2019–21) period was shaped by a bias towards optimistic narratives, largely because it did not consistently invite more dissenting or critical perspectives. ICAI concurs that – taking the benefit of hindsight – there was an overemphasis on governance and economic stabilisation priorities in UK programming, including macroeconomic policy reform, without adequately interrogating the links between economic incentives and conflict dynamics, or fully recognising the threat Sudan's entrenched political and military elites posed to long-term stability. A more risk-aware strategy may have allowed the UK to identify more ways to alleviate the pressure on a fragile political process.
- 3.14 Even in the current conflict period (April 2023 onwards), despite Sudan's designation as a UK foreign policy priority, there are opportunities to increase cross-departmental coordination. Defence and migration portfolios in particular have been largely peripheral, including on efforts to align international messages around peace. The Home Office has only recently shown greater engagement on Sudan, driven in part by rising numbers of Sudanese arrivals via small boat crossings, even though it has been likely for some time that the conflict would affect migration flows into Europe and towards the UK. However, this has not translated into sustained interdepartmental collaboration in strategic planning on the UK's response to the conflict, although the government tells us that there is an FCDO and Home Office commitment to develop a Sudan/regional migration strategy by March 2026.
- 3.15 A formal National Security Council-style process (see [Box 7](#)) may not be necessary, but without more deliberate coordination and engagement across departments, the UK is at risk of missing opportunities for effective engagement in a complex and rapidly evolving situation.

Box 7: The National Security Council

The UK National Security Council is a Cabinet committee chaired by the Prime Minister. It brings together senior ministers and officials, such as the Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, Home Secretary, and heads of intelligence and defence services, to promote strategic alignment across departments on issues including national security, foreign policy and defence.

21 **International humanitarian law (IHL)** is a set of rules that seek to limit the effects of armed conflict by protecting civilians and those not taking part in the fighting, and by restricting the means and methods of warfare.

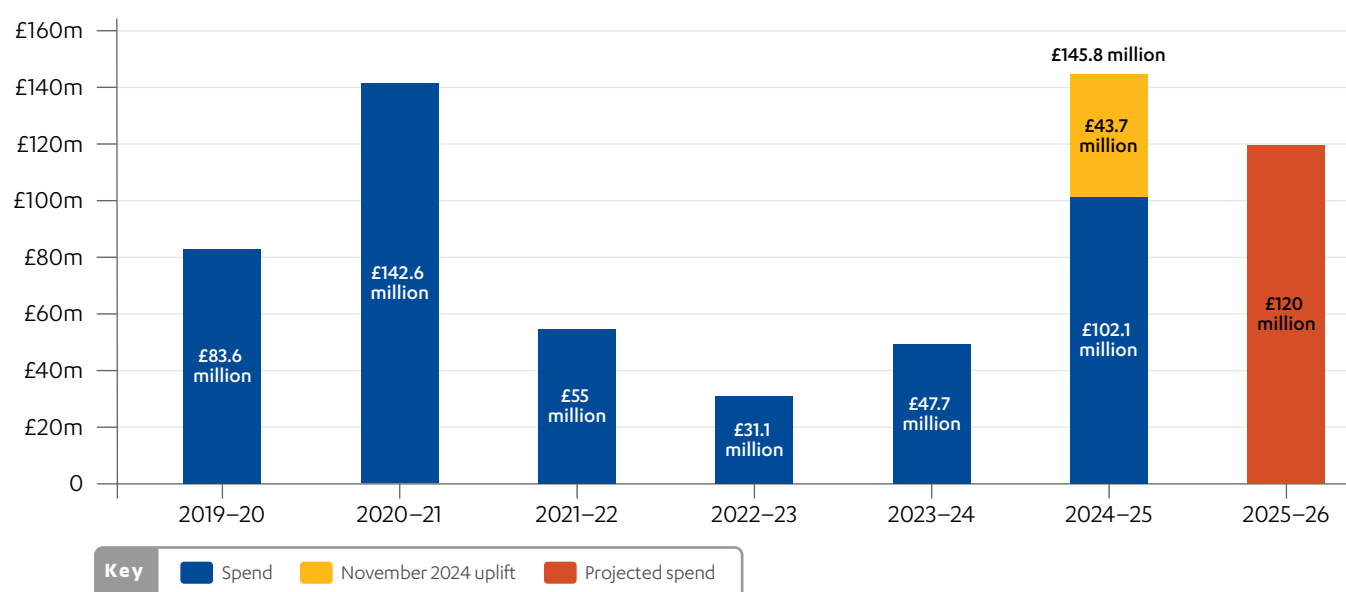
22 **Using famine as a weapon of war** refers to the deliberate obstruction of food supplies, humanitarian aid, or agricultural activity to starve civilian populations as a tactic of conflict, which is prohibited under IHL.

Volatility and uncertainty in UK aid to Sudan has undermined trust and hampered forward planning

- 3.16 UK aid to Sudan has fluctuated significantly over the review period (see **Figure 5**). The reduction in the UK aid budget to 0.5% of gross national income (GNI) in 2021 led to sharp reductions to the Sudan budget, with further pauses and reductions in 2022. The Sudan budget was reduced during the course of 2022–23 by 40%, from a planned £51.7 million to £31 million. As a consequence, some planned activities within programmes were postponed, and a water, sanitation and hygiene programme was closed early. According to an unpublished FCDO equalities and inclusion assessment of the budget reductions, these measures were implemented in a way that prioritised high-performing programmes and protected those most in need within Sudan.²³ They nonetheless resulted in significant reductions in the numbers of people reached by UK humanitarian support, as well as delays in support to women-led organisations at a key moment in peace negotiations.
- 3.17 This volatility in UK support has eroded partner trust in the UK’s ability to sustain a leadership role, limited scope for forward planning and disrupted programming – particularly for larger initiatives such as the Sudan Free of Female Genital Mutilation (SFFGM) programme and the Sudan Stability and Growth Programme (SSGP). As **Figure 5** shows, the Sudan allocation had fallen by 75% in the two years leading up to the outbreak of conflict. As one UK official interviewed for this review put it, “we went from big spend a few years before, to a crash at a time when the country needed it”.

Figure 5: Total bilateral aid to Sudan, from 2019–20 to 2025–26

Column chart showing UK bilateral official development assistance in Sudan (not including funding for the regional humanitarian crisis caused by the Sudan conflict in neighbouring countries) since 2019–20, with figures for projected rather than actual spend in 2025–26.



Source: Compiled from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, ‘[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2019–2020](#)’, ‘[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2020–2021](#)’, September 2021; ‘[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2021–2022](#)’, July 2022; ‘[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2022–2023](#)’, July 2023; ‘[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2023–2024](#)’, July 2024 and ‘[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2024–2025](#)’, July 2025; and 2025–26 data supplied to ICAI by FCDO

Description: The chart shows UK aid spend and funding uplifts (where applicable) to Sudan, for financial years 2019–20 to 2025–26. The columns show actual spend for all years apart from the 2025–26 column, which shows projected spend. Following UK budget reductions in 2021, spending reduced significantly from £142.6 million in 2020–21 to £55 million in 2021–22. Spending then increased from £31.1 million in 2022–23 to £145.8 million in 2024–25, following a £43.7 million funding uplift in November 2024. Projected spending for 2025–26 is £120 million.

23 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, ‘Equalities and Inclusion Assessment – Sudan (ODA cuts FY22–23)’, unpublished

- 3.18 These reductions also weakened the UK's visibility and credibility in key multilateral forums. At moments when international attention and coordination were critical, especially following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, the UK lacked senior representation at major pledging conferences and other diplomatic platforms such as the Sudan Pledging Conference in June 2023, diminishing its influence over the international aid response.
- 3.19 However, after designating Sudan as one of three priority countries for UK humanitarian aid in mid-2024, the UK significantly increased its financial commitment up to a projected spend of £120 million in Sudan in financial year 2025–26, re-establishing itself as a prominent donor. This has in turn helped reinforce UK diplomatic influence. Alongside continuing leadership roles, such as serving as UN Security Council 'penholder' on Sudan (see **Box 8**), the UK is also a member of major donor groups, such as the Sudan Humanitarian Fund Advisory Board, and co-chair of both the Core Donor and Humanitarian Donor Working Groups. There was also a funding uplift for the regional response to the Sudan humanitarian crisis. In Chad and South Sudan, this renewed aid investment has strengthened the UK's voice in strategic and humanitarian coordination.

Box 8: The UK as Security Council 'penholder' on Sudan

Within the UN Security Council, one or more member countries (typically one of the three Western permanent members, France, the UK and the US) acts as 'penholder' for particular countries or issues, leading on the preparation of resolutions, statements and other documents. As the 'penholder' on Sudan since 2019, the UK has a platform for building consensus among members and influencing Security Council action. The UK is also 'penholder' for a range of other countries, including Somalia and Yemen, and for thematic issues such as the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda.

- 3.20 However, this review found that partners remain concerned about the UK's reliability as a funding partner. Despite the designation of Sudan as a priority country, the government's [February 2025 decision](#) to reduce overall aid to 0.3% of GNI by 2027 has left a perception of uncertainty among Sudanese stakeholders. Ongoing unpredictability, coupled with the fact that increased funding often comes from late uplifts, such as the announcement in November 2024, hampers planning and risks undermining long-term resilience programming.²⁴

Early leadership in the transition period was underpinned by strategic foresight and timely support, but delays in programme approvals and delivery undermined impact

- 3.21 During the transition period (2019–21), the UK demonstrated clear strategic foresight. Together with UK work on HIPC (see **Box 4**), pre-planning enabled the UK to become the first bilateral donor to support Sudan's transitional government, with early governance programming responding quickly to emerging political opportunities. Programme reporting shows that these efforts delivered visible results, including increasing women's participation in the Juba peace talks, coalition building in Darfur and Blue Nile, and capacity building for grassroots peace efforts. This reinforced the UK's credibility at a critical moment, particularly as other donors held off engaging.
- 3.22 The Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response (SHPR) programme, the UK's principal humanitarian vehicle in Sudan, also displayed significant agility. Its flexible structure enabled rapid pivots in response to the humanitarian fallout of the April 2023 outbreak of conflict, including scaling up food security support and diversifying partnerships by reallocating funds towards international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) with coverage in important areas when access constraints increased.

24 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[Press Release: UK doubles aid for Sudan and neighbouring countries facing the worst humanitarian crisis of the decade](#)', 17 November 2024

- 3.23 The governance and humanitarian programmes were grounded in ongoing political analysis and maintained delivery despite a deteriorating operating environment. This underscores the value of adaptable programming in fragile and fast-moving contexts.
- 3.24 However, while existing programmes demonstrated ability to adapt to changing contexts, internal processes for approving new programmes have often constrained the flexibility of the UK response. Lengthy business case approvals and complex internal clearance procedures – both within FCDO and between FCDO and HM Treasury – have delayed implementation during critical windows. In 2022, for instance, a key humanitarian business case was reportedly “stuck with Treasury” during a period of heightened need. This coincided with a pause in official development assistance (ODA) spend while the impact of budget reductions was being worked out. Such delays have undermined the UK’s agility and limited its ability to respond in real time to shifting dynamics on the ground. While tools such as the Internal Risk Facility contingency funds²⁵ have since helped humanitarian teams manage peaks in need, stakeholders consistently noted that the UK’s internal systems are not well adapted to the demands of such a fast-moving context.

The UK maintains a strong and constructive engagement in South Sudan and Chad, where its effective partnerships support donor coordination and help attract other funding

- 3.25 In South Sudan, the UK serves as a collaborative and influential lead donor, supported by a well-staffed embassy and an active role in donor coordination. This has helped promote strategic alignment and effective implementation across the international humanitarian response. In Chad, while operating with very limited staffing in a new and small embassy, the UK has nonetheless also played a leadership role in donor coordination, with support from the FCDO regional office in Dakar. However, as funding pressures intensify and humanitarian strategies evolve, deeper operational coordination among donors will be essential to sustain impact across the region (see [para 3.97](#)).

The UK’s response is not fully adapted to the cross-border nature of the Sudan conflict and humanitarian crisis, limiting its ability to address regional spillover effects

- 3.26 The current crisis has exposed critical interdependencies between conflict and fragility in Sudan and its neighbours (see [Box 9](#)), including flows of small arms, disrupted trade corridors and regional economic shocks. These cross-border or ‘spillover’ effects are not systematically reflected in UK strategy or programming, which is organised primarily at country level. While there is informal coordination and information sharing between FCDO staff in Sudan and neighbouring countries, there is no overarching approach to align the UK’s diplomatic, humanitarian and development responses across borders.
- 3.27 A more deliberate regional approach would strengthen coordination between UK country-led priorities, policy and programming, ensuring attention to Sudan-related impacts as well as to existing country-specific priorities in already fragile contexts. It is essential that focus on the Sudan crisis does not lead to neglect of other important humanitarian and conflict/fragility issues in the region. In Chad, the Sudanese refugee response has drawn attention and funding away from other crises in the Sahel region (see [Box 9](#)).
- 3.28 While FCDO does not view a shared regional aid budget as the right solution, adequate financing for spillover effects remains essential. Top-up UK aid allocations to Chad and South Sudan have helped, but without a more deliberate regional approach, the UK risks reinforcing siloed, border-bound interventions, diminishing its ability to mitigate the wider destabilising impacts of the Sudan conflict.

25 FCDO’s Internal Risk Facility (IRF) is a built-in contingency fund available within crisis response programmes, designed to provide rapid, flexible financing of up to 10% of a programme’s total budget to address unforeseen emergencies or spikes in need on the ground.

Box 9: Regional interdependencies of the Sudan conflict: focus on South Sudan and Chad

The Sudan conflict has had spillover effects on neighbouring countries, particularly South Sudan and Chad, exacerbating existing humanitarian and political fragilities. Both countries have received large numbers of people fleeing the conflict – since April 2023, there are around 875,000 newly arrived refugees in Chad and more than 1.2 million newly arrived returnees and refugees in South Sudan. In both countries, these arrivals come in addition to existing displaced populations and widespread humanitarian needs, and have placed additional pressure on already overstretched services and infrastructure. These movements intersect with longstanding conflict dynamics, border tensions and resource competition, heightening instability.

In Chad, where communities host large numbers of Sudanese refugees, including both the new arrivals since April 2023 and more than 300,000 Sudanese refugees who fled previous outbreaks of conflict in their home country, pressure on land, livelihoods and basic services is intensifying. Meanwhile, in South Sudan, the influx of returnees and refugees is straining a humanitarian system already facing severe funding shortfalls and climate-related shocks.

Regional fallout and interdependencies are not only humanitarian, but also political and economic. Both Chad and South Sudan maintain complex relationships with actors in Sudan's conflict and are affected by crossborder trade, arms flows and political alliances. The UK's response to Sudan must therefore be grounded in a regional lens that balances support for Sudanese refugees with ongoing commitments to host communities. This includes working with local authorities to preserve social cohesion and prevent destabilisation, aligning humanitarian and development strategies to avoid creating imbalances, and ensuring that country-specific priorities are not overshadowed by regional crisis response. Without such a joined-up approach, there is a risk that efforts to support Sudanese populations could inadvertently undermine stability in neighbouring states.

Has the UK acted for and with women and girls through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding refugee flows into neighbouring countries?

"Overwhelmingly, what I've seen here in Chad, on the border with Sudan, are women and children fleeing for their lives – telling stories of widespread slaughter, mutilation, burning, sexual violence against them, their children."

Foreign Secretary David Lammy, [reported by the BBC](#), 25 January 2025

Setting the scene

- 3.29 Under the [International Development \(Gender Equality\) Act 2014](#), UK development and humanitarian assistance should be delivered in ways that promote gender equality. The Act requires that, before allocating ODA, the Secretary of State must consider doing so in ways that contribute to reducing gender inequality and that take into account gender-related differences in needs. This duty applies not only to long-term development programming but also to emergency and humanitarian responses.
- 3.30 The [International Women and Girls Strategy \(2023–2030\)](#) sets out three priorities for the UK in support of women and girls internationally: educating girls; empowering women and girls, including through health and rights; and ending gender-based violence (GBV). It is guided by five principles: standing up for women's and girls' rights; supporting grassroots women's rights organisations and movements; targeting investment across life stages; acting in crises; and strengthening systems. It commits FCDO to ensuring that at least 80% of its bilateral aid programmes will include a focus on gender equality by 2030 (a reference to the 'gender marker' system used in international aid statistics – see [Box 10](#)), and to developing UK expertise through a centre of excellence and other knowledge resources.

- 3.31 The status of the International Women and Girls Strategy is unclear after the 2024 UK election, as the current government has not listed support for women and girls among its stated priorities for international development. Nonetheless, there remain commitments on gender in FCDO's [Programme Operating Framework](#), which sets out rules and principles governing FCDO programming, and FCDO has informed us that there will be a refresh of the International Women and Girls Strategy in late 2025. Programme teams must assess the impact of aid programmes on gender equalities at each stage of the programme cycle, including selection, design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation, while business cases are required to assess options for supporting gender equality in programme design and delivery.

Box 10: The gender equality marker system

The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD-DAC) is a forum where donor countries agree the standards for international aid statistics. In 1997 it introduced a [Gender Equality Policy Marker](#), to help donor countries monitor and report on their efforts to address gender equality through their development finance.

Donors can score their aid programmes using a three-point system, as follows:

- 0 (Not targeted): Gender equality is not a policy objective
- 1 (Significant objective): Gender equality is an important and explicit objective, but not the main reason for the intervention
- 2 (Principal objective): Gender equality is the primarily goal.

If scored 1 or 2, a programme is considered to be gender equality-focused. The commitment in the UK's [International Women and Girls Strategy](#) is that 80% of FCDO bilateral programmes (by number) will be scored as gender equality-focused by 2030. The most recent international aid statistics from OECD-DAC show that 63.9% of the UK's total bilateral allocable aid in 2023 was scored as 1 (55.2%) or 2 (8.7%), while 25.3% was rated 0, and 10.8% not screened against the gender equality marker. Looking at Sudan only, the share of gender equality-focused programming is higher: 91.2% of all UK bilateral allocable aid to Sudan was scored as 1 (77.9%) or 2 (13.3%) in 2023.²⁶

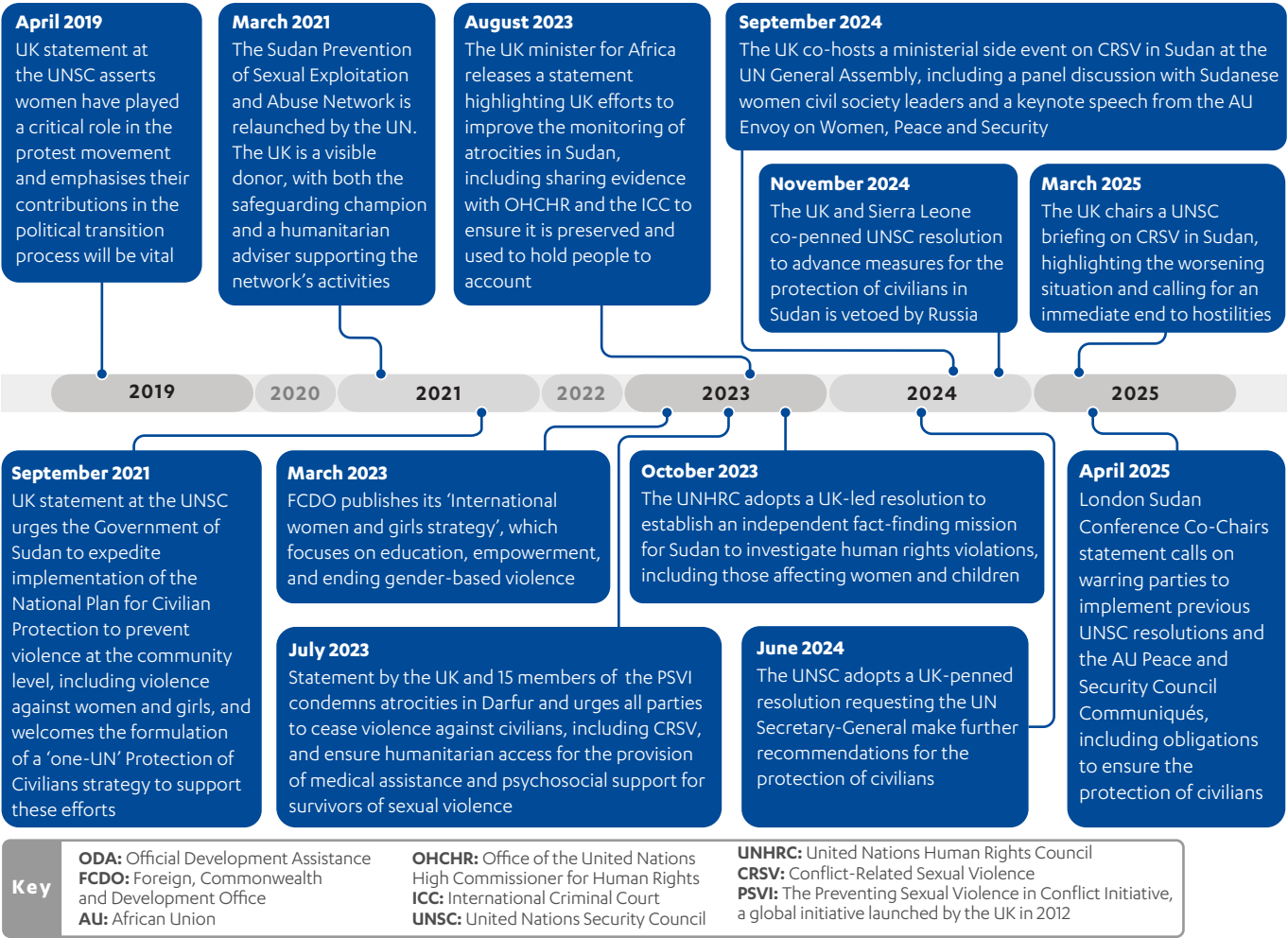
Globally, the vast majority of gender equality-focused programmes are scored as significant, rather than principal. In 2023, OECD data show \$9.5 billion ODA scored as principal, with a further \$99.1 billion scored as significant.²⁷ However, the global data are not fully reliable. Independent reviews of how different donors apply the OECD-DAC gender equality marker, undertaken by Oxfam²⁸ and the Overseas Development Institute,²⁹ show gaps and inconsistencies in reporting practice. Not all donors systematically screen all programmes against the marker, and programmes are not always accurately labelled, particularly those in the 'significant' category.³⁰ While the UK screens most of its aid against the gender equality marker and has internal guidance in place to ensure that the marker is correctly applied, it also has issues with accuracies in its scoring. The gender equality marker data provides a useful indication of progress, but other analysis is needed in order to judge the extent to which gender equality is effectively mainstreamed across a portfolio.

Source: [OECD Data Explorer](#)

- 26 Percentage calculations are made using OECD-DAC data. OECD Data Explorer, '[Gender Markers: Aid \(ODA\) activities targeting gender equality and women's empowerment](#)', with the following categories: UK donor data for bilateral allocable aid, all sectors, to Sudan and all developing countries in 2023, counting disbursements in current prices.
- 27 House of Commons Library, '[Research Briefing: UK aid and women and girls](#)', Philip Loft and others, 9 April 2025, page 6 (viewed on 25 September 2025)
- 28 Oxfam, '[Are they really gender equality projects? An examination of donors' gender-mainstreamed and gender-equality focused projects to assess the quality of gender-marked projects](#)', February 2020, page 16 (viewed on 15 September 2025)
- 29 ODI Global, '[A blurred picture: three global gender data gaps that need plugging](#)', June 2024 (viewed on 15 September 2025)
- 30 House of Commons, '[UK aid and women and girls](#)', April 2025, page 26 (viewed on 15 September 2025)

- 3.32 The inequalities facing Sudanese women and girls are immense, especially in times of conflict. Entrenched social norms severely restrict Sudanese women’s mobility, access to education and participation in decision making. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is deeply embedded in cultural and social norms, with more than 86% of Sudanese women and girls affected.³¹ The drivers behind the practice include patriarchal gender stereotypes and the belief that the practice protects girls’ social status and marriage prospects. Although prevalence was slowly declining before the April 2023 conflict, many stakeholders we consulted noted that weaknesses in law enforcement and the increased vulnerabilities of communities in conflict-affected areas and in displacement mean that the risks facing girls are once more on the rise.
- 3.33 Since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, these underlying inequalities have been sharply compounded by the large-scale use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) reports that 12.2 million people, mostly women and girls, are at risk of GBV – a figure that has surged by 80% since 2024 and by 350% since the war began in April 2023.³² Sexual violence is used systematically during invasions of cities, occupations of residential areas, and attacks on camps and people fleeing conflict-affected areas. Many survivors are unable to access life-saving assistance, due to displacement, the lack of health services, and the shame and stigma associated with sexual violence.
- 3.34 The UK has recognised the centrality of gender equality to Sudan’s stability, incorporating women and girls as a strategic priority in its policies and programming. Across multiple country business plans since 2019, related objectives have included enhancing women’s inclusion in political and peace processes, ensuring women’s access to education and healthcare, and strengthening support for survivors of GBV (see [Figure 6](#)).

Figure 6: Timeline of key events in UK’s approach to support women and girls in Sudan



31 The FGM/C Research Initiative, ‘[Sudan Key Findings](#)’ (accessed on 14 August 2025)

32 United Nations Population Fund, ‘[Sudan Emergency Situation Report No 21 – June 2025](#)’, 23 July 2025 (viewed on 28 July 2025)

Key findings

The UK has helped raise awareness of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and support survivors but, given resource constraints, has opted to take the least ambitious approach to the prevention of atrocities, including CRSV

- 3.35 The UK has demonstrated clear leadership in raising global awareness on CRSV – defined as acts of sexual violence that are directly or indirectly linked to a conflict – and the need to protect women and girls in Sudan. High-profile diplomatic efforts, including the sponsoring of a draft Security Council resolution on humanitarian access and the protection of women and children (supported by 14 of 15 Council members but vetoed by Russia) and visits to Chad by the Duchess of Edinburgh (2024), former Foreign Secretary David Lammy (2025) and Minister for Development Baroness Chapman (2025) have helped keep these issues visible on the international stage.
- 3.36 The UK has supported services for survivors of CRSV and other GBV through its [Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response](#) (SHPR) programme. It has also invested in targeted protection and survivor interventions for Sudanese refugees in Chad and South Sudan. These include support to UNHCR’s [Project 21](#), which provides vital protection monitoring data in Chad, and membership of a working group on protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA) in South Sudan. The UK also funds targeted GBV-related services for conflict-affected communities in Sudan, primarily for women and children, through mechanisms such as the [Protection Consortium](#). It plans to supplement this work with a new programme to reach the most vulnerable and excluded survivors. The UK’s Sudan Free of Female Genital Mutilation programme (see [Box 12](#)) has shifted its operations to support survivors in displaced communities with interventions such as counselling and post-rape care – thereby adapting to the changing context and needs.
- 3.37 In 2024, UK officials considered increasing the UK’s ambition on support for the protection of civilians, including atrocity prevention (see [Box 11](#)). An internal options paper outlined four broad options for scaling up protection of civilians: establishing an international protection mechanism; locally led protection interventions; working to support accountability and engagement with armed actors; and increasing protection through humanitarian support. Of the options, FCDO opted to take the fourth – and least ambitious – option. It provided additional funding for protection activities as part of its humanitarian funding uplift in 2024, allocating an extra £10 million to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for various activities, including protection, and has also provided support to the Centre for Civilians in Conflict and Geneva Call for protection and mediation programming. FCDO stakeholders interviewed for this review recognised the value of supporting locally led protection of civilians interventions, but stated that an already overstretched country team did not have the capacity to take on a complex new programming area. This has constrained the UK’s ability to support stronger protection results within Sudan – including for women and girls.

Box 11: Protection of civilians

Protection and the protection of civilians are two closely related concepts rooted in International Human Rights Law, International Humanitarian Law and International Refugee Law. Protection, which focuses on safeguarding those most at risk in situations of conflict and crisis, including civilians, refugees, internally displaced people, women and girls, and people with disabilities, is a key pillar of the [FCDO Humanitarian Framework](#).

As defined by FCDO's [Approach to the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict](#), first published in 2010 and updated in 2020, the concept of protection in the context of armed conflict "encompasses all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law. In essence, the goal of protection is to improve the safety of civilians by limiting their exposure to violence, abuse, coercion, exploitation and deprivation and the threat thereof". When examining options for the protection of civilians in Sudan in 2024, FCDO combined this definition with a humanitarian model for protection used to group protection approaches around responsive action, remedial action and environment building to explore mechanisms to address the protection risks identified in the Humanitarian Country Team Protection Strategy for Sudan. These risks included:

- civilian deaths, injuries and displacement
- arbitrary arrest, detention and restrictions on freedom of movement
- looting, occupation and attacks on civilian objects and humanitarian facilities
- systematic CRSV, predominantly targeting women and girls.

Source: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Protection of Civilians Rapid Options Paper', October 2024, unpublished

- 3.38 In 2025, the UK reviewed its approach to CRSV, considering options and levers for increasing its impact. It concluded that the most practical option was to make CRSV a cross-cutting objective across the Sudan country programme. Yet funding constraints and limited programme management capacity have made it difficult in practice to incorporate CRSV-related activities across the portfolio, although the team is attempting to integrate GBV (of which CRSV is a specific subcategory) responses into the humanitarian effort. The UK is developing a dedicated women and girls programme for Sudan in the medium-to-long term (from 2026), to succeed the Sudan Free of Female Genital Mutilation (SFFGM2) programme.
- 3.39 Despite high-level advocacy from international development partners and multilateral institutions, the parties to the Sudan conflict continue to commit CRSV and other atrocities with impunity, and there is no meaningful legal protection for women and girls. The UK is helping to put in place some of the foundations for future accountability through monitoring and evidence collection.
- 3.40 However, some partners interviewed for this review suggested that more could be done by the UK and other international actors to challenge misinformation by warring factions that obscures accountability for CRSV, and to counteract narratives that operate to silence survivors. Some interviewees also argued that the UK – as Security Council 'penholder' on Sudan – missed opportunities to embed protection of civilians more centrally into the mandate of UNITAMS, the UN political mission created to support the transition to democratic government, during the period of intensifying violence leading up to the outbreak of the war. The argument was that, while the UK was focused on efforts to revive the political transition in Khartoum after the coup, it did not sufficiently recognise the rapidly deteriorating context outside the capital. This led to missed opportunities for the UK to push for recalibrating UNITAMS' priorities towards the protection of civilians. However, this argument must be weighed against UNITAMS' limited capacity to intervene, as a civilian-led political mission with only a small number of police officers and military advisers. Furthermore, Sudan's authorities and some UN Security Council members were against increasing the protection elements of UNITAMS both during its creation and subsequently after the coup. UNITAMS was closed in February 2024 by the Security Council, after the warring parties had ceased cooperating with it and removed host-state consent.

The UK has played a leading role in tackling harmful norms and practices, including female genital mutilation and child marriage

- 3.41 The UK has sought to tackle FGM and child marriage in Sudan through two generations of programming: the Sudan Free of Genital Mutilation (SFFGM) programme phases 1 and 2, with a planned investment of £32 million over ten years from 2016 (see **Box 12**).

Box 12: The Sudan Free of Genital Mutilation (SFFGM) programme

Through two phases of the Sudan Free of Genital Mutilation programme, the UK has funded interventions to combat female genital mutilation, child marriage and GBV through long-term, locally grounded action.

Phase 1 SFFGM (2016 to 2022, approximately £12 million), focused on community norm change, legal reform and institutional capacity building. The UK worked with UN partners and civil society to promote awareness, train midwives and legal actors, and support the 2020 criminalisation of FGM in Sudan.

Phase 2 SFFGM2 (2019 to 2026, approximately £20 million, via UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO) focused on scaling up services and strengthening systems. Support has included survivor care, health worker training and law enforcement, with services reaching hundreds of thousands of women and girls, despite escalating conflict conditions.

- 3.42 Since 2016, the two SFFGM programmes have helped promote a range of legal and institutional reforms, as well as social and cultural changes. The programmes have promoted open discussion on FGM among young people, including in national forums, although they have been less successful in having communities publicly commit to abandoning FGM practices. Key networks and civil society groups working on FGM at national and state level, as well as individual health practitioners, have been supported in their efforts. Girls' clubs have been established across the country, providing safe spaces for girls, as well as places for community dialogue, engagement and advocacy on FGM and child marriage. Training and capacity-building workshops have been held for local stakeholders and service providers.
- 3.43 Sudan's national health and social welfare policies and action plans now integrate FGM-related measures – a remarkable achievement given the political change and high turnover of Sudanese officials over the review period. In addition, FGM was criminalised in 2020 – a significant milestone, to which UK-funded advocacy campaigns contributed.
- 3.44 The programmes have also enabled the UK to build strong local partnerships, particularly with civil society organisations and women-led groups. These relationships remain an important resource, with the potential to serve as platforms for continued advocacy, service delivery and influence during the conflict.
- 3.45 The SFFGM programmes have played a leading role in efforts to tackle harmful social norms and have helped to promote legal reforms, strengthen services, encourage social change and reduce prevalence rates – although there are strong concerns that the conflict has led to those gains being reduced or reversed. UK staff and experts interviewed for this review were clear that continued donor investment combined with sustained national and localised commitment would be required if FGM is to be eliminated in Sudan.
- 3.46 In practice, UK investment in this area has trended upwards since 2016, but the scale-up has been constrained by UK aid budget reductions. The budget was reduced by 47% in 2021–22, to £1 million, and planned expenditure of £5.5 million in 2022–23 was reduced to £3.8 million. These budget reductions were controversial within FCDO, with many staff seeing this as a flagship UK initiative that should have been protected. The budget then increased in 2023–24 to £4.6 million, but is forecast to fall back to £3.6 million in 2024–25. The longer-term funding outlook remains uncertain, although FCDO informs us that the upcoming business case will include funding for GBV prevention.

3.47 In the conflict period (April 2023 onwards), the programme has pivoted its activities towards a broader focus on CRSV. While advocacy and policy engagement on FGM has been curtailed, the programme has expanded into new geographical areas to help provide services to displaced women affected by CRSV through medical and psychosocial support (including treatment of FGM complications). This was an appropriate shift of emphasis, given the extent of CRSV. The UK remains in dialogue with SFFGM2 partners, notably UNICEF, on the future of the programme.

The UK has worked to promote women's participation in political dialogue and peace processes, but its objectives have not been matched by sustained and sufficient resources

- 3.48 During the transition period (2019-21), the UK supported the capacity of women and women-led organisations to participate in Sudan's transitional government. Under the Sudan Stability and Growth Programme, the UK supported women's political participation through training, coalition building and advocacy. The UK's activities during this period were well aligned with the goals of the UK's International Women and Girls Strategy (adopted later in 2023) – in particular, the objectives on protecting and supporting women leaders, activists, human rights defenders and peacebuilders, to enable their safe and meaningful participation in decision making.
- 3.49 When mechanisms for the inclusion of civilians, including women, in national political processes broke down in the lead-up to and following the military coup, the UK shifted its focus to the subnational level, funding national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to support coalitions of women's groups across the Darfur region and Blue Nile state to develop a collaborative agenda on women's rights, political participation, peace and security. This work, however, was affected by funding reductions: as part of the 2022-23 budget reductions, support to UN Women for building the capacity of women-led organisations was halted, as was support for women's civil society organisations, envisaged as interlocutors for engaging with the wider Sudanese public.
- 3.50 During the crisis period (since April 2023), the UK has continued to strengthen women's participation in the pro-democracy movement. For example, it has funded an embedded gender adviser for the Tagadom coalition, which was an alliance of anti-war political and civil society actors before it split in 2025. These efforts have helped keep women's inclusion on the agenda and have been widely welcomed as laying the groundwork for future progress on the UN Women, Peace and Security agenda.³³ Stakeholders, including other donors, emphasised that the UK is well placed to lead in this area, given its strong partnerships, but that its efforts would benefit from greater scale.
- 3.51 Despite these positive actions, investment in female-led mediation and peacebuilding remains limited – from both the UK and the wider international community. Structural barriers persist to women's active engagement in peace processes, and opportunities for women to influence formal negotiations have been missed. Many Sudanese women interviewed for this review felt that visible advocacy from the UK and other international partners had not been matched by sustained support. As one civil society leader put it: "There are many speeches, but no specific support." Without more deliberate, sustained support, and efforts to track real-world impact of interventions, there is a risk that peace efforts will exclude women and will fail to address the gendered drivers, impacts and after-effects of conflict and women's needs during these periods.

The UK funds women-led organisations through intermediaries, which has helped build their capacity and amplify women's voices, but this approach has limitations for sustainability, value for money and genuine partnership

- 3.52 The UK has supported women-led organisations (WLOs) – a commitment under the International Women and Girls Strategy – mainly through intermediaries such as UNICEF. This is also the case in the ongoing humanitarian response, where partners are encouraged to integrate WLOs into their delivery models.

33 Sudan adopted its first [Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan](#) in March 2020, for the period 2020–22.

- 3.53 While this support has helped build capacity and amplify women's voices, WLOs are generally positioned as downstream partners, delivering activities chosen by others, thereby limiting their ability to shape priorities and programme design. Sudanese stakeholders note that this reduces sustainability and value for money. Local stakeholders requested that the UK complement its funding through intermediaries with more direct engagement with and funding for WLOs, including in the diaspora, to enhance their resilience and impact.
- 3.54 Reductions to governance and human rights funding following the coup hurt WLOs. According to Sudanese interlocutors, this in turn reduced the UK's visibility and impact on gender topics. In general, WLOs in Sudan do not feel that women and girls' issues are adequately prioritised in the international response.

Aid statistics suggest that gender equality has been mainstreamed within the Sudan programme

- 3.55 Successive reductions to UK aid between 2020 and 2022 have impacted programming for women and girls in Sudan. According to international aid statistics, UK aid programmes incorporating gender equality as a principal or significant goal (hereafter, 'gender equality-focused programming', see [Box 10](#)) fell from \$169.6 million (£126.1 million) in 2020 to \$35.8 million (£26.6 million) in 2022, before recovering to \$54.2 million (£40.2 million) in 2023 (the last year of available statistics).³⁴ However, as a share of the total Sudan budget, gender equality-focused programming has remained consistently high, at 91% in both 2020 and 2023, and rising to 98.5% in 2022, when total UK aid was at its lowest. This is well above the average among OECD-DAC donors in Sudan, which fell from 50.7% in 2020 to 38.7% in 2023, although it is important to note that donor reporting against the marker is inconsistent. There are also inconsistencies in the way that UK aid to Sudan has been coded against the gender marker, raising questions about the reliability of the data.
- 3.56 Overall, the figures suggest that gender equality has been mainstreamed across the portfolio, with 80% of British Office Sudan (BOS) bilateral aid programming, and a higher proportion of the expenditure, consistently marked as gender equality-focused. In governance and development work, gender-sensitive approaches were incorporated from early stages, to ensure that issues affecting women and girls were addressed within broader state-building and service delivery initiatives. In particular, the UK was influential in shaping the approach taken by the World Bank-managed Sudan Transition and Recovery Support Trust Fund (see [Box 3](#)). The UK also made efforts to promote women's inclusion in community development committees, which were created to select local development priorities for international support.
- 3.57 In the humanitarian sphere, in addition to the protection initiatives discussed above, there has been a focus on supporting women through cash-based assistance and vouchers through the World Food Programme (WFP) – the primary form of women's economic empowerment found in the Sudan programme. Following initial difficulties in reaching women with this assistance, a culturally specific gender strategy was created, which included prioritising pregnant and nursing women at service points and targeted communication to encourage the inclusion of women from polygamous households. As a result, over 50% of the 2.6 million people reached with cash and food assistance between July 2022 and September 2023 through the World Bank-repurposed funding to WFP have been women – and, in West and Central Darfur, over 80% of cash recipients were women.³⁵
- 3.58 The UK has also undertaken a range of other activities to support the mainstreaming of gender equality. It has contributed to data collection and analysis on gender issues. Tools such as the Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker – a platform designed to monitor government commitments, track policy implementation and expose gaps in transparency – helped partners better understand how

34 ICAI calculations based on figures from OECD Data Explorer, '[GenderMarkers: Aid \(ODA\) activities targeting gender equality and women's empowerment](#)' (accessed 7 October 2025). Data is calculated using the following categories: UK donor data for bilateral allocable aid, all sectors, to Sudan, 2019-2023, counting disbursements in constant prices.

35 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[Sudan Economic Impact and Reform Programme Annual Review 2023](#)', May 2024

government policies affect women and girls. Combined with technical assistance via the World Bank, this has enabled more gender-aware policy dialogue and planning. Current humanitarian interventions, such as support via the cash consortium (a partnership of Sudanese and international NGOs that provides life-saving assistance and livelihoods through cash) has also made use of this data in identifying gender-specific needs.

- 3.59 While gender equality objectives have been mainstreamed in BOS programmes, there is relatively little data available on concrete outcomes for Sudanese women and girls. The gender marker data does not tell us anything about the effectiveness of programmes achieving gender-focused objectives. We do not have sufficient evidence to allow us to assess if a mainstreaming approach to achieving gender objectives, considering the highly gendered nature of the Sudan conflict, is an effective approach to supporting better results for women and girls. The structural barriers hindering their ability to access UK-supported services and the entrenched exclusion of women from decision making in Sudan has made it difficult for UK programmes to advance gender equality-focused objectives. While gender is included in many programme designs, it is rarely prioritised strategically or delivered at a scale that might contribute to systemic change.
- 3.60 Recent announcements about further budget reductions and changing strategic priorities for UK aid have raised doubts about the future of the UK's programming targeting gender equality.³⁶ Amid global backsliding on gender equality, many stakeholders interviewed for this review pointed to a widening gap between the support offered by the UK and other international partners and the level of sustained investment required to deliver results. Given the centrality of gender to the Sudan crisis, this widening gap has the potential to undermine the goals of the UK and other development partners in Sudan.

Has the UK demonstrated genuine partnership through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding the impact on neighbouring countries?

"We will work with others, in good faith, to build genuine partnership, underpinned by our respect for other governments, organisations, communities, and individuals."

Anneliese Dodds, '[Minister for Development speech at Chatham House](#)', October 2024

Setting the scene

- 3.61 Several UK strategies and statements have placed partnership at the heart of UK development cooperation, committing to move away from a traditional donor-recipient model towards partnerships based on patience, mutual respect, equity and local ownership.³⁷ The UK has routinely highlighted the need for localisation, broadly defined as the process by which international development actors support local leadership, for example through the transfer of power, including control of resources. This section looks at how these principles have been applied in the context of the Sudan crisis.
- 3.62 During the transition period, the UK worked with the civilian-led administration and with a range of non-government partners to support the restoration of the democratic process. It also used its partnership with the World Bank to shape international support for Sudan's economic reforms. Following the 2021 coup, it recalibrated its approach to partnership, suspending direct support to the de facto authorities while intensifying engagement with civil society, women-led organisations and local peace efforts. The 2022–2025 Country Business Plan emphasised Sudanese leadership in shaping the country's recovery, with the UK seeking to position itself as a respectful and responsive partner.

36 International Development Committee, '[Oral evidence: The development work of the FCDO](#)' (viewed on 15 September 2025)

37 Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[International development in a contested world: ending extreme poverty and tackling climate change. A white paper on international development](#)', November 2023; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[The UK government's strategy for international development](#)', August 2023; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world](#)', March 2023

- 3.63 Since the outbreak of conflict, the UK has worked through or with a range of multilateral channels and groupings, such as the Troika and Quad, African-led efforts via the AU and the subregional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and UN institutions. Operationally, the UK has supported INGOs, UN agencies, the World Bank and the International Committee of the Red Cross in delivering frontline assistance and protection (see [Figure 7](#)).
- 3.64 The current partnership landscape in Sudan is complex. Formal governance is fragmented, with control of Sudan split between different warring parties with varying (but consistently low) levels of governing structures in place. International partners, including the UK, work with multiple international, national and local actors to deliver humanitarian assistance. At community level, Emergency Response Rooms coordinate much of the life-saving local relief. Local organisations, including Muslim charitable networks and the Sudanese Red Crescent (active in all 18 states), play key roles in the negotiation of humanitarian access, including facilitating UN operations in areas inaccessible to international staff.

Box 13: Key partners in UK support for governance reform, peace and security

The UK's support to governance in Sudan was primarily conducted through the Sudan Stability and Growth Programme (SSGP), which aimed to (i) support political processes and address drivers of instability; (ii) support the inclusion of civilian actors in political dialogue; and (iii) strengthen communications among Sudanese groups (see Annex 2 for a summary of SSGP objectives). Over the review period, this support reached a range of state and non-state actors, including Sudanese think tanks, universities, professional associations, trade unions, journalists and resistance committees.

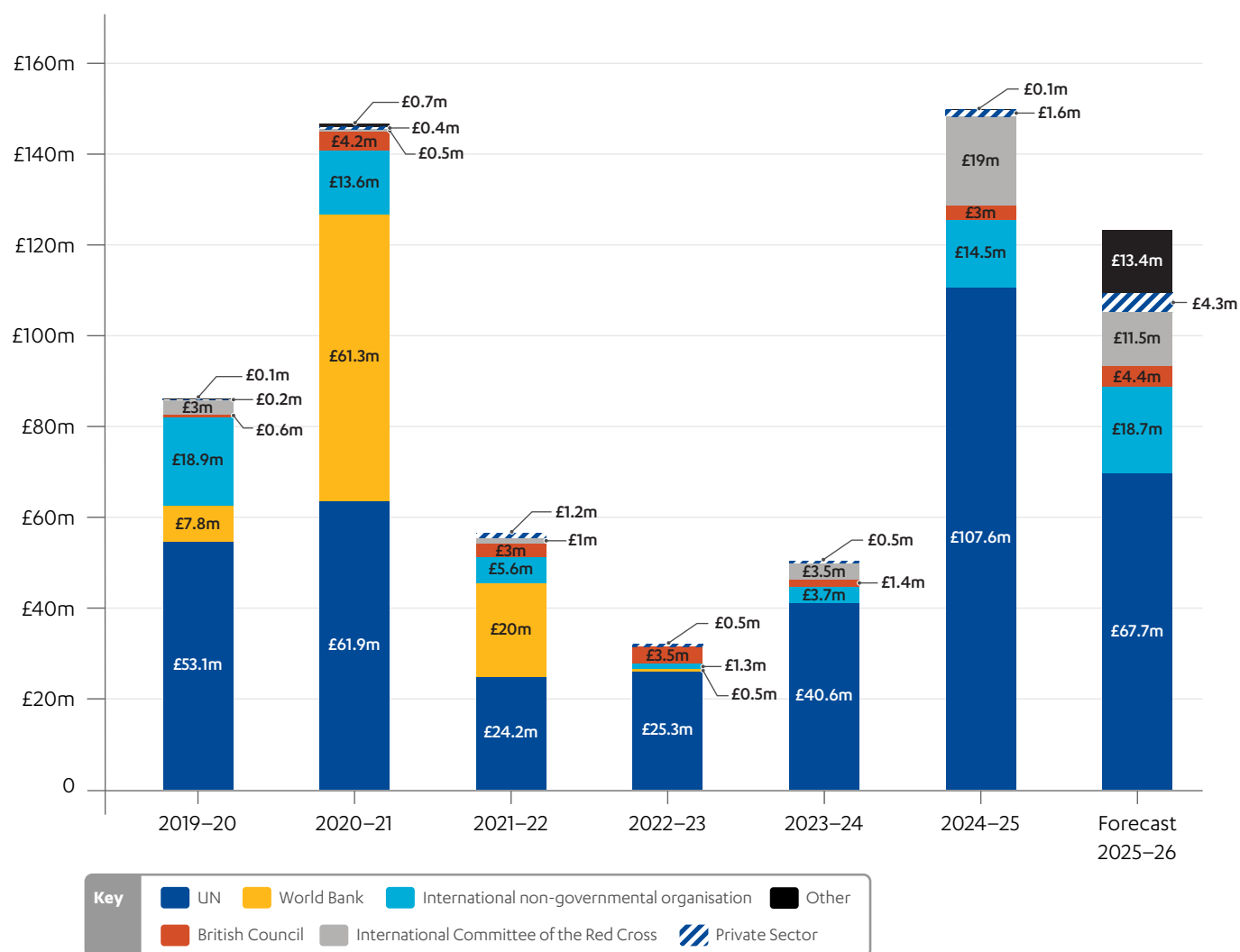
Support to the civilian-led transitional government: Before the 2021 military coup, the UK funded engagement with Sudanese public sector institutions (for example, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning) to support economic and governance reforms. Initial support focused on expanding the government's social safety net, building delivery capacity in basic services such as water, and supporting the development of a national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. Working through international and national NGOs, the UK also supported the Sudanese Prime Minister's Office and government communications officers to promote channels of dialogue between government and civil society. However, by 2021, hopes for citizen involvement in the transition had been frustrated by a lack of adequate state-citizen engagement mechanisms, and UK support increasingly focused on building the capacity of civil society groups to engage in specific policy arenas or subnational governance reforms.

Support to civil society actors: During the period of transitional government, the UK supported the Sudanese Professionals Association and other trade unions with significant citizen mobilising power, leading to successful reforms of trade union and civil society laws. The UK also supported civil society-government collaboration on public health security during the COVID-19 pandemic and citizen-state dialogue at the subnational level, including in Darfur, Blue Nile, Khartoum and Kassala, Red Sea, River Nile, Sinnar and North Kordofan states.

After the 2021 military coup, the UK continued to support consultations between diverse civilian groups, including workshops organised by the Sudanese Bar Association in the lead-up to its publication of a draft transitional constitution framework document in September 2022, which formed the basis of the landmark Political Agreement signed in December 2022.

Following the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, UK funding provided logistical support for a civilian conference in Addis Ababa in October 2023, which led to the launch of the Coordination for Civilian Democratic Forces (Tagadom), a pro-democracy and anti-war umbrella group. Over the review period, the UK also provided significant support for capacity building and knowledge sharing to improve the transparency of political processes, including training for economists and journalists to counter disinformation, and research through the Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker.

Figure 7: UK bilateral official development assistance disbursements in Sudan by partner organisation



Source: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, ‘Sudan spend 2019–2025’, September 2025, unpublished

Description: The UK’s biggest partner by spend is the UN, receiving £56.1million in 2019–20 (63% of total bilateral spend), £61.9 million in 2020–21 (43% of spend), £24.2 million in 2021–22 (44% of spend), £25.3 million in 2022–23 (81% of spend), £40.6 million in 2023–24 (82% of spend), £107.6 million in 2024–25 (75% of spend), and forecasted to receive £67.7 million in 2025–26 (56% of spend). The World Bank received 43% in 2020–21 and 36% in 2021–22, and funding to international non-governmental organisations ranged from 23% in 2019–20 to 4% in 2022–23.

Notes: ‘Other’ includes in-house programme-funded roles and unallocated spend.

Key findings

Skilled and trusted international and national FCDO staff have been key to the UK’s credibility, relationships and influence in a complex political context

3.65 The UK’s credibility on the Sudan conflict with partners in Sudan, the region and globally has been strongly reinforced by the calibre and consistency of its personnel. Across the transition (2019–21) and coup (2021–April 2023) periods and the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis, the UK’s personnel were widely recognised by stakeholders interviewed for this review for their deep expertise, professionalism and commitment. Their trusted presence has helped sustain constructive relationships and shape coherent international messaging, particularly during moments of political uncertainty and diplomatic complexity.

3.66 For example, during the transition (2019–21), it was the diplomatic skill and credibility of the UK's Sudan team (UK and Sudanese staff) that enabled them to play a leading role in advancing Sudan's economic reform agenda, navigating sensitive political dynamics and building consensus among international partners. In the period since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, British Office Sudan (BOS), Chad and South Sudan teams continued to be recognised for their agility, contextual depth and professionalism. This human capital has been a quiet but central pillar of UK influence in an unstable and fast-moving environment.

The decision to terminate most Sudanese staff after the evacuation of the embassy from Khartoum weakened UK engagement with national and subnational actors

3.67 Before the evacuation of Khartoum in April 2023, country-based staff (CBS) – locally hired staff working for FCDO and governed by local labour laws – played a central role in the Sudan programme, handling nearly all programme management and providing key political and technical input and contextual knowledge, particularly in economic resilience programming. FCDO opted to terminate most Sudanese staff on CBS contracts following the evacuation, citing a range of legal and operational reasons for doing so. For a small number of staff on CBS contracts in key advisory and programme roles, FCDO exceptionally allowed these staff to work from other countries for a period (International Remote Working), albeit after a protracted internal process and agreement from HM Treasury. BOS made significant and sustained efforts to retain these key staff, within the constraints of the visa rules of the third countries that BOS had relocated to and the UK government's own human resource rules regarding remote working. It was not successful in this endeavour. By contrast, some other donors were able to retain staff within Sudan or relocate them to safe countries. This decision resulted in a loss of institutional memory and contextual knowledge, and affected the UK's capacity to engage effectively at both national and subnational levels.

3.68 This loss had tangible consequences. It weakened the delivery of more complex programming and reduced UK credibility at a time when sustained presence and engagement were vital. Operationally, the decision placed additional strain on the remaining team members, who spent significant time completing programme management tasks as well as identifying options to fill staffing gaps. It also had ethical implications for FCDO as an employer.

3.69 This experience carries lessons for other contexts. Similar staffing models and human resource management systems are in place in neighbouring countries such as Chad and South Sudan, yet the challenges encountered in Sudan do not appear to have been addressed in their business continuity plans. Without adjustments, there is a risk that future evacuations or security disruptions will trigger the same challenges for retaining country-based staff.

British Office Sudan remains significantly under-resourced and overstretched, with insufficient staffing and support to match ministerial ambition

3.70 Despite its centrality to one of the UK's top foreign aid priorities, BOS (see [Box 2](#)) is under-resourced, relative to the scale and complexity of the crisis and to ministerial ambition. FCDO has asked ICAI not to publish staff numbers, in line with standard practice. Although ICAI was not able to obtain precise figures for other UK comparator countries, staffing for the Sudan situation does appear to be low in comparison, and staff report that rigid human resource policies and a shortage of experienced staff are constraining delivery capacity and therefore results.

3.71 While FCDO has increased its Sudan capacity in London, BOS (currently located in Addis Ababa and Nairobi) continues to operate under significant pressure. Surge mechanisms like the Temporary Deployments Overseas and Directorate Flexible Resource have not proved able to provide sufficient staff with expertise appropriate to Sudan's complex needs – a challenge also noted in other fragile and conflict-affected states, including South Sudan. There is currently a shortage of expert advisers and programme management staff available for redeployment to help teams like BOS that face sudden capacity gaps, or to deploy as part of the usual recruitment cycle. FCDO's agility model has also yet to demonstrate added value in this environment (see [Box 14](#)).

Box 14: Adapting systems and processes to fast evolving environments

FCDO's Temporary Deployments Overseas is a surge mechanism that allows short-term deployment of UK civil servants into business-critical roles overseas for up to 12 months to fill an unexpected resourcing gap or undertake a short-term assignment. FCDO's Directorate Flexible Resource also enables short-term deployment of staff who are between substantive roles. FCDO acknowledges that these mechanisms are not always able to deliver staff with the right expertise to fill critical needs.

FCDO's 'agility model' is a reform aimed at further simplifying operations across its global network, featuring a single unified budget, integrated finance/HR systems, and streamlined decision-making processes. It is designed to enhance responsiveness to emerging crises like Sudan.

- 3.72 At the time of evidence gathering for this review, staff wellbeing remained a serious concern. BOS's senior leadership had taken steps to raise awareness of wellbeing issues, including through the provision of individual counselling, group welfare sessions, monitoring of wellbeing levels and flexible work arrangements. However, according to staff, this support had not always been adequate to the pressures they have faced, which impacted morale and long-term sustainability.
- 3.73 Further, this is a protracted conflict that demands continuity and expertise. Short duty tours mean frequent staff turnover, and slow recruitment creates frequent gaps. With few current team members having been present in Khartoum before the 2023 evacuation, there is a risk of loss of institutional memory. The loss of Sudanese staff, who could have helped retain knowledge and context-specific insight, compounds this risk. These challenges are not unique and offer lessons for neighbouring countries and other fragile contexts.

The UK has played a strong coordinating role with international partners, but strategic coordination and collective donor action amid a humanitarian funding crisis is weak

- 3.74 The UK has historically played an active and constructive role in the coordination of international diplomatic efforts on Sudan, particularly through platforms such as the Troika and Quad (see [Box 5](#)). The UK has also shown positive leadership within donor coordination platforms, including in Chad and South Sudan, helping align international approaches on famine early warning, humanitarian access, protection and the delivery of essential services. This collaborative posture has amplified the reach of UK funding and built goodwill with key partners.
- 3.75 However, the scale of the conflict – especially given shrinking global aid budgets – requires a much more coordinated and strategic response across donors. Stakeholders noted that donor coordination efforts have not kept pace with escalating needs, and that risks of duplication, competition and diminished influence are rising. While UK alignment with the other major donors, such as ECHO, is welcome, the UK now has an opportunity to step up and lead joint strategic planning to help navigate the impact of global funding reductions and minimise the risk of programme disruption.

During the transition (2019–21), the UK built effective partnerships to advance Sudan's economic recovery

- 3.76 During Sudan's transition (2019–21), the UK played a leading role in supporting economic recovery by shaping engagement and partnership with international financial institutions. It also helped form a coalition of 11 donors to establish the World Bank-administered Multi-Donor Trust Fund (see [Box 3](#)). At the World Bank, the UK has successfully advocated for INGOs (not just UN agencies) to be eligible for direct contracting during the conflict period (April 2023 onwards), challenging the UN's default delivery role and pushing for more efficient, competitive approaches on the ground.

The UK has shown consistent commitment to multilateralism by supporting UN processes, but its influence, along with others, has not been enough to overcome challenges affecting UN performance

- 3.77 The UK has demonstrated a consistent commitment to multilateralism in Sudan by supporting the UN through funding, diplomacy and operational collaboration. The UK has also worked with the AU, notably in co-hosting the London Sudan Conference (see **Box 6**). It has worked closely with UN agencies and partners on the ground, recognising the UN's central and irreplaceable role in the Sudan conflict and humanitarian response, by funding strategic roles within the UN system (such as for civil-military coordination), and by engaging consistently both at country level and with UN headquarters in New York to improve performance. The UK also continues to advocate behind closed doors for increased UN humanitarian access, greater UN focus on protection and a more coordinated response across the system.
- 3.78 However, despite sustained UK investment and diplomatic pressure from the UK and other donors, UN performance in Sudan has often fallen short – particularly on protection, access negotiations and international staff presence in hard-to-reach areas, recognising that some of these issues are beyond the UN's control. While recent improvements linked to global reform efforts have been promising, progress remains uneven and the UN's limited operational footprint in Sudan continues to constrain impact. Recognising the need for a step change in UN performance, the UK has sought to enhance agency effectiveness by leveraging its influence in-country and in New York, with UK staff pushing for greater accountability, expanded access and more responsive delivery. However, stakeholders noted that these efforts have yet to yield meaningful improvements, and concerns remain about the UN's ability to meet the scale and urgency of the crisis.

The UK is seen as a technically strong and responsive partner by its funded delivery partners, but short funding cycles, limited transparency and delays in approvals have undermined predictability and impact

- 3.79 UK-funded partners across Sudan, South Sudan and Chad consistently praised the technical expertise, flexibility and professionalism of the UK's personnel, which helped sustain delivery and strong partnerships in highly challenging contexts. Funded partners also agree that administrative requirements for grants are generally proportionate and manageable.
- 3.80 However, partners expressed concern about short project cycles and reliance on incremental, top-up funding, which constrain strategic planning, limit collaboration among partners and reduce overall impact. While the 2025-26 allocation of £120 million to Sudan was announced after the UK's decision to move to an overall aid budget of 0.3% of GNI, multiple episodes of uncertainty around future aid levels have undermined the UK's reputation as a reliable partner. Several partners called for more transparent communication on funding decisions and greater involvement in programme design and adaptation. Delay in funding approvals was also flagged as a barrier to agility.
- 3.81 In addition, insecurity in Sudan has limited the UK's ability to oversee its funded partners. While a third-party monitoring arrangement is in place, it is compliance-focused and does not focus on learning or outcomes. There is a need for more evaluation to look at outcomes, alongside the third-party monitoring. FCDO acknowledged that there is limited coordination and information sharing of monitoring results across donors, an area where the UK could show more leadership.

Despite stated political ambition, the UK's cautious approach to localisation and limited resources constrain the full potential of local partnerships

- 3.82 The UK government has made commitments to locally led development, including the former Foreign Secretary's stated ambition to accelerate localisation.³⁸ However, these political aspirations have yet to translate into a step change in practice in Sudan. Across Sudan, local actors – particularly first responders like Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms – remain under-supported. These groups often have the capacity to provide more cost-effective and contextually grounded responses than international partners but face significant barriers to accessing funding due to stringent UK compliance requirements. Several partners noted that these compliance demands put pressure on agile community actors to become "mini-INGOs" in order to access UK funds, undermining their unique strengths and flexibility.
- 3.83 FCDO generally finds it difficult to allocate funds directly to local humanitarian responders. Its due diligence processes (for example, checking that partners have systems in place to protect against fraud and breach of terrorist financing rules) are onerous, and managing multiple small contracts with local organisations is administratively burdensome. The UK therefore generally chooses to work through intermediary organisations, which subcontract or manage grants to local partners. In Sudan, it supports the [Sudan Humanitarian Fund](#) (SHF), which in 2024 channelled 37.5% of its funding through local actors. However, the SHF itself has onerous eligibility requirements. Partners have to be nominated through the UN-managed coordination system ([the cluster system](#)) and then individually assessed for compliance with SHF requirements by the UN. As a result, they usually participate as subcontractors to UN organisations or INGOs. Of the \$325 million allocated to SHF partners since 2023, only \$5 million (or 1.5%) has been allocated directly to local partners without passing through intermediaries.³⁹
- 3.84 As a consequence, the UK commitment to localisation has not translated into more predictable or better-quality funding for local partners in Sudan. The UK funding that reaches them is generally for small-scale, short-term projects, at the end of long subcontracting chains. This is unlikely to boost their capacity or lead to better targeting of humanitarian assistance. In an environment where international partners face severe access constraints, this is a missed opportunity to make use of the comparative advantage of local partners.
- 3.85 The UK Sudan team noted that they approach localisation in a conflict-sensitive way, aiming to 'do no harm' and avoid inadvertently fuelling tensions, putting local stakeholders in harm's way or undermining fragile local capacities. While this intention was recognised by external partners as thoughtful and principled, it has also hampered progress on localisation, beyond a couple of pilots – particularly in comparison to the US approach, before the closure of USAID. The US approach to localisation benefited from significantly greater staffing resources, a higher risk tolerance and strong institutional backing through USAID, enabling more flexible funding models and a faster shift towards direct support for local actors. In contrast, the UK's localisation efforts are being advanced with far fewer dedicated personnel and under more stringent compliance expectations, which limit speed and agility. In this context, many partners encouraged the UK to better align its ambitions with the practical enablers – such as staffing, flexibility and risk appetite – needed to turn its commitments into meaningful localisation.

38 The UK is party to a large number of commitments and frameworks that promote better-quality partnerships and local leaderships, including the following: 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness; 2016 Humanitarian Grand Bargain; 2021 OECD-DAC Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance, which includes a call to 'Promote and invest in the leadership of local civil society actors in partner countries or territories'; Global Commission on Adaptation 2021 Principles for Locally Led Adaptation; Call to Action on Protection from GBV in Emergencies, which committed the UK to facilitating the systematic and meaningful participation of women-led organisations as both agents of change and leaders in humanitarian action.

39 Figures sourced from [UN Country Based Pooled Funds Data Hub](#) (accessed 1 August 2025)

Despite clear interest from Sudanese communities, the UK has not consistently engaged diaspora groups, missing opportunities to strengthen its insight, influence and impact

3.86 Sudanese diaspora groups interviewed for this review expressed a strong desire for deeper engagement with the UK, viewing themselves as important partners in responding to the conflict. Diaspora members can offer unique contextual knowledge, community networks and advocacy reach that could strengthen UK insight, influence and programme relevance by addressing gaps in agency, relevance, and resourcing.⁴⁰ However, engagement with the diaspora, including women's groups, has been inconsistent and largely ad hoc, limiting the UK's ability to harness their contributions effectively. While UK staff recognise the potential of partnership with diaspora communities, they also noted that insufficient staffing capacity has constrained the UK's ability to consult, coordinate or act on diaspora perspectives in a sustained way. This represents a missed opportunity to draw on diverse perspectives and local knowledge to inform the UK approach.

Has the UK delivered, contributed to and supported an effective humanitarian response post-April 2023 both in Sudan and regarding refugee flows into neighbouring countries?

"We must also work together for peace in Sudan and a proper response to the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today."

Prime Minister Keir Starmer, [United Nations General Assembly Speech](#), 26 September 2024

Setting the scene

- 3.87 The UK approach to humanitarian aid is set out in the '[UK humanitarian framework](#)', published by the previous government in November 2022. Its core objectives are to prioritise assistance to those in greatest need, to protect those most at risk, and to anticipate and prevent future crises by building resilience and tackling the drivers of conflict, instability and food insecurity. It pledges the UK to providing "principled assistance", protecting vulnerable groups (including displaced people, women and girls, and people with disabilities), applying international humanitarian, human rights and refugee legal frameworks, and advocating for human access and the protection of civilians, including within the UN Security Council.
- 3.88 While Sudan has received international humanitarian assistance for more than 20 years, the scale of need since the outbreak of armed conflict in April 2023 is unprecedented. Civilians have borne the brunt of the violence, leading to the world's single largest internal displacement crisis.⁴¹ Nearly two-thirds of the population now requires humanitarian assistance, including 16 million children.⁴² Food insecurity has reached critical levels, with famine conditions confirmed in several areas and millions on the brink of starvation. The crisis is further exacerbated by disease outbreaks and persistent drought. Women and girls face conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) on a huge scale, and more than 12.1 million people are in need of protection services such as child protection and gender-based violence prevention and response.⁴³ The continuing conflict creates severe access challenges for humanitarian actors, while ongoing funding shortfalls impede the delivery of life-saving aid to those most in need.
- 3.89 Refugee flows and other spillover effects (such as disruption to trade and food markets) have spread the humanitarian crisis into neighbouring countries, including Chad and South Sudan, both of which also had pre-existing humanitarian needs. The UK humanitarian response to the Sudan crisis therefore covers programming inside Sudan and in neighbouring countries.

40 See the discussion in Martin Russell, '[Diaspora Engagement in Transition Assistance: Bolstering Local Resources and Agency](#)', IFIT Policy Brief, August 2025

41 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, '[Sudan Emergency](#)' (viewed on 31 July 2025)

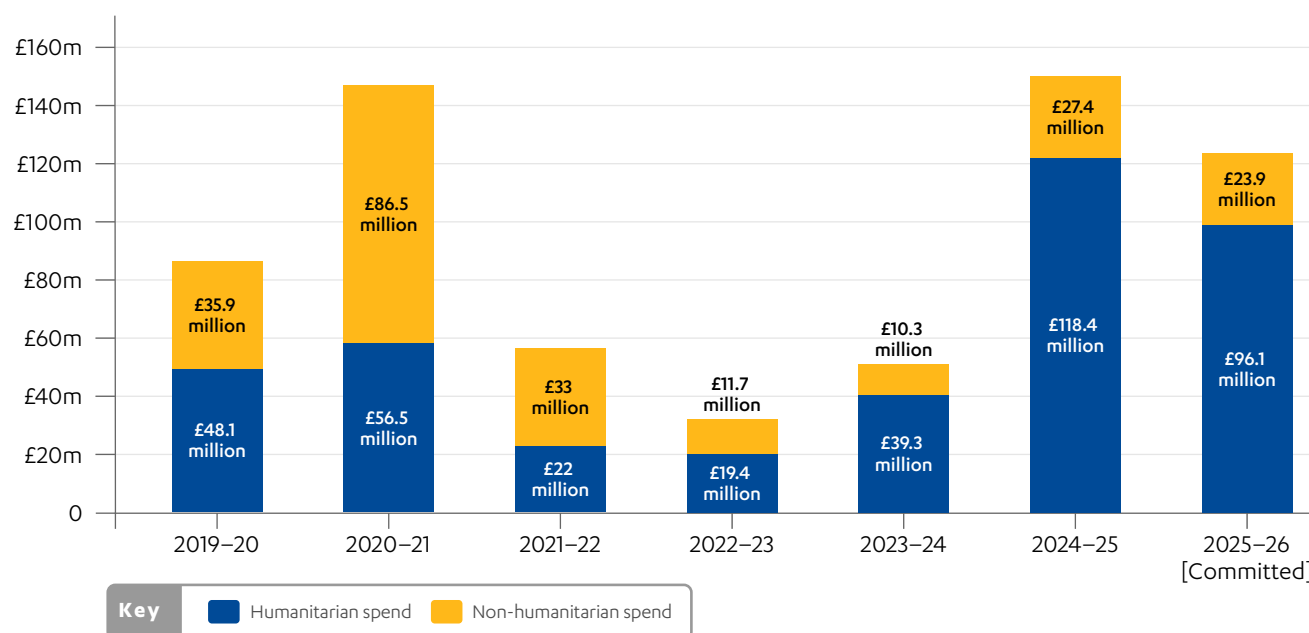
42 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, '[Southern and Eastern Africa: Sudan](#)' (viewed on 17 July 2025)

43 United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, '[Southern and Eastern Africa: Sudan](#)', 2025 (viewed on 17 July 2025)

- 3.90 Within Sudan, the UK's humanitarian support is funded through a single programme, the [Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response \(SHPR\)](#) programme, which began operations three months before the outbreak of large-scale conflict in April 2023. The majority of the funding has gone to multilateral agencies, along with some INGOs, and more recently, small amounts of funding through intermediaries to local partners. It includes support to the UN-managed [Sudan Humanitarian Fund](#) (SHF), which allocates funding to a range of partners, including local actors. The UK has directed its funding towards priority sectors, including food security, protection and cash transfers (see [Box 15](#)).
- 3.91 **Figure 8** below shows levels of UK funding for humanitarian support inside Sudan since 2019. Humanitarian funding was around £50 million in 2019–20 and 2020–21, fell by more than half in the next two years in line with UK aid budget reductions, before rising sharply after April 2023.

Figure 8: UK bilateral humanitarian spend in Sudan

Column chart showing UK bilateral humanitarian and non-humanitarian spend in Sudan, 2019–20 to 2024–25, with committed rather than actual spend for 2025–26



Source: Compiled from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2019–2020](#)', July 2020; '[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2020–2021](#)', September 2021; '[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2021–2022](#)', July 2022; '[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2022–2023](#)', July 2023; '[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2023–2024](#)', July 2024; '[FCDO Annual Report and Accounts 2024–2025](#)', July 2025; and 2025–26 data supplied to ICAI by FCDO.

Description: The chart shows how UK humanitarian assistance to Sudan fell from £56.5 million in 2020–21 to £19.4 million in 2022–23 and then increased rapidly to £118.4 million in 2024–25.

Box 15: UK headline humanitarian results

Humanitarian results are primarily reported in terms of the numbers of people reached through different types of humanitarian support. Since its launch in early 2023, the UK's [Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response \(SHPR\)](#) programme has reported the following results:

- Through the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, over 1 million people in hard-to-reach areas (Darfur, Kordofan, Khartoum and Blue Nile states) were reached with multisectoral support and 345,895 people were reached with protection and GBV-related interventions.
- Through the Protection Consortium, over 1,000 local groups and NGOs were trained on humanitarian protection, and over 7,000 people were provided with legal assistance.
- Via UNICEF, over 744,000 people were provided with access to basic water services and over 98,000 children under five with severe acute malnutrition were admitted for treatment.
- Via ICRC, a range of health facilities and hospitals in frontline and conflict-affected areas were supported, providing trauma care to the wounded. Cash assistance was provided to over 71,000 vulnerable individuals, including victims of International Humanitarian Law violations, people with disabilities and IDPs.
- Through WFP and the Cash Consortium, more than 229,000 food insecure people were reached with cash vouchers and/or in-kind food assistance.

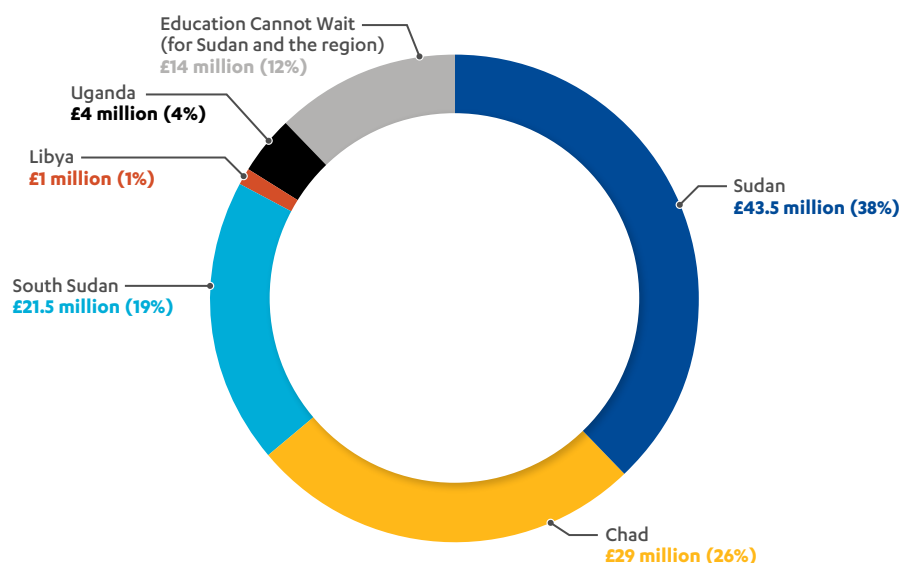
Actual results are likely higher, as the reporting cycle means these results do not reflect activities supported through the November 2024 uplift.

Source: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, '[Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response Programme Annual Review 2025](#)', January 2025

- 3.92 In South Sudan, the UK has a large and long-standing humanitarian response, pre-dating the outbreak of war in neighbouring Sudan. Immediate humanitarian relief is balanced with programmes aimed at delivering basic services (health, nutrition and education) and building resilience. The [South Sudan Humanitarian and Resilience Programme \(SSHARP\)](#) is the primary vehicle for the UK's humanitarian response, and includes support for data collection and analysis, rapid response tools and cholera response. In South Sudan, humanitarian actors have agreed to follow a delivery model based on vulnerability, rather than status (that is, as a refugee, returnee or host community member). Care is taken by donors, including the UK, to maintain a 'do no harm approach', ensuring that funding does not aggravate tensions between host and displaced communities. That means that funding should not be earmarked only for refugees or other needs related specifically to the Sudan conflict.
- 3.93 In Chad, the UK had a small humanitarian operation before the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April 2023, but funding has since increased, mainly targeting the eastern border region where Sudanese refugees are located. The UK support utilises delivery mechanisms under a number of existing programmes, including the [Sahel Humanitarian Assistance and Protection Programme](#) (SHAPP), the [Shock Response Programme](#) (SRP), [Climate Resilience in the Sahel Programme](#) (CRISP) and [Education Cannot Wait](#) (ECW). Unlike in South Sudan, the UN has long treated the situation in the east as a refugee crisis, coordinated by the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR. The UK has earmarked most of its new funding specifically for eastern Chad and vulnerabilities related to the Sudan conflict.
- 3.94 A further uplift of funding for the Sudan crisis of £113 million was provided in November 2024. **Figure 9** shows how it has been distributed between Sudan and neighbouring countries. This funding uplift doubled the UK's humanitarian response, to £231.3 million for 2024–25, making the UK one of the largest donors in-country and regionally.

Figure 9: Allocation of the UK's humanitarian funding uplift to respond to the Sudan crisis

Pie chart showing the distribution of the November 2024 £113 million funding uplift to address the humanitarian emergency in Sudan and neighbouring countries



Source: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 'Sudan spend 2019–2025', September 2025, unpublished; FCDO, '[UK doubles aid for Sudan and neighbouring countries facing the worst humanitarian crisis of the decade](#)', 17 November 2024

Notes: Education Cannot Wait is a global fund hosted by UNICEF, supporting marginalised children affected by conflict and other crises to access education.

Description: The chart shows that of the £113m funding uplift announced in November 2024, the majority was allocated to Sudan (£43.5 million), followed by £29 million to Chad, £21.5 million to South Sudan, £14 million to Education Cannot Wait, £4 million to Uganda and £1 million to Libya.

Key findings

The UK has played a leading technical and operational role in the humanitarian response, but has struggled to overcome challenges in the UN system

- 3.95 The UK has played a leading role in the humanitarian response at the technical and operational levels, and along with other donors has pushed the UN to overcome weaknesses in the system. Stakeholders interviewed for this review valued its technical analysis and strategic inputs. Its contribution to sector-wide planning has been enhanced by its network of humanitarian advisers and its central helpdesk facilities. Overall, the review finds good use of data and evidence in assessing humanitarian and protection needs.
- 3.96 The UK works closely with UN agencies and partners on the ground to strengthen the international humanitarian response across the region. The UK recognises the UN's central role in coordination, operations and fund management, and has sought to enhance its capacity in Sudan and neighbouring countries through multiple strands of support (see [para 3.77](#)). Despite these efforts, the effectiveness of the UN-led response is hampered by challenges within the UN humanitarian system, including risk-averse access protocols and a limited operational footprint (see [para 3.78](#)). Stakeholders interviewed for this review were particularly critical of the UN's failure to explore different solutions to access constraints within Sudan. They also described UN funding mechanisms, including the Sudan Humanitarian Fund, as misaligned with the scale and urgency of the Sudan conflict. In South Sudan, this is less of an issue for the UK's contributions since it prioritises funding UN agencies directly, while it has also contributed to the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund in recognition of its ability to respond to shocks and complement other funding sources.

- 3.97 The humanitarian response in the region faces a serious new challenge since the withdrawal of USAID funding and the other funding reductions in early 2025. The UK has been in dialogue with UN agencies on how to mitigate the effects of these. A shared set of strategic objectives, beyond operational coordination, would improve the humanitarian system's collective ability to address the impacts of the funding crisis and ensure that the remaining funds are used effectively (see [para 3.75](#)).

[Since April 2023, the beginning of the Sudan conflict, the UK has been a key humanitarian actor in neighbouring countries, supporting timely humanitarian responses](#)

- 3.98 In South Sudan, the UK has played a key role in ensuring that needs related to the Sudan crisis are considered within existing humanitarian and development programmes. UK partners working in border areas and transit points for Sudanese refugees and South Sudanese returnees described British Embassy Juba staff as supportive and flexible and their interventions as timely and effective.
- 3.99 In eastern Chad, the UK's rapid and flexible funding response to the Sudan refugee crisis, through the Sahel Regional Fund and FCDO's own Central Crisis Reserve, positioned it as a 'first mover' and a significant humanitarian donor. This proved critical when other major donors, including France and the US, scaled back their support in 2025. The government of Chad's supportive refugee policies, including offering land for settlement and supporting economic inclusion initiatives, are commendable, and require sustained donor backing to ensure their long-term sustainability. In this context, the UK's focus on social cohesion is a good strategic choice that is greatly valued by partners.

[The UK was quick to adapt existing programmes following the outbreak of conflict](#)

- 3.100 The World Bank-managed Sudan Transition and Recovery Support (STARS) multi-donor trust fund (see [Box 3](#)) was established to support the transitional government with implementing economic reforms, including through a social protection component. After the outbreak of conflict, the trust fund was repurposed to fund the humanitarian response, including by changing the rules to allow funds to be directed through INGOs. UK conflict advisers also produced a note for the World Bank on how to incorporate conflict sensitivity principles into the repurposed fund.
- 3.101 The Sudan Free of Female Genital Mutilation programme (SFFGM2) was also adapted to the conflict context (see [para 3.47](#)), taking on a broader focus on CRSV. Overall, the UK has shown a good level of agility in repurposing existing programmes to respond to the humanitarian crisis.

[In neighbouring countries, it is essential that the UK's focus on the Sudan crisis does not divert resources and attention from pre-existing humanitarian needs](#)

- 3.102 The UK's humanitarian response in eastern Chad has performed well. There is, however, a risk that in a context where overall UK aid is reduced while the Sudan crisis is explicitly designated a priority area, spending in Chad would primarily focus on refugee flows from Sudan, to the potential neglect of other critical humanitarian and fragility challenges, including in the Lake Chad region. In 2024–25, of an overall spend of just over £61 million on humanitarian and development assistance in Chad, £39 million was for the Sudan response in eastern Chad, and £5 million was for humanitarian efforts in Lac province (the Lake Chad area). The rest was designated as countrywide programming. Effective refugee response requires integrating humanitarian assistance with a broader response to stability, climate and security challenges, to reduce the risk of the refugee burden undermining the resilience of host communities. This is an area where the UK response would benefit from a broader approach to supporting regional stability.

3.103 In South Sudan, the humanitarian response prioritises vulnerability, balancing the pre-existing needs of communities with the needs of refugee and returnees from the Sudan crisis. Complementing the humanitarian support, the UK's longstanding support for essential services like health and education has achieved gains over time in expanding access, particularly girls' access to education. However, the programmes are not currently on a path to sustainability, due to inconsistent engagement and ownership from national authorities. Given political tensions and a growing risk of a new phase of violent conflict, this engagement is likely to further diminish. In view of this, future UK funding decisions will impact on these essential services. In interviews, stakeholders raised a concern that the UK government's prioritisation of the Sudan conflict could distort the broader vulnerability-based response in South Sudan.

The UK has technical depth in famine response, but delivery options have been constrained by financial resources not being accompanied by additional programme management capacity

3.104 At the global level, the UK has demonstrated robust technical engagement in famine prevention through investments in data and information systems, and through its diplomatic efforts. The UK has been a strong supporter of an international early warning and famine prevention system in Sudan. However, stakeholders are critical of the international response, which has been constrained by a reluctance to attribute famine to the actions of governing authorities, as well as by obstruction of data collection by the warring parties (see **Box 16**).

Box 16: Famine in Sudan

Even before the outbreak of conflict in April 2023, Sudan faced severe food insecurity affecting one-third of the population. The conflict has led to rapidly deteriorating food security, through population displacement, looting and the destruction of the infrastructure needed for food distribution.

The conflict also exposed weaknesses in the international humanitarian information system in Sudan. One challenge lies in the dominance of highly technical and standardised approaches to food security analysis and early warning, primarily focused on measuring malnutrition and mortality, rather than the underlying drivers of food insecurity. This approach is largely reactive, with limited forward-looking analysis to guide humanitarian planning, particularly in contexts where food insecurity is driven by conflict and political instability. This limitation is compounded by the obstruction of data collection by warring parties, leading to blind spots in the official data.

The few NGOs which retain some level of access to the worst-affected areas continue to report on the deteriorating conditions. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) provided some of the earliest warning signs, and its malnutrition data from Zamzam camp between January and March/April 2024 provided some of the earliest evidence that famine thresholds had been crossed.⁴⁴ However, the official famine declaration by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) system did not occur until August 2024, nearly four months later. The delay was largely caused by the IPC's governance structure, in which the Sudan Technical Working Group is co-chaired by the government, giving de facto authorities in Port Sudan significant influence over data assessments. Furthermore, the IPC requires positive, quantitative evidence that famine thresholds have been crossed, making it unable to respond when data collection is deliberately obstructed by warring parties.

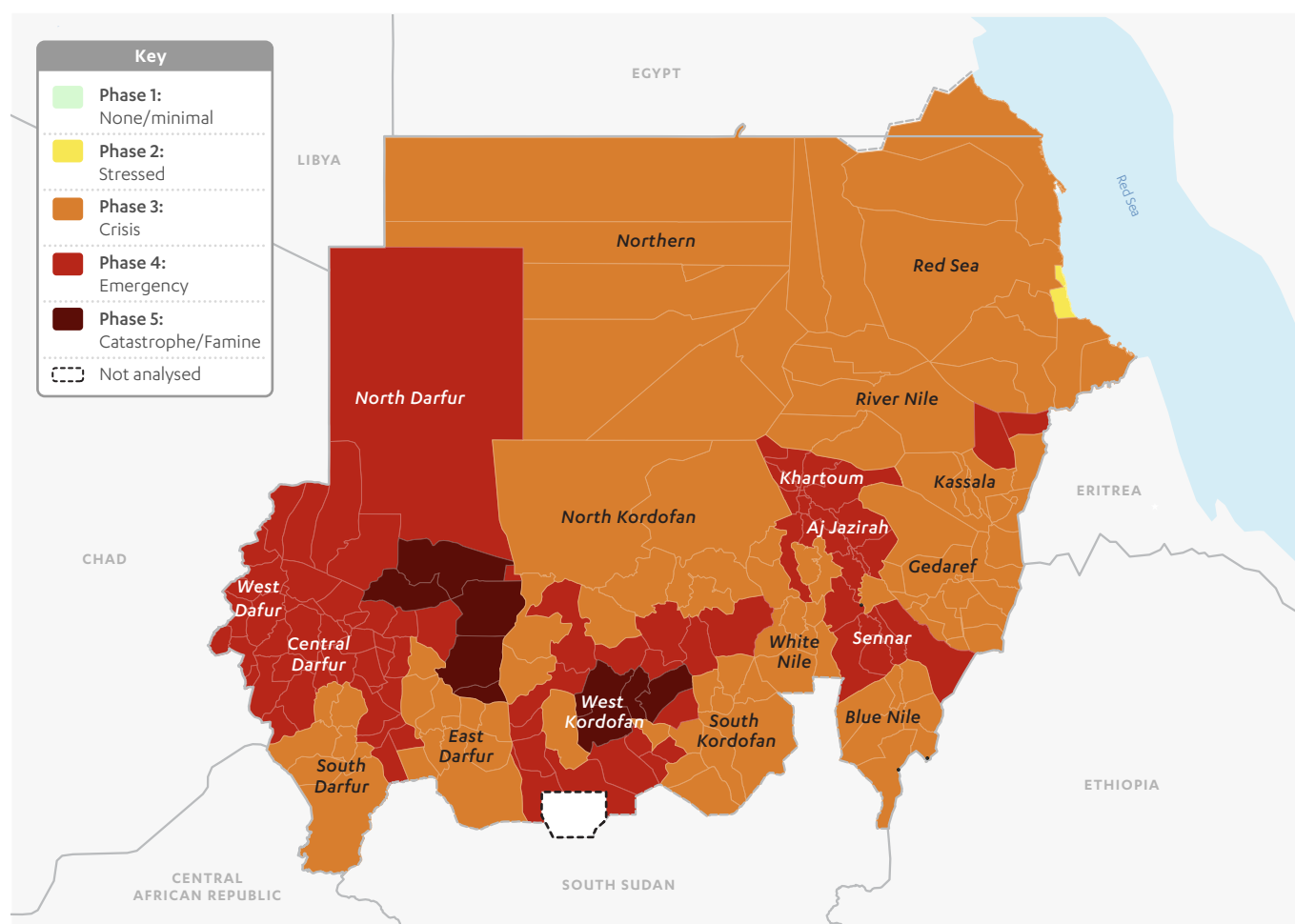
By December 2024, the IPC was able to confirm that famine conditions were present in a number of locations, including North Darfur and the Western Nuba Mountains (Kordofan), affecting both residents and IDPs.⁴⁵ Famine risk was identified in a further 17 places, with projections that 24.6 million people would face high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above) over the following six months (see **Figure 10**).

44 Médecins Sans Frontières, '[Urgent response needed amid high death rates and malnutrition crisis in North Darfur](#)', February 2024 (viewed on 31 July 2025)

45 The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, '[Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation – Updated Projections and FRC conclusions for October 2024 to May 2025](#)' (viewed on 12 August 2025)

Figure 10: Famine in Sudan

Map showing Famine Review Committee projections and conclusions on the acute food insecurity situation in Sudan, December 2024 to May 2025



Source: The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, ‘[Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation – Updated Projections and FRC conclusions for October 2024 to May 2025](#)’, accessed 12 August 2025

Description: The map shows projected levels of acute food insecurity across Sudan for December 2024 to May 2025. It shows almost the whole country in at least Phase 3 (crisis), with large areas in Phase 4 (emergency) and a number of areas (concentrated in North Darfur, South Kordofan, Khartoum and Gezira states) in Phase 5 (catastrophe or famine).

- 3.105 The UK has played an important role in supporting improvements to the humanitarian information system. The UK was cited in interviews as a valued and informed resource partner to the IPC system at global level, well placed to support changes needed in the assessment model (see [Box 16](#) for some of the current shortcomings). The UK has also supported efforts to make better use of contextualised qualitative data and bring in the voices of those affected by famine. In 2024, FCDO’s Research and Evidence Directorate partially funded a mortality study led by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, which partnered with Sudanese community kitchens and found preventable disease and starvation to be the leading causes of death.⁴⁶
- 3.106 The UK’s adoption of a proactive, ‘no regrets’ approach after famine alerts (that is, measures to avert famine are considered justified, whether or not the risk ultimately eventuates) has helped mobilise resources to address looming famine. However, operational delays have limited the impact. The increase in funding was not accompanied by additional programme management capacity, constraining the UK’s ability to engage with partners, including local and national NGOs. Instead, most funding was channelled

46 Maysoon Dahab and others, ‘[War-Time Mortality in Sudan: A Capture-Recapture Analysis](#)’, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, November 2024

through UN agencies and the Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SHF), which prioritised famine hotspots based on local analysis but struggled to operate in hard-to-reach areas. Given well-documented barriers to reaching the areas most at risk of famine, additional programme management capacity would have enabled the UK to explore further delivery options. The UK subsequently gained additional capacity and diversified its funding, with the aim of enabling increased access to hard-to-reach areas including those affected by or at risk of famine.

[The UK offers flexible funding that could help deliver integrated humanitarian and development programming, but has been constrained by short funding cycles and limited predictability](#)

3.107 The UK is valued by humanitarian partners for the flexibility of its funding, which allows changes to programmes in response to contextual shifts. The UK use of ‘soft earmarking’ in its funding agreements also supports adaptability. Unlike some bilateral donors, the UK does not separate its humanitarian and development aid across separate institutions, enabling it to integrate humanitarian response, conflict management and longer-term development. Flexibility was also demonstrated through the introduction of reduced reporting requirements for partners early in the conflict, enabling them to focus on urgent delivery challenges.

3.108 The benefits of this flexible funding have, however, been undermined by short project cycles and frequent delays in the release of funding. The lack of multi-year, predictable funding has hampered planning and led to increased administrative overheads and operational costs. It has also restricted partners’ ability to make longer-term investments in resilience and durable solutions, threatening both value for money and sustainable outcomes. There may be future improvements, as FCDO told us that there are plans, not yet publicly confirmed, for the UK government’s current three-year Spending Round to allow for multi-year funding and multi-annual agreements with partners.

[The UK’s flexible business cases and strong partnerships have enabled timely humanitarian responses, but overstretched teams and complex approval processes undermine coherence, innovation and learning](#)

3.109 The UK’s use of flexible business cases enabled timely pivots and rapid funding decisions after the outbreak of conflict, including scaling up food security and cash assistance within Sudan and swift responses in Chad and South Sudan.

3.110 This flexibility is undermined, however, by FCDO systems that are too rigid to support a fast-paced crisis response. The Hera financial management platform, for example, is viewed as cumbersome and not fit for purpose, limiting timely access to critical information, increasing the administrative burden on staff and contributing to delays in delivery. FCDO has recognised these challenges and expressed an intention to streamline its processes.

3.111 Internal learning systems were strong in all three countries, with lessons learned from past programming systematically incorporated into business cases. However, there is limited evidence of learning from other humanitarian contexts. Furthermore, limited bandwidth within the overstretched BOS team means that there is little time given to sharing learning with partners.

[FCDO’s system for managing security risk is not well suited to fragile and conflict-affected settings like Sudan and its neighbours, with limited scope for situation awareness and local judgement](#)

3.112 The UK’s relatively restrictive security policies limit the ability of staff to visit field operations. This has a number of unfortunate effects, including reducing direct engagement with partners, local authorities and affected populations, and limiting first-hand understanding of operational contexts. The inability of UK staff to travel curtails their ability to monitor partners, increasing reliance on partner reporting, notably in South Sudan. This is an FCDO-wide problem, with both BOS and British Embassy Juba describing themselves as having the highest risk appetite permitted within FCDO’s system.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

- 4.1 This review has assessed the UK's performance in Sudan through the lens of its commitments to responsible global leadership, support for women and girls, genuine partnership and effective humanitarian response. It has done so across a highly volatile time period, including a promising moment of political transition, the military coup and the outbreak of large-scale conflict. It has also looked beyond Sudan's borders to consider the UK's support to neighbouring countries, particularly Chad and South Sudan.

Leadership

- 4.2 The UK demonstrated political leadership and convening power on Sudan, particularly during key moments of the transition (2019–21) and following the outbreak of conflict (April 2023 onwards). Early in the transition, it played a central role in donor coordination and helped secure rapid debt relief. More recently, high-level engagement and diplomatic visibility have raised international awareness of the Sudan crisis, with the UK reestablishing its position as a leading donor and influential actor across humanitarian and diplomatic platforms, including in Chad and South Sudan. Since mid-2024, increased funding has strengthened the UK's influence over partners and enabled it to support civilian pro-peace and democracy forces. Agile programmes like the Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response programme have been well received by partners.
- 4.3 However, structural and operational constraints persist. Cross-government coordination – especially on military and migration issues – is underdeveloped, and earlier funding volatility has affected stakeholder trust. Despite Sudan's priority status, uncertainty over future aid and slow internal processes risk undermining impact. Sustained political will and senior attention will be essential if the UK is to deliver on its ambitions in what remains one of the world's most urgent and neglected crises.

Women and girls

- 4.4 The UK has shown credible leadership on women and girls in Sudan, underpinned by its legal obligations in the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014. It has combined gender mainstreaming with targeted efforts on conflict-related sexual violence and survivor support, combatting female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and other harmful gendered practices, and supported women's participation in peace processes. Major targeted investments, including over £30 million for the Sudan Free of FGM programme, built credibility among national stakeholders, and UK leadership on and support for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence reinforced its principled stance.
- 4.5 Spending on gender equality-focused programming fell sharply between 2020 and 2022 as a result of wider UK aid budget reductions, before recovering in 2023. However, the proportion of funding going to gender equality-focused programming has remained consistently above 80%. The review found that, based on evidence from FCDO's use of the gender marker, gender has been mainstreamed across the UK's governance, economic empowerment and humanitarian programming, together with a range of supporting activities, such as data collection. However, we do not have sufficient evidence to assess if a mainstreaming approach, considering the highly gendered nature of the Sudan conflict, is an effective approach to supporting better results for women and girls. There is limited evidence of lasting outcomes for Sudanese women and girls, given the volatile context and the structural barriers to change. Most UK support to women-led organisations is indirect, limiting local ownership and sustainability. The UK has had limited ambition on protection programming inside Sudan, which has constrained its ability to influence and support atrocity prevention and survivor-led accountability efforts within the country. Amid global backsliding on gender equality, and the centrality of gender to the Sudan crisis, there is a widening gap between the support offered by the UK and other international partners and the level of sustained investment required to deliver results for women and girls. This gap has the potential to undermine the goals of the UK and other development partners in Sudan. Meeting the UK's commitments will require stronger diplomatic engagement, direct investment in women-led organisations and bolder public positioning.

Partnership

- 4.6 The UK is widely seen as a credible partner in Sudan, Chad and South Sudan, thanks in large part to the calibre and consistency of its personnel. UK staff have built strong relationships with local, regional and international actors, shaping coherent diplomacy and supporting coordination in complex contexts. The UK role in platforms such as the Troika, the Quad and donor groups has extended its influence, particularly during Sudan's transition (2019–21) and in humanitarian efforts in neighbouring countries. Engagement with multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the UN has further reinforced its leadership.
- 4.7 Looking ahead, the UK can deepen its impact through stronger strategic coordination on prioritisation with key donors like the European Union, especially in the face of global funding reductions. Despite its support for multilateralism, the UK's influence has yet to improve UN performance, including on access and protection, although many challenges are a result of restrictions and delays imposed by the warring parties. Short-term funding cycles and uncertainty around future UK aid levels have undermined partner trust, while a cautious approach to localisation has limited the UK's ability to work with agile, community-based groups. The British Office Sudan remains under-resourced, and the loss of national country-based staff in critical roles post-2023 has affected continuity. Greater engagement with diaspora organisations could also strengthen the UK's reach and contextual insight.

Humanitarian response

- 4.8 The UK has provided credible and visible humanitarian leadership in Sudan and the region, acting as a responsive and respected donor. Its early, flexible funding in Sudan, Chad and South Sudan positioned the UK as a 'first mover' when others stepped back. Strong technical expertise, use of rapid funding tools and high-level diplomatic engagement reinforced its influence. UK staff were widely praised for their technical knowledge and responsiveness, and investments in areas like famine and protection helped uphold the UK's reputation as a principled actor.
- 4.9 The UK has made progress in aligning its humanitarian response with regional needs, adapting long-term programmes and supporting resilience. Its use of UN pooled funding mechanisms and collaboration with the UN have added value, and the UK has helped strengthen humanitarian data and early warning systems. However, the absence of a clear strategic approach that covers the cross-border impacts of the conflict has limited the UK's ability to shape a joined-up response across Sudan and neighbouring countries. The UK now has an opportunity to show leadership by convening donors on how to reprioritise assistance following the loss of US and other funding in 2025.
- 4.10 Ongoing challenges include short funding cycles (although FCDO told us that there are plans, not yet publicly confirmed, to introduce some multiyear funding), limited programme management capacity on the ground, and rigid internal systems that delay delivery and limit agility. Relatively restrictive security policies limit access and operational insight, while uncertainty over future official development assistance (ODA) levels has undermined partner confidence. A clearer regional approach, more predictable funding, and reformed delivery systems will be essential for the UK to sustain and build on its leadership.

Looking ahead

- 4.11 With continuing large-scale conflict and humanitarian need, Sudan faces a highly uncertain future. The next UK country strategy will need to balance continuing crisis response with recovery and resilience building, factoring in issues such as shrinking international support. Given the highly gendered nature of the conflict and the scale of the challenges, there is also a need to continue to prioritise women and girls. Meeting this challenge will require sustained political attention, a more agile and joined-up delivery model and renewed focus on working with local and regional actors. It is also an opportunity for the UK to reevaluate how it delivers aid in fragile settings, ensuring that ambition aligns with capacity and that principles like localisation, protection and gender equality are fully integrated into its operations.

- 4.12 Sudan remains one of the most urgent and most overlooked crises in the world. With few donors stepping up, the UK has both the responsibility and the opportunity to lead. To do so effectively, it must match its ambition with the systems, capabilities, and political resolve required to deliver results – now and in the years to come.
- 4.13 ICAI intends to follow up on progress by the government in responding to the findings and recommendations of this report first in April 2026 and then again in April 2027. In April 2026 we intend to assess actions taken in the short term by the government, returning for a more detailed assessment of the impact of these and other actions in April 2027.

Recommendations

For the UK government:

Recommendation 1: Ensure sustained high-level political attention to the Sudan conflict and humanitarian crisis, including by strengthening cross-government ownership and coordination.

Problem statements:

- Sudan is not yet identified as an explicit cross-government priority.
- Ministry of Defence and Home Office engagement on Sudan has been limited, despite high migration flows and the critical role of military cooperation in defence diplomacy.
- Without sustained senior-level UK engagement, there is a real risk of an inadequate international response to atrocities and the worsening famine in Sudan.

Recommendation 2: Develop and implement a clear regional approach to the Sudan conflict, aligning strategies across Sudan and neighbouring countries.

Problem statements:

- The Sudan conflict is generating significant spillover effects across the region, including large-scale refugee and returnee flows, placing increasing pressure on already fragile neighbouring countries.
- Focus on Sudanese refugees (and returning citizens) risks distorting aid investment priorities in host countries, where local populations face equally urgent needs.
- The UK approach to peacebuilding in Sudan lacks a clear approach to engaging with interested external actors due to wider foreign policy considerations.
- While information flows between UK teams are strong, the absence of a regional strategy limits the UK's ability to deliver a coherent, joined-up policy and programmatic response to the Sudan conflict.
- The lack of interlinked country business plans between desk and field teams limits shared understanding of priorities, roles and timelines, and hinders the optimal use of staff resources across the UK's Sudan response.

Recommendation 3: Align delivery capacity with ministerial ambition by backing Sudan's priority country status with multi-year, protected funding and adequate capacity to deliver effectively.

Problem statements:

- The UK lacks a clear commitment to sustained and sufficient funding for the conflict in Sudan and the region.
- Current staffing levels in British Office Sudan (BOS) are not adequate to support the UK's ambition and require urgent review.
- Recruitment to teams in BOS, Chad and South Sudan are not keeping pace with need. Persistent gaps, high turnover and challenging roles are placing a constant burden on staff and making recruitment time-consuming and difficult.

For FCDO:

Recommendation 4: Adopt a more agile and coherent delivery model for fragile and conflict-affected environments, to maximise agility in dynamic contexts.

Problem statements:

- Surge mechanisms like Temporary Deployments Overseas have not been able to consistently provide sufficient staff with expertise for crisis response in Sudan.
- Beyond short-term surge, departmental human resource systems do not facilitate getting the right staff for longer-term posts related to complex fragile environments.
- The loss of locally hired country-based staff has weakened delivery capability, institutional memory and staff morale.
- Short-term, unpredictable funding cycles have undermined partner trust, programme continuity and value for money, especially in resilience-focused and protection sectors.
- Within the context of the UK's ODA reduction to 0.3% of gross national income, delivery in fragile and conflict-affected settings like Sudan should not focus solely on humanitarian delivery but ensure balanced portfolios that blend 'pure' humanitarian work with resilience building and nascent development work.
- FCDO systems are applied too rigidly and approval processes are too centralised for agile programming in a high-risk, rapidly changing environment, which requires greater ability and devolved decision making, with increased risk taking.
- Security restrictions and lack of dedicated resource to enable security assessments have severely limited in-country access for UK staff, constraining oversight, operational insight, and direct engagement with affected populations.

Recommendation 5: Support the UK's localisation commitment by increasing direct funding to local organisations, simplifying compliance procedures, fostering long-term partnerships and strengthening local leadership of humanitarian response and resilience building.

Problem statements:

- FCDO's due diligence and reporting requirements are designed to operate at scale and less suited for funding delivery through local actors such as Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms, creating barriers to effective localisation in high-risk contexts.
- FCDO is unable to manage increased direct funding to local actors (which generally requires a larger number of smaller grants) without simplification of procedures or additional programme management capacity.
- FCDO has yet to establish a coherent organisational approach despite its work to capture and apply lessons to ensure progress on localisation, limiting learning and consistency across contexts.
- Responsibility for engaging with diaspora groups sits across other government departments, outside of FCDO core business, which tends to limit regular engagement and prioritisation.

Recommendation 6: Address the need for more targeted programming for priority gender-related challenges in Sudan, and assess how well the current mainstreaming approach is delivering results for women and girls.

Problem statements:

- While gender is central to the conflict, investment in gender has been insufficient, particularly as relates to dedicated programming, given the scale of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and other risks and challenges facing Sudanese women and girls. We are informed that a dedicated programme on CRSV is currently being designed.
- Most UK support to women-led organisations is provided indirectly, heightening costs, limiting their leadership role, reducing sustainability and undermining localisation principles.

- The UK has had limited ambition on protection programming inside Sudan, and its approach to protection and atrocity prevention in Sudan is still evolving, including on developing a comprehensive strategy to integrate aid with diplomatic and other forms of leverage and influence.
- We do not have sufficient results data and other evidence to assess if a mainstreaming approach, considering the highly gendered nature of the Sudan conflict, is an effective approach to supporting better results for women and girls in Sudan.

Recommendation 7: Use learning from the Sudan conflict as an opportunity to rethink and adapt UK international leadership on mobilising and coordinating the international response to major crises, given severe global funding pressures, a shifting donor landscape and rising humanitarian need.

Problem statements:

- Despite the UK and other donors' influencing efforts, UN performance in Sudan in areas such as access and protection of civilians has been disappointing, highlighting the need to embed reform of the international humanitarian system.
- The UK has played a strong coordinating role with international partners, but strategic coordination and collective donor action amid a humanitarian funding crisis is weak.
- A shared set of strategic objectives, beyond operational coordination, would improve the humanitarian system's collective ability to address the impacts of the funding crisis and ensure that the remaining funds are used effectively.

Annex 1: Review questions and sub-questions

Review question	Sub-questions
1 Has the UK demonstrated responsible global leadership through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding the impact on neighbouring countries?	1.1 Did/does the UK have the right approach in Sudan related to its responsible global leadership ambitions? 1.2 Did/does it deliver on this approach in a way that maximises results and delivers value for money? 1.3 Did UK efforts incorporate learning and adapt appropriately to the changing context? 1.4 Are the UK's policy frameworks and systems fit for purpose to deliver on this ambition in Sudan?
2 Has the UK acted for and with women and girls through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding refugee flows into neighbouring countries?	2.1 Did/does the UK have the right approach in Sudan related to women and girls? 2.2 Did/does it deliver on this approach in a way that maximises results and delivers value for money? 2.3 Did UK efforts incorporate learning and adapt appropriately to the changing context? 2.4 Are the UK's policy frameworks and systems fit for purpose to deliver on this ambition in Sudan?
3 Has the UK demonstrated genuine partnership through its past, present and planned efforts both in Sudan and regarding the impact on neighbouring countries?	3.1 Did/does the UK have the right approach in Sudan related to responsible genuine partnership? 3.2 Did/does it deliver on this approach in a way that maximises results and delivers value for money? 3.3 Did UK efforts incorporate learning and adapt appropriately to the changing context? 3.4 Are the UK's policy frameworks and systems fit for purpose to deliver on this ambition in Sudan?
4 Has the UK delivered, contributed to and supported an effective humanitarian response post-April 2023 both in Sudan and regarding refugee flows into neighbouring countries?	4.1 Did/does the UK have the right approach related to an effective humanitarian response? 4.2 Did/does it deliver on this approach in a way that maximises results and delivers value for money? 4.3 Did UK efforts incorporate learning and adapt appropriately to the changing context? 4.4 Are the UK's policy frameworks and systems fit for purpose to deliver on this ambition in Sudan?

Annex 2: Methodology

The methodology for this review consisted of eight main components:

- **Strategic review:** Review of strategies, policies and commitments, to explore the relevance and coherence of the UK's approach to Sudan. The strategic review explored the evolution of the UK's approach to Sudan over the review period, commenting on how this approach addressed key issues identified by the UK and how coherent these approaches are across different sets of strategies. The strategic review contributes to answering review sub-questions 1.1, 1.4, 3.1, 3.4 and 4.1 (see [Annex 1](#) for the review sub-questions).
- **Literature review:** A review of existing literature on evidence and research to inform the report. The areas of focus for the literature review correspond to the review's four review questions.
- **Programme desk reviews:** Desk-based review of British Office Sudan active official development assistance-funded programmes (see [Annex 3](#) for the full list of programmes).
- **Famine deep dive:** Primary focus on the humanitarian dimension of the famine, providing analysis that contributes to Question 3 of the review, while also providing coverage of the UK's diplomatic efforts to avert famine. The deep dive included a review of documentation including HMG and publicly available reports and semi-structured interviews with HMG staff, experts/academics, humanitarian responders and advocates, and early warning and data analysts.
- **Stakeholder consultation (key informant interviews and roundtable discussions):** Interviews with a range of stakeholders (see breakdown in [Table 2](#)) including current and former UK government officials, implementing partners including multilateral organisations, civil society organisations and experts. During the design and data collection phase, roundtable discussions with experts provided an opportunity for external stakeholders to contribute expert reflections on the UK's aid to Sudan over the review period.
- **Country visits:** An in-country visit to British Office Sudan (Addis Ababa and Nairobi) to conduct key informant interviews (KIIs) with FCDO staff and external stakeholders including other bilateral donor governments and implementing partners. Following consultations and analysis in the design phase, Chad and South Sudan were selected as the two country case studies to examine the regional impact and response. The selected neighbouring country case studies were conducted as virtual country visits.
- **Perception survey:** Survey to gather the perspectives of the UK's non-HMG partners and independent experts who have followed the UK's efforts in Sudan and the region.
- **Locally led research:** Consultations in Kenya and Uganda, led by Sudanese researchers in the diaspora, to gather insights from a diverse range of stakeholders including Sudanese diaspora leaders, refugee-led organisation representations, women-led groups, and human rights and atrocity prevention activities to inform the broader review. A total of nine targeted KIIs and six focus group discussions across the two locations were conducted. Discussions and interviews were structured around the key themes of the review: partnership and localisation; humanitarian response; and support to women and girls. The locally led research excluded questions on global leadership because participants may not be familiar with the UK's role or contributions in donor and international forums.

Table 2: Breakdown of stakeholders consulted for the review (total of 175 people)

Stakeholder group	Number of people consulted
FCDO	60
Sudanese civil society/diaspora	40
Multilateral organisations including UN agencies	23
International non-governmental organisations	30
Academia/research	12
Donor governments	8
International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)	7
Other UK government department/public body	2
National non-governmental organisation	2

Box 17: Limitations to the methodology

While initial arrangements were made to conduct in-person consultations in South Sudan, an escalation in the security situation during the data collection phase necessitated a shift to a virtual country visit.

A significant number of invitees to participate in the locally led research component of this review declined to participate or were unresponsive to invitations. The research team reported signs of consultation fatigue among participants.

A conventional response rate for the survey cannot be calculated as respondents were encouraged to share the survey within their networks to increase reach and views obtained.

Annex 3: Programmes reviewed

1 Sudan Humanitarian Preparedness and Response (SHPR)

SHPR aims to reduce excess mortality and morbidity by delivering life-saving humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable in Sudan. SHPR includes delivery of large-scale food aid, community management of acute malnutrition, multi-sector emergency responses and provision of protection services. An 'Enabling Facility' improves the use of data and monitoring, and strengthens the response through secondment of personnel into key UN roles. This programme is the only bilateral spending vehicle through which British Office Sudan (BOS) can deliver humanitarian aid into Sudan. Delivery partners include the UN, NGOs and local organisations.

Duration: August 2022 – March 2026

Value: £318.9 million

Implementing partners include: UNICEF, WFP, UN OCHA (SHF), Danish Refugee Council, Mercy Corps, ICRC and Palladium

2 Sudan Economic Impact and Reform (SEIR)

The original purpose of the programme was to support Sudan's transition to democracy by providing cash transfers to help up to 80% of the Sudanese population cope with economic reforms necessary for debt relief. In May 2022, recognising the rising humanitarian need due to the economic crisis and lack of progress towards restoring a civilian-led government, donors agreed that \$100 million of unspent donor funds should be re-purposed to an emergency cash and food transfer programme through the World Food Programme. Before the conflict, this supported 2.4 million people through cash and food assistance. The current phase (2024–29) aims to improve access to basic services and food security of communities in Sudan through i) community-led basic service delivery centred around education, health, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and gender-based violence (GBV) response; and ii) working with farmer organisations and small and medium-sized enterprises to improve agricultural productivity and the supply of food to local markets.

Duration: November 2020 – December 2028

Value: £80 million

Implementing partners include: World Bank

3 Sudan Stability and Growth Programme (SSGP)

The original purpose of the programme was to contribute to Sudan's long-term stability and poverty reduction by supporting reforms for greater macro-economic stability, inclusive economic growth, improved governance, and strengthened donor-government coordination, closely aligning with the objectives of support delivered through SEIR. The programme was re-adapted to respond to the new context following the April 2023 war. The Strategic Support Unit, led by the British Council, acts as a facility to deliver interventions and engage with Sudanese civil society, building on previous Department for International Development programming supported by the British Council. Key activities include support to civilian-led dialogue and processes including communications support to strengthen anti-war civilian voices; support to data collection, verification and prevention of atrocities to ensure justice and accountability for human rights violations; funding for two analyst positions to strengthen the UN's early warning and analytical capability; analysis of the war economy and illicit finance to inform coercive measures including sanctions.

Duration: November 2018 – December 2026

Value: £48.5 million

Implementing partners include: British Council, UNDP, UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office and OHCHR

4 Sudan Free of FGM Phase 2 (SFFGM2)

SFFGM2 is FCDO's flagship programme on tackling female genital mutilation (FGM) in Sudan. The programme's objective is to reduce the prevalence of FGM and child marriage (CM) in Sudan, particularly among the younger generations most at risk, by supporting positive shifts in social and gender norms around FGM, CM and other harmful practices including GBV, and strengthening governmental and non-governmental systems to both prevent FGM and effectively support those who have been affected by the practice. The programme is delivered by a partnership of three UN agencies – UNICEF, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and World Health Organisation (WHO) – working with a range of down-stream partners that include civil society organisations, universities, parastatal bodies and medical associations. Since the out-break of conflict, the programme has pivoted and scaled up work in humanitarian settings and states where citizens and partners have been displaced to. The programme has also scaled up work on protection, prevention and care services in response to increased rates of GBV.

Duration: January 2019 – March 2026

Value: £19.95 million

Implementing partners include: UNICEF, UNFPA and WHO

5 Sudan Independent Monitoring and Analysis Programme (SIMAP)

SIMAP works to strengthen the effectiveness of the UK's policy and programme portfolio in Sudan by providing objective information and delivery and contextual developments to inform decision making. The programme is centred around three priority areas which include i) improving assurance of programme delivery, delivered through field-based monitoring of programme delivery and results, assessments of implementing partner systems, and targeted technical assistance to build partner capacity; ii) enabling more innovative policy and programming approaches to be tested based on rapid feedback and learning mechanisms; and iii) increasing access to outcome-focused research analysis to support strategic decision making. SIMAP also funds a project-funded post, Human Development Adviser, to support BOS policy priorities on women and girls and education.

Duration: May 2023 – September 2027

Value: £9.5 million

Implementing partners include: Oxford Policy Management



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