



# **THE EU'S ENGAGEMENT IN SUDAN: PERCEPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM CIVIL SOCIETY**

## **CSDN Country Briefing Paper**

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## European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO)

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The European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) is the largest independent civil society platform of European NGOs, NGO networks and think tanks that are committed to peacebuilding and the prevention of violent conflict. EPLO's mission is to influence European policymakers to take a more active role in securing peace and resolving and preventing and conflict through nonviolent means in all regions of the world, and to do so more effectively.

## Civil Society Dialogue Network

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## **| Table of Contents**

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
■ <b>THE EUROPEAN UNION’S RESPONSE TO THE CONFLICT .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CIVIL SOCIETY IN SUDAN: CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES .</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PERCEPTION OF THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION ...</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>TOWARDS A STRONGER NEXUS APPROACH .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>KEY TAKEAWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>11</b>

# Introduction

This Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Country Briefing Paper gathers a snapshot of civil society perspectives on the perception of the EU in Sudan and recommendations for the EU's engagement in the country. It is the outcome of a series of interviews held between January and February 2026 with EU policy makers and civil society experts.

There was no attempt to reach a consensus in this Briefing Paper; it contains a general overview of the interviewees' contributions, even where they disagreed. The key points and recommendations which are included in this Briefing Paper may not be attributed to any individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the individuals interviewed or the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO).

## ■ The European Union's Response to the Conflict

As the war in Sudan approaches a third year, over 9 million<sup>1</sup> people are internally displaced and 4 million<sup>2</sup> have fled across borders, making it the largest displacement crisis in the world. Currently, more than 30 million – over half of the population –, need humanitarian assistance, and famine has been confirmed in multiple areas of the country, including North Darfur<sup>3</sup>.

On the humanitarian front, the EU allocated in 2025 a total of €270 million<sup>4</sup> inside Sudan and across the region, specifically for displaced populations and host communities in neighbouring countries (Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and the Central African Republic), making it the **largest EU humanitarian funding package in Africa**. It also activated its ReliefEU capacities, transporting over 950 tonnes of humanitarian supplies to Port Sudan.

The EU has imposed an **arms embargo** on all conflict parties and adopted **targeted sanctions** (travel bans and asset freezes) on selected Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) leaders, as well as mining and trading entities<sup>5</sup>. Since the start of the current conflict, the European Parliament adopted resolutions on 15 June 2023<sup>6</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> International Organisation for Migration (IOM). (2026). *Displacement Tracking Matrix: Sudan*.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2026). *Operational Data Portal: Sudan situation*.

<sup>3</sup> Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). (2025). *Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for September 2025 and Projections for October 2025 - January 2026 and for February - May 2026*.

<sup>4</sup> European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO). (2026). *Sudan*.

<sup>5</sup> European Commission. (2025). *EU Sanctions Map Sudan*.

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament. (15 June 2023). *Resolution on the humanitarian situation in Sudan, in particular the death of children trapped by fighting (2023/2736(RSP))*.

18 January 2024<sup>7</sup>, and 13 March 2025<sup>8</sup>, calling for individual sanctions for the RSF and SAF commanders, alongside a reinforcement and geographic expansion of the embargo beyond Darfur to the whole country.

The EU has co-chaired the **April 2025 London Conference** alongside the African Union (AU), France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, and chaired the **Fourth Consultative Meeting on peace initiatives coordination in June 2025**, bringing together the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Arab League, the AU, the United Nations (UN), and the Quad (United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE)).

In addition, through its EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the Horn of Africa, Annette Weber, the EU has maintained channels of communication with all conflict parties, including through an **initiative on the protection of critical infrastructure**. Most recently, together with the AU, IGAD, the League of Arab States, and the UN, the EU adopted the **Quintet Joint Statement**<sup>9</sup>, urging an immediate halt to the hostilities and safe humanitarian access for affected populations.

The **October 2025 Council conclusions on Sudan**<sup>10</sup> set out the EU's position on the conflict. The document condemns the atrocities committed by both parties, calls for a ceasefire and inclusive civilian-led governance, demands a halt to external military support, and reaffirms support for the ICC and the UN Fact-Finding Mission. The conclusions also **underline the role of civil society** in ensuring that any political dialogue reflects the voices of the Sudanese people, and recognise their work, including the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), recipients of the 2025 EU Human Rights Prize.

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<sup>7</sup> European Parliament. (18 January 2024). *Resolution on the threat of famine following the spread of the conflict in Sudan (2024/2505(RSP))*.

<sup>8</sup> European Parliament. (13 March 2025). *Resolution on the severe political, humanitarian and human rights crisis in Sudan, in particular sexual violence and child rape (2025/2595(RSP))*.

<sup>9</sup> The Quintet (the African Union, Intergovernmental Authority on Development, League of Arab States, European Union and the United Nations). (February 2026). *Joint Statement on de-escalation of the conflict in Sudan*.

<sup>10</sup> Council of the European Union. (20 October 2025). *Council Conclusions on Sudan*.

## Civil society in Sudan: context and challenges

The war in Sudan has severely weakened civil society, with violence and displacement constraining activities across all areas of work. Student movements, once the driving force of political and civic activism in the country, have been particularly affected. As noted by one interviewee, civil society previously played a larger role in shaping narratives around peace, democratisation, and policy change, while today, agenda setting remains almost entirely in the hands of political actors and armed groups.

Alongside the severe erosion of the civic space, the conflict is further exacerbating **civil society's fragmentation**, which is partly linked to Sudan's size and diversity, but also the result of deliberate strategies by the ruling elites to weaken civilian actors. Civil society remains divided on fundamental issues, including the meaning and scope of transitional justice, different approaches on security sector reform, and the structure of a future political transition. Interviewees noted that if a deal is reached under the current conditions, armed actors will dominate the political process and the patterns that led to past failures will be reproduced.

Historically, interactions between diverse groups in Sudan occurred organically in shared social spaces, but the current context has made such exchanges nearly impossible.

**Polarisation is increasingly intensified by the violence experienced**, and the resulting lack of mutual empathy undermines dialogue at all levels. Moreover, many civil society figures have left the country, while those remaining often operate under significant security constraints. **Tensions have also grown with diaspora actors**, whose claims to represent voices from inside Sudan are sometimes disputed.

Interviewees stressed that **addressing this fragmentation will require long-term investment, and time and space for civilians to come together**, rebuild relationships, develop shared positions, and clarify priorities before any transition begins. This way, they will be able to demonstrate leadership and coherence to both national and international actors, rather than entering a transition fragmented and reactive.

Several interviewees stressed that civil society in Sudan is fundamentally built on personal relationships, and noted that bringing together individuals who had previously been hostile in public discourse has often produced unexpected successes in overcoming divisions. For this, in-person engagement, both among those inside the country and across the border, is seen as essential. However, it was noted that given the current context, **it is unlikely that these spaces for dialogue will emerge organically and need instead to be built**

**deliberately**, including victims' voices and accounting for **regional balance and gender representation**.

Identifying who to bring together and how is itself a significant challenge, as alliances and positions in Sudan shift rapidly and often in counterintuitive ways. Accurate information is increasingly difficult to be accessed, given the filters of traditional media, the unreliability of some sources, and limited ground presence, which leads to **disinformation and false narratives**. Given the complexity of the landscape, interviewees noted the **need for rigorous factchecking and continuously updated mappings of actors and dynamics**, grounded in close engagement with civil society actors present in the country that can provide first-hand information.

Considering the plurality of actors and overall lack of coordination, concerns about the potential duplication of initiatives and the **need for synergies** were also highlighted. However, **some cautioned against excessive coordination**, arguing that while streamlining resources is important, similar activities involving the same participants (e.g., mediation efforts) may employ different methodologies and therefore yield different outcomes. **Distinct processes often serve different purposes that can remain relevant at the same time**. For instance, some organisations bring people together within specific groups (e.g., armed factions, political parties, women, youth, etc.) to foster cohesion and develop shared positions, while others focus on cross-group engagement.

Alongside these concerns about duplication, interviewees also pointed to the risk of narrowing voices and a **lack of balance in participation and representation**. Although civil society actors are usually invited to large conferences, engagement tends to prioritise formal actors – often highly visible individuals who may lack real constituencies – while **grassroots and community-based groups remain largely overlooked**.

Interviewees also noted that **legal constraints, which in many cases prevent the EU from funding unregistered CSOs, can reinforce this tendency**. The EU manages to support local responders and ERRs channelling funding through INGOs. Nevertheless, this model **complicates localisation efforts** and involves a significant risk transfer. Local CSOs bear most of the operational risks, often with limited capacities, operating in areas inaccessible to INGOs, which focus on the administrative side.

Beyond the EU's funding constraints, the **registration requirements imposed by the conflict parties** themselves present another complex challenge. Organisations operating in SAF-controlled areas are required to register with the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) in Port Sudan, while those seeking to operate in RSF-controlled territory need permission

from the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO) and must now also register with the National Authority for Humanitarian Access (NAHA), both established following the creation of a parallel government structure by the RSF. This creates a significant operational dilemma. As noted by one interviewee, **organisations that register with NAHA risk retaliation from Port Sudan authorities**, who have already issued warnings that such registration would revoke operational permissions in SAF-controlled areas.

## Perception of the role of the European Union

Perceptions of the EU and international actors more broadly vary significantly. In general, often no distinction is made between the EU, Member States, other international institutions or NGOs, being all viewed as part of a broader Western presence. Among the local population, **views of international actors are overall negative**, which some attribute as a legacy of the al-Bashir era. Authorities, community leaders, religious leaders, and security figures often view INGOs as spies or as pursuing hidden agendas. There is also **resentment toward the international community for failing to act in preventing the atrocities in El Fasher**, despite the warning signs. Regarding the EU specifically, local populations rarely distinguish between EU structures, viewing it instead as a single entity. Interviewees noted that changing these perceptions is not an easy task, and will require awareness raising, transparency, and clearer strategic communication.

Civil society organisations active on peace and security and in the humanitarian and development sector hold a more nuanced view. Those familiar with humanitarian principles and human rights frameworks tend to have a more positive perception of the EU. However, organisations that are not directly funded by or are rarely in contact with the EU similarly **struggle to distinguish its different institutions or differentiate it from its Member States**. For example, one interviewee mentioned that often EU support had to be downplayed to prevent discussions from being dominated by references to specific EU Member States' national positions.

Among those engaging with the EU more directly, interviewees noted that the **establishment of specific focal points helped overcome some initial confusion** about which institution to approach. At the working level, **the experience with EU officials is considered largely positive**. Counterparts were described as committed, knowledgeable, and communicative, most times engaging in a consultative rather than extractive manner, and consistently responsive to early warning issued by civil society.

This positive assessment extends across several EU institutions. Interviewees noted a **high level of engagement with the European External Action Service (EEAS)**, reporting frequent contact particularly with the Horn of Africa, East Africa Division. On the European Commission side, the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations' (DG ECHO) work was seen positively. Despite the acknowledged funding limitations, **interviewees recognised that DG ECHO makes the most of the resources at its disposal, delivering essential aid**, including stepping in to fill the gaps left by the limits of the work of UN agencies.

The **Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI)** was equally well regarded. One interviewee highlighted that when conflict dynamics forced a reorientation of an already planned project funded by the service, FPI responded constructively, encouraging adaptation rather than insisting on rigid compliance. This was also made possible by the project's design, which built on a prior investment and existing structures, allowing the necessary adjustments to be made swiftly and without having to start from scratch. The **ability to combine a longer-term programming vision with the capacity to adapt to shifting circumstances on the ground** is what interviewees repeatedly stressed as necessary, especially to ensure the effective institutional support that is conducive to meaningful and sustainable impact.

The role of the **EUSR team** was praised for the responsiveness and help in **leveraging diplomatic channels to address operational obstacles for humanitarian work**, such as visas, travel permits and access blockages. However, some noted **limited visible activity by the EUSR on areas other than critical infrastructure and SAF-RSF dialogue**.

Complementing its role as a donor, the **EU is also positively perceived as a convening power in the humanitarian space**, bringing together humanitarian actors, UN agencies, NGOs, and Sudanese civil society at its **annual Humanitarian Senior Officials Meeting**. In a context where coordination is fragmented and access is severely constrained, the EU's ability to convene key actors around a shared assessment of needs and responses was seen as particularly significant.

When the lens shifts from humanitarian aid and peacebuilding programming to broader political engagement, the largely positive perception gives way to more mixed views. Some interviewees noted that **the location of the EU Delegation being Cairo, engagement remains challenging**, and that despite recent encouraging signals since the appointment of the new Ambassador, staff remain too small for the scale of needs.

More broadly, **the EU is not seen as a key actor in mediation spaces**. The **diplomatic engagement was described as reactive rather than proactive**, with some interviewees questioning the timeliness and incisiveness of official statements. However, it was also noted that recent developments point to a renewed momentum. **The adoption of the October 2025 Council Conclusions has been received as a signal of greater political commitment**, even if at global level the conflict continues to receive less attention than its scale warrants. These conclusions offer a foundation on which more sustained engagement could be built.

## Towards a stronger nexus approach

Since the outbreak of the war in 2023, development and peacebuilding programming in Sudan have sharply declined. **Funding has shifted almost entirely toward life-saving assistance**, a trend further compounded by the withdrawal of USAID. This shift, even if understandable given the scale of the humanitarian crisis, carries **strategic risks** that need to be taken into consideration. Neglecting **conflict prevention, including efforts to address tribal tensions, extremism, hate speech, and resource competition, alongside rehabilitation activities** in areas where these could be introduced, risks impeding the reconstruction of a society already deeply fractured. Even if an agreement between all parties was reached today, failing to address these tensions could easily lead to a resurgence of violence.

Prolonged humanitarian aid, while essential for survival, is financially unsustainable at current scales and does not address the root causes of conflict. Most interviewees stressed that **investment in peacebuilding and other complementary initiatives should run in parallel with humanitarian assistance** and that this cannot wait until hostilities end. This includes not only conflict prevention and dialogue efforts but also work on the **reintegration of displaced populations and returnees into host communities**, where investment in social cohesion will be fundamental to any sustainable recovery.

In fact, interviewees noted that **some local responders are already putting this integrated logic into practice**, operating with a **high degree of flexibility**. Instead of working within silos or a strict nexus approach, they just describe their work simply as "aid, build, and thrive", reflecting the instinct that humanitarian, development and peacebuilding action must go hand in hand.

Interviewees also pointed to concrete examples of recent activities that demonstrate the relevance of investing beyond humanitarian aid, contributing to preventing violence and strengthening dialogue between communities. One interviewee described how, following rising tensions between agriculturalist and pastoralist communities in their operating area, they supported the convening of all parties through **existing peace and reconciliation committees, which led to informal incident management and prevention mechanism**. At the time of writing, no violence had further erupted between these groups. While other factors inevitably play a role, the intervention was widely seen as a meaningful contributing one, encouraging the organisation to work creatively beyond the narrower scope of the project. Other interviewees similarly highlighted **negotiated agreements around crop planting and cattle movement** as practical examples of how dialogue can deliver tangible

outcomes for communities, facilitating understanding and halting further escalation, even as the broader conflict continues.

In this regard, it is also important to recognise that the conflict affects the regions of Sudan differently. **Conflict dynamics vary significantly across the country, and programming must reflect that reality.** In the west and south, particularly **Darfur, Kordofan and the Blue Nile area** where fighting is currently more intense, conditions call primarily for a humanitarian approach, centred on life-saving assistance and the protection of civilians. In other parts of the country, such as in **eastern Sudan (Khartoum, Gezira, Gadarif, and Kassala)**, the dynamics are different. Where active fighting has subsided, there is growing scope and demand from the local population to introduce development and peacebuilding interventions alongside humanitarian action.

Addressing these intertwined needs across the country requires a **sustained and coordinated approach**. Within the EU, a degree of coordination already exists and represents an important foundation to build on, although interviewees see the space for stronger institutional footprint and greater political will.

To illustrate the coordination that currently takes place, interviewees pointed to the **existing complementarity between DG ECHO and FPI**. For example, DG ECHO supports ERRs in first-line emergency response, while FPI steps in to addressing peacebuilding elements that fall outside the scope of humanitarian funding. Nonetheless, it was noted that this collaboration, even if improving, **depends heavily on individuals rather than on institutionalised practices and structures**, which makes coordination fragile. Coordination was also highlighted between DG ECHO and the EUSR team, with the latter raising humanitarian access issues at the diplomatic level and helping resolve practical obstacles for implementing partners.

The interviewees identified the development component as the weakest link of the nexus. **With a shift towards the Global Gateway strategy, civil society fears a reduced engagement by the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA) in Sudan.** Some interviewees noted that DG INTPA's projection of some of the EU's domestic priorities, such as migration management, in the engagement with Sudan risks compromising the efforts carried out by other parts of the EU in working along the triple nexus.

In addition, **regional funding envelopes are also small relative to the scale of needs**. Under the updated Sub-Saharan Africa Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2021-2027, Sudan is not addressed through a dedicated country allocation – in fact, the EU put in hold

its cooperation agreement with Sudan following the outbreak of violence<sup>11</sup> – but grouped it with other countries facing complex settings. A dedicated envelope of €238 million was added to the regional MIP to cover actions in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Sudan combined<sup>12</sup>, a figure that, spread across four countries, falls short of what the situation demands.

A final concern raised by interviewees is the need to increase funding for protection activities, which also remains limited despite urgent and growing needs. A key obstacle was identified in the **lack of a shared understanding of what protection entails**. While institutional actors tend to approach protection in remedial terms, focusing on case management and referrals, practitioners tend to see it as more fundamentally linked to prevention. Without a common framework, **funding allocations risk clashing with expectations and needs**. Aligning these perspectives and fostering collaboration, not only between institutions and civil society, but also among civil society actors themselves, was seen as necessary for an adequate response.

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<sup>11</sup> Eric Pichon. (November 2025). *Understanding the war in Sudan: The human cost of geopolitics*.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission. (October 2024). *Addendum No. 1 to the multiannual indicative programme for Sub-Saharan Africa for the period 2021-2027*. p.2.

## Key takeaways and recommendations

1. **Broaden and deepen civil society engagement.** The EU should actively seek out and engage grassroots groups, community-based organisations, women's organisations, and youth groups. Engagement should move beyond large conferences where the same voices tend to dominate toward more inclusive and representative forms of participation, including support for dedicated dialogue spaces where diverse civil society actors can rebuild relationships and develop shared positions ahead of any political transition.
2. **Conduct regular actor mapping.** The EU should invest in rigorous, continuously updated mapping of actors and conflict dynamics, developed in close collaboration with organisations present on the ground. Given the number of actors involved and how rapidly alliances and positions shift in Sudan, accurate and first-hand information is crucial for effective engagement. Close communication with established focal points within EU institutions has proven valuable in this regard and should be maintained.
3. **Reinforce diplomatic engagement.** The EU should use its diplomatic leverage to address the politicisation of humanitarian access and retaliatory measures against civil society by conflict parties and their affiliated structures. The same leverage should be applied consistently to raise the profile of the conflict internationally and in the EU's engagement with external actors providing support to the parties, reinforcing a clear commitment to humanitarian principles, civilian protection and de-escalation.
4. **Strengthen the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus.** The EU should ensure that peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and development initiatives are resourced in parallel with humanitarian assistance and not deferred until hostilities end. Programming must also reflect Sudan's geographic diversity, differentiating between active conflict zones and areas where development and peacebuilding interventions can be progressively introduced.
5. **Formalise inter-institutional coordination.** Nexus coordination should move beyond collaboration that depends on individuals toward formalised, resilient structures. The complementarity between DG ECHO, FPI and the EUSR team is a positive foundation to build on.

6. **Develop a shared protection framework.** Institutions and civil society should work toward a common understanding of what protection entails. In practice, this means bridging the gap between remedial and preventive approaches and fostering collaboration among all actors involved in the response.