Sudan in crisis:

Islamic Relief's humanitarian response and the road to resilience

Acknowledgements:

We would like to express our gratitude to our Islamic Relief Sudan colleagues for their support and valuable inputs in developing this learning paper. Their extraordinary effort in keeping Islamic Relief programmes operational under extremely challenging circumstances are highly appreciated. Many of our colleagues in Sudan have been displaced themselves, yet they are continuing to serve communities in desperate need of support.

Leo Nalugon (Global Food Security and Livelihoods Advisor), and co-authored by Najah Almugahed (Gender Inclusion and Protection Advisor).

© Islamic Relief Worldwide 2025

Table of contents

Executive summary 4

1. Introduction: Why this review matters 5

2. Sudan's spiralling crisis 6

2.1 A country in collapse: Today's humanitarian reality 6

2.2 Interconnectedness of sectors and impact 7

2.3 Economic and environmental factors 8

3. Islamic Relief's operational footprint and response 9

3.1 Overview of operations and geographical presence 9

3.2 Programmatic interventions and reach 10

3.3 Key sectorial impacts: Food security, health and protection 11

3.4 Coordination and partnerships 12

4. Challenges and obstacles in delivering aid 13

4.1 Logistical and access constraints 13

4.2 Bureaucratic hurdles and operational interference 13

4.3 Funding shortfalls and resource limitations 13

4.4 Internal operational challenges 14

5. Strategic recommendations for Islamic Relief's future engagement 15

5.1 Enhancing programme effectiveness and strategic shift towards recovery and resilence 15

5.2 Strengthening operational capacity and staff welfare 15

5.3 Adapting to the evolving context 16

5.4 Advocacy and partnership reinforcement 16

6. Conclusion 17

Executive Summary

Sudan is facing one of the world's most severe and complex humanitarian crises. Its roots in a conflict that erupted in April 2023, the crisis is now in its third year. The toll the conflict has had on Sudan is staggering, including displacement on a mass scale, famine conditions in multiple regions, a decimated health system, and rising protection risks, especially for women and children.

Islamic Relief has stayed the course, delivering aid in hard-to-reach places where few others operate. We have navigated navigated extraordinary hurdles - blocked roads, suffocating bureaucracy, relentless insecurity, and plummeting funding to name a few – to reach some of the most vulnerable people in Sudan.

This report captures the current situation and Islamic Relief's role within it. Drawing on internal field insights, humanitarian data, and strategic reflections, it lays out a clear call — as the crisis becomes protracted, the response must evolve.

We must move from emergency to resilience. From survival to recovery. From relief to self-reliance.

Key recommendations:

- Scale up integrated, multi-sector and longer-term programming.
- Expand the reach of cash assistance.
- Strengthen staff support systems and field capacities.
- Reach hidden and marginalised groups - especially those hosted by families.
- Push for bolder advocacy on humanitarian access and funding.
- Ensure protection is mainstreamed as a cross-cutting issue in all Islamic Relief Sudan's operations, and where possible include standalone protection related components.

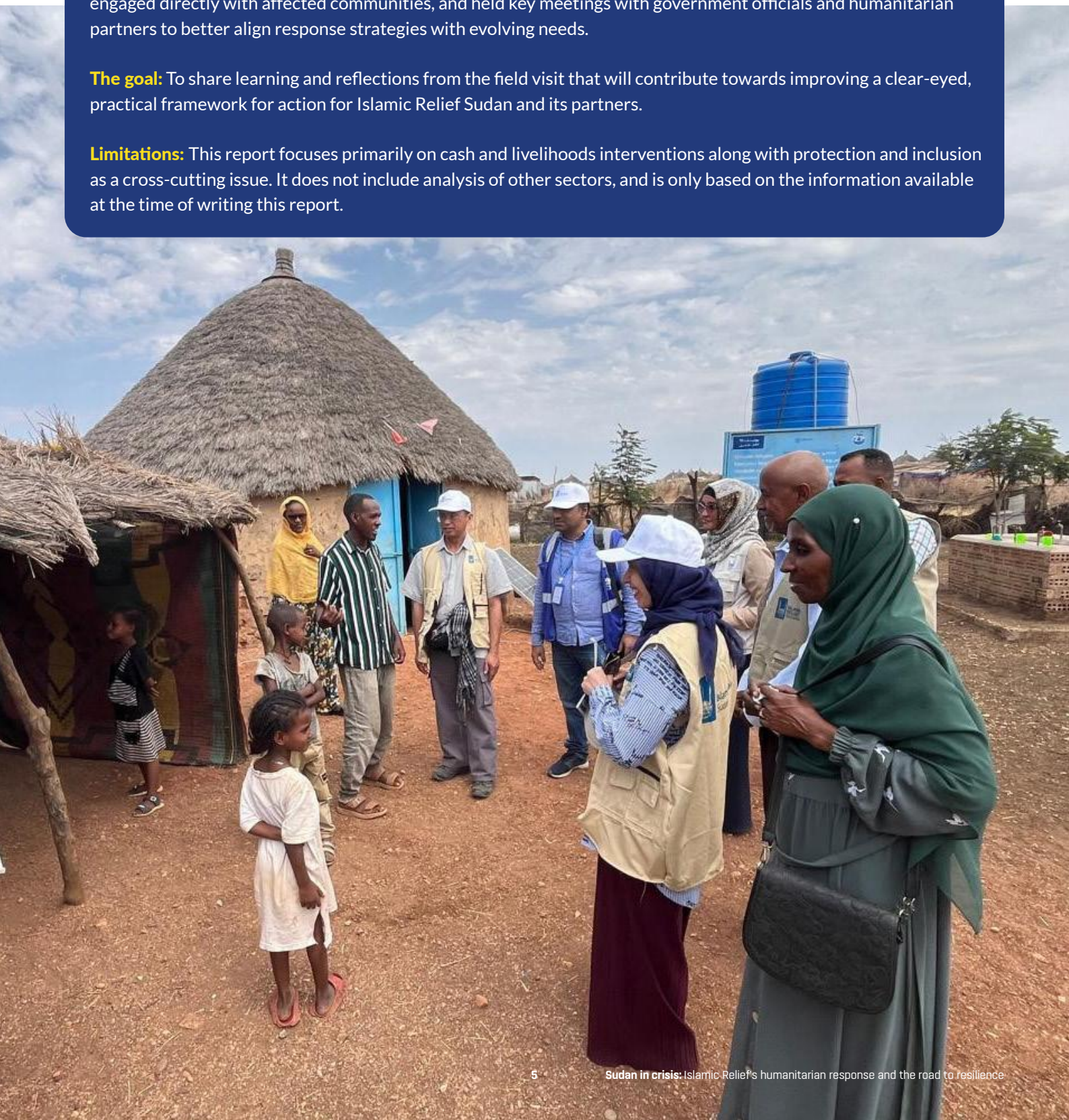
1. Introduction: Why this review matters

This report sets out what's happening in Sudan, and how Islamic Relief is responding.

It draws on a recent field visit by a team from Islamic Relief Worldwide's Programme Quality department, including Leo Nalugon (Global Food Security and Livelihoods Advisor), and co-authored by Najah Almugahed (Gender Inclusion and Protection Advisor) who travelled to Sudan to support the country office. The visit, which is part of ongoing efforts to strengthen frontline programming, focused on sharpening the design and delivery of food security and protection programmes. On the ground, the team visited project sites in Port Sudan and Gedaref, engaged directly with affected communities, and held key meetings with government officials and humanitarian partners to better align response strategies with evolving needs.

The goal: To share learning and reflections from the field visit that will contribute towards improving a clear-eyed, practical framework for action for Islamic Relief Sudan and its partners.

Limitations: This report focuses primarily on cash and livelihoods interventions along with protection and inclusion as a cross-cutting issue. It does not include analysis of other sectors, and is only based on the information available at the time of writing this report.



2. Sudan's spiraling crisis

Since the conflict broke out in April 2023, Sudan has unravelled. Widespread fighting has destroyed homes, gutted infrastructure, decimated farms and markets, and driven millions from their homes. It is a war with no frontlines and no clear end in the near future.

This is no longer a short-term emergency. It's a full-blown, drawn-out disaster. Relying solely on emergency aid can only offer short term relief and could arguably entrench dependence instead of helping communities recover. That's why a strategic shift is needed — one that goes beyond short-term fixes and puts recovery and resilience at the centre of our approach.

This approach echoes Islamic Relief's broader vision: *Changing Lives, Empowering Communities.*

2.1. A country in collapse: Today's humanitarian reality

Sudan is facing a perfect storm: Conflict, economic collapse, and climate shocks have collided, creating one of the world's most under-reported humanitarian catastrophes.

The numbers: Displacement, hunger, and the risk of famine

More than 12 million people have been forced to flee their homes in one of the fastest and largest displacement crises on record. With over 30 million people needing aid, half the population is now in a state of crisis — 16 million of them are children.

Hunger is now at catastrophic levels. Over 25 million people face acute food insecurity. In at least five regions, famine conditions have already taken hold. Many more are just one failed harvest or blocked aid delivery away from starvation.

But famine isn't just about food, it is also shaped by political realities. In Sudan, the delicate balance between international recognition of the crisis and domestic political sensitivities has made it harder for the world to respond effectively. Humanitarian organisations find themselves navigating complex diplomatic terrain, often resorting to the use of cautious phrases such as "minimum packets of famine response" instead of more direct language that might complicate their operational access.

Table 1: Key numbers behind the crisis (Q2/Q3 2025)

Indicator	Data Point (Range/Value)
Total forcibly displaced	9.9 million people
Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)	7.5 million people
Refugees displaced to neighboring countries	4.3 million people
Total people in need of humanitarian assistance	30-30.4 million people
People facing Acute Food Insecurity (IPC Phase 3+)	24-25 million people
People facing Catastrophic Food Insecurity (IPC Phase 5)	635,000-700,000 people
Children acutely malnourished	3.4-5 million children
People at risk of gender-based violence (GBV)	12.2 million people
Children out of school	17 million children

Note: Data points may vary slightly across sources due to different reporting dates and methodologies.
The table reflects the most recent available figures .

2.2. Interconnectedness of sectors and impact

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan manifests across multiple critical sectors, with each problem exacerbating others, creating a complex web of interconnected and mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities.

Food Security: Beyond the immediate threat of famine, the conflict has systematically dismantled agricultural production, leading to widespread shortages of essential goods and a dramatic surge in prices. This economic devastation has rendered basic necessities unaffordable for a significant portion of the population. The nutritional impact is particularly severe on children, with over five million children acutely malnourished. Another 3.4 million children under the age of five are at high risk of acute malnutrition. Food remains the consistently identified top priority need across all affected communities. The gendered impact of food insecurity means women and children are more affected by this crisis. Approximately 75 per cent of female headed households are food insecure, being three times more likely to be food insecure than male headed households.

Health: Sudan's health system is on the verge of complete collapse, with over 80 per cent of healthcare facilities in conflict zones rendered non-operational. This systemic breakdown has facilitated a surge in preventable disease outbreaks, including a deadly cholera epidemic. Medical supplies are critically low, and the extreme heat, capable of reaching up to 47 degrees Celsius (116.6 degrees Fahrenheit) in areas like Port Sudan, further endangers lives. Strained and overwhelmed hospitals are making urgent calls for cooling equipment and additional personnel.

Protection: The conflict has led to a sharp rise in gender-based violence (GBV), placing an estimated 12.2 million people at risk, an 80 per cent increase from the previous year. Horrific cases of sexual violence, including rape and kidnapping, are widespread and reportedly used as a weapon of war, yet remain largely underreported due to fear of stigma and lack of safe reporting mechanisms. Reported incidents include rape (including child rape), gang rape (some involving more than 20 perpetrators), sexual harassment, forced marriage, and sexual slavery — during which survivors report being held for days, to over a month. There have also been reports of survivors being raped in front of family members, highlighting the use of conflict related sexual violence as a tool for family or community humiliation and reprisal. Other forms of GBV continue to be reported including intimate partner violence, sexual exploitation, child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FMG/C).

FGM/C continues to be practiced, persisting as a cultural norm even amidst the conflict. Sudan's FGM/C rate remains one of the highest globally, affecting over 86 per cent of Sudanese women and girls aged 15-49 in 2014 (the most recent comprehensive data available). The demand for specialised GBV services has surged by 400 per cent, highlighting the escalating need for support.

Furthermore, the conflict has tragically created a desperate need for assistance for a growing number of orphans and their families.

The combination of conflict, displacement, and economic hardship then contributes to heightened protection risks, particularly for women and children, who face increased vulnerability to GBV and exploitation. For instance, the lack of basic food can prevent individuals from even articulating other needs, as hunger takes precedence. There is also an increase in early and forced marriage, intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation as a direct consequence of food scarcity and displacement. Similarly, the economic collapse strips women of their livelihoods, forcing many into desperate and exploitative situations.

The crisis in Sudan is not a mere collection of isolated problems but a complex tapestry of interconnected and mutually reinforcing challenges. Displacement directly exacerbates food insecurity by disrupting access to land and livelihoods. This, in turn, weakens the health and nutritional status of populations, making them more susceptible to disease.

This intricate web of dependencies highlights that a fragmented or siloed humanitarian response will be largely ineffective. Instead, it highlights the critical necessity for integrated programming that simultaneously addresses multiple needs within the same communities or households to achieve truly sustainable and impactful outcomes, a principle that Islamic Relief has recognised and is striving to implement.

2.3. Economic and environmental factors

The conflict has inflicted severe damage on Sudan's economy, leading to the destruction of vital infrastructure, the disruption of agricultural production, and the widespread collapse of livelihoods. This economic devastation has resulted in extreme shortages of essential goods and skyrocketing prices, meaning basic necessities are largely unaffordable for much of the population.

A critical economic challenge is the widespread lack of cash, which is choking aid delivery and hitting the most vulnerable the hardest. New banknotes introduced to fight counterfeiting have triggered a cash shortage. Withdrawal limits cap access at just 200,000 Sudanese pounds (approx. £246), if cash is even available. The ongoing conflict has led to the closure of numerous banks, damage to essential banking infrastructure, and the looting of cash.

Humanitarian agencies are unable to source enough local cash to pay for distributions, delaying aid to millions. Payments via mobile apps are used more often — via apps like Bankak, Cashi and KhartouMap — but patchy networks, power cuts and digital exclusion limit their reach. Many vulnerable families lack phones, internet or electricity, leaving them cut off from digital transfers.

Even where mobile platforms exist, outages and high fees reduce reliability and value. Cash-based assistance empowers families and boosts local markets but Sudan's cash crisis is locking out those who need it most.

Sudan is also facing severe environmental shocks. The country experiences extreme heat, torrential rains, and devastating floods. These climate-induced events further displace families, destroy homes and infrastructure, and contribute to the resurgence of disease outbreaks, such as cholera. The presence of extreme heat and torrential rains and the fact that flooding and storms are displacing families and destroying homes indicate that pre-existing climate vulnerabilities are being significantly exacerbated by the ongoing conflict. This means that environmental shocks are acting as powerful multipliers of the humanitarian crisis, adding another complex layer to an already dire situation.

Future humanitarian responses must integrate climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies, focusing not only on immediate flood response but also on longer-term investments in resilient infrastructure and early warning systems to mitigate future impacts on highly vulnerable populations.

3. Islamic Relief's operational footprint and response

Islamic Relief has been operational in Sudan for more than 30 years, having first responded to the devastating famine in 1984. Over the decades, we have adapted our focus to encompass both emergency relief and long-term development programmes aimed at building up community resilience.

3.1. Overview of operations and geographical presence

Islamic Relief is distinguished by its operational presence in highly challenging and hard-to-reach areas, including regions such as Central Darfur and Kordofan, and remote locations like Gelat, near the Ethiopian border.

Our presence in difficult, marginalised areas positions Islamic Relief as a critical partner for broader humanitarian efforts, enabling access to populations that might otherwise be entirely cut off. It also highlights the need for specialised support and resources to sustain operations in such demanding environments.

Following the outbreak of the conflict, our main office in Khartoum was looted, forcing the relocation of staff and operations to Port Sudan. From this new base, teams undertake arduous and often dangerous journeys to project sites. Recent visits included Gedaref, where the Aanja IDP camp and Doal refugee camp (near the Ethiopian border) were assessed.

Despite the challenges, Islamic Relief Sudan continues to deliver aid across nine states. These include Gedaref, Blue Nile, Sennar and Central Darfur. In North and West Kordofan, teams are working in areas that remain accessible, while our office in Al Jazirah has reopened. In Khartoum, where access has recently improved, a new office has been established in Omdurman to support the humanitarian response. The country office in Port Sudan also coordinates relief efforts for displaced communities in Red Sea State.

In 2025, Islamic Relief maintain a lean but dedicated team of 253 staff members (167 male, 86 female) on the ground, managing over 50 diverse projects across these challenging regions.

3.2. Programmatic interventions and reach

Islamic Relief's programme portfolio in Sudan is comprehensive, designed to address the multifaceted needs arising from the humanitarian crisis. Our priority areas of focus are food security, nutrition and and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions with protection being mainstreamed into different sectors. Islamic Relief Sudan is also prioritising the same sectors for emergency response.

Key areas of intervention include:

Food security and livelihoods: This remains a primary focus, directly addressing acute food insecurity, severe hunger, and widespread malnutrition. Interventions include direct food aid distribution, implementation of livelihood projects (such as supporting farmers in Galat), and the provision of multipurpose cash assistance.

Health and nutrition: Islamic Relief supports the collapsing health system by providing emergency medicines, essential medical supplies, and fuel for generators in affected hospitals. Our efforts also target acute malnutrition in children, a critical and widespread issue.

WASH: Many of our programmes target improving water and sanitation infrastructure, ensuring access to safe, clean water, and distributing hygiene kits to prevent disease outbreaks.

Protection: Protection is a cross-cutting theme across all of our programmes in Sudan, with continuous efforts to expand standalone protection components. A cornerstone of these efforts includes the establishment and operation of "women and girls friendly spaces" and "child friendly spaces," which serve as vital safe environments for community members to find support and disclose cases of violence. While Islamic Relief does not currently provide specialised GBV services, it maintains an established and clear referral system in all field offices to link survivors to specialised organisations.

Despite the stated commitment to mainstreaming protection, there appears to be a gap between policy and the practical implementation of basic protection standards. For instance, the visit highlighted that many of the basic minimum standard of protection checklists is lacking, citing examples such as mixed toilets that do not have proper locks and facilities without proper lighting in camps.

This discrepancy indicates a need for more rigorous application and monitoring of protection principles across all interventions. Inadequate attention to these basic standards, even in seemingly non-protection sectors like WASH, can inadvertently heighten vulnerabilities, such as increasing the risk of gender-based violence in unsafe sanitation facilities.

This situation highlights the necessity of robust quality assurance mechanisms and enhanced capacity building for field staff to ensure that protection principles are genuinely embedded and operationalised in all programmatic activities.

Education: Efforts include providing access to education for children, a critical need given that millions are out of school.

Orphan Sponsorship: This is a significant programme, with a desperate need for expansion due to the increasing number of children orphaned by the conflict, a call echoed by the Sudanese government.

Multipurpose cash assistance: Getting cash into people's hands has proved to be one of the toughest challenges on the ground. Local markets are under pressure, and while bank transfers would be the safest way to deliver aid, opening an account with Bank of Khartoum — one of the few viable options — has been slow, confusing, and riddled with delays. The process highlights the urgent need to simplify banking for those without access. Unpredictable bank liquidity and long waits between cash distributions have chipped away at trust and dulled the impact of support. Yet despite these hurdles, cash assistance remains a vital part of Islamic Relief's response — giving families the freedom to make their own choices and helping local economies stay afloat.

Islamic Relief has demonstrated significant reach in its response. Since the onset of the conflict, the organisation has delivered vital life-saving humanitarian aid to a substantial number of people, with figures of over 1.2 million individuals in 2024. This includes IDPs, host communities, and returnees, underscoring the breadth of its operational impact across the country.

3.3. Key sectoral impacts: Food security, health, and protection

Table 2: Islamic Relief's programmatic reach and key activities (2024-2025)

Category	Details
Total people reached (since conflict onset)	1.2 million (with 650,000 noted as vital aid delivered over past year)
Key programme areas	Food Security and Livelihood, Health and Nutrition, WASH, Protection, Education, Orphan Sponsorship, multipurpose cash assistance
Specific activities	**Food Security and Livelihood:** provision of food packs, multi-purpose cash assistance, cash assistance for livelihoods recovery, agriculture seeds, inputs, and tools, distribution of livestock (i.e., sheep, goat, etc.), cash for renting/leasing land and vocational training. **Health and Nutrition:** medicine, medical supplies, medical equipment, and logistics for health facilities, rehabilitation of health facilities, mobile health clinic, cash assistance for patients, incentives for health workers, response to any diseases outbreak, diseases prevention mass awareness, strengthening the capacity of existing health and nutrition workers, screening SAM (Severe Acute Malnutrition) and MAM (Moderate Acute Malnutrition) children and providing nutrition supplement or referral support, community based nutrition support and distribution of newborn baby kits. **WASH:** distribution of hygiene kits, water storage kits and water bladders, construction/rehabilitation of water sources and latrines, water trucking, hygiene awareness session/campaign, water quality monitoring and chlorination. **Shelter and Non-Food Items (NFI):** distribution of plastic sheets for temporary shelter, mosquito nets, and tents **Protection:** psychosocial support, dignity kits for women and girls, recreational items for children, women, and girls, child-friendly spaces (CFS), women and girls-friendly spaces (WGFS), cultural event psychosocial support (PSS), training for service providers on protection issues, GBV case management referral support, psychosocial and wellbeing support for Islamic Relief Sudan's staff. **Education:** educational materials for students and teachers, rehabilitation of schools, furniture and equipment for schools
Geographical presence	Port Sudan (main base), Gedaref state, Blue Nine state, Sennar state (reopened the office recently after), Central Darfur, North Kordofan (Islamic Relief operating in the accessible areas), West Kordofan (Islamic Relief operating in the accessible areas), Al Jazirah state (recently resumed the office), Khartoum state (recently Khartoum is accessible, Islamic Relief Sudan opened an office in Ondurman — part of Sudan, and started response), and Red Sea state (Islamic Relief Sudan country office in Port Sudan, Red Sea and also responding for IDPs in Red Sea state).
Number of projects	Over 50 projects
Number of staff	Less than 200 staff members on the ground

3.4. Coordination and partnerships

Islamic Relief is actively engaged and well-integrated into the broader humanitarian architecture in Sudan, particularly within the cluster system. This system, led by the United Nations, brings together humanitarian organisations working in the same sectors such as food security, protection, health, and shelter to ensure a coordinated and effective response. We maintain active linkages and coordinate with other international and national organisations, various stakeholders, government agencies, and specific clusters, such as the food security and protection clusters.

This engagement is not merely a procedural formality but a strategic essential. Active and visible participation in these cluster systems directly impacts Islamic Relief's ability to secure funding and coordinate effectively within the broader humanitarian response. For instance, the food cluster system tracks active engagement, which is a key factor in recommendations for common humanitarian funding applications.

This highlights that dedicated resources and effort should be allocated to strengthening Islamic Relief's engagement with clusters, including consistent data sharing, active participation in meetings, and showcasing their unique reach and impact in marginalised areas. Such efforts can significantly enhance the organisation's reputation, influence, and funding prospects.

While Islamic Relief does not currently provide specialised GBV services, it has established clear referral systems in all field offices to link cases to specialised organisations that possess the expertise and resources for in-depth case management and support. Furthermore, we actively contribute data and information from the areas we operate in to the cluster system, aiding in comprehensive needs assessments and the effective utilisation of specialised services by the wider humanitarian community.

4. Challenges and obstacles in delivering aid

Delivering humanitarian assistance in Sudan is fraught with immense challenges, making it one of the most dangerous and difficult operating environments globally. These obstacles span logistical, bureaucratic, funding, and internal operational domains.

4.1. Logistical and access constraints

The logistical challenges in Sudan are severe and pervasive. Travel conditions are extremely arduous, exemplified by a 700-kilometre land journey from Port Sudan to Gadaref, which involved navigating 32 checkpoints and enduring exceptionally poor road conditions, often requiring the use of side roads that were in better condition than main routes. This arduous travel significantly impedes the ability to reach those most in need.

Reaching inaccessible areas and overcoming bureaucratic requirements for comprehensive needs assessments and timely aid delivery remains a substantial hurdle. The ongoing conflict, compounded by heavy rains and flooding, further disrupts critical transportation routes, making large parts of the country difficult or impossible to access. The sheer number of checkpoints and the necessity of using alternative, often poorer, roads are not merely indicative of inadequate infrastructure. They reflect a deeper systemic issue of fragmented control, pervasive insecurity, and potentially arbitrary authority exercised by various warring factions, which are hallmarks of a fragile state and intense conflict.

This situation means that the severe logistical hurdles faced by Islamic Relief are symptoms of a profound breakdown in governance and deliberate impediment of humanitarian movement, rather than just poor road conditions. This necessitates a highly robust and adaptive logistics strategy, potentially involving the exploration of alternative transport routes, such as airlifts (as explored by other agencies), decentralised supply chains, and significant investment in security protocols.

It also highlights the critical need for high-level diplomatic engagement to advocate for unrestricted humanitarian access across all conflict lines.

4.2. Bureaucratic hurdles and operational interference

Sudan's bureaucratic system is described as "very bureaucratic" in its complexity. Obtaining the numerous permits required for travel and securing approvals for every document significantly slows down operations, creating substantial delays in program implementation. Humanitarian access is consistently hampered by these bureaucratic impediments, alongside operational interference, active hostilities, and direct violence against aid personnel, assets, and facilities. The grave risks faced by aid workers are underscored by the fact that over 110 humanitarian personnel have been killed, injured, or abducted since the conflict began. Islamic Relief's own offices have been looted, further demonstrating the extreme operational environment.

The emphasis on numerous permits and the requirement for every single paper approved suggests that the bureaucracy is not simply inefficient but may be a deliberate, systemic barrier employed by authorities to control or restrict humanitarian aid. This exacerbates the crisis by limiting access to those in desperate need.

This situation demands that Islamic Relief invest in specialised local expertise to navigate the intricate system. It also necessitates higher-level advocacy with relevant authorities and international bodies to champion humanitarian access principles and highlights the need for flexible internal procedures that can adapt to such an unpredictable operating environment.

4.3. Funding shortfalls and resource limitations

While not as affected as some agencies, Islamic Relief is grappling with drastic funding cuts, which place considerable stress on the organisation and heighten expectations to expand programmes despite continuously rising needs. This internal challenge is reflective of a broader, severe underfunding of the humanitarian response in Sudan.

The 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which sought $4.2 billion (approx. £3.6 billion) to assist 21 million vulnerable people, was only 23 per cent funded as of July 2025. Similarly, the World Food Programme (WFP) faces

a substantial $500 million (approx. £433 million) shortfall for its emergency food and cash assistance programmes in Sudan. This critical and growing disconnect between the escalating humanitarian needs and the diminishing or insufficient international funding available forces organisations like Islamic Relief to make difficult decisions regarding the scope and reach of their programmes, often compelling them to do more with less.

It is also important to recognise the global scale of funding cuts. It has affected many sectors but protection services seem to suffer the most. According to the protection cluster, some activities have suspended fully or partially in 15 states and 54 localities. It is estimated that 318,000 people lost access to protection services including women, children and people with disabilities , increasing their exposure to abuse and exploitation.

Furthermore, a significant lack of liquidity for multipurpose cash assistance persists, severely impacting the implementation of programmes. A shortage of physical currency — sparked by new banknotes and worsened by conflict — has crippled the banking system. With banks closed, infrastructure damaged, and strict withdrawal limits in place, humanitarian agencies can't access enough cash to deliver aid. This dire funding landscape necessitates aggressive advocacy efforts by Islamic Relief and the wider humanitarian community to highlight the severity of the crisis and mobilise increased international donor support. It also implies a pressing need for Islamic Relief to diversify its funding base and explore innovative financing mechanisms to sustain its vital operations in Sudan.

4.4. Internal operational challenges

Beyond external obstacles, Islamic Relief faces several internal operational challenges that impact its effectiveness and sustainability in Sudan.

Staff wellbeing: The dedication of Islamic Relief staff on the ground is undeniable, yet they are enduring immense personal hardships. Many team members are IDPs themselves, having lost family members and homes, while simultaneously serving other IDPs. Despite their remarkable resilience and ability to keep a smile on their faces, this profound personal burden represents a significant psychological strain. There is a recognised and urgent need to provide robust psychosocial support for the country team, even if delivered remotely.

The profound personal hardships endured by national staff, many of whom are internally displaced themselves and serving other IDPs, represent a significant psychological burden that can impact their wellbeing, productivity, and the long-term sustainability of Islamic Relief's operations.

Prioritising and implementing robust psychosocial support mechanisms for staff is not merely an ethical essential but a critical operational investment. Neglecting this could lead to burnout, high turnover, and a degradation of programme quality and institutional memory.

Protection mainstreaming gaps: While protection is explicitly intended to be mainstreamed across all Islamic Relief programmes, there are instances where basic minimum standards are lacking. For example, the absence of proper locks and adequate lighting in mixed toilets within camps highlights a gap in the practical implementation and quality assurance of protection principles in seemingly non-protection sectors like WASH. Regardless of the availability of tools and guidance, the emergency nature of programmes and time constraints is often used as reasons for such shortfalls. With programmes that have standalone protection components, such as child-friendly spaces and projects for women and girls, there seems to be a more intentional effort to follow minimum standards and sectorial guidance. A survivor centered approach is heavily emphasised within such programmes that also includes GBV emergency response cash assistance funds.

Integrated programming definition: There is a recognised need to standardise the definition of integrated programming within Islamic Relief. A clear, shared understanding of what constitutes integrated programming — whether it means providing multiple components within a single project or targeting the same group of rights-holders with intersectional outcomes — is crucial for consistent and effective implementation and for achieving desired results.

Data and adaptability: The rapidly changing environment in Sudan means that data and analysis findings can quickly become outdated, often within a few months. This dynamic context necessitates that Islamic Relief maintains a high degree of adaptability and flexibility in its response strategies and internal systems. The organisation's internal processes and procedures may need to be more agile to respond effectively to evolving needs and circumstances on the ground.

5. Strategic recommendations for Islamic Relief's future engagement

To enhance its effectiveness and impact in Sudan's complex and evolving humanitarian landscape, Islamic Relief should strategically focus on several key areas.

5.1. Enhancing programme effectiveness and impact strategic shift towards recovery and resilience

While the provision of life-saving assistance remains paramount, Islamic Relief should strategically re-evaluate its budget distribution to significantly invest in recovery and livelihood projects. As the crisis enters its third year, enabling people to regain self-sufficiency and reduce long-term dependency is crucial. This strategic pivot will foster sustainable resilience within communities.

Standardise integrated programming: A clear and standardised definition of integrated programming is essential for Islamic Relief. This involves ensuring that projects are designed to target the same groups of rights-holders with intersectional outcomes — for example, by providing food, WASH, nutrition, health, and protection services to the same beneficiaries. Such an approach will lead to more holistic and measurable results, as integrated programming — when properly defined and implemented — is not an efficient delivery mechanism but a fundamental strategy for building holistic resilience in communities.

By addressing multiple, interconnected needs simultaneously, it creates a synergistic effect that strengthens overall community well-being and reduces vulnerability. Islamic Relief should prioritise training and resource allocation to ensure that programme design and implementation truly reflect this integrated approach, moving beyond mere co-location of services to genuine cross-sectoral synergy, which can be a distinguishing factor for the organisation.

Scale up multipurpose cash assistance: In a country gripped by chronic liquidity shortages, Islamic Relief must expand its multipurpose cash assistance programmes to meet growing needs. Collaborating with the Bank of Khartoum to simplify account setup — especially for those without formal ID — could unlock access for the most vulnerable. Exploring alternative financial service providers or digital platforms like Zain Fintech, which enable transactions without a bank account or smartphone, offers promising pathways to ensure predictable cash distribution. Piloting mobile cash-out points in remote areas could ease the burden of travel for recipients. While mobile payments offer a potential alternative, their effectiveness is limited by low adoption rates, network outages, and the lack of digital infrastructure in many areas. Islamic Relief will have to adapt by piloting new delivery models and combining cash with voucher or in-kind assistance, especially in areas with weak financial infrastructure. As ever, training staff to deliver cash projects with precision and empathy remains essential, with capacity strengthening in cash and voucher assistance flagged as a critical need. Close coordination with cash working groups and clusters will help maximise impact, avoid duplication, and open doors to new funding. At its core, cash assistance restores dignity, empowers families with financial choice, and breathes life into local economies.

Rigorous MEAL systems and quality standards: Investing in enhancing the capacities of the country office through the implementation and use of existing guidance tools and toolkits. Implementing rigorous Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) systems will improve the quality of operations and ensure strict adherence to minimum standards, particularly in cross-cutting areas like protection within WASH programs.

5.2. Strengthening operational capacity and staff welfare

Prioritise psychosocial support for staff: Recognising the immense personal hardships faced by the country office team, many of whom are internally displaced themselves, providing robust psychosocial support is paramount. This support, even if delivered remotely, is critical not only for the wellbeing of staff but also for the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of Islamic Relief's operations.

Enhance country office capacities: Continuous investment in the skills and capacity of the local team is essential. This includes providing ongoing training, guidance tools,

and toolkits to ensure adherence to sector standards and to improve the overall quality of operations, especially given the rapid pace of project implementation in a crisis environment.

Flexible internal systems: Islamic Relief's internal systems and procedures must be adapted to be more flexible and responsive to the fast-changing environment and complex bureaucratic challenges in Sudan. This may necessitate a review and adjustment of standard organisational processes to allow for greater agility and responsiveness on the ground. The deep local knowledge and expertise of Islamic Relief's Sudanese staff in navigating the complex and bureaucratic operating environment is a critical strategic asset. This localised capacity allows the organisation to maintain access and deliver aid where other organisations might struggle. Islamic Relief should actively invest in, empower, and leverage this local expertise, potentially through formal training programmes focused on bureaucratic navigation and by decentralising decision-making authority to country teams. This approach strengthens localisation efforts and significantly enhances operational effectiveness in a challenging context.

5.3. Adapting to the evolving context

Reprioritise targeted areas and groups: Tailored responses are required for the diverse internally displaced populations. This includes specific support for those desperate to return home but lacking the means, for those who cannot return and require long-term solutions, and crucially, for the large proportion (estimated at 80 per cent) of IDPs who are hosted by families and are often unrecorded, thus lacking access to formal services.

In recent months, more than two million people have returned to their places of origin, particularly in Khartoum and Al Jazirah. Islamic Relief Sudan is actively responding to the needs of these returnees, integrating IDP-returnee programming into its wider humanitarian efforts to ensure that those rebuilding their lives are not left behind.

The vast majority of displaced persons in Sudan are living in informal arrangements with host families, making them largely invisible to traditional humanitarian tracking and assistance mechanisms. This creates a significant gap in the response, leaving a highly vulnerable population marginalised. Islamic Relief needs to develop innovative, community-based approaches to identify, monitor, and deliver assistance to these hosted IDPs, potentially through cash transfers to host families or community-led initiatives, to alleviate the burden on hosts and ensure equitable access to services. This requires flexible programming and strong local partnerships.

Expand target groups to orphans: There is a desperate and growing need to increase focus and programmes dedicated to orphans and their families. This aligns with direct calls from the Sudanese government for expanded orphan sponsorship programmes.

Prioritise women, girls and children: The continued operation and expansion of spaces for women and girls and child-friendly spaces in all camps are crucial. These safe environments are vital for building trust within communities, providing essential first-line support, and effectively linking vulnerable individuals to specialised protection services.

5.4. Advocacy and partnership reinforcement

Strengthen linkages and visibility within clusters: Islamic Relief must actively improve its coordination and engagement with humanitarian clusters, such as those for food security and protection. Enhanced visibility and active participation are crucial for ensuring eligibility for and securing common humanitarian funding.

Advocate for unimpeded humanitarian access: Given the systemic nature of access constraints and funding deficits, advocacy is not merely a supplementary activity but a core operational function for Islamic Relief. Engaging in high-level advocacy with all parties to the conflict and international stakeholders is essential to demand safe, sustained, and unrestricted humanitarian access. This includes addressing bureaucratic impediments and ensuring the protection of aid workers. Islamic Relief should integrate advocacy more deeply into its country-level strategy, empowering local staff to collect and share evidence of access impediments and funding gaps, and linking these insights to global advocacy campaigns to influence policy and donor behavior.

Mobilise international funding: Intensified advocacy efforts are required to address the drastic funding shortfalls for the Sudan response. Highlighting the severity and immense scale of the crisis to international donors is paramount to mobilising the necessary resources to meet the escalating humanitarian needs.

6. Conclusion

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan represents one of the most urgent and complex challenges of our time, characterised by mass displacement, severe food insecurity, a collapsing health system, and pervasive protection risks. Islamic Relief plays a critical and commendable role in this response, particularly through its unique operational presence in hard-to-reach and marginalised areas, demonstrating a profound commitment to the most vulnerable populations.

However, the protracted nature of the conflict and the significant operational environment — marked by severe logistical constraints, stifling bureaucratic hurdles, and drastic funding shortfalls — necessitate a strategic evolution in Islamic Relief's approach. The goal is clear: to move beyond immediate life-saving assistance towards integrated, resilience-focused programming that empowers communities to rebuild their lives. This requires a standardised approach to integrated interventions, a scaling up of multipurpose cash assistance, and the implementation of rigorous quality assurance systems.

Internally, prioritising the psychosocial wellbeing of the dedicated Sudanese staff, many of whom are themselves displaced, is not merely an ethical obligation but a critical investment in operational sustainability. Leveraging the invaluable local expertise in navigating the complex bureaucratic landscape and fostering flexible internal systems are also essential.

Furthermore, adapting to the evolving context demands innovative approaches to reach marginalised populations, particularly the vast number of internally displaced persons hosted informally by families, and an increased focus on the growing needs of orphans.

Finally, persistent and high-level advocacy is indispensable. Islamic Relief must continue to strengthen its linkages within the broader humanitarian architecture, relentlessly advocate for unrestricted humanitarian access, and champion the mobilisation of increased international funding.

Despite the pervasive darkness of the crisis, the resilience of the Sudanese people and the unwavering dedication of Islamic Relief staff offer a beacon of hope. Sustained commitment and a strategically adaptive response are crucial to supporting their path towards recovery and stability.

Islamic Relief Worldwide
19 Rea Street South
Birmingham
B5 6LB
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 121 605 5555
Fax: +44 121 622 5003

irw@irworldwide.org
www.islamic-relief.org

Registered Charity No. 328158
Registered Company No. 02365572