

A Qualitative Exploration of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) in Sudan: A Case for Resilience in a Humanitarian Crisis

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Abstract: Sudan is experiencing the world's largest humanitarian crisis, with nearly half of the population in urgent need of assistance. Political instability, economic collapse, and the war that began in April 2023 have severely weakened state systems, forcing communities to rely heavily on local initiatives (OCHA, 2025). Within this fragile context, the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has become a critical framework through which cooperatives, social enterprises, and mutual aid groups sustain livelihoods, strengthen social cohesion, and build resilience. This dissertation explores the role of SSE in Sudan's ongoing crisis, situating it within wider debates on localisation, resilience, and alternative approaches to development. A qualitative case study was employed, combining analysis of grey and academic literature with fourteen semi-structured interviews involving cooperative members, social entrepreneurs, advisors, and NGO staff. Interviews continued until saturation was reached, and findings were thematically analysed. The results show that SSE initiatives were vital to community survival, enabling people to maintain livelihoods, foster solidarity, and adapt to rapidly changing needs. Yet these efforts were constrained by infrastructural deficits, limited government support, and chronic funding shortages, along with unmet community needs and external agendas that were not localised. Despite these obstacles, SSE actors demonstrated resilience and innovation that highlight their significance as immediate coping mechanisms and as a potential pathway toward Sudan's socio-economic recovery.

Keywords: Sudan, Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), Humanitarian Crisis, Localisation, Community Resilience, Socio-Economic Recovery.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since April 2023, Sudan has faced an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, driven by conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in the west and centre of Sudan. Over 12.5 million people have been displaced, including IDPs, asylum seekers, and refugees, making this the world's largest internal displacement crisis (OCHA, 2025). Around 30.4 million people, two-thirds of the population, require humanitarian assistance, including 16 million children. Famine conditions, acute food insecurity, disease outbreaks, and climate shocks have intensified the emergency. Women and girls suffered from sexual violence, while humanitarian access remains severely constrained by insecurity and funding shortages (OCHA, 2025). The Economist Intelligence Unit (2024) warns that the conflict not only deepens Sudan's economic collapse but also raises regional escalation, as neighbouring states seek to protect their own interests. Amid this bleak context, scholarship on coping mechanisms remains limited. This study employs qualitative methods, including interviews with Sudanese citizens, to examine how Social and Solidarity Economy

(SSE) approaches may support economic recovery and social inclusion. It highlights important community responses in protracted crises and contributes to the literature on SSE as a framework for resilience.

➤ Research question and Aim

This research undertakes a qualitative exploration of how SSE operates as a locally rooted, bottom-up framework for humanitarian response and resilience in conflict-affected Sudan, presenting both its potential and its limitations within a fragile political and economic context.

• Research Question

How do SSE frameworks, particularly cooperatives and social enterprises, contribute to local resilience and humanitarian response in conflict-affected Sudan, and what challenges and strategies shape their effectiveness?

- *Objectives*

- ✓ To explore the current frameworks and practices of cooperatives and social enterprises operating within Sudan's SSE.
- ✓ To identify effective services and assess the role of SSE actors in fostering community resilience and enabling locally led, context-sensitive humanitarian responses during Sudan's ongoing conflict.
- ✓ To identify strategic pathways for strengthening SSE initiatives, with a focus on enhancing institutional capacity, reducing aid dependency, and supporting sustainable post-conflict recovery.

- *Rationale*

Despite growing global interest in SSE frameworks, their role in conflict-affected contexts remains underexplored, with literature still dominated by Global North experiences (Utting, 2015). Humanitarian responses in Sudan, as elsewhere, have largely prioritised international emergency aid, often neglecting locally rooted alternatives (Barakat and Milton, 2020). Yet mutual aid efforts such as Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) have been critical to survival, even while lacking institutional support and legal recognition (Mahdi, 2023). This study addresses this critical gap by exploring how SSE models contribute to resilience and recovery during Sudan's ongoing humanitarian crisis. As an agrarian society with rich traditions of collective action, Sudan presents an important site for examining how locally led initiatives, such as community kitchens, ERRs, cooperatives, social enterprises, and informal solidarity networks, respond to crises where state systems have collapsed. It contributes to critical debates on localisation and decolonisation in humanitarianism. As Glennie (2008) and Easterly (2006) argue, international aid systems have too often reinforced dependency and external control. In contrast, SSE frameworks embed local resilience, participatory decision-making, and mutual accountability. Initiatives like the Nyéléni Declaration exemplify how grassroots actors reclaim agency over development processes and challenge extractive global systems (La Via Campesina, 2008). Focusing on Sudan, the study generates evidence-based insights to inform more effective, context-sensitive humanitarian and development policies. It illustrates how principles like collective ownership, participatory governance, and bottom-up production can offer viable alternatives to top-down aid, supporting sustainable, locally anchored recovery in conflict-affected settings.

- *Key Ideas*

SSE emerges as a critical framework for fostering resilience in conflict-affected communities. Defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2017), SSE encompasses a diverse array of organisations including cooperatives, mutual associations, and social enterprises, that combine social objectives with economic activity, guided by principles such as solidarity, democratic governance, ecological sustainability, and collective ownership. This conceptual foundation is underpinned by the notion of social capital, which refers to the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. As

Woolcock (1998, p. 155) articulates, "expect communities blessed with high stocks of social capital to be safer, cleaner, wealthier, more literate, better governed, and generally "happier" than those with low stocks, because their members are able to find and keep good jobs, initiate projects serving public interests,.. resolve disputes more amicably, and respond to citizens' concerns more promptly." In conflict-affected contexts like Sudan, where institutions have eroded and economic systems are in disarray, social capital becomes a vital resource that enables communities to mobilise support, share resources, and sustain livelihoods.

The urgency to explore SSE in Sudan is underscored by the UNDP (2024) report, reveals that full-time urban employment has halved since the onset of conflict. Many households have turned to self-employment, often in unstable and informal conditions, while unemployment has surged from 1.6% to 18%. This crisis necessitates resilience-oriented programmes that support sustainable income generation and social protection, roles that SSE can potentially fulfil. This study contributes to debates on localising humanitarian response and development planning, in line with principles for locally led adaptation, which call for shifting power, resources, and decision-making to local actors (Soanes et al., 2021). It focuses on how SSE models support resilience in Sudan, both during and after conflict, emphasising the need to move beyond emergency aid paradigms towards community-rooted models that reinforce social cohesion and build long-term resilience. (Utting, 2015; OECD, 2023). It also showcases Sudan's informal but vibrant traditions of mutual aid and grassroots organising (nafeer), elements of a social economy that often remain unrecognised in formal frameworks (The Guardian, 2024). To situate Sudan's experience within a wider discourse, the research considers comparative examples from other crisis contexts in the globe, such as Ukraine and Rwanda, illustrating how diverse SSE models operate across varying socio-political environments (Sotnyk et al., 2024; Sentama, 2009).

Post-conflict reconstruction, as Calvo, Morales and Zikidis (2017) argue, must extend beyond infrastructure to include the renewal of social institutions and economic relations. SSE provides a platform for marginalised groups to shape recovery on their own terms, particularly in contexts where state legitimacy is weak, and formal institutions are fragmented. SSE's emphasis on inclusion and local control makes it especially relevant in fragile states. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa supports this view. In Uganda, a shift from donor-dependent NGOs to SSE-aligned, earned-income models enabled communities to reduce reliance on external aid. Embedding economic activities within cooperative and community-based structures enhanced social cohesion and supported sustainable livelihoods. Such transitions illustrate SSE's role in promoting agency and decolonising development by grounding economic power in local networks (Calvo, Morales, and Zikidis 2017). Rwanda's post-genocide experience with cooperatives further highlights SSE's capacity to rebuild social fabric while addressing structural inequalities. As Borzaga, Salvatori, and Bodini (2019) observe, cooperatives can (1) build the adaptive capacity of crisis-affected populations, (2) ensure the ownership and

sustainability of recovery efforts, and (3) foster social dialogue and cohesion. These mechanisms play both an economic and psychosocial role in fragile settings. Transitioning to an SSE framework represents a departure from conventional aid and market-based models. Rooted in collective agency and participatory governance, SSE offers a bottom-up alternative that prioritises long-term resilience over short-term intervention. It challenges neoliberal development paradigms that often privilege growth metrics and donor agendas over equity and local knowledge (Utting, 2015). Sudan's civic mobilisation and agrarian traditions demonstrate how SSE principles are already embedded in local practice. ERRs, nafeer, and other solidarity-based systems exemplify mutual aid, local knowledge, and voluntary participation, even if they remain outside formal recognition (Young & Ismail, 2019; The Guardian, 2024). Such initiatives embody SSE's core values (ILO, 2017) but provide mainly short-term relief. Without structural support, they cannot be scaled or sustained, underlining the need for formalisation and integration into broader SSE strategies that promote resilience, recognition, and inclusion (British Council, 2020; UNTFSSSE, 2025).

To explore these dynamics, the study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology. Understanding these dynamics requires a grounded methodological approach. Through in-depth interviews with participants from diverse age groups, regions, and socio-economic backgrounds, this research examines how social solidarity is experienced and practiced on the ground. Triangulating interviews with international standards, NGO reports, and existing literature ensures a rigorous, context-sensitive analysis. Particular emphasis will be placed on gender and intersectional dynamics to unpack who benefits from SSE and under what conditions. Ultimately, this research aims to inform both policy and practice. It does not propose SSE as a universal solution but rather as a contextually adaptable framework with strong potential to complement formal recovery efforts. In the absence of national SSE policies, the study recommends adopting internationally recognised SOPs and guides to support sustainable local responses. Key priorities are legal recognition, stakeholder awareness, capacity-building, and ecosystem integration. Hence, it contributes to advancing inclusive, community-led recovery models in Sudan and other conflict-affected contexts.

II. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the methodological framework used to examine how SSE actors in Sudan respond to humanitarian crises and contribute to resilience. Given the exploratory, context-specific nature of the research, it adopts a qualitative case study design combining semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and thematic analysis. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of SSE's depth and contextual complexities in systemic crises. The chapter also details the sampling strategies, ethical considerations, limitations, researcher positionality, and data analysis methods.

➤ *Research Design: A Qualitative Case Study Approach*

In recent years, there was a significant move toward remote research methods in conflict zones and insecure settings, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For evidence-based approaches, it is imperative to include vulnerable groups, who cannot participate in traditional research methods. Thus, establishing meaningful connections with participants, even remotely, remains vital for producing credible research outcomes (Douedari et al., 2021). In Sudan, conflict and displacement have reshaped research design and field engagement. This study applies qualitative methods within an interpretivist case study to examine the practices and experiences of SSE actors. The term "case study" covers a wide and debated range of research styles, including small-N qualitative designs, ethnographic research, and process tracing (Gerring, 2004, p. 341). Gerring argues that this diversity is a methodological strength, enabling researchers to adapt case study approaches to the complexities of real-world social contexts. In this study, Sudan is treated as a single embedded case, where various actors, including community members, solidarity-based institutions, and humanitarian practitioners, respond to a humanitarian crisis and the breakdown of formal governance. This approach aligns with Gerring's view of case studies as bounded systems that enable contextual analysis and the tracing of causal mechanisms.

Complementing this, Dion (1998) offers a qualified defence of selecting cases based on the presence of an outcome when testing necessary conditions. While such selection has been critiqued for potential bias, Dion argues that when the goal is to assess whether a certain condition (community needs and state collapse) is necessary for a particular outcome (the emergence of SSE), this method is both valid and valuable. Therefore, focusing on Sudan as a purposely selected case of humanitarian crisis and disruption is methodologically sound even within a small-N design. Showing how the absence of formal state support can foster environments of mutual aid and alternative solidarity initiatives.

➤ *Data Collection*

• *Semi-Structured Interviews*

14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals engaged in SSE, including representatives of cooperatives, social enterprises, unions, consultants, and NGO practitioners (see Appendix B). Questions were tailored to each category and organised around three themes:

- ✓ Organisational Roles and Functions
- ✓ Resilience, Support, and Operational Realities
- ✓ Strategic Outlook

This structure was designed to enable comparative analysis across diverse actors. It also captures the multi-scalar nature of SSE efforts, ranging from immediate survival strategies at the household level to broader community resilience and systemic transformation. As Singh-Peterson and Underhill (2017) contend, effective assessments of resilience must be rooted in local realities, span multiple

spatial scales, and extend beyond immediate coping to encompass long-term adaptation and transformation. Their framework underscores the value of thematically structured, context-sensitive research, especially in humanitarian settings where resilience arises through layered, interdependent local responses and innovation.

• *Document and Grey Literature Analysis*

To triangulate the findings and strengthen contextual understanding, this study analysed grey literature and NGO reports from organisations active in Sudan’s SSE sector, including Mercy Corps, CARE, and the ILO, alongside journalistic sources such as TIME and The Guardian. As Johnston and Seel (2023) comment, grey literature is vital in evidence-based research, especially in complex or under-documented settings, as it offers practical insights and ground-level perspectives often missing from academic publications. These sources were selected for their ability to amplify diverse community voices and for their direct relevance to the research question. They provided valuable evidence on informal economies, grassroots responses, and locally led innovations, enriching the analysis with real-time, area-based data. This component enabled a holistic view of

how SSE actors are represented, supported, and sometimes constrained within the broader humanitarian landscape.

➤ *Sampling Strategy*

This study employed purposive sampling to identify individuals involved in SSE activities. As Bouncken, Czakon, and Schmitt (2025) note, purposive sampling, combined with thematic saturation, yields rich, context-specific insights from diverse participants. Saturation, reached when no new themes emerged, signalled analytic adequacy and reinforced the credibility of findings. The sample was expanded through snowball sampling, where participants referred others in similar grassroots initiatives. This approach is effective for sensitive or under-researched topics requiring insider knowledge to reach dispersed populations (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). In Sudan’s conflict context, where no formal registries exist, selection prioritised diversity across gender, geography, community role, and displacement status, strengthening depth and trustworthiness (Dahal et al., 2024). Despite access, security, and connectivity constraints, actors were at least from four states (see Table 1 for an overview of the participant matrix).

Table 1 Overview of Participants’ Matrix

Participant Matrix				
Participant Category	Role	Number of Interviewees	Example Stakeholders	Outreach Plan
1. Social Enterprise and Cooperative Owners	Founders, Leaders, representatives	4	Women-led cooperatives, agro-enterprises, etc.	Referral via NGOs and local cooperatives
2. SSE Administrators	Union reps, public sector officials	6	Cooperative Unions, Social enterprise and cooperatives, consultants, MicroFinancial institutes (MFI), Technical Advisors	Outreach via professional networks
3. NGO Practitioners	Program staff working with SSE actors	4	International NGOs and National NGOs	Direct contact through Sudan NGO networks
Total Estimated		14		

➤ *Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis*

Data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. The process was guided by close reading of interview transcripts (see Appendix D) and reflective note-taking to track emerging themes across participants’ responses. This iterative approach enabled the identification of both semantic (explicit) and latent (underlying) themes, ensuring a nuanced understanding of participants’ narratives.

The analytical lens was further shaped by Woolcock’s (1998) social capital framework which emphasises the balance between autonomy and embeddedness across bottom-up and top-down processes. This is particularly relevant to Sudan, where community groups mobilise from the bottom-up while negotiating institutional expectations from the top-down. Applying Woolcock’s framework kept the analysis attentive to how local solidarity practices operate

in parallel with, and sometimes in tension with, broader structural conditions. The thematic analysis generated six overarching themes: regulatory and policy challenges, service provision to SSE actors, community resilience, operational and contextual barriers, coordination, and future directions. For coherence, only four themes are examined in Chapter Four, while future directions are considered in the Conclusion (Chapter Five).

➤ *Researcher Positionality*

As a Sudanese researcher with a background in humanitarian and development work, I entered this study with contextual familiarity but adopted a learning rather than interventionist stance. Unlike previous roles where research informed programming, this dissertation allowed me to explore grassroots solidarity responses without pre-set agendas. While I did not maintain a formal reflexive journal, I consciously held a neutral position throughout the research process. Following Simons (2009), I remained attentive to how my background, assumptions, and emotional responses might shape the research. I noted contextual observations,

reflected on potential bias, and consulted my supervisor during key stages, such as question design and interpretation, to check for latent assumptions. These measures kept the study grounded in participants' narratives and helped minimise bias. Rather than a limitation, this reflexive awareness strengthened the interpretive depth and credibility of the research.

➤ *Limitations*

Conflict-related displacement and weak rural connectivity meant repeated follow-ups and rescheduling, particularly during snowball sampling. Some cultural nuances in Arabic were difficult to capture in English translation. All participants were Sudanese, offering valuable critical perspectives on NGO engagement, yet the absence of foreign practitioners with implementation experience in Sudan limited broader triangulation. The lack of government reports also prevented independent verification of SSE policies and services, leaving the study reliant on participant testimony and grey literature. Finally, Sudan's ongoing crisis complicated neutrality, as participants often emphasised state failure, exclusion, and systemic marginalisation.

III. SSE IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Embarking on the development literature in fragile and conflict-affected contexts reveals a longstanding dominance of top-down models prioritising state-building and institutional reform (Barakat and Milton, 2020). In most fragile settings, institutional capacity is too weak to deliver livelihood security or inclusive resilience, as recent evidence from Sudan shows (UNDP, 2024). This has encouraged scholars and practitioners to consider alternatives that emerge from below, grounded in local practice rather than imposed from above (UNTFSSE, 2024). SSE has been recognised as one such paradigm. Building on activist traditions, it is centred on collective wellbeing, democratic governance, and ecological sustainability (Utting, 2015). Evidence from Ukraine and Rwanda illustrates how cooperatives and grassroots solidarity networks can rebuild trust and resilience during conflict (Sotnyk et al., 2024; Sentama, 2009), while global studies highlight SSE's role in contexts of displacement and fragility (OECD, 2023). For Sudan, these debates resonate with long-standing traditions of communal solidarity, including nafeer and other grassroots mobilisation practices (Sharfi, 2025; Freedom House, 2022).

This chapter situates Sudan within wider debates on SSE, drawing on social capital theory (Woolcock, 1998; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000) and engaging with post-neoliberal critiques that challenge Eurocentric modernisation models (Amin, 2019; Escobar, 2010). At the same time, it acknowledges critical perspectives on governance weaknesses and fragile institutional settings in Sudan (Mahdi, 2023; Slom, 2024). Together, these insights provide the foundation for a contextually grounded analysis of SSE's potential and limitations in crisis.

➤ *Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of SSE*

• *Key Elements of SSE*

The literature introduces SSE as a set of practices and an emerging paradigm linked to alternative development approaches (Utting, 2015). Social capital, meanwhile, has been developed as a theoretical lens for understanding economic development (Woolcock, 1998). SSE roots could lie in traditions such as the cooperative movement advocating collective ownership, the social economy prioritising welfare over profit, and alternative development focused on grassroots sustainability (Lopera-Arbeláez and Richter, 2024). Andersen, Hulgård, and Laville (2022) contend that SSE should not be seen merely as an alternative or new economic paradigm. They assert that its core features are practices deeply rooted in human history, and critique the tendency to link it solely to social enterprise, which risks narrowing it to an organisational form shaped by shifting dynamics between state, market, and civil society.

SSE encompasses a wide range of initiatives, including cooperatives, NGOs, self-help groups, fair trade networks, consumer associations, and diverse forms of social enterprise (ILO, 2017; OECD, 2023). These actors, united by principles of democratic governance and solidarity, form an "ecosystem" of localised and participatory economies (Utting, 2015). In Sudan, they manifest in both formal and informal variants, which will be examined later in the chapter. Among these forms, cooperatives and social enterprises are often highlighted as the most prominent (Utting, 2015; ILO, 2017). The ILO identifies these as key expressions of SSE while also recognising the importance of informal institutions such as associations, mutuals, and community groups. Yet Andersen, Hulgård, and Laville (2022) consistently caution that limiting SSE to such organisational forms risks neglecting its wider traditions of self-management. Historically, cooperatives emerged from 19th-century worker movements, with the first modern example founded in 1844 by the Rochdale Pioneers in the UK (UK Co-operative, n.d.). Cooperatives are typically member-owned entities based on collective ownership and democratic processes, with profits either shared among members or reinvested into the organisation (European Commission, 2015; Eurofound, 2019). They are commonly divided into producer cooperatives, which support members in producing goods or services, and consumer cooperatives, which improve access to essential goods and services (Eurofound, 2019). By contrast, social enterprises are more recent entities that combine entrepreneurial innovation with social impact. They reinvest profits to pursue social objectives rather than distribute them to shareholders (European Commission, 2023; British Council, 2020). While sharing cooperatives' commitment to democratic values and community focus, they are typically more flexible in structure and do not always require member ownership. Both forms embody SSE principles of solidarity, local embeddedness, and sustainable development (Eurofound, 2019).

• *Bottom-Up Perspectives in SSE*

Eschweiler and Hulgård (2018) conceptualise SSE through a bottom-up lens, underscoring the role of citizens and communities in shaping alternatives to dominant economic models. While this framing reveals the potential of grassroots mobilisation rooted in self-help, democratic participation, and solidarity, it also risks idealising community action and overlooking the uneven power dynamics that shape such initiatives. They argue that the solidarity economy extends beyond organisational forms like cooperatives or social enterprises, encompassing diverse practices such as fair trade, solidarity tourism, short supply chains, renewable energy, recycling, microfinance, and social currencies. From this perspective, bottom-up approaches demonstrate both the promise of SSE as a form of political and social empowerment and the difficulties it faces in maintaining a clear identity and scaling its impact when operationalised in a scattered mix of initiatives (Eschweiler and Hulgård, 2018).

• *Social Capital and the Foundations of SSE*

The theory that most directly embodies the bottom-up approach within SSE is social capital, which explains how communities build resilience through shared networks and collective action. Aldridge, Halpern, and Fitzpatrick (2002,

p.5) define social capital as “the networks, norms, relationships, values, and informal sanctions that shape the quantity and cooperative quality of a society’s social interactions.” In development contexts, Woolcock and Narayan (2000) extend this by stressing its economic benefits, particularly reducing transaction costs, improving resource mobilisation, and strengthening resilience by enhancing community well-being.

Building on this foundation, Woolcock (1998) proposes a dual-dimensional framework distinguishing embeddedness and autonomy. Embeddedness refers to strong intra-community ties that cultivate solidarity and collective identity, while autonomy denotes the external linkages and institutional capacities that allow communities to access wider support systems and policy arenas. These dimensions operate at both micro (local networks) and macro (institutional structures) levels. Development is most sustainable when bottom-up integration (micro-level, community-rooted action) is balanced with top-down integrity (macro-level, institutional credibility and responsiveness). As illustrated in Figure 1: Woolcock’s (1998, p.165) Dual-Dimensional Framework, sustainability depends on synergy and linkage, where institutions engage meaningfully with communities while grassroots actors maintain autonomy to influence higher-level systems.

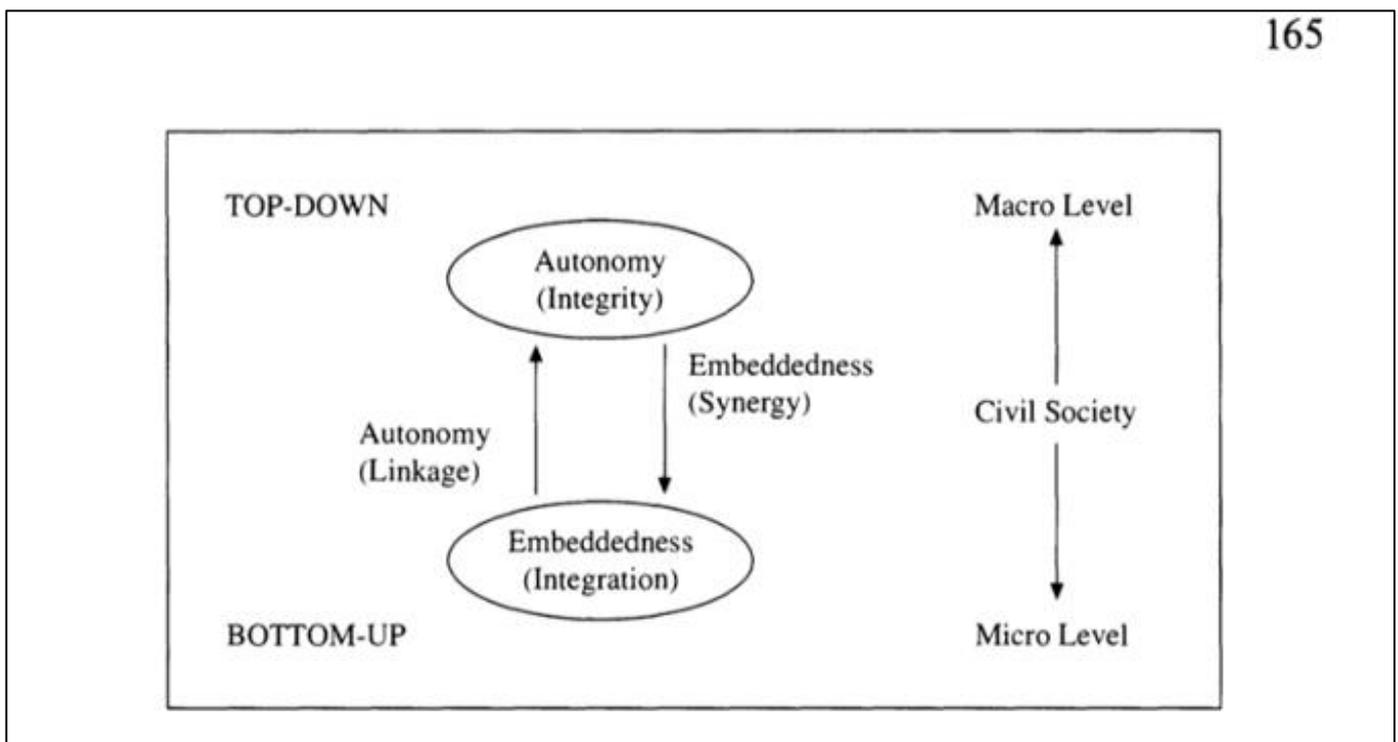


Fig 1 Top-Down and Bottom-Up Development and the Forms of Social Capital.

This framework is particularly relevant for analysing SSE in fragile settings like Sudan, where mutual aid groups and other local networks demonstrate strong grassroots capacity (UNDP, 2024). While SSE relies on local agency and solidarity, it also requires institutional and policy support to legitimise and sustain such efforts. In Sudan, however, weak institutional frameworks undermine scalability (Ottaway and El-Sadany, 2012). Viewing SSE through the

lens of social capital highlights civil society’s role as the connective tissue between individual agency and systemic transformation. This reflects Laville’s (2014) argument that SSE is not merely an alternative economic model but a societal practice grounded in relational and collective action, embedded in the wider interplay of market, state, and civil society.

Yet in Sudan, the transformative potential of social capital is constrained by institutional fragmentation. Formal governance, including the Ministry of Industry and Trade and the Ministry of Labour and Social Development, functions unevenly across regions (Slom, 2024). The Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) nominally leads NGO coordination, but in many areas the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) operate a parallel body, the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO), creating competing centres of authority (ACAPS, 2024; UNDP, 2024). This duality hinders SSE actors, such as cooperatives and social enterprises, from securing stable recognition, financing, and integration into wider systems. Moreover, as Portes (1998) cautions, social capital may generate negative effects. Strong internal ties can exclude outsiders, restrict access to resources, and entrench monopolies that limit social mobility. Likewise, excessive social control within tightly knit groups can curtail individual freedoms and diversity. In Sudan, these risks are exacerbated by displacement and complex processes of social integration. Chiovelli et al. (2021) observe that internally displaced persons (IDPs) often report significantly lower levels of social and civic inclusion. Without deliberate interventions to connect diverse forms of social capital, networks that sustain survival may also reproduce exclusion and deepen fragmentation. To grasp how these localised dynamics interact with wider structures, it is necessary to account for the historical and structural conditions that have shaped development trajectories. Post-neoliberal perspectives provide such a lens, positioning SSE as both a response to neoliberal reforms and a holistic framework that acknowledges the enduring legacies of colonialism and the structural inequalities they produced (Maldonado-Torres, 2011).

- *Post-Neoliberal Critiques of Development*

The post-neoliberal critique of development offers a crucial lens for understanding SSE in conflict-affected settings like Sudan. It explains how neoliberal reforms and incomplete decolonisation have produced overlapping crises, most notably debt dependency, austerity, weakened public institutions, and exclusion from global governance for countries in the Global South (Debt Justice, 2023). As Glennie (2008) and Easterly (2006) argue, development paradigms rooted in neoliberalism often prioritise market liberalisation, private ownership, and growth indicators, often at the expense of social justice, democratic governance, and local needs. While SSE champions community-driven solutions, Utting (2015) observes that such initiatives often face challenges of scaling, resource mobilisation, and long-term sustainability, which may necessitate some engagement with broader institutional and market systems. Access to markets can provide financial resources that help local initiatives grow and sustain themselves. Some literature points to hybrid models, such as public-private partnerships (PPPs), which combine resources and expertise from both sectors. These can, in theory, address certain challenges SSE faces in contexts like Sudan. However, PPPs remain controversial, and their integration with SSE must be carefully managed to safeguard community priorities and social justice goals (Local Government Association, 2023).

In contrast, post-neoliberal critiques, drawing on decolonial perspectives (Maldonado-Torres, 2011; Escobar, 2010) argue that neoliberal development models have exacerbated inequalities in the Global South by marginalising indigenous knowledge and non-market economies. These critiques challenge Eurocentric models of modernisation, which portray the Global South as “lagging behind” and in need of catching up with Western ideals (Amin, 2019). Instead, they call for an inclusive and pluralistic vision of progress that adopts multiple ways of thinking and rejects a single “one-size-fits-all” development model. This perspective prioritises collective ownership, participatory democracy, and ecological sustainability, while valuing indigenous practices and community empowerment over externally imposed solutions (Maldonado-Torres, 2011). A central concept in this discourse is *Buen Vivir*, which translates to “living well” in harmony with people, community, and nature (Escobar, 2010). *Buen Vivir* mirrors the principles of the SSE by emphasising social justice, ecological balance, and the strengthening of community-based systems.

- *Nyeléni: A Global Case Study for Food Sovereignty and SSE Principles*

The Nyéléni Food Sovereignty Movement, launched at the 2007 International Forum on Food Sovereignty in Mali, provides a compelling case for linking food sovereignty with SSE principles. Bringing together over 500 representatives from 80+ countries, the forum produced the Nyéléni Declaration, which defined food sovereignty as not only the right to food but also the right of peoples to democratically shape their food and agricultural systems, grounded in cultural traditions, ecological knowledge, and local control of resources (La Vía Campesina, 2008; Friends of the Earth International, 2024). Nyéléni’s reinforces collective ownership, indigenous knowledge, biodiversity, and agroecological practices mirrors core SSE values of solidarity, democratic governance, and sustainability. It challenges the dominance of transnational agribusiness and reclaims community control over food production and distribution. In Sudan, parallels can be drawn with community-based agricultural practices and labour traditions such as *nafeer* (“call to mobilise”), which similarly reflect bottom-up resilience in contexts of conflict and state failure (Sharfi, 2025). While Nyéléni offers a transformative vision of food sovereignty, challenges of scalability and limited institutional support often restrict such initiatives to the local level, highlighting the need for stronger linkages between grassroots efforts and enabling policies.

- *SSE in Humanitarian and Conflict-Affected Contexts*

SSE models, cooperatives, mutual aid networks, informal solidarity groups, social enterprises, and community-led associations, are increasingly recognised as effective frameworks for supporting communities in humanitarian crises and conflict-affected areas. They function as adaptive instruments of governance and economic coordination, mobilised when formal state institutions collapse (Utting, 2015). They are vital for promoting mutual support, creating livelihoods, fostering psychosocial recovery, and, in some cases, contributing to peacebuilding and state

resilience (Sotnyk et al., 2024). As Eschweiler and Hulgård (2018) observe, SSE initiatives often emerge spontaneously in conflict or post-conflict settings to meet urgent local needs where government presence is weak or absent, typically operating through participatory, inclusive, and democratic principles.

The next section highlights SSE efforts globally. While contexts differ, the logic of SSE, unity, local agency, and participatory governance, remains adaptable across crisis settings in both the Global North and South.

- *SSE in the Global North*

The Ukrainian case underscores the global relevance of SSE in crisis contexts. Despite regional and historical differences, both Sudan and Ukraine show that community-driven initiatives are crucial for building resilience, maintaining dignity, and shaping alternative development pathways. Ukraine offers a valuable comparative lens, sharing key challenges with Sudan, namely mass displacement, unemployment, and threats to social cohesion. Amid war-induced trauma, Ukrainian communities relied on spontaneous acts of solidarity among neighbours, relatives, volunteers, and civil society groups. These localised actions provided material and emotional support and catalysed broader community resilience (Sotnyk et al., 2024). SSE strategies in Ukraine have centred on reintegrating IDPs, supporting socially oriented enterprises, and implementing skills training through incentive programmes for returning qualified personnel, remote employment, and state and local initiatives that fund public organisations and community projects. Crucially, these measures are not temporary relief but part of a long-term agenda to reconstruct social and economic systems. Sotnyk et al. (2024) highlight that Ukraine's SSE activities involve participatory governance, state support for grassroots initiatives, and incentives for socially driven businesses, seen as instrumental in rebuilding the post-war economy and strengthening community agency.

- *SSE in the Global South*

Evidence from the Global South underscores the role of SSE in post-conflict recovery and resilience. In Rwanda, cooperatives were central to post-genocide reconciliation and rebuilding, serving as platforms to restore trust and promote economic participation. They distributed goods at fair prices, mobilised savings, and extended credit to farmers and workers excluded from formal lending (Sentama, 2009). In South Sudan, social enterprises combined humanitarian relief with skills training to support refugee integration, while Uganda's open-door refugee policy, granting freedom of movement, land access, and the right to work, enabled SSE actors such as social enterprises to deliver agricultural training, supported by impact investors (OECD, 2023). In Syria, emergency schools addressed basic needs including nutrition, hygiene, and protection while also offering psychosocial support and learner-centred education, showing how SSE-aligned interventions can merge immediate relief with longer-term social cohesion (OECD, 2023). The OECD further highlights that SSE actors not only provide humanitarian aid but also advance social justice, inclusive growth, and policy innovation in fragile contexts.

Beyond immediate response, SSE also contributes to development through a transformative lens. Rather than complementing welfare or market systems, it reframes development as participatory, justice-oriented, and ecologically sustainable (Laville, 2014). Bucos (2024) shows how SSE initiatives actively support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), not only as tools for achieving targets but also as systemic enablers of equity and inclusion. Examples include Brazil's urban agriculture cooperatives strengthening food security and employment, Morocco's UNIDO-backed circular economy project engaging informal workers in plastic recycling, and Latin American waste-picker cooperatives generating inclusive green jobs (Bucos, 2024). These initiatives reflect the sociocultural foundations of solidarity in the Global South, contrasting with the more innovation-driven approaches in the North, underscoring that SSE models must be tailored to local realities (Gaiger, 2017). While cooperatives' developmental contributions are well recognised, the literature also critiques their role in postcolonial and post-conflict contexts. Moulton (2021) and Andersen, Hulgård, and Laville (2022) argue that colonial and development agendas often co-opted cooperative movements, replacing grassroots autonomy with technocratic, centralised models during the decolonisation period. Moulton's research on the Co-operative College shows how these frameworks were manipulated to serve external agendas rather than local empowerment. This history reminds us that cooperatives are not inherently democratic or community-driven, making it essential to analyse their origins and functions critically. In Sudan, this legacy persists: cooperatives remain tied to the Ministry of Trade and shaped by donor agendas, limiting their grassroots character and reinforcing dependence on top-down structures (Mahdi, 2023).

- *Sudan's SSE Landscape and Local Efforts*

- *Sudan's Socio-Political and Humanitarian Context Shaping SSE*

Sudan's SSE landscape has evolved amid prolonged conflict, economic contraction, environmental stress, and the steady erosion of state capacity. Years of civil and tribal wars, coupled with international sanctions and cycles of political unrest, including mass protests against presidential rule, have undermined formal governance (Ottaway & El-Sadany, 2012). Environmental shocks such as floods and droughts have further constrained production and livelihoods, especially in rural areas (Touray and Etang, 2022). In this context, community-led mechanisms have assumed roles traditionally associated with the state. Local networks organise resource pooling, collective action, and social safety nets, visible in dry-season farming, artisanal mining, and informal trading, practices that remain indispensable in regions such as Darfur, where conflict and insecurity are chronic (Young & Ismail, 2019). The escalation of fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since April 2023 has deepened these pressures, producing the world's largest displacement crisis, with over 15 million people uprooted internally or across borders (IOM, 2025). Disruption of food systems, destruction of infrastructure, and heightened risks for women and girls

have made community-based systems even more critical (OCHA, 2024). In the absence of functional central authority, SSE initiatives have emerged as decentralised, community-driven structures that mobilise resources, make collective decisions, and sustain basic services under crisis conditions (UNTFSSSE, 2025). Though diverse in form, their shared capacity to combine local knowledge with adaptive organisation has enabled them to fill major gaps in humanitarian provision.

- *Mapping Sudanese SSE Actors*

Sudan's SSE actors span a spectrum from formal, legally recognised entities to informal, culturally rooted mutual aid systems. This diversity reflects both historical traditions and responses to challenges intensified by the current conflict.

- ✓ *Formal SSE Interventions*

- *Cooperatives and International NGO Activities*

Cooperatives have long shaped Sudan's rural economy, particularly in agricultural production and marketing (Birch, Carter & Satti, 2024). More recently, formal SSE structures have been reinforced mainly through international partnerships, with Mercy Corps and the ILO standing out as notable examples.

Mercy Corps has applied Market Systems Development (MSD) approaches in displacement contexts to restore supply chains, strengthen producer linkages, and rehabilitate infrastructure. Its cost-sharing model, where NGOs and community cooperatives jointly invest in assets such as motorised or solar irrigation pumps, has helped raise yields, reduce post-harvest losses, and expand income streams. Extension services further ensure that these assets are effectively integrated into production cycles (Mercy Corps, 2019).

The ILO, working in partnership with the Sudanese NGO HOPE, has targeted women farmers' cooperatives with governance training, transparent financial management, and bulk procurement. Using tools such as Think.COOP and Start.COOP alongside Good Agricultural Practices and climate adaptation, the programme combines organisational development with technical support. Starter kits, including drought-tolerant seeds, are distributed and monitored through remote sensing to provide tailored advice (ILO, 2024). These initiatives enhance market participation and bargaining power, but their dependence on donor funding leaves sustainability vulnerable to political and financial shifts (Utting, 2015).

- *Local Social Entrepreneurship*

In contrast to these internationally driven efforts, local social enterprises demonstrate how Sudanese actors adapt SSE principles to conflict realities. A prominent example is 249Startups, which supports early-stage entrepreneurs in health, education, and climate resilience. By providing co-working spaces, accelerator programmes, and mentorship, it enables access to digital platforms, finance, and markets. This model has expanded youth participation and women's

economic engagement, even in conflict zones (OECD, 2023). Research in fragile contexts suggests such enterprises can adapt to market disruptions while maintaining social objectives (White, 2021). However, their reliance on connectivity and infrastructure, often disrupted in Sudan, limits scalability in rural or highly insecure areas (Lanfranchi, Yassien & Elmurtada, 2024).

- ✓ *Informal Mutual Aid and Traditional Social Safety Nets*

Sudan's informal SSE is anchored in long-standing social and religious practices. Zakat (mandatory Islamic almsgiving), extended family networks, and nafeer (collective voluntary labour, or "call to mobilise") remain vital for resource pooling and survival. These systems are particularly critical when external aid is delayed, functioning simultaneously as safety nets and culturally embedded mechanisms of solidarity (Birch, Carter & Satti, 2024).

- *ERRs and Community Kitchens*

Since the 2023 war, ERRs and community kitchens have become key mutual aid networks. Drawing on nafeer traditions, ERRs operate where formal humanitarian systems cannot reach, often bridging ethnic, gender, and political divides (The Guardian, 2024). They coordinate food distribution, temporary health posts, and supply delivery through decentralised committees. Initially reliant solely on local contributions and diaspora support, ERRs later received selective international assistance (Time, 2024). In urban areas, they run kitchens providing daily meals for displaced families, with neighbourhood-level decision-making ensuring rapid, transparent distribution (The Guardian, 2024).

These initiatives exemplify how SSE adapts under crisis, enabling communities to control priorities and delivery while offering an alternative to centralised systems (Lopera-Arbeláez & Richter, 2024). Yet they also face constraints, including volunteer fatigue and unpredictable funding. Even when supported by international NGOs, ERRs struggle under "onerous and bureaucratic funding mechanisms... in terms of monitoring and accountability," which hinders responsiveness when swift action is most needed (Khalafallah, 2024).

- *Challenges, Critiques, and Risks of SSE in Crisis Settings*

- *Legal Frameworks, Conflict Impact, and Donor Dynamics*

Sudan lacks a coherent legal or policy framework for SSE, forcing actors to operate under fragmented and often restrictive regulations. Social enterprises have no dedicated status and must register as associations, co-operatives, or companies, each carrying bureaucratic limitations (British Council, 2020). While co-operatives are formally recognised under the Co-operative Societies Act, provisions remain outdated and tied to traditional models (Mahdi, 2023; ILO, 2002). Political constraints further restrict civic space, impeding local groups' ability to organise and scale (Freedom House, 2022). Analysts note that without reforms, SSE actors remain vulnerable to disruption (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024; Khalafallah, 2024). Kayizzi-Mugerwa (2003) observes that governance frameworks in Africa often overlook local

capacity, while in Sudan, donor programming has tended to prioritise short-term humanitarian goals, sometimes overestimating local actors' ability to respond without adequate resources and obscuring structural inequalities (Jaspars, 2021).

In wider crisis contexts, initiatives are more sustainable when backed by enabling policy frameworks and embedded in social protection systems (OECD, 2023). Associating community-led initiatives with national strategies can shift responses beyond short-term aid towards approaches that strengthen disaster recovery and inclusive development. Such integration allows SSE to complement formal governance while retaining flexibility and responsiveness (UN DESA, 2024).

- *Limitations: The Role of Partnerships and Co-Construction in SSE*

Partnerships and co-construction are central to SSE in fragile settings. The UNTFSSSE (2025) highlights that partnerships are relational, based on trust and mutual benefit, linking SSE entities, governments, and civil society. Co-construction involves joint policymaking and co-design of tools such as financial mechanisms, market access, and knowledge platforms. These processes aim to bring multiple stakeholders together in flexible, iterative governance that reflects diverse voices (UNTFSSSE, 2025). In Sudan, however, such collaboration faces major barriers. The fragility of state institutions, shaped by governance shortcomings and prolonged war, limits capacity for meaningful policy co-design (Freedom House, 2022). Donor fragmentation and the absence of coherent legal frameworks further compound these challenges (UNTFSSSE, 2025; Jaspars, 2021). While SSE has the potential to foster participatory governance and reduce exclusion (Sennett, 2012; Feindt & Weiland, 2018), its effectiveness is constrained by weak institutional support. Consequently, marginalised groups, including women, youth, refugees, and people with disabilities, often remain excluded from SSE benefits (Bucos, 2024).

SSE nonetheless provides an opportunity to rethink governance and democracy in fragile contexts. Scholars argue that it can help fill gaps in basic services such as health and education by creating community-managed systems where state provision is weak. It can also advocate for human rights and challenge harmful social norms by embedding equity, participation, and accountability into local economic structures (Utting, 2015; Andersen, Hulgård & Laville, 2022). Moreover, SSE enhances inclusion by building trust and reciprocity across diverse groups, supporting cohesion in crisis-affected settings (Sennett, 2012; Feindt & Weiland, 2018).

The literature thus positions SSE as a critical framework for resilience and inclusive development in conflict-affected contexts such as Sudan. Cooperatives and social enterprises leverage trust and collective action to fill service gaps, support livelihoods, and foster cohesion in the absence of effective governance. The discussion has engaged theoretical perspectives, including social capital and post-neoliberal critiques, while reflecting on challenges such as restrictive

legislation, fragmented partnerships, and limited policy backing. Grassroots food sovereignty movements such as Nyéléni illustrate SSE's transformative potential, aligning with Sudan's traditions of mutual aid. Yet without systemic support through legal frameworks and coherent policies, SSE risks remaining under-recognised and under-resourced. Ultimately, the review frames SSE as both a survival mechanism in crisis and a potential driver of long-term recovery, setting the stage for deeper exploration of Sudan's SSE landscape and community-led initiatives.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter provides an integrated overview of the research findings and their interpretation, grounded in literature. The thematic analysis generated six overarching themes: regulatory and policy challenges, ecosystem, service provision to SSE actors, community resilience, operational and contextual barriers, and future directions. For coherence, this chapter focuses on four themes central to the study's aims: regulatory and policy challenges, ecosystem, service provision, and community resilience. The theme of future directions is developed further in Chapter Five, while operational and contextual barriers are acknowledged but not explored in depth, as they extend beyond the immediate scope of analysis. Together, the four themes presented here reflect both the structural and operational landscape of SSE actors, as well as the community-driven innovations shaping resilience in Sudan's humanitarian crisis.

➤ *Systemic Gaps in SSE Recognition and Regulation*

- *Policy and Institutional Gaps*

A prevalent concern among interviewees was the absence of a clear policy or legal framework for SSE actors. The deficiency of supportive policies and excessive government control over cooperative registration and operations have significantly hindered the growth of the cooperative movement in Sudan. Additionally, social enterprises often operate under the outdated or inappropriate "company limited by guarantee" model. Many also mentioned outdated cooperative laws limited legal recognition for hybrid entities like social enterprises, and bureaucratic hurdles that obstruct registration and formalisation.

A cooperative technical advisor noted, "The 1999 law decentralised the cooperative movement to the state level. It fragmented the movement...the result is that there has been no unified national policy since." Another social enterprise advisor marked, "The social enterprise has its own regulation and structure, and it's not commonly known or used in Sudan."

Participants consistently referred to the marginalisation of cooperatives since 1989 and the erosion of state support. This issue of sustainability is compounded by the broader institutional gap in how the government interacts with cooperatives. The ILO's Recommendation 193 on the Promotion of Cooperatives (2002) stresses that governments should implement supportive laws and develop mechanisms

to improve access to essential services, helping cooperatives build their business resilience and create jobs. However, in Sudan, the deficiency of consistent legal frameworks and supportive public infrastructure limits the growth of independent, resilient actors. Without explicit policy support and official recognition, the sector remains on the margins of formal development efforts, reducing its potential to drive transformation (Mahdi, 2023).

- *Misconceptions*

Structural gaps are compounded by widespread misconceptions among donors, INGOs, and local authorities about the role of SSE initiatives. Participants noted that NGOs often treat SSE actors as project implementers rather than autonomous development agents, while external partners frequently conflate SSE models with charity work, overlooking their market orientation and democratic governance. This reflects a broader process of co-optation, where grassroots organisations conform to donor norms rather than define their own pathways. As one cooperative Advisor explained: “The fragility principle in dealing with cooperatives is not the right approach.” Richez-Battesti and Petrella (2023) echo this concern, warning against institutional isomorphism, where community organisations imitate external expectations instead of sustaining their own practices.

6 interviewees stressed that Sudanese authorities fail to recognise hybrid models that blend social and economic goals. This often leads to community initiatives being registered as cooperatives, undermining their rights, or as conventional companies. A social enterprise representative who supports cooperatives underlined the need to distinguish cooperatives from community-based organisations (CBOs), noting: “Cooperatives are not just community-based groups; they are structured economic institutions with principles that shouldn’t be violated by short-term aid models.” Mahdi (2023) similarly warns that dependence on NGO or government subsidies erodes cooperative autonomy. As one cooperative advisor put it: “When you just give them grants, you break all the values of self-reliance and collective effort.”

Concerns were also raised about external actors imposing their own agendas: “Some donors are more interested in serving their own interests than truly empowering cooperatives.” These reflections align with Mahdi (2023) and Chundu, Masara, and Mucheri’s (2022) call for capacity-building strategies that strengthen autonomy through member contributions, diverse services, and stronger market connections. In fragile environments like Sudan, where donor priorities shift and funds are volatile, such reforms are essential. As stated by the technical advisor, “Funds or aid packages often do not meet the real needs of the community.”

➤ *Ecosystem Gaps and Coordination*

- *Fragmentation and Siloed Interventions*

Building on the aforementioned policy and institutional gap, 5 out of the 14 interviewees raised another common issue of a fragmented support ecosystem for Sudan’s SSE actors.

Despite the presence of multiple ongoing projects and well-intentioned initiatives, participants flagged that many operate in silos, with little cooperation across sectors or long-term strategies. This fragmentation, both horizontally (among NGOs and INGOs) and vertically (between local groups and national institutions), was seen as weakening the sustainability and effectiveness of SSE activities. According to the ILO’s guide for economic recovery in post-conflict (2010), fragmented institutional structures can lead to poor coordination, impede inclusive planning, and ultimately weaken the effectiveness and scalability of grassroots efforts. The absence of unified frameworks and common institutional objectives causes inefficiencies in service provision, missed collaboration opportunities, and diminished community trust in externally driven programmes. A technical social enterprise advisor noted, “For example, we find that there are multiple projects currently running in Sudan, each project is working in a silo and trying to do almost everything on its own. That might not be very effective; it feels like these efforts are being done in isolation.” These observations resonate with broader critiques in development literature that advocate for holistic, ecosystem-based strategies instead of fragmented projects (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2024). Usually, short-term interventions driven by donors do not consider the real development paths of cooperatives and social enterprises, especially in fragile environments where adaptability and institutional knowledge are scarce (Soanes et al., 2021). Some INGOs noted efforts to counter fragmentation by embedding SSE actors into wider systems. One worker explained, “We always link enterprises with local institutions,” stressing that even at the project level, interventions aim to foster integration, despite the policy absence.

- *Coordination and Systems-Based Engagement*

Participants observed that this fragmentation resulted in the absence of coordination among key stakeholders, including INGOs, government agencies, SMEs, training institutions, and cooperatives. In place of co-designed interventions, many actors implemented isolated strategies, resulting in duplicated efforts and reduced operational efficiency. Relevant literature also found this fragmentation. For example, the Oxford Sudan Workshop Statement (2024) highlights how uncoordinated project-based aid often results in duplicated efforts and inefficiencies, advocating for more harmonised and integrated strategies. The lack of shared platforms, common metrics, and inclusive planning processes was identified as a key structural weakness. An INGO worker outlined, a diverse ecosystem is necessary for a resilient SSE landscape: “When we talk about market actors, we include the government, farmers, cooperatives, SMEs, INGOs, private companies, training centres, consultants, everyone involved in the agricultural value chain.” This perspective embodies the core principles of the MSD approach. MSD offers the need to bring together various stakeholders, such as governments, private sector actors, and civil society, around common value chains. It promotes a facilitative rather than directive role for development actors in creating inclusive markets. Additionally, MSD underscores systems thinking to address root causes of exclusion, prioritising long-term, sustainable engagement that is embedded in the local socio-economic landscape. This approach offers a compelling

framework for advancing SSE in fragile contexts like Sudan (Mercy Corps, 2023). The INGO practitioner further advocated for “a cluster-based model, where NGOs and local actors co-develop 5–7 year pathways for SSE growth, tailored to local capacities and market realities.”

➤ *Support Services that Work*

A primary aim of this study was to identify which support services most effectively benefited Sudanese communities during the crisis. Participants consistently highlighted the value of both financial (grants, revolving funds) and non-financial (training and peer exchange) support. These services were commonly delivered by NGOs, microfinance institutions, or local experts.

• *Flexible and Tailored Financial Support*

Participants overwhelmingly recognised flexible and accessible financial support as the most impactful form of assistance, particularly when it contributed directly to local production, market engagement, and services. A microfinance institution manager said, “Financing for agricultural projects is a very, very important thing; it contributes to reviving the local economy and therefore also contributes to creating job opportunities and contributes to increasing production and productivity.” Approximately 65% of this institution’s financing portfolio is allocated to agriculture, reflecting the high demand for rural and community-level economic stimulus. In response, the bank developed a specialised “Cooperative Product” tailored to the needs of local cooperatives. Its design was informed directly by community consultations and active participation, applying the principles of Community-Based Participatory Planning (CBPP) approach. As WFP (2014, p. 2) affirms, “CBPP links people to their landscapes and provides the entry point for scaling up resilience-building activities through assets creation and complementary partners’ efforts.”

While local institutions have made efforts to introduce more adaptive financial tools, such as revolving credit and cooperative-specific products, this requires complementary support from international funding organisations. In particular, flexible and timely funding streams, attuned to community-identified priorities. The ICRC (2023) champions humanitarian financing strategies that reinforce, rather than bypass, local protection systems, grounding support in the principles of neutrality, independence, and community ownership. This perspective corresponds with participants’ focus on embedded support systems and the role of trusted local institutions in delivering timely and relevant services.

• *Business Development Services (BDS) and Organisational Strengthening*

Another widely cited form of effective support was the provision of BDS for cooperatives, SMEs, and consumer groups. These services included training in financial literacy, governance, marketing, and planning. A development practitioner described, “We hired BDS development services to conduct training in finance, electricity, marketing, and business development, good governance also, to build the farmer cooperative capacity on managing their farming and

cultivation in a commercial and political way.” This skills-based support enabled actors to function more autonomously and sustainably, particularly when embedded in existing community structures and facilitated by local experts. The Egan Review (2004, p.13) highlights the importance of such holistic skills frameworks, noting that “sustainable communities are a holistic long-term objective requiring a holistic approach to skills.”

However, a challenge raised in both participants’ testimonies and the literature is the limited integration between financial and non-financial support. As Narasimhan (2004, p.5) points out, “Though some of the BDS providers have a very good policy of consulting farmers and entrepreneurs about their needs and being able to adapt their production and marketing, it is still a challenge ... to bring benefits to the farmers and their organizations regarding unlocking the capital and enabling financial services”. These findings underline the need for more integrated, demand-responsive support models, those that align technical and financial assistance in mutually reinforcing ways (ILO, 2010).

• *Peer Learning and Experiential Exchange*

Beyond technical training, participants stressed the value of peer-led knowledge exchange as a powerful mechanism for sustaining livelihoods. One cooperative leader reflected, “They took us to Tanzania for a month, and we saw the farming there, which was simple and basic. We were amazed, and when we came back, we applied the things we had learnt there.” Such experiential learning echoes Eriksen et al.’s (2021, p.11) call to centre “learning processes within organisations and with marginalised populations” in adaptation strategies. These participatory models also facilitate what Weberg, Fors and Lund (2025) term “scaling deep”, embedding new values, knowledge systems, and practices within communities over time. These approaches prioritise transformation over expansion, reinforcing resilience through long-term, culturally grounded engagement (Soanes et al. (2021).

• *Decentralisation and Local Capacity Mobilisation*

Conflict dynamics also led to an unintended but beneficial outcome: the redistribution of skilled professionals from urban to rural and underserved areas. Enhanced local capacity, as previously centralised expertise became accessible at the grassroots level. A National NGO Worker puts it: “We actually have capable people who can qualify these associations in a strong way.” This decentralisation contributed to more grounded, responsive systems of support, an outcome supported with SSE principles such as local knowledge, democratic participation, and collective ownership. As the OECD (2019, p.12) notes, “Decentralisation may expand citizen participation by bringing government closer to citizens and allow [service providers] to best tailor public service provision to meet citizens’ needs.”

- *Structuring Support for Resilience: A Capability Approach*

Collectively, these efforts are consistent with the structural backing promoted by Sen's (2001) capability approach, which defines development as the growth of individuals' actual freedom to lead the lives they value. In this context, SSE actors and networks contribute to what Sen describes as economic facilities: the freedom to access credit, participate in markets, and influence decisions that affect one's livelihood. The ability of people and communities to exercise autonomy, innovate, and maintain resilience in prolonged crises is strengthened by these freedoms, which are not just instrumental but also constitutive of agency (Birch et al., 2024).

- *Adaptation and Resilience Practices*

With most production services centralised in Khartoum, the ongoing conflict in Sudan has severely deteriorated the economic situation, leading to a staggering unemployment rate, with nearly half of the population without work (IRC, 2024). According to analysis published in the news platform *The Conversation*, the combination of widespread unemployment, sharp currency devaluation, and systemic service disruptions could cause Sudan's gross domestic product (GDP) to contract by as much as 42% by 2025 (Siddig, 2025). In this multi-layered crisis, resilience has emerged not as a static condition, but as a dynamic and context-specific practice, anchored in the capacity of local actors to reorganise, adapt, and deliver support in ways that respond to rapidly changing needs (Birch, Carter and Satti, 2024). Notwithstanding the erosion of the social fabric that dramatically reshaped civil society, where many elite organisations have relocated abroad, the smaller grassroots organisations remained in Sudan, focusing their operations on urgent survival needs (INTRAC, 2024). As a response, these organisations have adapted their business models to prioritise the public's necessities over profit-driven imperatives. Interviews with these entities revealed a growing aspiration to be seen as trusted local partners while operating in new states they were displaced rather than external implementers. This adaptive shift implements a collaborative framework that serves as a practical tool to enhance resource mobilisation, attract investment for local producers, and strengthen trust and community acceptance (Ammirato et al., 2021). Illustrating this shift, a social enterprise owner shared, "Before, we had 22 products, but now we are producing only five essential ones" This perspective underscores the enterprises' ability to streamline and tailor offerings based on local priorities (Chundu, Masara and Mucheri, 2022). The owner noted a pivot toward deeper community collaboration, stating, "We realised that collaboration with local cooperatives would be better received by the community. To build trust, we shifted our role...to managing local projects and enabling cooperatives to register as formal businesses."

- *Adaptive Pivotal Approaches*

It is crucial to foreground what participants consistently described as "adaptive pivotal efforts", locally tailored innovations that arose as necessary responses to unmet community needs amid institutional collapse and humanitarian inaction. Consistent with the literature, these

initiatives included ERRs, neighbourhood kitchens, informal safety nets (women groups), and Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA), which together have functioned as de facto welfare systems in severely affected areas. This trajectory allies with global calls for more inclusive and context-responsive models of social protection, as highlighted in the *World Social Report 2024*, which advocates for expanding protection systems beyond formal schemes to recognise and support informal, community-rooted mechanisms in fragile settings (UN DESA, 2024). Despite often lacking formal classification as cooperatives or social enterprises, these grassroots mechanisms embody key principles of the SSE, including collective ownership, solidarity-based exchange, local embeddedness, and democratic control (OECD, 2023). "SSE entities pursue social goals and operate, often at the local level, in a manner that prioritises social impact over profit maximisation for personal enrichment" (OECD, 2023, p. 4). A consultant remarked, "In social protection, we observed the importance of mutual aid organisations...one of the most amazing demonstrations of this economy, the fact that these NGOs were nominated for a Nobel Prize says a lot".

Global crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and escalating conflicts, have reversed key development indicators, producing the first global rise in extreme poverty in over two decades and a significant widening of inequality (UN DESA, 2024). These compounded crises have laid bare the limitations of formal aid systems, while underscoring the vital role of local initiatives, which often demonstrate greater agility, legitimacy, and contextual sensitivity in responding to rapidly shifting needs (Birch, Carter and Satti, 2024). Reports from *TIME* (2024) and *The Guardian* (2024) illustrate how ERRs and community kitchens, rooted in neighbourhood trust and collective responsibility, were able to respond more effectively than conventional systems. Their decentralised organising logic resonates with global movements such as the Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty (2007), which defends the rights of communities to self-organise around food, land, and governance. In Sudan, ERRs embody this ethos through non-hierarchical governance, voluntary participation, and context-appropriate solutions to urgent social needs. As adaptive pivotal approaches, these grassroots mechanisms combine local innovation with deeply embedded social networks, enabling communities to navigate crisis conditions while laying the groundwork for longer-term resilience (Lopera-Arbeláez and Richter, 2024). Such approaches are not isolated practices; they form part of a broader shift towards recognising local actors as co-architects of recovery and can complement formal financing systems by leveraging community trust, diaspora resources, and local knowledge to channel funds more effectively (UNTFSSSE, 2025). These patterns are echoed in the *Oxford Sudan Workshop Statement* (2024), which calls for greater investment in mutual aid actors and the integration of their contributions into longer-term support systems. The Sudanese diaspora has also played a significant role, providing both financial resources and strategic solidarity during periods when formal aid was absent. As the consultant noted, "We also have diaspora funding and financing..."

Gender-inclusive practices were also featured. In Sudan, female-headed households (FHH) are particularly reliant on women's income, making their participation in SSE initiatives critical for both family survival and wider community resilience (CARE, 2024). A cooperative leader described, "the support was disbursed to an agricultural project through revolving, refundable funds to both men and women. This support continues today." Such initiatives are particularly significant for women, whose enterprises have been disproportionately affected by conflict. Kirui et al. (2024), drawing on Sudan MSME survey data, show that female-led agrifood businesses have faced severe disruption, prompting adaptive responses such as digital innovation, income diversification, and mobilisation of community networks. These strategies not only enabled women to sustain livelihoods under crisis conditions but also created new spaces for participation and influence. CARE's Beyond Economic Empowerment report (2024) reinforces this trajectory, showing that VSLA participation has strengthened women's visibility, confidence, and public engagement, thereby shifting entrenched gender norms and enabling greater economic empowerment. Similarly, the Oxford report (2024) illustrates how women were able to build social networks and challenge restrictive norms, even if formal political participation remains limited. Building on these outcomes, ERRs, VSLAs, mutual aid groups, and informal safety nets collectively exemplify the imperative for humanitarian and development actors to co-develop systems that are responsive to intersecting economic, social, and environmental challenges (UNTFSSSE, 2025). Nonetheless, formal recognition and support for these grassroots institutions could enable them to evolve into active economic actors, contributing not only to local resilience but also to broader economic recovery, inclusive growth, and long-term prosperity in Sudan (Mahdi, 2023)

- *Community-Based Resilience Mechanisms*

Alongside crisis-driven innovations, long-established cooperatives have provided enduring models of economic and social recovery. A cooperative leader explained how their organisation, founded in 1974, initially focused on agricultural production but later expanded to include community retail shops: "The goal was to improve the community's standard of living through awareness and support for health centres and schools." These cooperatives also developed risk-sharing mechanisms, such as flexible or deferred repayment arrangements during poor harvest years, that functioned as informal yet effective safety nets. Similar practices are documented in FAO (2010), illustrating African agricultural finance mechanisms such as trust funds, group savings guarantees, and interest rebate schemes designed to distribute credit risk among cooperating producers. One social entrepreneur explained how their initiative supported 900 smallholder farmers, noting: "This collective model gave them bargaining power... and helped them engage and have access to land and investment." This form of mobilisation serves as a resilience practice, as Sudanese cooperatives have mitigated market volatility by opening urban shops to stabilise access to food and essential supplies. These outlets offered both commercial and social protection functions: "We opened shops in towns to control price fluctuations. It made

a big difference for local families." Resilience literature further presents, communities living through the crisis often generate their solutions through lived experience and embedded social knowledge. Aldrich and Meyer (2015, p.256) point out that "individual and community social capital networks provide access to various resources in disaster situations, including information, aid, financial resources... along with emotional and psychological support".

The sustainability of these systems rests on the financial and organisational autonomy of cooperatives. A cooperative leader puts it: "We believe cooperatives should be funded by the community itself. The goal should be service and long-term sustainability." An NGO worker articulated the importance of internal capacity building: "We tried to maintain it so that these associations could depend on the savings and credit scheme, so that when the organisation leaves, they have a way to replace that request." Participants also expressed concern about maintaining political neutrality in SSE initiatives. Echoing Sentama (2009), who stressed that cooperatives in post-genocide Rwanda could only rebuild trust when free from political interference, Sudanese interviewees declared the importance of being perceived as non-partisan actors. A consultant stated, "Policies and decisions regarding cooperatives were often politically motivated rather than based on the actual needs and development of the cooperative sector." These reflections encapsulate the belief that resilience in Sudan's conflict-affected communities depends not only on technical capacity, but on collective values and social cohesion. As one union representative succinctly put it: "The only way for us in wartime, the only path to resilience, is through cooperation. This, in my view, is the way out for all activities. To rise, we must rise through cooperatives and collective associations."

- *Embedded Solidarity: The Sudanese Ethos of Mutual Support*

Anchored in the theoretical foundation of this study, Woolcock's (1998) framework provides a valuable lens for interpreting localised resilience practices. Rather than treating resilience as only a community-level phenomenon, Woolcock situates social capital within broader top-down and bottom-up processes of development, underscoring the balance between autonomy (local actors need integrity and independence to self-organise), but also embeddedness (synergy and integration to connect with wider institutions and markets). While community bonds can provide vital safety nets in the short term, Woolcock and Narayan (2000) caution that over-reliance on them risks trapping groups in insularity. Poor entrepreneurs, for example, may initially survive through local solidarity but ultimately require bridges to other actors and links to institutions to expand their enterprises and contribute to structural economic change. This underscores the need for SSE actors in Sudan to go beyond informal social safety nets, formalise and scale their activities, and engage economically and institutionally. It also reflects wider debates on SSE as an alternative pathway to development (Laville, 2014; UNTFSSSE, 2025). These collective reflections show that resilience is not a singular event, but an ongoing, adaptive process shaped by context, capacity, and motive (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2024).

Sudanese SSE actors have consistently demonstrated that their social capacity has outpaced their material resources, seizing opportunities to innovate and self-organise, establishing strategies that are not only reactive but also transformative (The Guardian, 2024; UNTFSSSE, 2025). These strategies offer alternative pathways to development while acting collectively amid institutional collapse and humanitarian disengagement (Mercy Corps, 2023). This interpretation reflects broader conceptualisations of community resilience. The RAND Corporation (n.d.) defines resilience as “a measure of the sustained ability of a community to utilise available resources to respond to, withstand, and recover from adverse situations,” effectively treating resilience as an indicator of long-term sustainability. Similarly, Magis (2010, p.402) frames it as “the existence, development and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterised by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise.” These definitions move beyond survivalist framings of resilience, demonstrating the community’s ability to mobilise internal resources synergistically, maintain agency amid unpredictability, and emerge stronger through adversity. Aldrich and Meyer (2015, p.256) extend this by emphasising that “individual and community social capital networks provide access to various resources in disaster situations, including information, aid, financial resources, and child care along with emotional and psychological support.” In Sudan, such networks have been visible in the mutual support of ERRs, the collective security of VSLAs, and the bridging role of cooperatives and social enterprises, demonstrating how solidarity-based mechanisms sustain both livelihoods and social cohesion under crisis conditions.

Crucially, this form of resilience did not originate with the current war. It is deeply embedded in Sudanese traditions of collective engagement. Volunteer-led initiatives such as Nafeer mobilised thousands during earlier crises, creating decentralised models of community-led response that prefigured ERRs and other SSE initiatives (LSE, 2025). Many Nafeer organisers later helped establish ERRs, embedding a culture of mutual aid and innovation. This tradition also resonates with Sudan’s political resistance movements. As Freedom House (2022) notes, grassroots actors often favoured nonviolent organising through mubadarat (initiatives), student groups, and neighbourhood networks rooted in solidarity and shared responsibility. These practices illustrate how Sudanese communities, even in the absence of institutional infrastructure, have long sustained systems of care, exchange, and collective welfare.

The findings of this study show that Sudanese SSE actors, cooperatives, social enterprises, and ERRs, have stepped in as vital welfare infrastructures amid institutional collapse and humanitarian withdrawal. Participants pointed to practices such as flexible and tailored financing and peer-led knowledge exchange, often complemented by NGO contributions, including grants, tools, and training. Together, these allowed households to sustain livelihoods while also strengthening trust and reciprocity across communities (Sabates-Wheeler et al., 2024). Resilience here is not a fixed outcome but an evolving practice: communities reorganised,

adapted, and generated context-specific solutions under conditions of scarcity, resonating with perspectives that frame resilience as a dynamic, process-oriented capacity grounded in the mobilisation of social resources (Magis, 2010).

Overall, the findings show both the adaptability and solidarity embedded in Sudanese SSE actors, but also the structural barriers that continue to limit their wider impact. These tensions point to the need for closer attention to how local innovations can be supported, scaled, and linked to broader institutions if they are to sustain resilience in the context of a protracted crisis.

V. FROM ETHOS TO SUSTAINABILITY? THE FUTURE OF SSE IN SUDAN

This study examined Sudan’s SSE landscape during conflict and humanitarian crisis, rooted in traditions of collective action and solidarity but facing the challenge of evolving into a sustainable system that supports long-term resilience and recovery. This final chapter reflects on the findings and outlines future pathways for SSE in Sudan. Four main themes emerged. First, systemic gaps in recognition and regulation limit SSE actors, leaving them largely invisible in policy and without supportive frameworks to scale. Second, stronger ecosystems and synergies are needed, as weak coordination between NGOs, social enterprises, cooperatives, grassroots groups, and state actors leads to fragmentation and duplication. Third, service provision is a core strength, with flexible financing, training, and market linkages enabling SSE actors to address community needs. Finally, community resilience was evident in nafeer traditions and ERRs, while some cooperatives and social enterprises adapted by pivoting their models to meet market and social priorities. The sustainability of these initiatives remains constrained by short-term funding, unmet needs, and weak institutional support.

➤ *Visions and Recommendations for the SSE Sector*

• *Addressing Systemic Gaps*

The absence of an enabling policy framework limits SSE scalability. Reforms must be bottom-up, shaped by cooperatives and social enterprises rather than imposed from above (OECD, 2022). Participants noted that state-level governments often applied rigid rules as if SSE actors were conventional providers, leaving little flexibility. National development plans should include exemptions or supportive provisions that recognise SSE’s unique role in resilience, drawing on internationally recognised SOPs. This would provide legitimacy, unlock funding, and create a stable foundation for scaling.

• *Strengthening Ecosystem and Synergies*

SSE actors cannot operate in isolation. Greater coordination between NGOs, grassroots initiatives, cooperatives, and state institutions is needed to build a coherent ecosystem (OECD, 2022). Participants suggested NGOs should act as enablers, amplifying local capacity rather than overshadowing it. Sectoral or regional “clusters” could

pool resources, share knowledge, and connect SSE actors to local markets, reducing duplication and strengthening localisation (OECD, 2009).

- *Enhancing Service Provision*

Participants recommended durable solutions that move beyond short donor cycles. They emphasised the need to position communities as producers rather than passive consumers, shifting the focus towards agency and self-reliance. Achieving sustainable social and economic reforms in Sudan requires investing in models that combine technical assistance, capacity building, and community engagement. Programmes that integrate grant-based support with market access and foster local partnerships can help build long-term resilience and responsiveness, ensuring that progress is maintained and scaled over time (World Bank, 2021). MSD approaches, which strengthen value chains and connect producers to buyers, can further shift SSE from short-term gap-filling towards inclusive, sustainable market transformation (Catholic Relief Services, 2023).

- *Building on Community-Based Resilience*

ERRs and nafeer-based practices remain vital for rapid relief but lack sustainability (Lopera-Arbeláez & Richter, 2024). Cooperatives and social enterprises, by contrast, link economic activity with social goals and serve as longer-term SSE actors (Utting, 2015). Community initiatives should be recognised for their relief role, while co-ops and social enterprises are strengthened as sustainable alternatives. Many have adapted by embedding locally, aligning with calls to institutionalise SSE as a foundation for resilience (UNTFSSSE, 2025). Participants recommended durable recovery through capacity-building and stakeholder awareness, using tools such as Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments (VCAs) to map risks and capacities.

Together, these recommendations frame SSE not only as a survival mechanism but as a pathway to collective recovery and sustainable development.

➤ *Prospects: Could Sudan Learn from the UK?*

While SSE operates very differently in the Global North and South, this study poses a forward-looking question: could Sudan, in recovery, develop cooperatives that provide schools, shops, or even financial services, as seen in the UK? The fragile context makes this vision difficult, but it underscores the enabling conditions required: supportive laws, sustainable finance, and institutional capacity. The UK's Co-operative Group, for instance, has long shown how co-operatives can span diverse services, from food retail to funerals, insurance, and legal provision (Birchall, 2011). In Sudan, social enterprise remains new, introduced largely through British Council programmes, which helped expose local entrepreneurs to global practice (British Council, 2020). This demonstrates how international partnerships can broaden horizons and enrich Sudan's social economy. Global actors such as the World Bank and INGOs have also supported social protection and financial inclusion (Turkaw, 2015). Yet for such collaborations to have a lasting impact, they must adapt to Sudan's realities and prioritise local entrepreneurs' needs (CGAP, [n.d.]).

VI. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This dissertation has shown that Sudanese SSE actors embody both resilience and fragility. The research recognised Sudan's potential and the remarkable rise of solidarity-based initiatives under conditions of conflict and scarcity. While ERRs and other community responses are indispensable in emergencies, they are not sustainable economic structures on their own. For SSE to reach its potential, it must evolve into a movement linking solidarity with sustainability, capable of generating income, meeting community needs, and offering alternatives to reliance on aid.

The findings demonstrate that cooperatives and social enterprises contribute to local resilience and humanitarian response by creating livelihoods, providing services, and embedding reciprocity within communities. At the same time, they face challenges of restrictive legislation, fragmented governance, donor short-termism, and weak institutional support. Strategies proposed by participants and the wider literature, such as capacity-building, stakeholder awareness, MSD approaches, and participatory tools like VCAs, provide viable pathways to enhance their effectiveness.

There is growing recognition of a global shift: the era of NGOs is waning, while states reassert their role (Goldberg, 2025). Sudan, long reliant on external intervention, must pivot toward locally grounded systems of solidarity. This transition may be less difficult for Sudan than elsewhere, as traditions such as nafeer already embed SSE principles. Building on these practices offers a natural foundation for formalising resilience systems. With sustained institutional support and adaptive partnerships, Sudan can transform crisis-driven responses into durable systems of resilience and inclusive development.

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