# Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms: How Locally Led Aid Works

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https://risalatconsultants.com/sudan-emergency-response-rooms-locally-led-aid/

## Key Takeaways

Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms show how community volunteers can keep aid flowing in a war where formal systems have broken down, and what that means for donors and agencies that want to support locally led response.

- A community network - Emergency Response Rooms are decentralised volunteer groups that the Right Livelihood Foundation reports operate in all 18 states of Sudan with nearly 26,000 volunteers.
- Rooted in civic history - they grew out of the Neighbourhood Resistance Committees of the 2019 revolution and the tradition of nafeer, collective community action.
- Essential services - they run communal kitchens and organise health, water and other support where public services have collapsed.
- Recognised and at risk - they received the 2025 Right Livelihood Award and the EU in Sudan Human Rights Prize 2025, while members have been detained, tortured and killed.
- A lesson for funders - supporting groups like these needs funding, reporting and risk rules designed for small volunteer networks, not for large organisations.

## Introduction

Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) are neighbourhood-based volunteer groups that organise humanitarian help where the state and international agencies cannot operate normally. They run communal kitchens, help people reach health care and water, and coordinate local support, and the Right Livelihood Foundation reports that they now operate in all 18 states of Sudan with nearly 26,000 volunteers.

For governments, donors, United Nations agencies and NGOs, the Emergency Response Rooms raise a practical question that goes well beyond Sudan: how can international funding and support reach community groups that are trusted locally, without overloading them with procedures designed for large organisations, and without exposing volunteers to more danger? This article explains what the ERRs are, how they work, the risks they face and the lessons for anyone designing locally led humanitarian response.

The lessons matter for ministries and disaster authorities as much as for humanitarian agencies. In almost every crisis, neighbours and local groups respond first, and the way public and donor systems treat them in the first days often decides how many people are reached.

## What Are Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms?

The Emergency Response Rooms are not a single organisation with a headquarters and a chain of command. They are a network of local rooms, usually organised by neighbourhood, in which volunteers identify urgent needs, gather resources and organise help. The Right Livelihood Foundation, which named the network a 2025 laureate, describes them as emerging from the Neighbourhood Resistance Committees that played a key role in Sudan's 2019 revolution.

The European Union delegation in Sudan, announcing its Human Rights Prize 2025 for the network

on 15 May 2025, described the rooms as rooted in the Sudanese tradition of nafeer, which emphasises collective action. In practice this means that the people organising help are often the neighbours of the people receiving it.

## Why the model works where others struggle

Local volunteers know who needs help, which routes are open and which families have been missed. They can act quickly, often before formal assessments are possible, and they are trusted because they are part of the community. These strengths are hard for any outside organisation to replicate during active conflict.

## How the Emergency Response Rooms Deliver Aid

The best-known activity of the ERRs is the communal kitchen: volunteers buy or collect food, cook in shared spaces and feed families who can no longer afford or reach food. Around this core, rooms organise a wide range of support depending on local needs and capacity.

- Communal kitchens and food support
- Help to reach medical care and medicines
- Water and basic services where systems have failed
- Help for people leaving dangerous areas
- Support for vulnerable people, including protection and psychosocial support where volunteers have the skills

The European Union described the network as providing humanitarian assistance to over four million people. That figure comes from the EU's prize announcement and should be read as the network's reach as reported at the time, not as an audited total.

## Coordination without central control

Because each room is local, coordination happens through networks of rooms at area and state level rather than through a single management structure. This makes the system resilient: when one room cannot operate, others continue. It also means that funders dealing with "the ERRs" are in reality dealing with many separate groups with different capacities.

## The Risks Volunteers Face

The work of the Emergency Response Rooms is dangerous. The Right Livelihood Foundation reports that members have been detained, tortured and killed, and that nearly 160 volunteers have lost their lives. Volunteers work in areas affected by fighting, with unstable communications and difficult access.

These risks have direct consequences for how outsiders engage. Lists of volunteers, detailed beneficiary records or public reporting that names individuals can put people in danger. Any support, monitoring or publicity must start from the safety of the volunteers themselves.

## Funding Locally Led Response: The Practical Problem

Most humanitarian funding is designed for registered organisations with bank accounts, audited accounts, policies and staff who can write proposals and reports. Many community groups have none of these. When funders apply their usual rules, three things tend to happen: the money does not reach the groups at all, it reaches them through several intermediaries that each take a share and add requirements, or the groups spend scarce time on paperwork instead of delivery.

At the same time, accountability still matters. Funders must show that money reached the intended purpose, that people were protected from abuse, and that aid was not diverted. The

challenge is not choosing between flexibility and accountability; it is designing controls that are proportionate to the size of the grant and the reality of the context.

## Lessons for Donors and International Agencies

### Design rules for small grants

Small, flexible grants with simple reporting allow community groups to respond quickly. Controls should grow with the size of the grant, rather than applying the same requirements to a kitchen budget as to a large contract.

### Reduce the number of intermediaries

Each layer between the donor and the community group adds cost, delay and conditions. Where direct funding is not possible, intermediaries should agree to pass on funds quickly, keep their own requirements light and be transparent about what reaches the group.

### Share risk rather than transfer it

Volunteer groups cannot carry the full financial and legal risk of operating in a war. Funders and intermediaries who share that risk, for example by accepting some losses in exchange for faster delivery, make local response possible.

### Protect volunteers in every procedure

Data collection, monitoring and communications should be designed so they never expose volunteers. Public recognition, such as the awards the network has received, should be agreed with the groups themselves.

### Invest in capacity on the groups' terms

Basic financial recording, safeguarding and simple reporting can help community groups access more funding, but only if the support is practical, short and offered when the groups want it.

## Monitoring and Accountability Without Exposing Volunteers

Donors and intermediaries need assurance that funds reached their purpose. In a conflict setting, the usual tools, such as named beneficiary lists, frequent field visits and detailed photo evidence, can put volunteers and recipients at risk. Proportionate alternatives exist and can be combined:

- Simple spending summaries by category, supported by receipts kept locally rather than sent in bulk
- Community feedback channels that do not require people to identify themselves
- Third-party or peer checks carried out by trusted local actors
- Remote verification of outputs, such as the number of meals served, using aggregated figures
- Agreed thresholds: light reporting for small grants, more evidence for larger ones
- Clear rules on what data is collected, where it is stored and who can see it

The aim is enough evidence to manage risk responsibly, collected in a way that does not create new risks for the people delivering aid.

## How Capacity Support Can Help Community Groups

Community groups often ask for support that helps them work more safely and access more funding, rather than generic training. Useful support tends to be short, practical and offered on request:

- Basic financial recording: simple cash books and receipts that satisfy most small-grant rules
- Safeguarding: clear codes of conduct and a way to report abuse safely
- Simple proposals and reports: one-page formats agreed with funders in advance
- Digital security: protecting phones, messages and data in a conflict setting
- Volunteer wellbeing: recognising stress and arranging support

Support should never become a condition that delays emergency funding. It works best alongside funding, not before it.

## What This Means Beyond Sudan

The ERR experience is relevant wherever conflict, disasters or state collapse leave communities to organise their own response. Ministries, disaster authorities and project teams can learn from it in three ways: recognise community groups as partners in emergency plans, prepare funding and procurement rules that allow fast, small transfers in emergencies, and train staff to work with community organisations on equal terms.

For development and humanitarian projects, this also means designing grant mechanisms, monitoring and safeguarding procedures before a crisis, so that they can work with local groups from the first day rather than months later.

## Critical Questions Government and Project Leaders Should Be Asking

### Do our emergency plans include community groups?

If plans only list government agencies and international partners, the people who will respond first are missing. Map community networks and agree how they will be supported.

### Can our rules move small amounts of money quickly?

Check whether procurement and grant rules allow small emergency transfers to community groups, and how fast. If not, prepare simplified procedures in advance.

### How many intermediaries stand between our funds and the community?

Trace one grant from the source to the group that uses it, and count the steps, the time and the share retained at each step.

### Are our controls proportionate?

Compare the reporting required for a small community grant with what it actually needs to show. Remove anything that does not protect people or money.

### Do our procedures protect volunteers?

Review what personal data you collect and who can see it. In conflict settings, less data is often safer.

### Are our staff ready to work with community groups?

Working with volunteer networks needs different skills from managing contractors. Staff need training in partnership, proportionate risk management and safeguarding.

## How Risalat Can Help

Risalat works with humanitarian agencies, NGOs and project teams on locally led response, grant management and safeguarding through its humanitarian programme management programmes. Organisations can review their own readiness to work with local partners using the free institutional capacity assessment.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What are Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms?

They are a decentralised network of community volunteer groups that organise humanitarian help in their neighbourhoods, such as communal kitchens and health and water services. The Right Livelihood Foundation reports that they operate in all 18 states of Sudan.

### Where did the Emergency Response Rooms come from?

According to the Right Livelihood Foundation, they emerged from the Neighbourhood Resistance Committees that played a key role in Sudan's 2019 revolution, and they draw on the Sudanese tradition of nafeer, or collective action.

### Have the Emergency Response Rooms been recognised internationally?

Yes. They received the 2025 Right Livelihood Award and the European Union in Sudan Human Rights Prize 2025.

### Why does their model matter for donors?

It shows that community groups can keep essential services running where international agencies cannot reach, but it also shows that funding, reporting and risk management must be designed for small volunteer groups working in danger.

## Sources


- Right Livelihood Foundation: Emergency Response Rooms (2025 laureate)
- European External Action Service: European Union in Sudan Human Rights Prize 2025


## Related Risalat programmes

- Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESF) for Project Teams in Kigali, Kigali (8 Feb 2027)
- Environmental and Social Safeguards Training and Tour in Copenhagen, Copenhagen (8 Feb 2027)
- International Humanitarian Law Training in Vancouver, Vancouver (25 Jan 2027)
- Humanitarian Shelter and Settlements Training in Helsinki, Helsinki (25 Jan 2027)

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