

Cash Works: Time to Act and Save Lives Amid Starvation in Sudan

As unprecedented hunger grips Sudan, countless lives hang in the balance. Previous humanitarian efforts have fallen short, but a shift to cash-based interventions such as multi-purpose cash assistance and group cash transfers could be the lifeline needed to prevent widespread deaths.

June 2024

The humanitarian response in Sudan, where conflict has been raging and ravaging lives for over a year, finds itself at a crossroads. In light of immense restrictions on the movement of goods and personnel into and within the country, the response's primary focus on in-kind aid has proven to be ineffective in reaching people and meeting the sheer scale of needs of populations in the country. As a result, the humanitarian situation has only deteriorated since the conflict began and has now reached critical levels, with people already dying of starvation in parts of the country, and extremely worrying levels of malnutrition among children, especially adolescent girls, and pregnant and breastfeeding women.

Despite advocacy efforts aimed at recognizing the potential for the use of cash programming, especially multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA), including to quickly address the most urgent food and other basic needs, it is still not being prioritized in the response. Yet, evidence and experiences gathered by humanitarian organizations over the past year show that cash works in Sudan, and is currently the quickest - and sometimes only - way to save lives in many conflict-affected areas where humanitarian access is increasingly challenging.

Amid mounting hunger-related deaths and a high risk of famine, the response should immediately pivot to a focus on MPCA as a rapid first-line modality, with consideration of whether in-kind assistance can be complementary as access allows.

The response should also prioritize building on existing structures that have the capacity for a rapid and immediate scale up. **Members of the Sudan Cash Working Group have the operational capacity to reach nearly 2 million people with multi-purpose cash by October 2024, which would cost an estimated USD 380 million in funding.**

HOW CASH WORKS AMID HUNGER AND CONFLICT

Despite severe disruptions to the banking and telecommunication sectors in Sudan, humanitarian organizations have found ways to adapt over the past year, successfully identifying and using alternative ways to deliver cash to populations in need, notably through the use of multiple Financial Service Providers (FSPs). These include banks, microfinance institutions, and money transfer agents who are able to continue operations when networks are down and to address liquidity and access constraints in partnership with delivery agencies.

Working through money transfer agents is especially critical to the success of cash programming in Sudan, as in many conflict-affected areas they are virtually the only way to get cash in the hands of people in need. For example, a market assessment conducted in Khartoum in July 2023 found that 20 percent of all cash used by communities came from informal money transfer agents, and experience from practitioners delivering cash over the last year has indicated that money transfer agents are the primary providers across the Greater Darfur region.

As a result, a multitude of humanitarian actors were able to deliver cash assistance over the past year and set up the systems and structures necessary for a scale up, including strong relationships with communities and local authorities to ensure cash programming can be safely implemented. Crucially, cash assistance has also shown its effectiveness at reaching people in conflict-affected and other hard-to-reach areas that cannot currently be reached with in-kind aid. Since the start of the conflict in April 2023 and with limited dedicated



funds, humanitarian organizations who later formed the Cash Consortium of Sudan (CCS)¹ reached nearly 300,000 people with MPCA across 14 states,² as well as supported 190 community-based organizations with group cash transfers³ in each of Sudan's 18 states, indirectly reaching an additional 115,000 people with essential support.



Altuma and her children stand inside their roofless shelter in Gedaref, where they came after fleeing Khartoum. Photo Credit: International Rescue Committee.

SUPPORTING A MULTITUDE OF URGENT NEEDS

In May 2024, post-distribution monitoring exercises conducted in Central and South Darfur by Mercy Corps showed that in both locations, 97 percent of respondents who received MPCA spent cash on food items, confirming the effectiveness of cash assistance to support people's access to food from local markets. The next top category of spending included costs associated with health and medicines, at 48 percent—unsurprising considering the needs of conflict-affected families hosting children, elderly, and people with chronic illnesses, all of whom face further stresses due to rising food insecurity and malnutrition. Findings also showed that people spent a significant amount on debt repayment (25 percent), which is a common coping strategy in times of acute hunger as people go into debt with local shops to access food.

These results demonstrate that cash assistance—and MPCA in particular as a modality that allows people to address a multitude of their most urgent needs—is a critical form of multi-sectoral assistance in this crisis. Throughout 2023, the Norwegian Refugee Council monitored the impact of MPCA programs and found that people's food consumption scores increased by 95 percent, while their ability to meet basic needs increased by 309 percent. Findings also showed that communities relied less on negative coping strategies due to food shortages, highlighting the potential of cash for economic recovery and resilience of communities.



"I am diabetic, and I was not able to buy my medication or eat healthy food for months as I had no money. The conflict left us stranded here in East Darfur and medicine prices went high due to road blockages. I was so relieved when I was registered to receive cash assistance. I am so happy to get money for the first time in months. I will go directly to the pharmacy to buy my medication and buy some fruits," said **Adam, a retired teacher living in East Darfur.**

¹ The CCS is a partnership of 18 international and national organizations delivering a harmonized cash plus approach to drive impact, efficiency and cost-effectiveness in Sudan.

² Blue Nile, Central Darfur, Gedaref, Gezira, Kassala, Khartoum, North Darfur, North Kordofan, Sennar, South Darfur, South Kordofan, West Darfur, West Kordofan and White Nile

³ Group Cash Transfers consist of cash transfers to a selected group of people from an affected population to implement projects that benefit either a subsection of the community or the community at large.

While markets have undeniably been affected by the conflict, abundant evidence consistently shows that they are still functional, accessible and able to provide life-saving food and other basic goods to people in need in most areas of Sudan, including in conflict-affected areas. Recent data from the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI) shows that markets are functioning across most states and basic items are available, but that affordability of goods is heavily compromised by limited financial capacity of populations. Similarly, in IOM's latest displacement overview [report](#), a large majority of internally displaced persons indicated food was available in markets including in Al Jazirah (91 percent), Khartoum (77 percent), South Darfur (100 percent) or South Kordofan (87 percent). Yet, these respondents also stated that food was unaffordable, underscoring the necessity of cash assistance over in-kind aid.

In addition to providing quick and flexible life-saving assistance to people in need, cash assistance sparks spending, helps keep food and essential goods affordable, and strengthens the local markets and the businesses people rely on during crises. While in-kind aid is critical in areas where markets are not functioning and where distributing cash is challenging, it is essential to rely on market assessments and analyses available to ensure that wherever possible, cash-based programming is prioritized as the quickest way to address urgent needs, including extreme food insecurity.



"I used the money received to buy sorghum, onions, and oil from the market, which helped to feed our family for one month. We need more food but the prices are very high, we cannot afford it. With the rainy season approaching, I wish I could receive some funds to resume my farming job. Farming is really good business and it would help me to secure food and add income to my family." - **Arbab, 65 years old and father of seven children living in Central Darfur.**

SUPPORTING WOMEN AND GIRLS AND LOCAL RESPONDERS

In Sudan, gender integrated⁴ MPCA recognizes existing challenges faced by women and girls in the current crisis, improves their protection, promotes their empowerment, and can lead to more resilient households and communities.⁵ Cash is often the preferred modality for assistance by women and girls in crisis. Flexible financial support by CARE International to survivors of gender based violence (GBV) in Gedaref State demonstrated that aside from addressing the immediate needs of survivors, cash assistance bolstered their resilience. Women also reported to have gained the autonomy to make financial decisions for the wellbeing of their families.

Beyond direct support to families through MPCA, over the past year humanitarian organizations have found it critical to support local responders through group cash transfers in Sudan. Across the country, and especially in the most conflict-affected areas, community-based organizations⁶ have been pivotal in reaching the worst affected populations with life-saving assistance and services since the beginning of this war, often at great personal risk. They notably provide communal kitchens, clinics, transportation, and psychosocial support. However, these initiatives remain under constant threat of closing down due to lack of sustainable and flexible funding, as well as safety concerns. By providing regular group cash transfers to these local responders and initiatives, humanitarian organizations contribute to their survival, and ensure continued life-saving support to many communities otherwise unreachable by international actors.

⁴ Guidance Note on How to Promote Gender Equality in Humanitarian Cash and Voucher Assistance - GB Cash and Gender Sub-work stream.

⁵ The State of the World's Cash Report 2023

<https://www.calpnetwork.org/collection/the-state-of-the-worlds-cash-2023-report/>

⁶ Including Emergency Response Rooms and other volunteer-led mutual aid initiatives

“THE TRUCKS ARE NOT COMING”

Over the past 14 months, despite the demonstrated impact of MPCA to address people’s most urgent and multi-sectoral needs in an accountable and cost-efficient manner, most humanitarian donors and operational actors have favored the distribution of in-kind assistance, such as food and basic goods. This is clearly illustrated by both the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan and the Sudan Famine Prevention Plan which both include MPCA as an “add on” instead of a central pillar of the response. This approach has proven to be grossly inadequate due to significant challenges and deliberate obstructions to humanitarian access across the country, especially in greater Darfur, the Kordofan states, and Khartoum.

Alarming, these regions are also experiencing some of the worst levels of food insecurity and violence, leaving many without the critical assistance they need to survive. In the greater Darfur region alone, as of May over 60 trucks filled with emergency supplies were unable to reach people in need due to access restrictions, and only seven percent of people targeted with life-saving food and livelihood assistance have been reached so far. According to OCHA, during the month of May 2024, nearly 1.2 million people targeted by in-kind humanitarian assistance remained unreached due to access restrictions including denials of travel permits and cross-border operations. In-kind distributions by WFP have only managed to consistently reach about 10 percent of people suffering from extreme food insecurity.⁷



“I am stranded here in Khartoum for quite a while. I did not receive my salary for over one year now, and I struggle to meet even my most basic needs including food as prices are hiking and I cannot afford that. I will use this cash I received to buy some decent food stuff for my family that should hopefully last us for a while” **Fatima, a widow and a mother of five children living in Khartoum.**

THE NEED TO SUPPORT EXISTING STRUCTURES

As hunger tightens its grip on communities in several parts of the country, especially in areas most affected by conflict, it is critical for the humanitarian response to build upon the systems developed and lessons learned from a year of successful cash programming in Sudan. Yet, the Cash Consortium of Sudan (CCS) - which accounts for the majority of MPCA reaching people in need in Sudan - has received less than two percent⁸ of the total funding disbursed for the humanitarian response in Sudan so far this year. This is despite the fact that life-saving MPCA has consistently and successfully reached communities in most conflict and hunger hotspots across the country with an established delivery architecture in place and poised for greater scale, even as the challenges in operating in Sudan have mounted. In addition, cash assistance requires a smaller logistical framework than the delivery of in-kind aid making it a more cost-effective intervention. It is also easier to track to mitigate aid diversion, both critical aspects in a context where needs far outstrip resources and are continuing to spiral.

Famine is neither inevitable nor unpredictable; It is the result of a failure to act. In Sudan, despite commitments made in the Jeddah Declaration, conflict parties failed to act on their responsibilities to facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded humanitarian access. Humanitarian donors, politicians and other actors collectively failed to heed countless warnings and to act quickly and effectively enough to address an ever-worsening situation. Much more could - and should - have been done to prevent starvation and famine-like conditions if the humanitarian response had prioritized more efficient and adapted aid approaches, such as MPCA and direct support to local responders and food systems, over the largely unsuccessful delivery of in-kind supplies.

⁸ The CCS is currently negotiating additional grants for a total of USD 57 million, which would represent a mere 11.5 percent of total disbursements.

URGENT STEPS TO SCALING CASH NOW

By focusing on conflict-affected and displacement areas expected to be affected by the worst levels of food insecurity (IPC 4 and IPC 5), scaled up cash response would be critical to stopping the spread of starvation related deaths.

To improve the reach, impact, efficiency and value for money of the humanitarian response in Sudan and address the worst impacts of a widespread starvation catastrophe, cash assistance, especially in the form of MPCA and group cash transfers, should be prioritized by all humanitarian actors, with in-kind aid used as a complementary approach when and where possible.

- **Donors should urgently disburse pledges made at the Sudan Conference in April 2024 and prioritize a significant increase in funding for cash**, in line with continued advice from the INGO Forum and recent recommendations from the Emergency Directors Group who visited Sudan in May 2024. In the immediate term, donors should prioritize funding to existing structures that have the capacity for a rapid and immediate scale up, such as the Cash Consortium of Sudan.
- **The Humanitarian Country Team should continue to support the scale up of the cash response, ensuring that all humanitarian actors collectively adopt a gender integrated cash first approach wherever local markets exist**, and emphasizing the complementarity of in-kind assistance where possible. This includes making MPCA prominent within the national and sub-national Sudan Operational Coordination Cell, and including a dedicated target and budget for MPCA in the 2025 Humanitarian Response Plan.
- **UN leadership and donors should sustain strong support for the Cash Working Group (CWG) and Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI) as essential structures to the scale-up of the cash response.** OCHA should immediately appoint an experienced, senior, dedicated OCHA lead (P5) for the CWG who is able to lead the coordination of the scaled up cash response in Sudan. In addition, sustained support from donors is needed for the CWG through continued funding for a dedicated INGO co-lead and investments in information management capacity on data and analyses related to cash and markets. Specifically, greater support is needed for the JMMI as the common evidence base on the status of market functionality and prices within the country.



A woman receives multi-purpose cash assistance in Gedaref, Sudan. Photo Credit: Mercy Corps.