

Reflections

What can we learn from locally led experiences in Sudan?

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While it is easy to say that partnership is a two-way process, this is not so easy to implement in practice. Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA) wish to respect partners' agency and recognise the inherent power imbalances that exist in a partnership relationship. Having worked in self-implementing international non-governmental organisations, we've seen firsthand how traditional aid models can sometimes sideline local knowledge and reinforce Western-dominated narratives. That's why we value the model that NPA champions. We are actively challenging those imbalances by prioritising local leadership, amplifying community voices and shifting from a model of imposition to one of genuine collaboration. It's not just a different approach; it's a necessary correction in a sector that has struggled to adhere to the values of anti-colonialism, independence and participation.

Keywords

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Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) supports locally led initiatives across its humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work. The organization works together with a range of actors — non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but also women or refugee led organisations, indigenous groups, trade unions or community groups — organised around specific objectives or areas of shared interest. Its key approach is to stand in solidarity with the efforts of those affected by conflict or crisis, by working on the interest areas and thematics these partners identify as most important. We have developed an equitable partnership approach that allows us to identify, assess and work alongside a wide range of actors that share our values, work in areas of similar or mutually beneficial competence and identify that working in partnership together would strengthen our efforts. Having implemented this work for Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA) for many years, we wish to share our insights from putting into practice locally-led assistance in times of crisis. We have played a role in humanitarian responses, working alongside partners, in countries around the world including Palestine, Myanmar, Mozambique and Syria — each time beginning with an understanding of the context that straddles not only humanitarian considerations, but also looking at the longer term — and the value that civil society will play during a crisis but also in the years prior and following. We believe that strong civil society can ensure that fast, relevant and appropriate support reaches those affected by conflict, but that they also play a key role in the strengthening of institutions, social inclusion and democracy that is required to reduce the burden of conflict in the future.

Each time we begin a new partnership, we start by understanding whether we have a shared interest, and if so identify goals that are mutually beneficial. NPA's partnership approach is dialogue based, which means it is difficult to quantify and compare across contexts — decisions to initiate partnerships are taken as locally as possible to communities as we can be. However, like any organisation, NPA needs to secure funding, and that often means aligning with donors and other stakeholders' expectations. These are issues we discuss during the partnership assessment processes, and on an ongoing basis with partners. We aim to find ways to minimise the expectations placed on partners and use our capacity to allow them to focus on what they see as important. In practical terms, this means taking responsibility in partnership arrangements for particular aspects of programming and grant management that can be cumbersome or difficult for local and national civil society organisations to deliver, while meeting the requirements that often come with international grants — this can include on reporting, financial compliance and technical delivery capacity and knowledge.

While it is easy to say that partnership is a two-way process, this is not so easy to implement in practice. We wish to respect partners' agency and recognise the inherent power imbalances that exist in a partnership relationship. Having worked in self-implementing international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), we've seen firsthand how traditional aid models can sometimes sideline local knowledge and reinforce Western-dominated narratives. That's why we value the model that NPA champions. We are actively challenging those imbalances by prioritising local leadership, amplifying community voices and shifting from a model of imposition to one of genuine collaboration. It's not just a different approach; it's a necessary correction in a sector that has struggled to adhere to the values of anti-colonialism, independence and participation. We believe that being open about that reality and our perspectives with partners through discussion and transparency about our limitations is part of that, and we believe, the best approach. For example, through every year of partnership, we encourage partners to identify aspects of their work or their organisations that they would like to improve — this could include training to increase competency or understanding, improved financial systems, security protocols or support to better understand or make use of an aspect of their work, such as through networking, advocacy or campaigning. In some programmes, we have annual learning forums, or surveys, that formally consolidate feedback and allow us an opportunity to reflect and learn.

Partner organisations have a good understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, so we aim to gain a shared understanding of the context, challenges and opportunities in order to support the organisations we work with to reach their goals. Of course, we have other obligations — we are recipients of taxpayer money and receive donations from the public and our members — they expect us to spend their money with intention and to deliver on what we promise in line with compliance standards. That will often mean that partners may prioritise aspects of their work — such as improvement of procurement practices — to better reflect what they see as the expectations of an international partner. But we continuously try to ensure we provide space where we are accountable to our partners and can speak openly and honestly. Some of the partners we work with have aspirations to be a formal NGO, or a civil society entity that will be a trusted partner to other international actors — and if that is the case we support them with that goal and try to provide resources that will help. But if it is not, we will try to understand how we can best support the organisation to remain an informal entity, if that is their preference. Some civil society movements may resist the idea of 'formalising' themselves for legitimate reasons; they may fear losing their grassroots legitimacy, flexibility, or 'edge' — or becoming entangled in bureaucratic demands and donor-driven agendas that dilute their original mission. We recognise that formalisation is not the only path to impact, and we're committed to supporting diverse forms of organising that reflect the realities and priorities of the communities they serve.

Much of NPA's funding is provided by taxpayers in Norway and overseas and we are accountable to them. Our donors and NPA's own compliance systems, as well as legal and ethical obligations, are put in place to prevent corruption and misuse of funds as well as to work efficiently and guarantee value for money. In our experience, local and national organisations understand and share this expectation. At the same time, their accountability systems also run downwards — towards the communities that they represent and work for and with. While they might not always share the same systems and processes that are familiar to western organisations, we have learned through our careers that their desire for fairness, transparency and to provide value run deep. Implementing a locally-led approach, we work

together to find formal and informal mechanisms that work for us and our partners, our donors and most importantly, the people we serve. For example, in some contexts we've supported partners to establish informal coalitions or community-based networks instead of registering as formal NGOs - structures that allow them to retain their grassroots identity while still engaging effectively with donors and decision-makers

We share accountability not just with our partners, but also with the recipients of humanitarian assistance who have a right to high quality, appropriate and relevant support during crisis. Although some local actors may not be familiar with the jargon of the humanitarian architecture, or humanitarian principles or international standards, such as Sphere or CHS, they do have a strong commitment to serve their communities. Much of the spirit of the humanitarian principles is understood by people around the world – experiences of shared humanity and a desire to reduce suffering are universal. Local organisations understand their own contexts and in conflict situations often have access that is not available to international actors. In recent years, humanitarian space is further reduced - as the situation in for example Myanmar and Palestine testifies - often due to political decisions made by state actors that do not adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law. This hinders assistance to vulnerable populations. We provide the practical and technical support local actors need to meet their obligations as humanitarian actors, and learn alongside our partners, as we did and continue to do in Sudan.

Following the outbreak of war in 2023, Sudan has now become the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Over 11 million people have been displaced and 25 million are at risk of acute hunger. NPA had already been working in Sudan since 2022, supporting civil society organisations in the democratic movement. A network of volunteers and local actors had begun to provide humanitarian assistance to the local population and needed support. With most international organisations struggling to gain access to respond to the crisis, a locally led response became even more critical.

In Sudan, part of the response from civil society was that various Mutual Aid Groups (MAGs) and Emergency Response Rooms (ERR) were quickly established. With limited resources, these MAGs responded to the most immediate needs in neighbourhoods or villages across the country. They opened soup kitchens, providing essential meals to those most in need. They set up or support existing medical clinics and women's canters. They work to repair water and electricity supplies, offer education for children and youth and provide protection services for local populations.

Many of the organisers of these MAG and ERR are activists who had previously been organised in neighbourhood committees, forming the backbone of the democracy movement — doctors, trade unions, journalists, and grassroots organisations. Because we worked with them, we quickly became aware of these initiatives and we wanted to find a way to support them. We found this increasingly difficult as practical and financial access to Sudan became almost impossible. MAGs are using their networks, deep social engagement and understanding and extensive experience in organising volunteer movements and long-term resistance efforts - exactly the type of initiatives that we see in many other contexts. So, we made a decision — we would put the humanitarian imperative first and try to provide leadership in showing what could be done, thus showing solidarity with the bravery of those on the ground. The exact number of civil society responders that have been killed or injured during the conflict is not clear, but we have numerous reports that responders have been deliberately targeted by armed actors, harassed, detained and tortured. Members of civil society understand and generally accept these risks, and we have supported them to document their experiences and tried to provide advice and practical assistance to escape when possible — that is a solidarity approach.

To support MAGs/ERRs in their work in the face of all-out war, we quickly understood that we would need to simplify our financial reporting requirements and be flexible in our funding and compliance mechanisms to be able to help financially while trying to maintain an oversight. However, we needed to balance the humanitarian imperative with the financial risks involved. This we overcame by transferring small amounts and working with volunteer groups to put in place checks and balances that could satisfy our financial and other technical expectations for programming. An example of how this is done is that some of the groups we assist publish on social media about how the money received has been spent and holding open forums on decision making — both of which we have encouraged.

Volunteers, activists and others have united under the Sudanese concept of 'nafeer', which can be translated as 'community spirit' or 'collective voluntary effort'. The community-based MAGs provide more than just humanitarian aid, although that is their core purpose at a time of significant humanitarian needs. Their work is an act of solidarity, building trust and legitimacy. It is the start of a remedy for the fractured social structures caused by the civil war and goes beyond just humanitarian assistance — they are a beacon of hope and self-determination. These locally led responses can strengthen local communities rather than creating aid dependency. It is efficient, effective and compared to a lot of other humanitarian interventions, relatively bureaucracy-free humanitarian aid. Like the neighbourhood committees, the MAGs are horizontally organised, ensuring transparency and democratic decision-making. Their accountability is to the local communities they serve, not only to donors in the Global North. Their financial transparency also minimises the risk of corruption and mismanagement.

The humanitarian needs in Sudan remain overwhelming, and it is clear that the reduction of humanitarian and civil society space is illegitimate and makes an already devastating situation worse. Those seeking to provide support to others in Sudan have been targeted, injured and killed and there is little international attention and on the ground presence to catalogue crimes and provide in person support and solidarity to humanitarian workers. NPA is committed to continue to build our support and learn with partners what has worked, what can be scaled and what we can do better.

The grassroots movement for a peaceful Sudan is the same force that took a leadership role during the revolution, when many of the Sudanese people risked their lives and inspired the world in their courageous fight for democracy. Now, these same groups use their dedication, hard work and experience to prevent Sudan from total collapse. Thus, we work with this locally-led initiative to achieve our shared goal of putting Sudan back on track toward a democratic and peaceful future. We believe this new way of working is part of how we can meet the increasingly shrinking space for international humanitarian aid in many places around the world. If we want to remain relevant and adapt to the new reality we do need more daring new approaches to working with local partners in crisis situations.