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The Role of Civil Society in Transitional Justice and Peace in Sudan

Introduction

The devastating war in Sudan centres, by definition, on those waging it: the army, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), armed groups, militias, mercenaries. It seems to relegate civilians to the passive position of victims of the hostilities, of mass atrocities, forced displacement, starvation and gender-based violence. Conventional approaches to ending the war, based on Sudan's long experience with conflict, tend to be narrow elite bargains that privilege those with guns through power and wealth sharing arrangements. Impunity reigned, either through blanket amnesty or long-delayed implementation of official commitments.

Those well-known recipes to conflict management in Sudan have spurred its spiral of war and military rule, interspersed with short democratic openings and periods and areas of relative peace. That is why any credible peace process needs to include transitional justice that accounts for the accumulated violations and abuses. Civil society in its diverse forms has key roles to play in this context.

The December 2018 revolution marked a key shift in Sudan. Coming on the heels of their abrogation of the transitional period in October 2021, the power struggle within the military is also a fight over the dominance and definition of the country, and who it belongs to. It has been described as a “counter-revolutionary war” that weaponizes pre-existing cleavages between the centre and periphery as well as among neighbouring communities.¹ Mass displacement challenges the social fabric and the competing claims of two self-appointed governments divide the country, questioning state integrity.

It has been civic actors that mobilized from day one of the war, ensuring a measure of mutual support even where international aid did not reach. In this terrain, civil society is not an accessory to elite bargaining; it is the country's evidence pipeline, governance fallback, and moral compass. This paper outlines some of their contributions that meaningfully impact people's daily lives. They provide important lessons for formal and informal approaches to transitional justice and peace, and how international actors can better support them.

1. A war on civilians and a society in crisis

In the ruthless armed conflict since April 2023, ordinary people are the battlefield. Khartoum's urban core has been devastated; the violence radiated into Darfur, Kordofan, Blue Nile and the central plains. The RSF besieged El Fasher in North Darfur for 18 months, before they fully captured it in October 2025. The war displays mixed pattern: conventional fighting over territory between armed entities alongside targeted assaults, including killings, sexual violence, disappearances, abductions, and systematic looting of civilians, their homes and the infrastructure meant to serve them. Impartial reports by UN-mandated investigators implicate RSF-aligned units in atrocities against Masalit, Zaghawa and other non-Arab communities in Darfur, while the SAF has been accused of indiscriminate aerial and artillery strikes in dense civilian areas.²

Behind the headline violence sits a deeper unravelling. Sudan now faces the world's largest internal displacement crisis, with more than 9 million³ forced from their homes within the country, in addition to more than four million refugees.⁴ Over half the population faces high levels of acute food insecurity, with pockets of famine where markets are broken and aid is blocked.⁵ Conflict profiteering and checkpoint economies flourish; hate speech circulates rapidly online and offline, accelerating ethnicization and hardening communal boundaries that any future transitional justice process will have to bridge.⁶ Trust in formal institutions is threadbare. At the same time, a counter-current of civic self-help has kept social solidarity alive. The neighbourhood infrastructure built for protest was re-tooled, almost overnight, for survival.

2. Civil society, in its many forms, remains a pillar of stability

From April 2023 onward, Emergency Response Rooms (Ghuraf al-Tawari', ERRs) surfaced as hyper-local coordination hubs for first aid, evacuation, food distribution, and information flows, often operating block-to-block. In both Khartoum and Darfur, volunteer-run community kitchens—El Takkaya, a revival of an older Sudanese ethos of communal feeding—kept households afloat when supply chains failed.⁷ Women's initiatives are part of this architecture with “women's rooms”, quietly organized protection services, safe spaces, and referral pathways for survivors of gender-based violence, and offering psychosocial first aid where formal services have collapsed.⁸ Diaspora networks amplified these efforts by fundraising, procuring medicines, and maintaining secure channels for information and remittances. This is the governance the war did not extinguish.

Breadth is the civil sphere's advantage. Professional bodies—doctors, lawyers, engineers, teachers—

reconstituted themselves outside regime-controlled unions in the 2010s and underpinned the 2018–2019 mobilization through the Sudanese Professionals Association. Women's collectives and youth formations supplied both mass and moral energy to the revolution and still anchor mutual aid, rights monitoring, and trauma care. The media ecosystem—battered, partly exiled—survives through citizen journalists, verification desks, and diaspora-based outlets that challenge disinformation and elevate local voices. Traditional authorities, native administrations, and community reconciliation committees continue to matter in many locales, convening micro-truces, negotiating safe passage to water points, and mediating inter-communal flashpoints where state authority has receded.⁹ As such, contemporary civil society actors in Sudan extend much beyond established, donor-dependent and elite-centred NGOs, including decentralized actors embracing a spirit of *medania* or “civicness”.¹⁰ This revolves around notions of solidarity and the public good beyond ethnic, religious, or class divides.

Civil society's stabilizing role is practical and normative at once. Practically, civic actors deliver water, conduct emergency surgery, organize evacuation corridors, and provide food through El Takkaya community kitchens; they map needs faster than formal systems and adapt more quickly than large agencies.¹¹ Normatively, they keep the horizon of “civilian rule and accountability” in public view—through neighbourhood teach-ins, charters, legal drafts, and outreach. Even under repression and war, the institutional imagination persists. In 2022, the Sudanese Bar Association convened jurists and civic leaders to publish a draft transitional constitution that codified non-immunity for serious crimes and civilian oversight of the security sector.¹² During the war, activists keep humanitarian volunteering and political engagement separate to protect themselves. Civic education and advocacy have moved online. Mutual aid adds to social cohesion by creating a practical experience of solidarity and belonging. In that, volunteering serves another purpose: “Today, we fight the system by showing them: we are here,” says an activist who moved from going out in the streets in a resistance committee to volunteering with an ERR. “We tell people that war is not right because the right way for peace is to stand up together and not support the war by separating into groups supporting SAF and RSF.”¹³

The civic field also includes explicit anti-war alliances of youth groups, women blocs, and political parties, even if they also struggle with polarization, fragmentation and co-option by the warring parties. Who is mandated to speak on whose behalf is hotly contested even within these civilian coalitions. Battling with impartiality and intense political pressure, these coalitions do manage to maintain a strict rejection of the war and a focus on civilian governance as means to end the crisis.¹⁴ These/their efforts include workshops, seminars and initiatives specifically focused on transitional justice.¹⁵

3. Making peace and justice count for people's daily lives

International discourse and practice on transitional justice tends to be dominated by a focus on formal processes and institutions despite pledges to be context-specific and victim-centred. In charged political post-war or post-authoritarian contexts, transitional justice processes are often reduced to seemingly technical exercises of consultations, reports, legislation, and commissions.¹⁶ Professional, systematic exercises are needed, but should not obscure the inherently political nature of transitional justice. Similarly, an excessive focus on international justice mechanisms like the International Criminal Court (ICC) or large-scale truth and reconciliation commissions runs the risk of running outside of the reality in fragile settings and the actual needs and experiences of affected populations.¹⁷ After all, the ICC has delivered only one verdict in the situation of Sudan, in October 2025, relating to events more than two decades prior.¹⁸ Despite pledging to do so, the ICC prosecutor has not issued any further arrest warrants beyond the five legacy ones since the April 2023 war began. Seeing perpetrators being punished may help people's sense of justice, but the clinical court chambers in The Hague remain distant from the scenes of mass atrocities in Darfur or Khartoum. Hybrid tribunals either in-country or in the region may provide a bridge there.¹⁹

An everyday sense of transitional justice needs to include restorative elements. These can be formal apologies, community-led processes or memorials as physical symbols of acknowledgement and collective mourning. Furthermore, no transitional justice process can be effective if people's ordinary access to impartial, independent and effective justice is not restored - or established in the first place, given that Sudan has been plagued by the denial of rights. Restorative justice is a crucial element to keep societies together.

A justice-based approach to peace focuses on the reduction of harm to individuals and communities. In contrast to some elite bargains that simply redefine what counts as armed conflict or criminal violence,²⁰ peace needs to improve the human security of the population. Justice needs to include not just civic and political rights, but also the right to food, water and healthcare.

On a discursive level, an everyday approach to peace and justice needs to prevent the manipulation of reality as often practiced by some elites in the context of war. Instead, what is needed is an acknowledgement of complex and difficult experiences beyond a centralized understanding of history. For example, for some communities, e.g. in the Nuba mountains, war started much earlier than in April 2023.

4. Contributions by civil society to transitional justice efforts in times of war

In this context, we can identify several threads how civic actors are already contributing to such an everyday sense of transitional justice despite the ongoing war.

The first thread is the evidentiary one. Doctors, lawyers, and researchers have sustained a chain of custody for facts—documenting killings, enforced disappearances, conflict-related sexual violence, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. The Central Committee of Sudanese Doctors has maintained fatality tallies since the 2021 coup; legal groups compile affidavits, medical reports, metadata and geolocation, and burial records that can later stand up in court.²¹ Community monitors in Darfur and Kordofan—often anonymous for safety—connect eyewitness testimony to satellite imagery and forensic analysis, liaising with international mechanisms to preserve material before it is lost. This is the spine of any future TJ process.

The second thread is narrative harm-reduction. Hate speech and dehumanizing rhetoric spike with battlefield swings; civil society media desks and OSINT collaborators flag incitement trends, debunk rumours of imminent attacks, and issue “do-no-harm” communication packs to neighbourhood influencers in local languages.²² The aim is modest but vital: blunt the leap from online vilification to offline violence, and remind communities—and would-be instigators—of criminal liability for incitement.

The third thread is psychosocial repair. Women-led protection teams and “women's rooms within ERR structures offer discreet counselling, accompaniment to clinics, and peer-support circles for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Where formal services have collapsed, these nodes are often the only pathway to basic care and dignity. Faith leaders and local counsellors hold remembrance rituals that, while not formal TJ, preserve collective memory and create social space for eventual truth-telling.

The fourth thread is agenda-setting. Civic coalitions have kept TJ on the diplomatic docket through alerts to the UN Human Rights Council and Security Council, calls for an expansion of the UN arms embargo and for targeted sanctions on perpetrators, and demands for evidence preservation and cooperation with the International Criminal Court as well as the UN's Fact-Finding Mission. The through-line is consistent: cycles of impunity enabled repeat atrocities; breaking the cycle requires credible, survivor-centred pathways to justice and witness protection from the outset.

The fifth thread is logistics, because justice work needs fuel and phones. ERRs and diaspora networks procure antibiotics and surgical supplies, organize evacuations across front lines, and keep El Takkaya kitchens open through pooled micro-donations.²³ Lawyers maintain

emergency hotlines and pro-bono rosters. These are not substitutes for public services; they are stopgaps that prevent total social unravelling while preserving the social capital a TJ process will need.

Finally, there is local de-escalation. Tribal leaders, youth mediators, and ward-level committees broker short truces to open corridors, repair boreholes, or evacuate hospitals.²⁴ Women activists drive neighbourhood-to-neighbourhood messaging that reframes “honour” away from retaliation and toward the protection of life. These small instances of peace rarely make headlines, but they save lives now and seed the relational groundwork for any formal process later.

5. Challenges and roadblocks

Repression has been cyclical and costly. Under Bashir, independent associations were closed and activists detained or disappeared; during the 2013 austerity protests, security forces used live fire, killing scores.²⁵ After 2019, the law recognized TJ objectives but implementation lagged; the 2021 coup restored a climate of fear. Since April 2023, both main belligerents have targeted civic actors, commandeered NGO premises, and criminalized independent relief—further shrinking operational space and pushing many groups underground.²⁶ Documenting human rights abuses is extremely dangerous – those gathering evidence of war crimes may be targeted for elimination by perpetrators seeking to cover their tracks.

Fragmentation is the shadow side of resilience. The civic field’s decentralization—so effective against authoritarian tactics—can hinder coherence when national frameworks or negotiation platforms need unified positions. Different charters and coalitions sometimes talk past each other; periphery voices can feel under-represented in Khartoum-centric debates. Resource scarcity compounds this: core funding has collapsed, banking channels are disrupted, compliance burdens are hard to meet in a war zone, and volunteers shoulder trauma and burnout.

Exclusion from formal processes remains the norm. The 2020 Juba Peace Agreement’s justice chapter promised a Truth Commission, a Special Court for Darfur, and reparations—but those institutions never materialized before the coup, and implementation bodies were dominated by signatory armed groups. Women, youth, and victims’ associations—those most invested in justice—were under-represented. In current mediation tracks, civil society is too often relegated to “consultations at the margins.” Elite bargains among armed and political actors have proven brittle precisely because they lack civic ownership.

Above all, impunity corrodes trust. From the Darfur atrocities of the 2000s to the 3 June 2019 Khartoum massacre—where more than one hundred protesters were killed—survivors have watched investigations stall and suspects retain power.²⁷ This history can breed cynicism and fatigue among the public and even among civil society

activists themselves. Convincing victims to participate in yet another commission or to come forward with testimonies can be difficult when previous efforts yielded no closure or accountability. There is a corresponding mistrust between civil society and power-holders: security forces often perceive justice-oriented civil society as a direct threat, and even some civilians in power may worry that pursuing justice could destabilize things. Overcoming this impasse – where calls for justice are heard not as destabilizing but as foundational to peace – is an ongoing struggle. Civil society must continually make the case that peace and justice are not in zero-sum opposition, and that addressing grievances is essential to prevent future conflict.

6. Policy recommendations

International partners that stress their commitment to peace and civilian rule in Sudan need to support the practical work of locally-led civic organisations in Sudan and the region.

Diplomatically, international partners should press all parties to the conflict to halt arrests of activists and attacks on service hubs; reconstruction can only work if civic space is protected and those engaged in mutual aid are not persecuted for alleged cooperation with the RSF. They should use targeted sanctions more energetically against commanders credibly implicated in atrocities or obstruction of civic space and humanitarian access.

Operationally, international partners should provide flexible funds to Sudanese organizations and diaspora-linked consortia able to move supplies and stipends into the country; back evidence preservation with secure tooling, hosting, and expert mentorship; and fund survivor services (gbv response, mental health). They should create funding programmes specifically to support civil society in its various forms, even if they are not formally registered to protect their operations in Sudan. In their programming, international partners should coordinate with each other and avoid adding to the fragmentation through initiatives competing for visibility.

On the multilateral level, international partners should ensure the UN human rights mechanisms on Sudan continue to be mandated and receive sustained funding despite current cuts, making available voluntary pledges as needed. At the UN Security Council, they should ensure that the panel of experts on Sudan is able to work properly and advocate for an extension of the referral to the ICC to cover the whole country, not just Darfur.

Finally, international partners that are in a position to do so should set up and support credible and coordinated track two mediation initiatives that provide confidential and structured space for dialogue that include diverse civic actors as well as those close to the warring parties. Mediation support should enable an informed dialogue on key contested issues, including transitional justice as part of any post-war order.

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