



## Exhausted:

Three years of displacement and the collapse of survival systems in Sudan and the region

April 2026

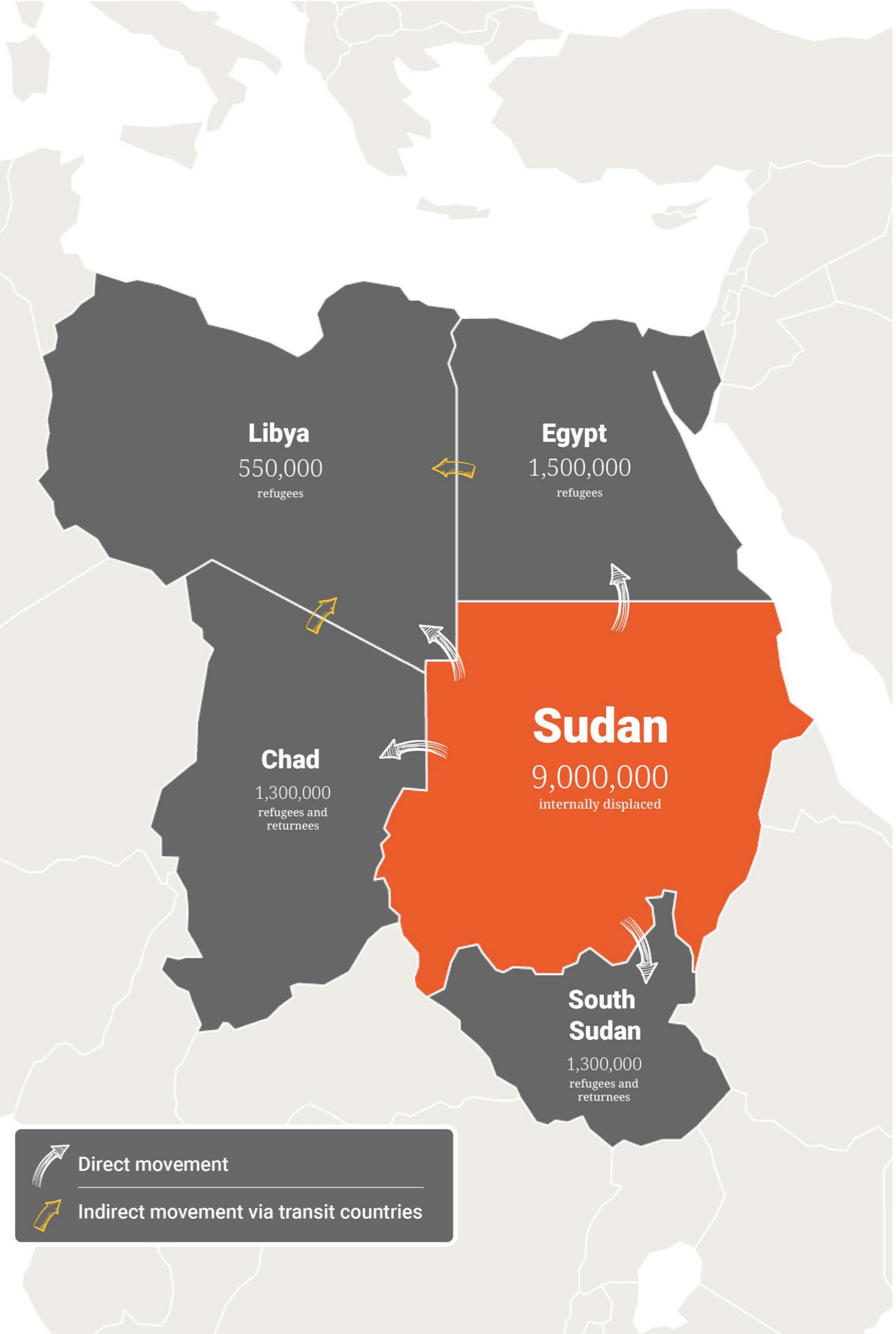



## Sudan's crisis


# 13,500,000

people forcibly displaced

**within the country and  
across borders.**



 Direct movement

 Indirect movement via transit countries

Figures are approximate, taken from IOM and UNHCR data.

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We are living dead only. We have lost all hope. May Allah help us.

- Refugee woman in Chad

On 15 April 2023, war broke out in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Since then, the fighting has been fierce, turning major cities into battlegrounds, villages and farms into ashes, and forcing millions of families to flee their homes. Hundreds of thousands died in the violence, and entire communities were killed because of their ethnicity in Darfur.

People fled across the country, from city to city, while millions more crossed borders into Chad, South Sudan, Egypt and Libya.

Three years later, Sudan has become one of the world's largest humanitarian crises, with mass atrocities inflicted on civilians, and famine confirmed in multiple areas.

The crisis did not stop at Sudan's borders.

Chad, already one of the world's poorest countries, absorbed hundreds of thousands of refugees. South Sudan, itself only a few years out of its own civil war, opened its doors. Egypt now hosts 1.5 million refugees, and in Libya, over half a million people find themselves at the edge of the continent, some hoping to continue onwards.

**Cover Photo:** Zaynab Ibrahim, a former Arabic teacher from Sudan, now lives alone in Touloum refugee camp in eastern Chad. Enayatullah Azad/NRC

## Protracted displacement

Three years of war in Sudan have pushed people to the limit of human endurance. Nine million [internally displaced people](#) (IDPs) and 3.6 million refugees and asylum seekers remain uprooted. For many, leaving home was supposed to be temporary. They expected a quick end to the conflict and [packed hardly anything](#) as they fled. Today, the vast majority of people displaced are now entering a fourth year without a home<sup>1</sup>.

Some are in displacement camps. Others are squeezed into a relative's spare room or struggling to pay rent in an unfamiliar city.

To understand how Sudanese are coping three years into the war, we surveyed refugees and IDPs across Sudan, Chad and South Sudan. Findings are supplemented by a separate needs assessment by partners in Egypt and REACH's Multi-Sector Needs Monitoring (MSNM) Round 2 data for Libya.



Photo: Goz Al Salam camp in Kosti, White Nile State, has become a shelter for thousands of displaced people. Ahmed Elsir/NRC

## In search of livelihoods and dignity

Over three years, people have exhausted every option available to them – finding work where they can, chasing documentation, trying to gain access to basic services – but the odds remain stacked against them.

Egypt was once the preferred destination for refugees in the early days of the conflict – bound to Sudan by historical ties, and offering visa-free entry to women, children and older men, along with access to healthcare and education.

However, increasing restrictions have placed refugees in an ever more precarious position. While nearly 70% reported multiple sources of income, primarily through wage labour and casual work, and almost 16% starting small businesses, 90% of surveyed families<sup>2</sup> earn less than 8,000 EGP per month or 5 USD per day, and 36% earn less than 2 USD per day. The consequences are stark: 85% of surveyed families struggle to secure enough food, 76% of families are carrying debt and 99% have used all of their savings.

When people need help, they often do not know where to turn, with 74.4% unaware of any humanitarian aid agency or UN helpline, and 66% not knowing where to seek legal advice.

<sup>1</sup> 63% of IDPs and 47% of refugees and asylum seekers will have been displaced for three or more years

<sup>2</sup> In our sample, the median household size in Egypt comprised of five family members

Refugees arriving in Libya spoke of local solidarity and humanitarian assistance as key sources of initial support, with some describing being welcomed by residents, security actors or humanitarian organisations. But the initial solidarity gave way to a much more difficult reality. Most have no idea how to register: 83% lacked basic information on the process and 36% were not registered at all.

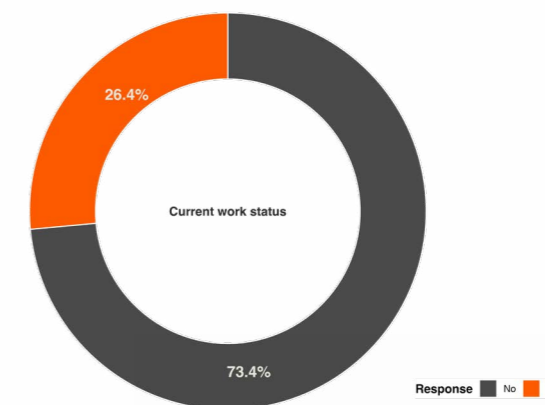
Without documentation, access to work, services and freedom of movement all narrow sharply. Though 64% consider paid work their main source of income, many are forced to seek informal day labour – the only option available without official papers.

Many families are left with little choice but to cut back on food, reducing meals and shrinking portion sizes. Even in Egypt's cities, 75% of displaced families are either skipping or reducing meals.

Conditions are hardest for those in camps. [In Sudan](#), 54% of displaced people are living in camps, gathering sites or public buildings. Many of these sites have existed since 2004 when the Darfur conflict triggered mass displacement. A further 39% are staying with host communities.

In Chad, similar dynamics have led refugees to congregate in and around long-established camps and border towns.

In South Sudan dynamics are more complex: an open-door policy has allowed new arrivals to settle in more freely, in camps, border towns and larger cities.



Many of those out of work are teachers, healthcare workers, engineers and traders, a professional class that has spent years idle in camps. For women, the situation is even more dire. In Chad, 90.4% of female-headed families have no income at all. This figure climbs to nearly 95% in Wadi Fira, where many of those who fled [the prolonged siege and atrocities in Al Fasher eventually settled](#).

**Respondents not engaging in any kind of activity to earn income**

Chad	86.9%
South Sudan	64.4%
Sudan	58.7%

**Families that were forced to reduce meals in the last 30 days**

Chad	72%
Sudan	80%
South Sudan	92%

Families are being forced to reduce or skip meals, with female-headed families particularly vulnerable. In South Sudan, nearly all female-headed families have skipped or reduced their meals over the past month. In Chad, refugees spoke plainly: "We are starving after fleeing war...we are desperate." In Sudan, 11% of families we spoke to reported that their children have either lost weight or fallen frequently ill because of poor nutrition.

Across all three countries the numbers paint the same picture: most displaced people are unable to secure an income. Those who do earn an income are a small minority: 5.48% who had enough capital to start a small trade or business, and 4.4% engaged in daily labour.

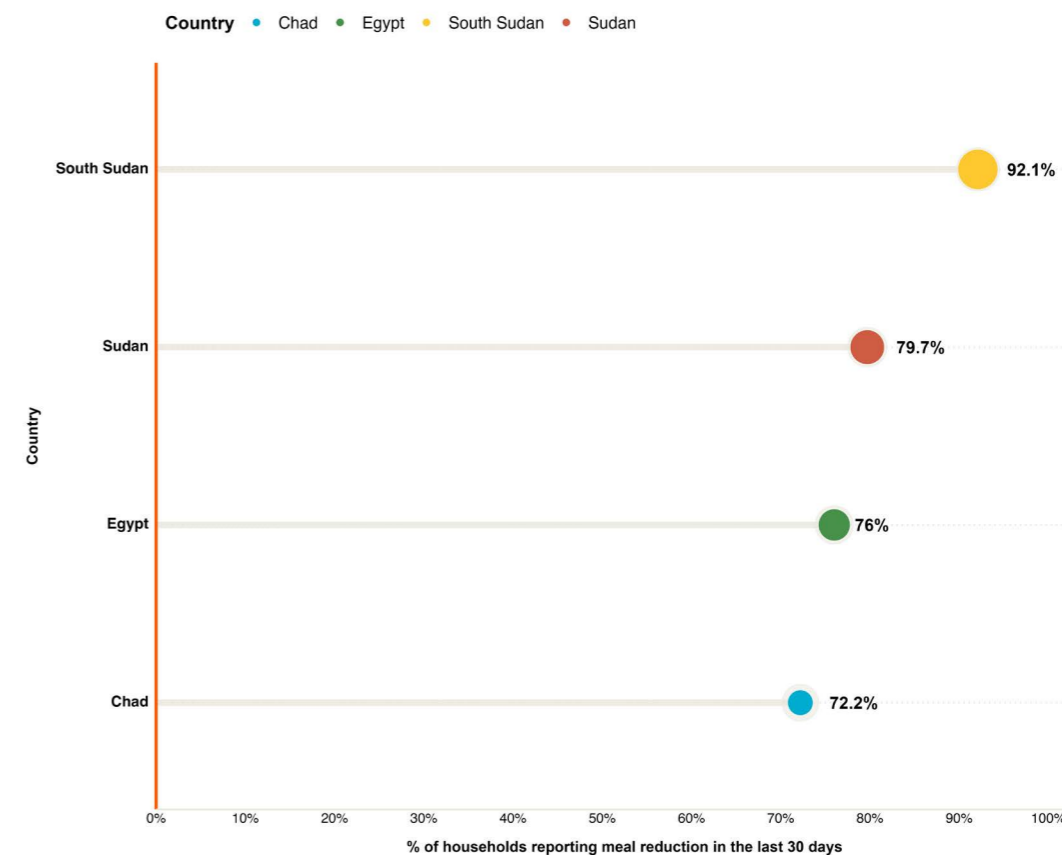


Photo: Refugees in Eastern Chad are collecting fire wood for cooking, but often this work comes with a risk. Enayatullah Azad/NRC

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**I want to let them know that we have suffered and are leading difficult lives. We have lost our dignity and hope.**  
 - Refugee woman in South Sudan

Ultimately, people want to live with dignity – and yet only 15% of respondents in Sudan, 25% in Chad and 43% in South Sudan feel their current conditions allow even that. Where dignity is preserved, it rests on the most basic foundations: personal belongings, a shelter that holds, water that is safe to drink and a toilet to use.

But even these conditions are not met. Fetching water, once a daily routine, has become a high-risk endeavour for women and girls in Sudan, South Sudan and Chad. They travel miles to *wadis*<sup>3</sup> where “insecurity reigns” as one respondent said. Another was more direct: “When we go to get water, we are beaten”. Even those willing to take that risk, often return without having secured enough. Access remains limited with only 25% in Chad, 38% in Sudan and 45% in South Sudan able to secure water regularly.

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**“My message to donors is to help provide us with a latrine because it’s very important.”**  
 - Refugee woman in South Sudan  
 ”

For women and girls, absence of safe sanitation presents another risk: 20% of female respondents reported having no access to any toilet or latrine, a rate three times worse than men. Those who do have access often have to share it with more than 20 people. Overcrowding and lack of private, safe sanitation create conditions where sexual exploitation becomes more common. One mother in Sudan experienced the consequences firsthand: “I noticed that my children are really affected because my two daughters have been impregnated by unknown people.”

<sup>3</sup> A wadi is a seasonal watercourse that flows with water during, and immediately after, the rainy season.

### Separation, trauma and coping



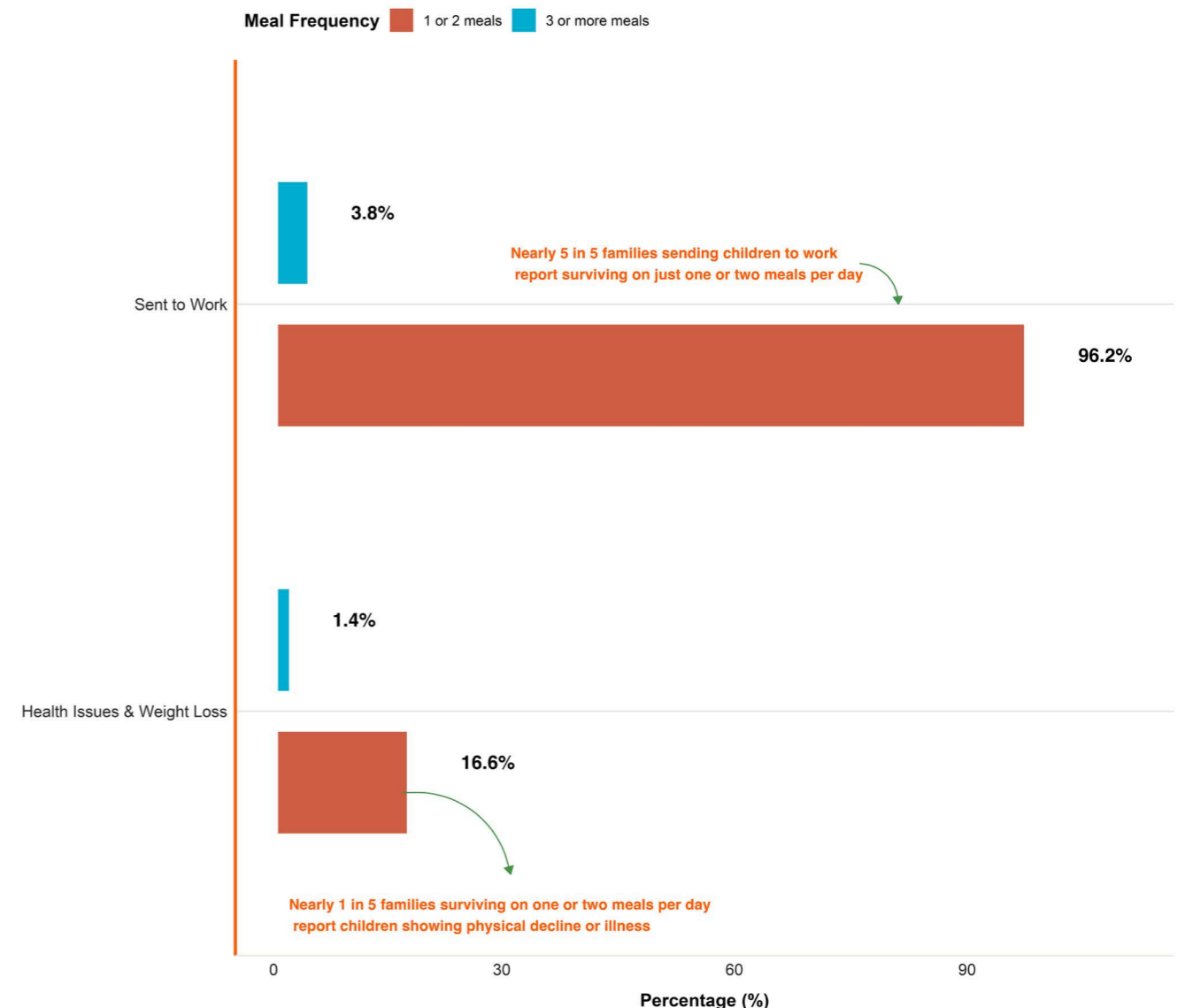
Many family members are separated

Years of lost income, depleted savings and limited opportunities have taken their psychological toll on families.

The longer families remain in displacement, the more they are compelled to fall back on a variety of coping mechanisms. In Chad, 79% of families we spoke to resorted to at least one negative coping mechanism, alongside 68.6% in Egypt. In Sudan and South Sudan, every respondent surveyed had done so. In Libya, 65% of families are experiencing medium or high stress<sup>4</sup>.

In Chad, Sudan and South Sudan, 66.5% of families borrowed money or food in the month before the survey was conducted. Many had lost belongings throughout their journey, as 72% have told us. Nearly 30% had to sell the little they had left. An alarmingly high 18% of those families are compelled to send their children to work, with those experiencing the most severe food insecurity, most likely to resort to this measure.

Comparing child labour and health issues by meal frequency



<sup>4</sup> Based on the reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI), which is an experience-based indicator measuring the behaviour of families over seven days they did not have enough food or money to purchase food.

Time and again the data speaks to how continued loss has marked people's lives and exacerbated their trauma. Families reported an average of nearly four major losses, including lost homes, livelihoods and personal belongings.

Family separation is near-universal across the respondents. More than 70% of refugees in Chad and South Sudan, and 55% of households in Sudan, have been separated from their loved ones. Among the people we spoke to, 66% across all three countries have lost contact with family members entirely, with no way of knowing where they are or whether they are safe.

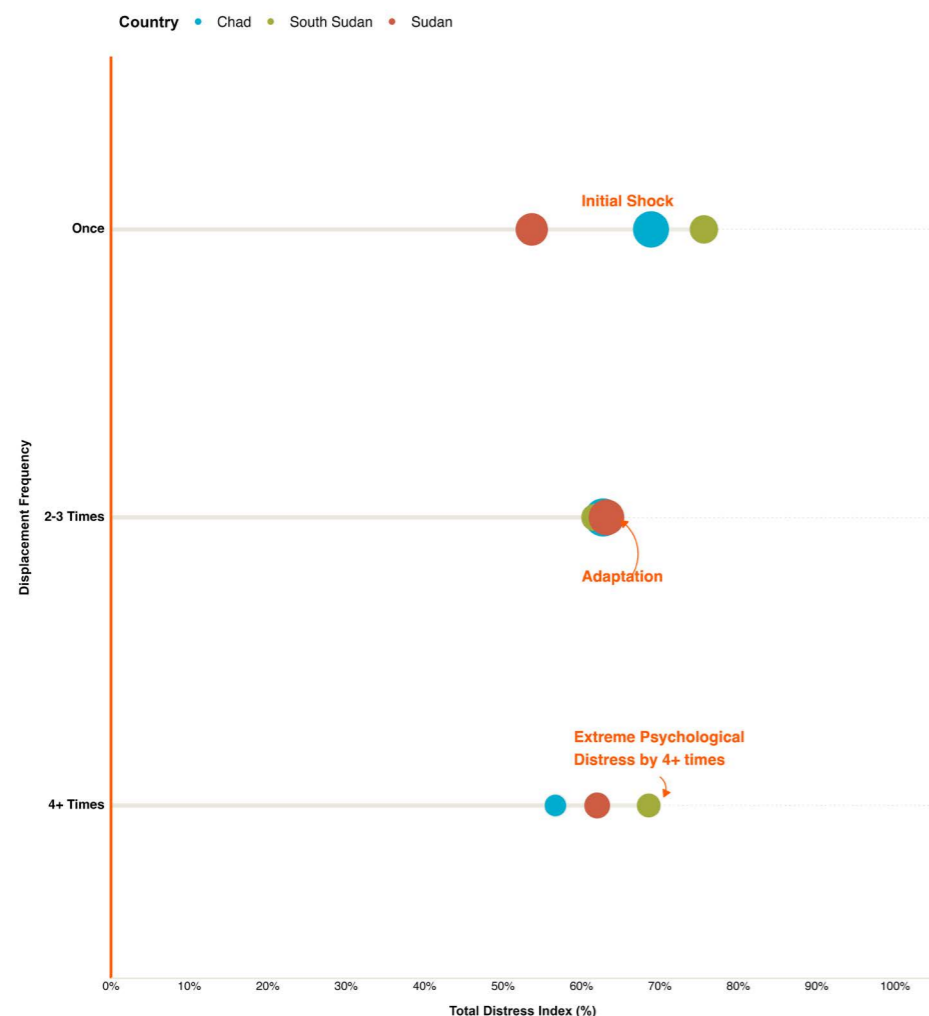
In Libya, the data tells a different story. Family separation was significantly lower, at 22%, with much of it driven by people leaving in search of work. This is most visible in Al Kufra and Tobruk, key logistical hubs that provide opportunities for both [legal](#) and [irregular](#) migration and employment, which recorded the highest family separation rates in the country at 89%.

For most, separation is not losing one person but missing three or more close members at once. That depth of loss is a major factor that pushes people into adopting extreme survival and coping mechanisms. The consequences of family separation fall hardest on children. In Chad, when the family unit is no longer intact, the risk of child marriage triples - from 3.5% to 11%. Child labour nearly doubles, from 12.3% to 22%.

Family separation is also reshaping how children behave. The more family members lost, the more children are inclined to exhibit negative behaviour.

Schooling, too, is both a casualty of displacement and a lifeline against it. Only 45% of displaced children go to school, and as educational attendance falls, troubling behaviours rise – including aggression and constant fearfulness.

Families who manage to get their children into school tend to keep them there consistently. School functions as routine, structure, and a buffer against the psychological weight of displacement.



What best describes how you feel when you think about the future?

	Chad	South Sudan	Sudan
I am trying to stay hopeful	35%	31%	40%
I am worried about how we will survive	34%	26%	27%
I don't know what the future holds	20%	39%	23%
I feel exhausted and at my limit	11%	5%	10%

While many of the families we spoke to are “trying to stay hopeful”, too many are focused on survival or concerned about an uncertain future for them and their loved ones.



“Yeah, we are leading a really difficult life, without food, education or shelter. Everything is difficult, and our children's future is affected. They're already losing hope for their future.”  
- Displaced woman in Sudan

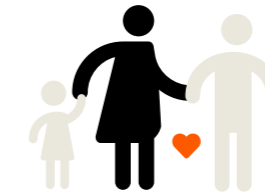


Photo: Many newly arrived refugees to Touloum camp in Eastern Chad are currently living in makeshift shelters made out of some sticks and fabric. Enayatullah Azad/NRC

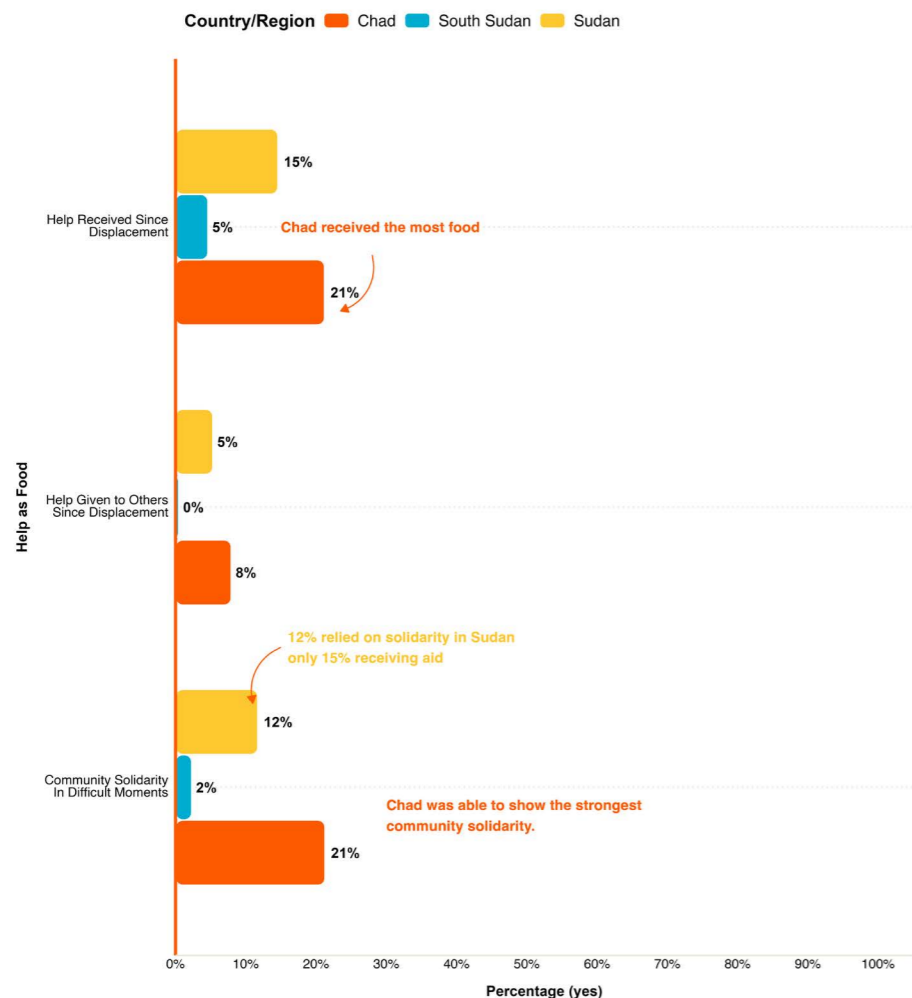
## Solidarity

Over the past three years, solidarity has been a critical lifeline, and a source of purpose, dignity and pride. Rooted in the Sudanese *Nafeer*, community-led groups, including [Emergency Response Rooms](#), [mutual aid networks](#) and refugee-led organisations have been at the forefront of the response, despite operating with minimal resources.

In fact, nearly one in three people in Sudan and Chad who received aid also managed to support others, most often by sharing food.



1 in 3 recipients of aid in Chad and Sudan are still helping others



Where aid from international organisations, local responders and community groups is widely available, those who are in need of aid do not spend their limited resources. In South Sudan 81% of respondents had received help but only 5% of those who did manage to help someone else, as opposed to 30% in Chad and Sudan where 58% and 62% received help.

Displaced communities are relying on local responders as their key source of aid. Most respondents – 95% – told us they benefitted from some form of communal support. This most often comes in the form of shared food (35%), other supplies (34%), and psychological and emotional support (14%).

Led by volunteers – including medical professionals who gave up salaried positions to run free clinics in border towns like Adré – these local efforts have provided shelter, healthcare, and food to newly arrived refugees. Host communities have also stepped up, sharing farmland and supplies. In Egypt, civil society groups have been at the forefront of the humanitarian scale-up, ensuring essential support for refugees in the absence of a larger international response.

Even resolute solidarity, however, is under growing pressure three years into the conflict. Resources have run thin in some contexts, while in others, refugee-led organisations and support structures face increasing scrutiny and restrictions. Meanwhile, needs to continue to rise.



### Immediate needs and an uncertain future

The war crosses into its fourth year, plunging families into ever greater uncertainty. Many are longing for an end to the violence, or at least safety and opportunity in their areas of origin – enough to finally return.

In May 2024, an assessment led by the [Mixed Migration Centre](#) found that 90% of Sudanese would return if the conflict ended. This required assurance of safety is reinforced by respondents in Chad, Sudan and South Sudan. When asked about their hopes for the coming year, the most common response, at 36%, was "to stay safe", followed by reuniting with family at 21%, and securing an income at 19%.

Only 12% of respondents have hope of returning home next year. In Libya, only 14% of respondents have a concrete plan to return to Sudan over the coming year.

Hope that the conflict will end - and with it, the prospect of safety, family reunification, and economic recovery - is fading.

## A message to the world

After three years, we asked people what message they wanted to share with the world. The answers were simple: food, water, cash, medical care and education.

This points to a crisis of survival systems, a crisis no longer solely defined by dramatic evolutions, but also by the erosion of resilience despite communal solidarity.

Ordinary people have done the extraordinary, sharing food and shelter when they almost nothing to share. That space is now closing, and many are reaching a breaking point.

These voices are a clear call for urgent international action. This means scaling up support to match the scale of the crisis, directing it to the most under-served and high-pressure areas, and routing more of it to frontline local responders.

It also means investing not only in emergency aid, but in the ability of communities to cope and recover, particularly where host communities who have supported the displaced for years are now under extreme strain.

Alongside this, sustained diplomatic efforts are needed to protect civilians, ensure humanitarian access, and create conditions that enable people to stabilise their lives.

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“We want the world to understand our suffering. We have all experienced loss and need support to rebuild our lives.”

- Refugee woman in Chad



Photo: A member of a women's agricultural association sits with fellow farmers to discuss the upcoming season, following support received through a winter farming loan programme. Elias Abu Ata/NRC

## REFUGEES AND RETURNEES

Many people who have fled Sudan are classified as returnees, meaning they are former refugees going back to their country of origin or, in the case of Chad, people who had chosen to live in Sudan because services and economic prospects were better there.

Many of the people who crossed the border into South Sudan were classified as returnees. Their individual stories may differ, but many had been out the country for many years, some are married to Sudanese nationals or were born and educated in Sudan.

While there are legal or operational reasons to differentiate between returnees and refugees, their humanitarian needs and the pressures on aid agencies to respond to them are largely similar.

## METHODOLOGY

The report relies on a targeted survey of 1,293 households across Sudan (472 responses), Chad (644) and South Sudan (177). The analysis used a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative responses were cleaned, harmonised, and categorised to lead the narrative, while quantitative data provides supporting evidence for the voices and messages from Sudan.

Data for Egypt comes from a separate targeted, urban-focused needs assessment that included 694 households, 464 of which were Sudanese. The assessment was conducted by our local partners.

**NRC**

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Photo: A man picks up his food aid ration at the Umdulu Camp reception area. The supplies include white beans, sorghum and salt. This area has been hosting displaced people mostly fleeing from Kadugli since the start of the military escalation in Kadugli at the end of 2025. Karl Schembri/NRC