

**“THEY WERE IN A
TRAGIC SITUATION, SO
WE STOOD BY THEIR SIDE”**

Interviews with
Host Communities in
Eastern Sudan

February 2021



TABLE OF CONTENTS

About this research brief	2
Key findings	3
Timeline	4
Background of the crisis in Tigray	5
Detailed findings from host community interviews	6
Recommendations	11
About Sayara International	12

GLOSSARY & ACRONYMS

COVID-19	Coronavirus disease caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus
IDI	In-depth interview
IDP	Internally displaced person
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

About this research brief

Sayara International is a global development research company with headquarters in Washington, D.C. and a local office in Khartoum, Sudan. Sayara considers investing in local staff, experts, and communities – as well as developing a deep understanding of local conditions – to be an integral component of our work. When the crisis erupted in Ethiopia’s Tigray State in November 2020, Sayara deployed its research network to reach out to refugees and document their experiences. These interviews formed the basis for our first report on this crisis: “Interviews with Tigray refugees in Eastern Sudan.” In December 2020 and January 2021, Sayara’s research team based in Gedaref and Kassala States in Eastern Sudan (on the border with Ethiopia) conducted In-Depth Interviews (IDI) with host community members living in Um Rakuba and Hamdayet. This report highlights findings from those interviews to better understand the situation of host communities and the impact of refugees on the community. Sayara believes that this type of self-funded research is a critical part of our responsibility as members of the international development community, and as global citizens in the countries and communities where we work.

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank all those who gave their time to speak to us, including Sudanese citizens from the hosting communities and Ethiopian refugees. There are considerable demands on all of these people’s time, and we truly appreciate their willingness to be frank and open about their concerns and aspirations.

Find the research brief that precedes this one, entitled “Interviews with Tigray refugees in Eastern Sudan” on the Sayara International website:

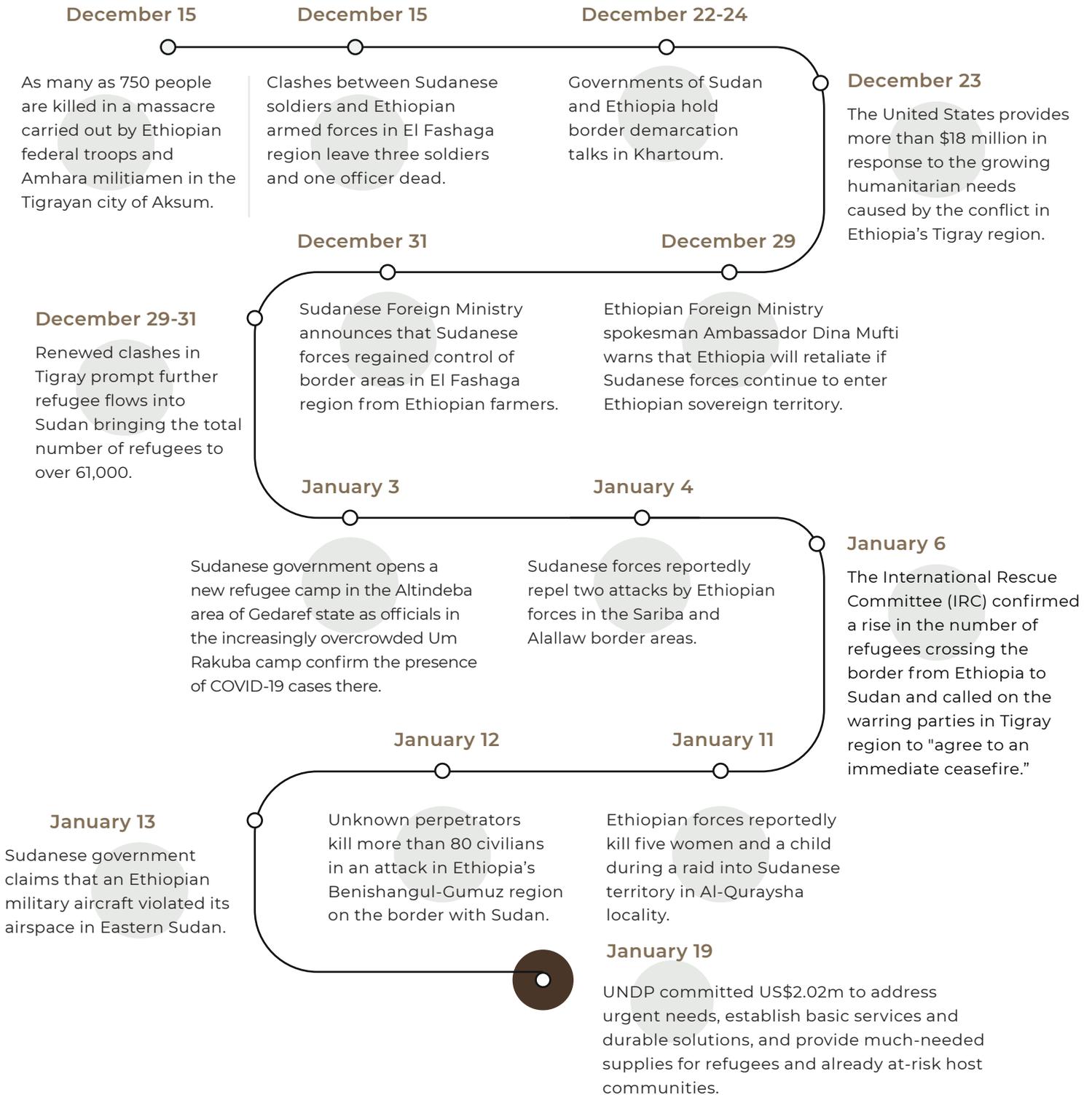
<https://sayarainternational.com/rapid-research-on-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-ethiopia/>.

KEY FINDINGS

- The humanitarian crisis in Tigray state, Ethiopia and Eastern Sudan is ongoing. Refugees continue to flee to Eastern Sudan due to conflict and security risks in Tigray.
- Generally, refugees arrive in Eastern Sudan in poor health and with few belongings.
- The influx of refugees into Sudanese host communities is placing significant pressure on local resources and infrastructure.
- Despite the negative economic effects on their livelihoods, host communities welcome and support refugees.
- Host communities feel neglected by the Sudanese government and do not receive any noticeable support from aid organizations or authorities to assist them in hosting refugees.
- Host communities fear the appearance and spread of diseases, including COVID-19, in their villages due to the arrival of large numbers of refugees.
- The influx of refugees into local communities is increasing food insecurity amongst host communities.
- When it comes to accessing basic services, host community members and refugees outside official camps largely face the same problems.
- Host communities suffer from a lack of basic services, including clean water, medical supplies, and electricity.
- The conditions for refugees staying in official camps are perceived to be better than in host communities.



TIMELINE



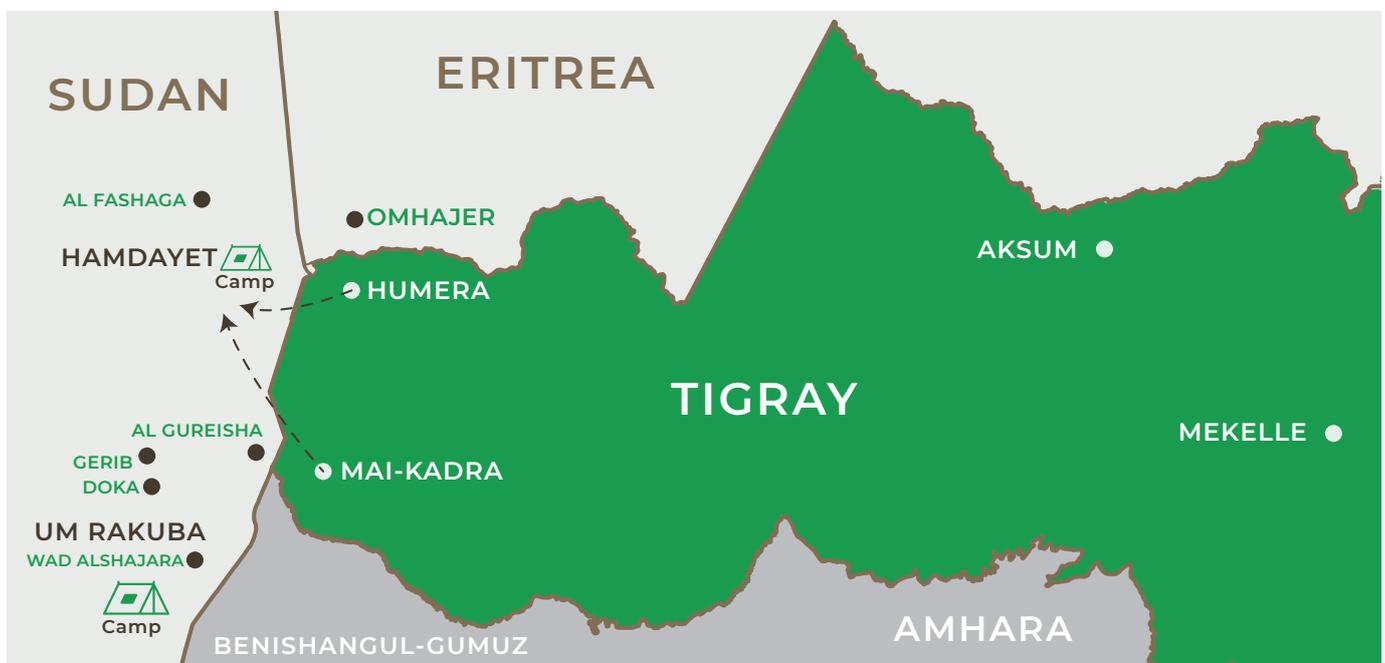
BACKGROUND OF THE CRISIS IN TIGRAY

Since the outbreak of conflict between the federal government of Ethiopia and the government of Tigray state in early November 2020, smaller-scale clashes have continued in the region, causing further displacement and an ongoing refugee crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), an estimated 60,000 refugees have now crossed the border between Ethiopia and Sudan, where they either reside with host communities in their homes or in official refugee camps.

Ongoing atrocities and massacres in Tigray are generating a steady stream of refugees into Sudan. In particular, the massacre of up to 750 people in the city of Aksum on 15 December,¹ as well as the ethnically-driven killing of 80 civilians in the Ethiopian border region of Benishangul-Gumuz on 12 January,² testify to the ongoing dangers facing civilians in western Ethiopia. The mass displacement has left humanitarian workers struggling to build up sufficient infrastructure to accommodate refugee flows.

Today, the security situation in Tigray remains unstable and unpredictable. Fighting continues to be reported throughout the region. The situation is particularly volatile in rural areas, where large numbers of people are believed to have fled. The reported presence of international actors in the region has also increased instability, while similarly diminishing the chances of a swift resolution to the conflict.³

In Sudan, the large influx of refugees is straining limited resources in host communities. UN agencies are currently providing lifesaving support, including treatment for malnourished children, critical vaccines, emergency medicines, and sanitation supplies. Aid agencies are also offering valuable humanitarian assistance. However, rising bilateral tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia over disputed border territories in the Al Fashaga region risk derailing attempts by humanitarian actors to provide aid. Military confrontations between Sudanese and Ethiopians on the border,⁴ which are reported to have claimed the lives of military personnel and civilians,⁵ are contributing additional risks for refugees who are crossing the border and residing in villages or camps near the disputed region.



1. Plaut, Martin. "Massacre at Tigray's Mariam of Zion Cathedral in Aksum." Eritrea Hub, 11 Jan. 2021, <https://eritreahub.org/massacre-at-tigrays-mariam-of-zion-cathedral-in-aksum>.

2. "Over 80 killed in attack in Ethiopian border region with Sudan - state rights commission." Reuters, 13 Jan. 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-violence/over-80-killed-in-attack-in-ethiopian-border-region-with-sudan-state-rights-commission-idUKKBN29123Z>

3. "US Says Eritrean Forces Should Leave Tigray Immediately." Voice of America, 27 Jan. 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/africa/us-says-eritrean-forces-should-leave-tigray-immediately>.

4. "Sudan says officers ambushed by Ethiopian 'forces' during patrol." Aljazeera, 16 Dec. 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/16/sudan-says-officers-ambushed-by-ethiopian-forces-during-patrol>.

5. "Five women, child killed by Ethiopian force as border tensions escalate." Sudan Tribune, 12 Jan. 2021, <https://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article70326>.

OVERVIEW OF EASTERN SUDAN'S HOST COMMUNITIES

Sayara's research team conducted ten interviews with host community members living in rural villages close to Um Rakuba refugee camp and the refugee reception center on the Ethiopian border at Hamdayet.

Interviewees indicated that a variety of ethnicities are present in the host communities on the border, including those from the Ja'alin, Hausa, and Beni Amer ethnic groups. The ethnic diversity of Eastern Sudan is a result of historical waves of migration by ethnic groups from both Sudan and neighboring states. Nilotic groups such as the

Ja'alin began to settle during the development of the area under the Turco-Egyptian regime, going on to play an important role as traders and agriculturalists. Others, such as the Hausa, arrived from West Africa as pilgrims on route to Arabia and settled in the late 19th century, while the Beni Amer have been historically present in the region.

Refugee flows from Eritrea in the 20th century also greatly increased the number of Beni Amer and Tigrayans in Gedaref and Kassala states, with many working as day laborers.

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH HOST COMMUNITIES



HEALTH, ECONOMIC CHALLENGES ARE MAIN IMPACTS ON HOST COMMUNITIES

Interviewees cited the health impact on local communities as the primary effect of the refugee influx. Increased demand for medicines and the already-meagre availability of medical treatment has raised concerns over potential health impacts on host communities. There is also a strong fear that COVID-19 may spread as the refugees integrate into communities. Increased overcrowding in local markets, coupled with the general lack of adherence amongst refugees to social distancing measures and the wearing of face masks, has raised concerns of potential COVID-19 outbreaks in host communities. One interviewee, a 39-year-old male farmer from Al Gureisha, described the appearance of new diseases in his village: ***“An unusual type of malaria started to appear in our area. We don't know if they brought it with them or if it has developed or mutated.”*** Host communities also voiced concerns over a potential spread in diseases such as tuberculosis, hepatitis, and HIV, especially during the cooler winter months. Respondents highlighted concerns over the impact on the provision of medicines.

Economically, the arrival of refugees has increased the demand for goods and services, causing a rise in the prices of goods which has affected poorer families, in particular. Host communities have taken the double hit of fewer job opportunities combined with a fall in wages for manual labor compared to before the crisis. While some local market traders have been able to make more money due to increased activity, the economic impact of refugee arrivals on host communities has been predominantly negative. The interviewees also mentioned the negative impact on availability of food supplies as well as increased strain on local infrastructure.

“Citizens used to make 800 to 1,000 Sudanese pounds per day [in wages] to feed their family. The refugees came and turned things upside down; they work for 500. The farmers or businessmen [now] take the cheaper manpower. The other things are the environmental and health risks. All of this was a shock to us and became a reality. We did not think there would be 30 to 40 thousand, and the numbers are increasing.”

55-YEAR-OLD MALE FARMER FROM WAD ALSHAJARA



The majority of host community members Sayara spoke with were hosting refugees in their homes and giving them food. Others were only able to provide moral support. Those hosting refugees often designated specific parts of their home for the refugees. Interviewees regularly cited the economic effects that hosting refugees was having on their family and community.

“We are affected economically. Instead of spending my income on myself and my family, I couldn’t do that from a humanitarian perspective. I couldn’t see them hungry.”

42-YEAR-OLD MALE FARMER

Despite these difficulties, interviewees confirmed that there had been no conflicts between host communities and refugees to date. Most doubted that any conflicts would arise in the future, although some were worried that frequency of petty crimes may increase, especially if the refugees’ economic situation does not improve. ***“The conflicts could be among the refugees, but not with the host community,”*** said a 38-year-old male farmer from Gerib. Some interviewees also highlighted concerns that limited land for agricultural work may cause competition between the host communities and refugees.

SYMPATHY AND GOODWILL DOMINATE HOSTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF REFUGEES

Host communities showed strong levels of sympathy for the refugees and a desire to assist them, particularly as the Sudanese government was seen to be doing little to help. Sayara’s earlier report “Interviews with Tigray refugees in Eastern Sudan” also reflected the help and support refugees received from host communities once they reached Sudan. Yet, while some people in host communities reportedly welcomed the refugees, others pointed out that the influx has disrupted labor flows, with refugees willing to provide cheaper labor than agricultural workers from host communities during the current cultivation season.

Although sympathy and goodwill towards the refugees predominate amongst host communities, interviewees also hoped that the situation would be temporary, particularly as they fear communicable diseases that the refugees may bring and their impact on local health infrastructure.

“We are afraid of the many diseases they have...There is fear related to potential health issues. The health care [here] is weak. There are hospitals, but the trained medical staff is weak, the medications are weak too. We ask God for protection.”

36-year-old teacher and farmer

HISTORICAL LINKS CONNECT HOST COMMUNITIES AND REFUGEES

Villages in Eastern Sudan and Western Tigray have long-standing cross-border trade and social ties. Prior to the conflict, Ethiopian laborers regularly crossed the border to work in Sudanese farms, while tradespeople crossed to buy and sell goods in local markets. These long-standing economic relations led to strong social ties between the communities, with interviewees noting instances of Sudanese men marrying Ethiopian women. According to interviewees, cross-border relations occurred despite the security risks of Ethiopian militias operating in the border regions.

Strong social and economic links have seemingly played a part in the extensive support provided by Sudanese host communities to the refugees. One host community member in Al Seraf village, who had family ties in Ethiopia, said that ***“some people know each other from long back. People in Humera and Hamdayet have been in contact through trade, so you can’t deny a person that you know from staying with you.”*** Kinship ties, as well as empathy for the plight of the refugees, have meant that Sudanese communities have welcomed the refugees into their villages and regularly hosted them in their own homes.

HOSTS CONFIRM DESPERATE REFUGEE JOURNEYS

“They were in a tragic situation, so we stood by their side because they are humans.”

36-YEAR-OLD TEACHER AND FARMER

Interviewees reiterated the challenging conditions refugees encountered on their journey from Ethiopia. Many were reported to have suffered from exhaustion and were in a poor state of health, bringing with them few belongings or none at all. ***“They were in a bad situation. They were walking on foot and had nothing,”*** said

one 42-year-old male higher studies researcher and farmer from Gerib village. Conditions were especially challenging for pregnant women and children, who suffered from the lack of food and water available on their journey. Sayara’s earlier report, based on interviews with refugees, shared experiences of these journeys in more detail. The refugees reported that they had walked long distances to reach the camps in Sudan, trying to stay undetected by Fano militia and bandits, and navigating a dangerous river crossing and patrolled checkpoints on their way.

MINIMAL SUPPORT FORTHCOMING FOR HOST COMMUNITIES

“There is no support, nothing from the government.”

42-YEAR-OLD MALE GENERAL LABORER

Host community interviewees were, for the most part, critical of the Sudanese government and emphasized the lack of assistance provided to villages hosting refugees. They denounced government failures to offer any additional services to improve the capacity of host communities, with one interviewee claiming that the government had even removed subsidies and certain services since the arrival of refugees.

In some communities, assistance is limited to support from the government-run Zakat fund for the poorest people. However, most people in the long-neglected eastern regions receive no support from authorities in Khartoum.

“The government collects taxes and we provide services to them, but they don’t provide us with anything. We pay and don’t get anything in return, this can be in agricultural crops, or road fees.”

36-YEAR-OLD FARMER

Many of the interviewees had little faith in the government and did not believe it would provide any assistance to them beyond basic security.

Interviewees equally underlined the limited support from aid organizations operating in the region. The respondents emphasized that organizations are currently focusing their resources on the refugees in official camps, providing little for either residents or refugees in host communities.

While one interviewee noted that Doctors Without Borders is providing free medical assistance to both refugees and host communities in Hamdayet, another in Hay Al Umda village commented that aid organizations have not yet decided how best to assist his community.

“The organizations are still studying how to support us. There is no tangible evidence that they are supporting us.”

36-YEAR-OLD FARMER AND PART-TIME TEACHER

REFUGEE INFLUX STRAINS INSUFFICIENT BASIC SERVICES IN HOST COMMUNITIES



“We don’t have electricity, or access to clean water. The health situation is terrible. We do not have basic sanitation and hygiene services in this rural area.”

36-YEAR-OLD TEACHER AND FARMER

Interviewees reported that host community residents experience difficulties in accessing basic services including clean water and electricity. The rural location of their villages has added to the challenges in receiving essential government services, with many consuming unsafe drinking water and relying on generators for electricity. Lack of basic sanitation services is also seen as a contributing factor to the transmission of infectious diseases within host communities.

According to interviewees, the influx of refugees has placed additional burdens on the limited services available.

“There are now more difficulties in obtaining clean water. There is too much demand and not enough for everybody.”

41-YEAR-OLD MALE TEACHER



Respondents similarly described difficulties in acquiring enough food on a daily basis. They explained that there is a lack of variety in the food they produce and eat, partially because some communities still rely on traditional agricultural methods which offer only limited yields.

“You can’t find anybody in the whole village who has food, apart from sorghum prepared in different ways. Many basic foods, including milk and fruits, are only sporadically available. ”

48-YEAR-OLD FARMER

Despite these challenges, many of the interviewees indicated that they provide food to refugees in their community, especially to those who are unable to earn money and buy their own food. The increased demand for limited local produce is perceived to be increasing levels of food insecurity amongst host communities.



Although respondents indicated that basic schools are present in their local communities, some also highlighted that the current economic conditions faced by many families prevent them from sending their children to school. Interviewees noted the high levels of school drop-outs in the region, with children who leave school often going on to agricultural work.

A lack of secondary level education in some communities, alongside excess demand for school places at primary level, also limits the educational opportunities for children in host communities.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, schools all over Sudan have been closed since mid-March 2020. It is unclear whether refugees will be able to enroll their children in local schools. Although interviewees acknowledged that they would allow refugees to enroll in their schools if the choice was in the hands of the host community, they noted that the decision mainly depends on the Sudanese government.

“We can’t say ‘Yes, it’s possible’ or ‘No, it’s not possible,’ because this depends on the government. We, as a community, will not say ‘No’ to them, but will the government agree to integrate the refugees with us in the schools?”

36-YEAR-OLD TEACHER

Interviewees also pointed out the potential challenges for refugee children attending Sudanese schools which use Arabic as the language of teaching. Some also mentioned that their local schools would not have the infrastructural capacity to accommodate a large influx of new students.

“They left their schools, their schools are open there. They study English and Amharic, but here this is Arabic, so they can’t understand anything.”

42-YEAR-OLD GENERAL LABORER

HOST COMMUNITIES CONCERNED OVER BETTER SERVICES IN REFUGEE CAMPS

Some interviewees highlighted that the situation for refugees is actually better than for host communities at times, as refugees are provided some services for free while local members of the community are required to pay for them.

“There is no difference, we are all human beings. Sometimes, the refugee can be in a better situation as they don’t buy anything. For example, I am a family man, I have to buy sorghum but the refugee doesn’t, it’s provided to them as a service. When refugees work with me, I am obliged to provide them with food, but when Sudanese people work with me, they have to provide it by themselves.”

42-YEAR-OLD FARMER

Host communities revealed that refugees staying in camps also have better access to essential services, such as water and food, with the availability of electricity often limited to refugee reception centers, clinics, and organization offices. The provision of health care services and medication is delivered to the refugees by organizations, while members of host communities do not receive any type of assistance or aid and tend to struggle to obtain these essential services.

“The organizations are taking care of the health services, they provide the medical stuff, and the medications. We don’t have access to this. It’s impossible for one of us to get into the camp to be treated, that is really difficult, and nobody will receive you. These services are provided for free by the organizations, we pay for it.”

42-YEAR-OLD TEACHER AND FARMER



Wad Alshajara village, Sudan

RECOMMENDATIONS

IMMEDIATE

- Cessation of conflict and restoration of humanitarian access to Tigray in Ethiopia is critical. Regional bodies such as the African Union, international diplomatic missions, and other influential stakeholders must continue to apply pressure on the Ethiopian government to reach a resolution that brings a stop to the fighting and violations against civilians.
- The Sudanese government and aid agencies should increase support to communities hosting refugees outside official camps.
- The Sudanese government and aid agencies should provide greater food assistance to host communities who have been affected by shortages due to increased demand from refugee arrivals.

URGENT

- The UN, Sudanese authorities, and aid organizations must ensure the safe transfer of refugees from overcrowded refugee camps and centers to official camps to reduce the transmission of COVID-19.
- Sudanese and Ethiopian military forces should halt military activity on the border and de-escalate tensions to guarantee the security of both refugees transiting through disputed border areas and local communities residing on or near the border.

AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

- The Sudanese government must increase investment in its eastern border areas and provide greater economic opportunities to local populations.
- The Sudanese government should improve local infrastructure for host communities in Eastern Sudan to cope with local demand as well as the increased demand from refugee arrivals.
- Authorities should implement mechanisms to monitor relations between host communities and refugees to provide early warning and mitigation of any potential conflicts.
- The Sudanese government should develop a consultative process that includes host community leaders to determine a policy on refugee access to host community schools.

About Sayara International

Sayara International is a global development firm that specializes in the design and implementation of rigorous research, social and behavior change communication, approaches to countering disinformation, and governance strategies in fragile, conflict-affected, and transitioning societies.

Founded in 2003, Sayara operates in 30 countries across Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Sayara supports the programming of our clients and partners with complex and sustainable research, evaluation, data-driven policy change, crisis management, and humanitarian response in the most challenging environments, working with and for the most vulnerable communities worldwide. Sayara's origins in conflict and the company's evolution across fragile contexts have equipped us with a set of values, core operating principles, systems, and competencies unique in the global development industry.

Using in-depth local knowledge and innovative designs, Sayara conducts research that allows our partners to manage their resources for maximum impact in the field. We provide our clients with the research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) services to inform more effective and relevant decision-making, intervention design, and implementation.

Sayara's office in Sudan comprises 15 staff and a network of experts and field researchers in all of Sudan's states. Sayara Sudan's clients include DT Global, Embassy of France in Sudan, Expertise France, GIZ, IOM, ITAD, Italian Cooperation, RVO, U.S. State Department, and USAID.

Our teams of professionals are based in field offices in Beirut, Kabul, Khartoum, Kyiv, Medellin, and Nairobi, with support from our offices in London, Warsaw, and Paris, and our headquarters in Washington, D.C.

✈ For more information about Sayara's work globally and in Sudan, visit www.sayarainternational.com.

✉ For questions about our Sudan operations, please contact Mr. Bakry Osman (Director – Sudan) via bakry@sayarainternational.com.

Prepared by:
Sayara International

Contributors:
Shams Kamal
Sara Karrar
Zena Nasser
Craig Greathead
Bakry Osman
Laura A. Young

Editing by Holly Ashmore
Design by Carolina Moreno
Photography by
Mark Warne-Smith
Abdelmohsin Abdalla
Eshag Essa