



SUDAN AND COVID-19: A VULNERABLE ECONOMY IN CRISIS

Domestic consequences and international responses for Sudan during the coronavirus outbreak.

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INTRODUCTION

After undergoing a markedly peaceful process of democratic change last year with the ousting of former President Omar al-Bashir, and the implementation of a transitional government, Sudan has been in the process of reform. The new administration, headed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok had set out an ambitious transitional agenda, including institutional reform, the implementation of greater civilian rule and the beginnings of a justice process that both sought a resolution with dissident rebel groups, as well as the prosecution of former regime members including Bashir himself. However, with the global COVID-19 pandemic, there is a new wave of uncertainty affecting these processes. From protests, to the economic shocks, to food and medicinal scarcity; there are no simple solutions for Sudan in the weeks ahead.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Sudan's government has, so far, been relatively successful at responding and communicating the risks of COVID-19 to citizens.
- > There are, however, signs of discontent from some pockets of society.
- > Potential issues may be exacerbated by a growing risk to the economy, and the impact of food and medicinal shortages on consumer prices and availability.
- > International aid has been primarily focused on the humanitarian sector, unlike other neighboring countries, which may be unhelpful for economic stabilization.
- > Despite this, on the local level there are several initiatives taking place in response to the pandemic that could be better supported.

SUDAN'S COVID-19 RESPONSE: BUILDING A CONSENSUS

Sudan, like much of the world has been affected by the outbreak of COVID-19. As of 27 April 2020, SUNA,¹ the State-news agency, reported 275 confirmed cases in the population, including 22 fatalities. Most of these cases have been in Khartoum state², where the capital is located.

In recognition of the severity of the global coronavirus outbreak, the Sudanese transitional government issued a series of precautionary measures³ to slow the spread of the virus, deciding to implement a lockdown on the capital Khartoum relatively early on 13 April 2020 when there were still only 29 confirmed cases of the virus in the country. This announcement was coupled by further measures. For example, Hamdok issued an Emergency Order⁴ enforcing several restrictions related to the lockdown, notably including legal protections for doctors and medical staff. Further measures include those taken by the Council of Ministers⁵ on 21 April to bolster information awareness-raising efforts regarding the virus, as well as greater steps to improve conditions for medical workers such as access to fuel. The Sudan Civil Aviation Authority⁶ also issued a decision on 20 April to extend closures of domestic and international airports until 20 May, in line with the lockdown measures.

The UN's own Country Preparedness and Response Plan⁷ (CPRP), recognizes the critical need to disseminate reliable and accurate information about COVID-19 for citizens. The CPRP, prepared jointly by the Humanitarian Country Team and UN Country Team based in Sudan, underscores the urgency of clear communication as the second pillar of its response (*Risk Communication and Community Engagement*). For this pillar, \$4,310,000 aid has been allocated, representing nearly 10% of the total aid budget for Sudan from UN agencies including contributions by UNDP, UNHCR,

UNICEF and WHO. According to the Sudan Situation Report of 17 April 2020⁸ prepared by OCHA, there have been several collaborative measures between UN-agencies and the Sudanese government through the Ministry of Health. These include information sent as text messages to 13.5 million mobile phone users, and the allocation of prime-time slots of government-owned and private networks for information broadcasting, with an estimated reach of 60% of the population. There have also been targeted initiatives such as the joint actions of the Ministry of Health and UNFPA to adapt the communication materials for breast-feeding and pregnant women.

Whilst there is still acknowledgement by authorities that more could be done to reach the entire population, these measures have had some success. This has been corroborated through interviews with Sudanese citizens who have remarked that the government is doing a 'satisfactory' job in informing and communicating the risks of COVID-19 and the measures necessary to tackle it. This has been crucial in the general acceptance of the population, for now, in the necessity of lockdown measures to contain the virus spread.

But acceptance and satisfaction in the government is not universal. Our interviewees suggested that there were some small and localized protests in the early stages of the outbreak, but they also suggested that these were not representative of the population. An example followed the decision⁹ by the Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments on 15 April suspending Friday prayers in mosques and churches. The former governor of Khartoum, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Abdoun Hamad, defied this order to cancel Friday prayers, and was consequently instructed to leave his post by Hamdok¹⁰. Gen. Hamad since then responded by issuing a statement¹¹ saying he intended to remain in his office. This dispute reveals the still-present rift between the current government, and elements of the previous regime. There have been genuine fears by Sudanese civilian officials that elements of the

¹ <https://suna-sd.net/en/single?id=658438>

² <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>

³ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/lockdown-in-sudan-capital-from-saturday-after-third-coronavirus-death-and-29-infected>

⁴ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-pm-hamdok-issues-first-emergency-order-for-2020>

⁵ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-cabinet-takes-stronger-coronavirus-measures>

⁶ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>

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<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/200>

[317_Sudan%20COVID-19%20Preparedness%20and%20Response%20Plan.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Sudan%20-%2017%20Apr%202020_1.pdf)

⁸ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Situation%20Report%20-%20Sudan%20-%2017%20Apr%202020_1.pdf

⁹ <https://www.darfur24.com/en/2020/04/15/sudan-suspends-friday-prayers-in-khartoums-mosques-for-three-consecutive-weeks-to-curb-spread-of-coronavirus/>

¹⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/world/coronavirus-news-updates.html>

¹¹ <http://www.alsudaninews.com/?p=65096>

army would use the pretense and uncertainty of the coronavirus to re-seize power, a fear shared by our interviewees.

However, as the lockdown has intensified, there have been more concrete examples. There were reports¹² of violent demonstrations by a group of miners in El Mahas district in Delgo in Northern State following the decision to close the market and restrict the movement of people, which led to police using live ammunition to disperse the crowds. Injuries were reported, but no fatalities so far.

ECONOMIC SHOCKS; FOOD & MEDICINAL SHORTFALLS

Unsurprisingly, given the nature of a global lockdown, the issue of economic forecasts is bleak, particularly for countries such as Sudan with acutely pre-existing issues. Economic challenges present themselves on all levels across society.

On the macro-level, Sudan was already dealing with economic recession between 2018 and 2019. However, in a newly released World Economic Outlook¹³ report by the IMF, considering the impact of COVID-19 after measuring this pre-existing contraction, Sudan's economy is now expected to contract by a further 7.2%.

On the micro-level, the economic shocks have had severe implications for ordinary Sudanese citizens. There is a critical issue of food and medicinal availability. Sudan¹⁴ needs to import 2.2 million metric tons of wheat, representing about 75% of the country's required amount. This percentage of imports is similar for other basic crops such as maize and rice. And yet exporting countries, such as Russia, from which Sudan imports most of its wheat, have implemented restrictions on the amount of its exports due to the virus.

¹² <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/violent-demonstration-against-coronavirus-measures-in-sudan-s-northern-state>

¹³ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>

¹⁴ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>

¹⁵ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/card/1rmMglMTf6/>

¹⁶ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>

¹⁷ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/200317_Sudan%20COVID-19%20Preparedness%20and%20Response%20Plan.pdf

Regarding medicines, the amount of imported medicine in 2019 was already 20% less than in 2017, and due to the crisis, new measures have created conditions for major delays to supply. These include customs clearance procedures, as well as the 14-day quarantine period for any shipments passing through the Suez Canal, where most imports to Sudan pass. The effect on Sudanese consumers is markedly increased prices on essential goods, and in some places seeing food sold for double its normal price¹⁵, which, coupled with employment insecurity due to lockdown measures, has been very disruptive.

The Sudanese government has adopted several measures to counter these effects. The Ministry of Finance signed an agreement with WFP Sudan to import 200,000 tons of wheat¹⁶. However, this import will eventually be paid for in Sudanese pounds from the government's reserves. There has also been coordination with UN-agencies in order to secure humanitarian funding. Over \$47 million has been mobilized¹⁷ to support the health sector's capacity to tackle coronavirus, including awareness-raising initiatives and capacity building at the local and national levels. The EU too has included support for Sudan in its 'Team Europe'¹⁸ assistance package for partner countries fighting COVID-19. Sudan is referenced¹⁹ in this regard through €80 million, of which includes a €10 million humanitarian project to provide access to clean water and hygiene, while assisting awareness-raising measure²⁰. Notably, 'Team Europe' is not new money, rather a re-shifting of already allocated money to new areas considering COVID-19. As such, another €30 million humanitarian assistance, announced for Sudan on 1 March 2020²¹ for food and nutritional care, is likely composite of this funding package.

However, there are significant considerations here. First, financing needs qualification and accountability that is effectively targeted towards achieving a

¹⁸ https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/lesotho/77326/coronavirus-european-union-launches-%E2%80%9Cteam-europe%E2%80%9D-package-support-partner-countries-more-%E2%82%AC20_en

¹⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/eu-institutions-response-to-covid.pdf>

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_606

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_359

specific objective, in order to be successful. There have been considerable issues with corruption and transparency of funding instruments in the past. Through interviews with BIC, many Sudanese citizens shared this fear of corrupted and wasted money. Second, the bulk of international financial assistance to Sudan has been framed in terms of humanitarian aid, which is unsurprising due to the preexisting issues in the country. From the EU, for example, we see that the EU normally considers “support to basic service delivery”²² as the means by which its funding improves the socio-economic situation of Sudan. This is not the same as sending millions of euros to support and prevent the banking sector from collapsing or ensuring liquidity in the treasury of a country. Compare this attitude to the sheer amount of money mobilized to stabilize and support the economies of the EU’s immediate neighbors²³. For Morocco, the EU has mobilized €150 million, with discussions in place for up to €300 million. For Tunisia, this figure is €250 million, while for Egypt €200 million.

Another glaring issue is that Sudan remains on the US’s state-sponsors of terrorism list²⁴, which is a huge deterrent to external investment and blocks much of the joint World Bank-IMF Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative that is supposed to give debt relief and write-off other State arrears. This has prevented much of the additional assistance that could have been mobilized to assist the country through COVID-19.

What is needed is an approach to funding that is varied enough to have a more sustainable vision of the country’s needs, such as initiatives to help support local businesses for instance, while being targeted and accountable. The issue of how to qualify which firm receives support and under which conditions will be key. T Accountability could be better achieved through a utilization of a transparency mechanism could identify whether firms are financially accountable for example, such as blacklisting those with assets linked to tax-havens as has been attempted recently by the Danish government. And in order to make funding more targeted, there could be different ways to ensure that money reaches those who need it is by doing more to connect funding to local initiatives. Some European development finance institutions, such as Germany’s

KfW-GED²⁵, are undertaking such initiatives in Sudan and other African countries, and best practices could be identified here. Additional coordination could be achieved using pre-existing capacity such as the UN’s in-country teams.

There are indeed several local initiatives that have been implemented to assist Sudan through this outbreak²⁶. The Sudanese Football Federation provided residence facilities to the Ministry of Health to be used by doctors and medical staff. Also, 180 women volunteering at the Orphans Care Home in Mygoma in Khartoum decided to remain at the home throughout the duration of the lockdown in order to continue their care. Kassala, in eastern Sudan, launched a food distribution project for 3,000 vulnerable families following a donation by a philanthropist. Several initiatives²⁷ have been implemented by local pharmacists and organizations, such as Builders Without Borders. And there are also locally run schemes to produce and distribute free facemasks.

KEY INSIGHTS & CONCLUSION

Sudan faces several challenges in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and will require tailored assistance from the international community.

› **Generally, Sudan’s government has taken decisive measures to respond to the virus, and these measures for the most part have been accepted by a majority of the population.**

› **However, there have been some dissenting voices, including from elements of the former regime, but voices from the general population may possibly increase with exposure to prolonged economic uncertainty.**

› **Food and medicine availability is, and will continue to be, an acute challenge for the authorities. Shortages are likely to exacerbate economic problems further.**

› **There has been a significant mobilization of international humanitarian aid money, from the UN**

²² https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/eu-sudan_factsheet.pdf

²³ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QA_NDA_20_606

²⁴ <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2020/03/10/Sudan-2019-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff->

Report-and-Statement-by-the-Executive-49254

²⁵ <https://www.deginvest.de/International-financing/DEG/>

²⁶ <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudanese-initiatives-in-support-of-anti-coronavirus-measures>

²⁷ <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/2200521/sudanese-initiative-launched-protect-medics>

and EU, among others. However, this money does not address long-term economic challenges for Sudan.

› There are also a number of effective local initiatives taking place with little outside assistance.

In conclusion, the challenge for the Sudanese authorities will be how to maintain compliance with the necessary lockdown procedures while ensuring that the basic needs of citizens are met. The international community, meanwhile, will need to recognize that Sudan's challenges are deep, pre-existing, and complex. Classic humanitarian aid, that can easily be corrupted, and often goes unseen²⁸, will not be effective. Accumulating added debt for import assistance is not

helpful, for example. Standard measures restricting imports and import times are exacerbating Sudan's problems. There may be cause for suspending, or reducing, the time taken for emergency and essential goods being in lockdown in Suez, this could also be supported by suspending debt accumulation payments as has been seen in the G20's announcement²⁹ of a freeze on bilateral loan repayments for low-income countries until the end of 2020. Finally, if the local level provides some hopeful examples of progress, these should be better identified and supported to flourish. It may be time for international agencies to consider more innovative ways of engaging with populations, rather than directly through the State.

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Towards the Sudanese government:

- > Consider exploring additional measures to increase information reach about the effects of coronavirus. This could be accomplished by expanding the number of partnering local organizations on the ground, as well as social media channels.
- > Refrain from violent responses to protests and communicate clearly that the grievances of the affected populations are being addressed.
- > Support international agencies through implementing a thorough financial accountability mechanism to ensure aid is distributed fairly and is not diverted.
- > Identify, and nominate, key essential items such as basic food and medicinal supplies, that should be fast-tracked through lockdown and other bureaucratic procedures inhibiting fast distribution.

Towards all relevant UN agencies:

- > Ensure aid money is being used as intended and request and support the Sudanese government in implementing a financial accountability system.
- > Consider debt relief, and refrain from excessive debt repayments on emergency goods such as wheat imports.
- > Identify effective initiatives at the local level and support them through coordination and support from in-country teams.
- > In conjunction with the Egyptian government, encourage a more nuanced temporary control procedure in the port of Suez, in order to ensure that essential import goods are not delayed in quarantine.

²⁸

https://www.transparency.org/topic/detail/humanitarian_assistance

²⁹ <https://www.ft.com/content/5f296d54-d29e-4e87-ae7d-95ca6c0598d5>

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