

Art as Peace Building

**Annex 2
Case Studies Sudan**

Disclaimer

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Country Context and Case Studies

Sudan

Country Context and Framing of the Conflict

Sudan has experienced continuous upheaval since the 2019 revolution that ended decades of authoritarian rule. The October 2021 military coup derailed democratic transition, followed by devastating war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) beginning April 2023. Over 10 million people are internally displaced, with 2.5 million refugees in neighbouring countries. The conflict has destroyed cities, spread famine, and created one of the world's largest humanitarian crises. The international community's divided approach – and the shift of global attention to other crises and wars – have marginalised Sudan's tragedy, leaving millions without adequate humanitarian support or international focus.

Sudan's trajectory from revolution to war represents a collapse of democratic hopes amid deepening polarisation. The 2019 revolution mobilised youth, women, and grassroots resistance committees against authoritarian rule, creating space for cultural expression and civic engagement. The 2021 coup reversed these gains, triggering

sustained protests and economic collapse. The 2023 war between military factions has devastated civilian infrastructure, targeting hospitals, schools, and cultural institutions. Arts and culture have shifted from tools of democratic expression during the revolution to instruments of survival, memory, and resistance in exile. Many cultural practitioners now operate across diaspora networks, using creativity to maintain Sudanese identity and global attention when diplomatic efforts fail.

The increasing political and bureaucratic pressure in neighbouring countries, especially Egypt, cannot be overlooked. Recent policy changes have introduced extortionate visa fees, while several bilateral agreements with Sudan have been revoked. This has led to family separation, reduced mobility, and a hostile environment for many Sudanese refugees. While diaspora activity continues, it should not be assumed that these support structures are stable or accessible in the long term.

Mapping of Cultural Ecosystem and Stakeholder Infrastructure

Before the war, Sudan's creative ecosystem had begun to flourish. The 2019 revolution triggered a cultural renaissance: street art, theatre, and music became instruments of collective imagination, driven by youth, women, and independent hubs. The EU-funded "Creative Connections" programme (2019–2022), implemented by the Goethe-Institut with the British Council and Institut Français, established thematic hubs – Moda (fashion), SAMA (music), Shasha (cinema), Hajjeytak (literature), and Turath (heritage) – training over 400 young creators and developing university curricula.

Parallel initiatives such as Savannah Innovation Lab, 249 Startups, and Andariya Magazine built bridges between digital innovation, storytelling, and cultural entrepreneurship. Independent cultural centres such as Omdurman Cultural Centre and Civic Lab embodied democratic, community-led models, while initiatives like Sobajo, Andariya, and 249Startups linked creativity with social enterprise and digital innovation.

Since the outbreak of war in April 2023, Sudan's cultural infrastructure has largely collapsed. Theatres, galleries, archives, and media buildings have been bombed, looted, or repurposed. The Sudan National Museum lost around 80% of its artefacts, marking a devastating blow to cultural heritage.

With the destruction of Khartoum's institutions, artistic work now radiates through diaspora hubs in Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, and Europe. Informal digital networks, such as WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and online archives, substitute for collapsed infrastructures. European cultural institutes remain reference partners but have pivoted to supporting mobility, residencies, and emergency relief rather than in-country programming. Despite displacement, Sudanese cultural actors sustain a connected and adaptive transnational field. In this moment of extreme fragility, arts and culture remain among the few spaces of agency and hope. However, their function is often misunderstood or deprioritised in humanitarian responses. Cultural practices enable trauma healing, social connection, and collective memory when formal governance collapses. As one Sudanese curator noted, "Art is not a luxury – it is a survival language." Investing in culture today is therefore not symbolic but strategic: it preserves identity, sustains creative livelihoods, and keeps Sudan's voice present on the global stage.

Institutional and Ecosystem Links

- **European partnerships:** EU-funded Creative Connections project linking Goethe-Institut, British Council, and Institut Français in comprehensive programming

- **Local-international bridges:** Sobajo's connections with UNHCR, UNICEF, and World Food Program for community support
- **Diaspora platforms:** Sudanese Artists Union in Egypt and international film festivals providing exhibition opportunities
- **Digital infrastructure:** WhatsApp networks and online platforms maintaining connections when formal structures collapse

Peacebuilding and Fragility Discourse

Sudan's trajectory exemplifies the complex relationship between fragility and peacebuilding discourse in contemporary conflict settings. The country's transition from the 2019 revolution through an interim democratic government to the 2021 military coup and subsequent outbreak of war in April 2023 demonstrates how quickly contexts can shift from hope to crisis.

This volatility has fundamentally challenged traditional peacebuilding models. When conflict erupted, many international organisations were forced to temporarily retract their physical presence, leaving local communities and artists to navigate the crisis with limited external support. While international actors are now steadily resuming operations, primarily through regional hubs and cross-border missions, humanitarian responses remain understandably focused on immediate survival, such as food, shelter, and health. However, this "survival-first"

approach often overlooks the essential role that culture, collective memory, and psychosocial cohesion play in sustaining community resilience during and after a crisis.

The fragility discourse in Sudan reveals a critical gap between humanitarian responses focused on basic needs such as food, water, health services and the recognition that cultural preservation and community cohesion remain essential even during active conflict. The challenge for Sudan's recovery is not only ending the war but preventing the next one. Durable peace depends on creating a "*community back-up system*" that can withstand political shocks, economic collapse, or external manipulation. This requires investment in education, local governance, culture, and civic networks as stabilising forces – complementing, not substituting, political negotiations.

As one implementer noted, the international community's tendency to "*forget that there are people who need to celebrate their culture*" and "*save it from disappearing*" highlights how fragility frameworks often overlook the role of arts and culture in maintaining social fabric during crises.

The Sudanese case suggests that effective peacebuilding discourse must acknowledge that cultural interventions serve not merely as post-conflict reconstruction tools, but as vital mechanisms for sustaining community resilience and identity during the most fragile periods, challenging donors to maintain engagement rather than retreat when contexts become most volatile.

Shifts Over Time

- **Revolution period (2019-2021):** Cultural explosion with increased civic space, artistic expression supporting democratic transition, and international programming expansion
- **Post-coup adaptation (2021-2023):** Shift from government partnerships to direct community engagement, maintaining programs despite political restrictions
- **War displacement (2023-present):** Transformation from institutional programming to survival-focused diaspora networks and trauma-informed approaches
- **Digital pivot:** Accelerated move to online platforms and virtual programming as physical spaces become inaccessible
- **Women's leadership emergence:** Increased recognition of women's roles in community healing and cultural preservation through crisis

Arts and Peacebuilding Landscape: Approaches and Mechanisms

Current Landscape and Sub-Sectors

Inside Sudan: some artists remain, trapped by financial hardship or family obligations, working intermittently amid insecurity and scarcity. Others, such as those in El Fasher or mainly Kordofan and Darfur, relocated internally. The African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (ACJPS) published a landmark report in 2024, [“The Tears of Guitars and the Cries of Museums,”](#) documenting

violations against artists from April 2023 to September 2024. The report notes over 55 artists killed, including singer Shaden Hussein (killed in May 2023) and composer Bashir Abdel Majeed, victims of torture and medical neglect.

Outside Sudan: roughly 80% of displaced artists fled to Egypt, while others resettled in the Gulf, East Africa, and Rwanda. Diaspora networks now act as the sector's operational backbone, organising exhibitions, music events, and cultural diplomacy to keep Sudan visible internationally. The *Sudanese Artists Union's Cairo branch* has become a vital coordination point, hosting collective exhibitions, film screenings, and fundraising events for artists in distress. Sudan's creative life survives through individual artists, many displaced inside or outside the country, maintaining visibility via digital platforms and diaspora-led showcases.

Community and Diaspora Initiatives Promoting Inclusion and Tolerance

Sudanese resilience also lies in the deep communal bonds of its diaspora. Families and friends have recreated home abroad – sharing housing, food, and childcare, pooling savings, and co-organising exhibitions, concerts, and religious festivals. These horizontal networks, often informal and self-funded, have become micro-ecosystems of solidarity, enabling artists to survive, collaborate, and keep Sudan's cultural pulse alive in exile. They demonstrate that collective identity, mutual care, and creativity remain Sudan's most enduring sources of peace.

The Sudanese diaspora now drives much of the country's cultural diplomacy. In Cairo, the Sudanese Artists Union has revived cultural programming by hosting monthly exhibitions and music nights that bring together Sudanese, Egyptian, and international audiences. Meanwhile, Sudanese women's groups in Kampala and Addis Ababa run community weaving and storytelling sessions for refugee mothers, linking livelihood with healing and solidarity.

Across the digital sphere, initiatives like the [“Shai be labn”](#) podcast have reclaimed the traditional Sudanese ritual of sunset tea – a time for socialising and storytelling – as a vital safe space for serious dialogue, personal narrative, and communal healing. Similarly, the [Ayin Network](#) remains an essential nonpartisan node, amplifying marginalised voices through reports and films that bridge the gap between fragmented communities. These platforms, alongside numerous independent graffiti projects, use online space to document collective trauma while creating new avenues for resilience. This transition into transnational digital solidarity is underscored by survey findings showing that 62% of Sudanese artists now collaborate online with peers abroad, turning distance into a site of creative resistance. Meanwhile, the [Sudan Art and Design Library \(SADL\)](#) persists as a digital anchor, fostering the artistic literacy and freedom of thought necessary to envision a “New Sudan.”

Most of these initiatives are individually led, yet they consistently attract community interest and participation.

However, lack of sustained funding remains a major obstacle, limiting the ability of these creative movements to maintain continuity and long-term community support.

- **Music** remains the most active subsector: informal concerts and online collaborations continue across Cairo, Addis Ababa, Nairobi, and Europe.
- **Fashion and handicrafts** persist through women-led brands such as *Sobajo*, adapting designs to reflect displacement and resilience.
- **Film and storytelling** have moved to the diaspora, documenting the conflict and preserving collective memory.
- **Heritage and Museum Work:** While physical sites have nearly collapsed, The ALIPH Foundation (2024–2025) has prioritised emergency archaeological protection at Meroe and Gebel Barkal. Meanwhile, the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund (CPF) launched the [“Transformedia” project \(2024–2025\)](#), which digitised the University of Khartoum's archives and created the “7oshna” mobile app for remote community heritage documentation.
- **Memory and Digitalisation:** The [Sudan Memory](#) project remains a critical baseline, having digitised over 88,000 items from the National Film Archive and National Museum before the 2023 escalation.

Modalities and Challenges

Modalities range from traditional skills training and storytelling to digital platforms and international festivals. Major constraints include funding gaps, displacement trauma, language barriers, and the challenge of maintaining networks across fragmented communities. The ecosystem operates through both formal partnerships and informal WhatsApp networks.

Sub-sectors and Mechanisms (illustrative)

- **Identity/voice/storytelling:** Traditional crafts, folklore preservation, and digital storytelling to maintain cultural memory and counter isolation
- **Psychosocial healing:** Women's creative gatherings, coffee sessions, and collective art-making as trauma processing and community building
- **Skills/livelihoods:** Fashion design, music production, and textile arts providing economic opportunities for displaced populations
- **Heritage/continuity:** Archaeological projects and cultural documentation preserving Sudanese history amid destruction
- **Civic space/advocacy:** Political cartoons, films, and exhibitions maintaining international attention on Sudan's crisis
- **Digital/safe spaces:** Online platforms like [Sudan Civic Lab](#) facilitate continued learning and resistance.

- **Diaspora networks:** Cross-cultural collaborations and international festivals showcasing Sudanese creativity globally

Where pre-war cultural hubs once anchored creative life, almost no physical or institutional infrastructure remains. Digital archives, websites, and equipment have been destroyed or lost; many organisations' data vanished with power outages and looting.

- **Functional nodes:** scattered diaspora communities, online presence, WhatsApp-based creative circles. Digital platforms, like [Sudan Art platform](#) Beit Alnissa, [Andariya](#), civic lab, [Sobajo](#)
- **Critical gaps:** no funding mechanisms, lost archives, demolished studios, and absence of national cultural policy

Cross-cutting Insights

- **Digital-first creation:** Artists now use mobile studios, cloud archives, and virtual showcases to produce, teach, and collaborate across borders. Online exhibitions, digital fashion shows, podcasts, and diaspora archives preserve memory and connect global Sudanese communities.
- **Skills mobility:** Artists trained in Creative Connections carrying expertise to Kenya, Uganda, Germany, and Egypt, creating cross-cultural collaborations.

- **Learning through host communities:** Exiled artists gain exposure, build new audiences, and exchange techniques with peers in Egypt, East Africa, and Europe.
- **Cultural diplomacy:** Sudanese films winning international recognition (Peace Film Prize, Amnesty International Special Mention) and maintaining global visibility. Concerts, exhibitions, and film screenings in Cairo, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Paris, and London are reframing Sudan's image beyond victimhood.
- **Rise of activism:** A new generation of youth uses art as a tool of protest, advocacy, and civic education, blending creativity with calls for justice and peace.
- **Network resilience:** Pre-war connections becoming lifelines for displaced artists accessing opportunities and support systems
- **Advocacy platforms:** Diaspora artists using international stages to document conflict and humanise Sudan's story

- **Cross-sector innovation:** Collaborations between artists, educators, and humanitarian actors are turning creativity into a pillar of psychosocial recovery and local entrepreneurship

Cross-cutting Tensions

These gains remain precarious, as cultural actors navigate a series of persistent tensions: the daily urgency of survival versus longer-term development goals; the flexibility of informal networks versus the stability of formal institutions; and the need to respond to local realities while aligning with international frameworks. Artists also face trade-offs between individual expression and collective impact, and between maintaining visibility for advocacy and ensuring personal safety. The sector continues to grapple with limited resources often diverted to humanitarian priorities, and with the challenge of integrating into host societies without losing Sudanese cultural identity.

Practical Implications and Recommendations

For policy makers:

- Integrate cultural programming into humanitarian response frameworks, recognising arts as essential infrastructure for community resilience
- Develop flexible funding mechanisms that can adapt from institutional programming to diaspora network support during crisis transitions

- Create pathways for cultural practitioners to contribute to peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction planning

For funders:

- Support long-term relationship building rather than short-term project outcomes, as networks prove more valuable than deliverables during crisis

- Fund trauma-informed approaches that recognise cultural work as psychosocial support, not just skills development
 - Invest in digital infrastructure and platforms that can maintain connections when physical programming becomes impossible • Prioritise women-led initiatives that demonstrate particular effectiveness in community healing and cross-cultural bridge-building
- For implementers:**
- Build local partnerships based on deep cultural understanding rather than institutional convenience or capacity
 - Develop low-profile approaches that can navigate complex political environments while maintaining community trust
 - Create programming that serves multiple functions simultaneously (economic, social, cultural, psychological) to maximise impact with limited resources
 - Establish diaspora engagement strategies from project inception, anticipating potential displacement and network needs

Context note: While these recommendations reflect strong field consensus, they must be applied with awareness of operational and political realities. In conflict-affected settings like Sudan, local authority endorsement can bring both legitimacy and risk, depending on power dynamics. Calls to reduce bureaucracy are constrained by funder compliance obligations, particularly for public donors. Mobility-based programming must contend with tightening visa regimes and revoked bilateral agreements in neighbouring states like Egypt where growing domestic pressures increasingly restrict access for Sudanese nationals.

Case Studies

Sudan & Europe Creative Connections project

Before the war, the Sudan & Europe Creative Connections project (2019–2022), funded by the European Union and led by the Goethe-Institut Sudan with partners such as the British Council and Institut Français, played a crucial role in strengthening Sudan’s creative ecosystem. It developed five key pillars: Moda (Fashion), SAMA (Music), Shasha (Cinema), Hajjeytak (Literature), and Turath (Archaeology). Over 445 young artists were trained, new creative curricula were developed for universities, and platforms for music, cinema, and storytelling were established.

Participants recognised that while the *Sudan & Europe Creative Connections* programme created valuable learning and collaboration spaces, political instability and weak infrastructure repeatedly disrupted progress. The 2021 coup halted implementation of the *SAMA Festival Management* outcomes, and subsequent conflict made it impossible to distribute Moda Connects fashion collections or maintain quality standards for new productions. Artists

also cited material shortages, limited funding, and logistical barriers as daily obstacles – from difficulties sourcing fabrics and art supplies to the collapse of transport networks and digital connectivity.

At the same time, these disruptions revealed new **opportunities for innovation and resilience**. The absence of traditional media and galleries pushed creatives to explore **digital platforms, abstract visual styles, and cross-generational storytelling** that resonated even in constrained settings. Many participants highlighted the **unexpected social cohesion** that emerged from working in crisis – the formation of music ensembles, design collectives, and online networks that now connect Sudanese artists locally and abroad. Despite interrupted timelines, participants described these relationships as the project’s most enduring outcome, proving that **creativity can outlast conflict** and continue shaping Sudan’s social and cultural recovery.

Application: Enabling and Disabling Factors

Artists face continuous barriers: safety threats, restricted mobility, and financial precarity. Within Sudan, public events remain risky; censorship and surveillance persist. Infrastructure collapse and looting, especially the loss of 80% of the Sudan National Museum's artefacts, represent an irreplaceable cultural wound.

Despite this, artists continue to adapt, organising through informal WhatsApp groups, pooling resources for shared studios abroad, and depending on foreign cultural partners for platforms and small grants.

“We work quietly, sometimes in darkness, but every image, song, or poem is a reminder that Sudan’s story is still being written.” – Female filmmaker

Overall major obstacles for continuing work in or outside are:

- **Political and security fragility:** ongoing fighting, repression, and militarised checkpoints make open cultural gatherings impossible; respondents cited fear and surveillance as their top constraint. Artists inside Sudan practice self-censorship or hide their identities to avoid detention.
- **Economic collapse:** inflation and scarcity have ended ticketed events and income generation; respondents mention “no buyers, no audience, no cash.”

- **Institutional void:** the Ministry of Culture and most state museums are non-functional; respondents report “no authority to contact for permits or support.” Heritage looting represents not just theft but destruction of collective memory.

“We lost our stage and our archives; now our voices must travel online.” – Musician

- **Digital tools:** participant artists use online platforms (Zoom, Instagram, YouTube) for collaboration or monetisation. SECC’s digital heritage and music academies have become blueprints for survival, offering hybrid training and income models.
- **Diaspora infrastructure:** networks in Cairo, Nairobi, Kampala, Addis Ababa, and the Gulf host workshops, exhibitions, and training; many respondents now work with diaspora partners.
- **Regional cooperation:** Goethe-Institut and Institut Français in Cairo have reopened Sudan-specific funding lines and residencies; EUNIC’s “Culture and Conflict” working group provides a framework for pooled EU response.

These developments mark **the shift from place-based to network-based culture**, where mobility, digitality, and partnerships replace buildings.

How international partners can support now

The data suggest eight priority actions.

1. **Flexible micro-grants:** replace large project cycles with small, fast, administered through trusted regional hubs; 91% of respondents prefer this model.
2. **Trauma-informed capacity support:** embed mental-health and safeguarding modules within every grant, echoing artists' requests for "help to cope before we create."
3. **Mobility and access funds:** subsidise travel/visas for Sudanese creatives to reach festivals, labs, and conferences across Africa and Europe.
4. **Visibility partnerships:** integrate Sudanese content into European festivals, online platforms, and media; advocacy events can counter the "invisibility crisis" artists highlighted in both the survey and interviews.
5. **Establish local cultural councils** in safe Sudanese towns and diaspora hubs to co-manage micro-grants, ethics, and archives.
6. **Rebuild sector curricula** (music, film, design, heritage management) through short accredited modules delivered jointly by regional universities and online academies.
7. **Support digital preservation frameworks** with UNESCO and Interpol to trace looted artefacts and train community archivists.
8. **Introduce monitoring indicators,** including participation, wellbeing, and trust to document culture's peace impact.

"We don't just need funds; we need systems that let us decide what culture means to us." – Female curator, Khartoum

Insights and Recommendations: The analysis reveals strong consensus that future cultural peacebuilding in Sudan must focus on continuity, accessibility, and inclusion. Artists and cultural practitioners emphasised the need for connection, mobility, and flexible support, reflecting both the impact of past programmes and the realities of working in crisis.

Sustain Collaboration and Continuity

Participants called for consistent follow-up and advisory support to sustain the impact of previous initiatives. Many noted that successful projects like SAMA, Moda Connects, and Shasha created valuable networks that have since dispersed due to war and displacement. They requested periodic reunions, mentorship sessions, and online hubs to maintain professional growth and mutual encouragement.

"We need more follow-up and consultation to keep communication and trust between participants."

Expand Reach and Inclusion

Respondents highlighted the need to reach beyond Khartoum to marginalised regions and refugee populations, where creative talent is rich but opportunities scarce. They stressed the importance of decentralising projects and engaging regional artists, women, and youth through schools, libraries, and rural cultural centres.

“Take the project to the regions, where the real artists are still excluded from these valuable opportunities.”

Invest in Long-term, Adaptable Structures

Participants urged donors to prioritise infrastructure and digital platforms that can survive instability. They recommended hybrid models that combine local partnerships, online learning, and coordination teams capable of responding to crises.

“Invest in digital platforms, coordination teams, and follow-up mechanisms with participants. Make funding flexible so projects can adapt during crises.”

Build Capacity Through Skills, Mobility, and Exposure

Artists requested skill-building workshops, travel grants, and networking events to reconnect Sudanese creatives across borders. Exposure to regional and international festivals was cited as critical for sustaining morale and creating visibility for Sudanese art after the war.

“We need more collaborations, free movement, exchange opportunities, and grants for artists.”

Promote Peace Through Inclusion and Creativity

Several responses linked art directly to peacebuilding. Participants stressed the role of storytelling, children’s participation, and community events in fostering tolerance. They advocated integrating art into schools and public spaces to shape the values of a new generation.

“Do not forget art in the middle of war – it is what keeps us human.”

Recognise Women’s and Youth Leadership

Many highlighted the transformative impact of women artists who lead micro-projects in fashion, music, and education. These voices called for dedicated spaces and safety mechanisms for women creatives who

anchor families and communities through crisis.

“Plan according to local needs, extend the training time, and give women the tools – they are the heart of change.”

Sobajo (Port Sudan)

Sobajo is a low-profile cultural safe space for women, youth, and displaced communities.

Sobajo is a women-led creative studio and social enterprise operating quietly since 2018, providing cultural, psychosocial, and livelihood support to women, youth, and refugee communities in Sudan. Its practice spans traditional crafts, storytelling, and intimate community gatherings, creating continuity in an environment marked by political upheaval, displacement, and the collapse of formal institutions.

Origin and Purpose: Emerging in Khartoum to support socially and economically disadvantaged women, Sobajo adapted and relocated core activities to Port Sudan after the 2023 war. Its purpose is deliberately modest yet high-impact: safe spaces where women gather, process trauma, share stories, and learn skills that reconnect them with cultural identity and enable pathways to income. Sessions resemble familiar women’s gatherings – coffee circles, embroidery groups, small bazaars – reframed as spaces for healing and protection. As one participant put it:

“We give them psycho support through art... we give them a space to relieve their pain.”

Operating Model: Low Profile, High Trust Sobajo operates “in a very low profile,” a strategic choice shaped by security concerns and political sensitivities. Instead of public events or high-visibility showcases, it relies on neighbourhood studios, small workshops, and personal networks. This quiet model protects participants and reaches those unwilling or unable to attend visible programming. Cooperation with UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, and embassies is largely informal, through trusted individuals rather than formal partnerships, bypassing heavy administrative pipelines that “don’t match the tempo of crisis work.” As one staff member put it: “The paperwork moves, but the needs move faster.”

Participants and Inclusion: Sobajo works with women from Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, including refugees, IDPs, widows, and those facing extreme precarity. Its ethos is explicitly inclusive – celebrating culture across origin and language. Women from

Kassala, Gadarif, Darfur, and Kordofan sit side by side, sharing stories and craft traditions; this everyday coexistence quietly counters stigma and division. Facilitators note that “many of them speak for the first time about what actually happened to them” in these spaces.

Activities and outputs consistent, simple activities are maintained even under severe constraint:

- Storytelling circles for emotional processing and bonding
- Craft workshops (Toubs, weaving, accessories, textile arts) for therapeutic engagement and income
- A small “survivor center” in Port Sudan offering safety and routine and as a micro-gallery showcasing regional crafts and lineages
- Informal market channels to private buyers
- Digital and diaspora ties enabling small sales and cultural continuity Despite volunteer-heavy operations, Sobajo has continued through displacement, infrastructure collapse, and donor withdrawal.

The 2023 war displaced team members and participants; travel to Port Sudan became “complicated and dangerous.” Sobajo adapted with smaller, safer workshops; mobile and home-based sessions; WhatsApp coordination; and diaspora collaborations (Cairo, Nairobi, Addis, Gulf, Europe). Donors initially “escaped,” leaving cultural actors isolated; some organisations have begun returning but remain focused on basic needs, often excluding cultural and psychosocial work.

Issues and challenges (in participants’ and facilitators’ words)

- Donor and partner exits emptied the ecosystem. Returns are slow and focused on food and shelter.
- “The paperwork moves, but the needs move faster.” Formal partnership routes are heavy and slow. People need help now; admin later, if ever. Informal trust networks keep things moving but are exhausting to sustain.
- “We are doing big things, but in a low profile.” Staying quiet is protection. High visibility can bring risk to participants, staff, and spaces. The low-profile approach is safer but makes it harder to attract resources and recognition.
- “Travel is complicated and dangerous.” Reaching Port Sudan or moving between neighbourhoods is risky. Small, local, home-based sessions help, but they limit scale and consistency.
- “Many speak for the first time about what happened to them.” Facilitators hold heavy stories with limited psychosocial backup. Volunteer-led care raises burnout risk; there is little margin for rest.
- “We don’t care where you are coming from... we celebrate the culture.” Inclusion is core, but stigma toward refugees and minorities persists; it takes daily work to protect dignity and keep the space welcoming.
- “We lost our stage.” Spaces, archives, and public platforms have disappeared. Digital and diaspora ties help, but online visibility is uneven and sometimes sensitive.

Key insights:

- Cultural spaces can operate as survival systems when formal institutions collapse
- Low-profile models can be more sustainable than visibility-driven programming in polarised contexts
- Women-led initiatives anchor cohesion and recovery
- Informal networks often outperform formal partnerships in crisis tempo
- Small, flexible funding would meaningfully reduce burnout and sustain continuity

What would help

- Provide small, flexible micro-grants to sustain day-to-day operations
- Support safe, discreet physical nodes (e.g., the Port Sudan survivor center)
- Enable ethical market partnerships to expand craft sales without exploitation
- Fund mobility and diaspora showcasing for continuity and visibility
- Create light administrative pathways so local actors are not excluded by bureaucracy

Access the full report here:
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