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# ROOTED IN TRUST

South Kordofan, Sudan, Y-Peer Sudan, 2021



## **MISINFORMED** Sudan's centralisation problem & the pandemic

AN INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENT BY INTERNEWS

SUDAN - MARCH, 2021

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**T**his Information Ecosystem Assessment documents how information around the COVID-19 pandemic is produced, consumed, and shared in Sudan contributing to the existence of multiple and overlapping information sub-systems within the supply side of the broader ecosystem. The findings show how the centralization of news production, as well as power and resources, leads to the development of these sometimes-competing sub-systems. This is evident through data collected from marginalized groups, such as displaced communities (refugees, IDPs, migrants) and those in communities that host them, who are not targeted by official supply mechanisms of information.

## THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Sudan has a broad and well-established, if limited, media scene. There has been intense government oversight of official media such as radio, TV and newspapers, and the country is now reconfiguring the relationship between the state and the media, following the 2018 revolution. The government-owned Sudan News Agency (SUNA) is at the center of the formal supply of news within Sudan's highly centralized information ecosystem. Official news is disseminated to the states, often meaning that news is seen through the prism of the political and geographic center. While state-level TV and radio exist, they have not sufficiently pivoted away from the control of Khartoum, post revolution. ●●●



Though some media freedoms have improved, the country is still ranked in the bottom 10 countries of Reporters Without Borders (RSF) index. There has been a crackdown on journalists during the pandemic which has resulted in the closure of 21 newspapers. Closure of newspapers, which are still considered a credible source and one of the most preferred for accessing information for those in Khartoum, compromises availability of sources, increasing the prevalence of COVID-19 misinformation and rumors. Localization of information is not part of the training for journalists, which has made it a challenge to communicate and report COVID-19 information in a manner that is relevant and in preferred languages.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the government appointed a media task force to the Ministry of Health (MoH) to inform the public through daily press conferences at SUNA. The government had formed a multi-sectoral Higher

Committee for Emergencies to respond to the pandemic. The top-down nature of information sharing meant that rumors started to appear and spread and ad hoc fact-checking during press conferences took place. Some attempts were made by the government and aid partners to address local interests and realities of COVID-19, though this was largely unsuccessful. This is due to the inability of the official, and formalized, information ecosystem, dominated by the government to respond to the needs of marginalized groups, thereby creating alternate information ecosystems, dominated by social media and informal media channels.

### INFORMATION NEEDS AND GAPS

COVID-19 information needs of displaced and host communities are usually unmet as official information is not inclusive of rescue and stimulus measures. Most needs related to information are on

education and employment rather than on the infection. Linguistic and geographic discrepancies increased the need for information on COVID-19 symptoms and prevention and in general IDPs and host communities were better informed about these than refugees and migrants.

Refugees in only some camps are better informed about aid and humanitarian relief in comparison to particularly non-camp IDPs and refugees, people with disabilities and the elderly. Migrant and host communities tend to be better informed though they are not always the main targets of humanitarian aid.

Across all five states respondents overwhelmingly reported that they were not informed on labor measures and state aid towards employment support. This was acutely so for Kassala and Blue Nile states, within which no respondents said that they were “completely informed.”





There is a need to adapt official information production away from its centralized source to local contexts, then move towards community-driven content.

### ACCESS

Frequent electricity cuts and unavailability of online payment systems have not hampered social media usage; 71.7% of responders always use social media to access information on COVID-19. Both formal channels: Radio (67.8%); TV (75.5%), and informal channels: online platforms (70.9%); social media (70%); and messaging applications (69.8%), are the key sources of information and are used concurrently. Access through newspapers correlates strongly with distrust in government. The high prevalence of conspiracy theories and myths, within informal and unofficial news sources and channels, suggests that the way in which official information is accessed and, crucially, trusted is poor.



This is not helped by the top-down way that information from official sources has been transmitted, through radio, TV and print.

Societal and cultural constructs of gender identity play a role in determining the types of information sources that are accessed by women. Newspapers and religious places are less frequently accessed by women who tend to access information through other less formal means, in social circles.

With the predominance of Arabic as the main language of communication

and information sharing, COVID-19 information is not localized to minority languages, which prevents vulnerable communities from accessing COVID-19 information. IDPs tend to rely on a more diverse range of news sources, both informal such as face-to-face communication with family and friends (54.7%), as well as formal channels (52.8%), indicating that they use a wider range of access channels. Refugees on the other hand are more limited to social media and messaging applications, indicating that their information ecosystem is almost entirely outside the formal system.







## TRUST

### Trusting Information Sources

There is clear lack of trust in information from official sources and local leaders, with reports that the government used the pandemic as a distraction for its political failures or to leverage aid. However, many respondents during focus group discussions reported that they would use government sources to check the veracity of claims that they had heard. 57% of respondents reported that having the information come from a loved one is important for trust. Far more (75.5%) think that information that is corroborated by different sources is important for trust, with responses consistent across states and displacement status including host communities.

Unofficial news sources tended to be more trusted as they have far more details or embellishment and are deeply linked to people's immediate priorities.

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reported that having the  
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Those who felt confident in being able to tell the difference between fact and rumor were more likely to always access information through informal means through social media. This indicated that distrust of formal media had to be filtered through informal channels, away from official interests, in order to become trusted. Similarly, the way that

content on social media travels – shared by close friends and family, repeated and interactive (or a discussion starter) – increased people's perceptions that the content was true. Focus groups found that when information is shared by a close friend or relative, it added a layer of trust.

### Trusting Information Channels

The most trusted official outlets are Sudan TV and Omdurman Radio. Despite the lack of general trust in official sources, reliance on the limited official channels as well as the repetition of information shown on air across different official channels makes the information more believable, as does using it to triangulate other reports. Even respondents in the center (Khartoum), for whom official information is better contextualized, reported that having the ability to consult more than one source, analogue and digital, makes reports more believable.





International media sources tend to be trusted more than local media channels on issues relating to COVID-19, due to the latter's perceived bias. In camps, focus groups found that community radio serves as the most trusted channel as it is seen as the most relevant to the local context, often providing much-needed information on conflict. Communities have expressed that they overwhelmingly prefer localized, well-defined

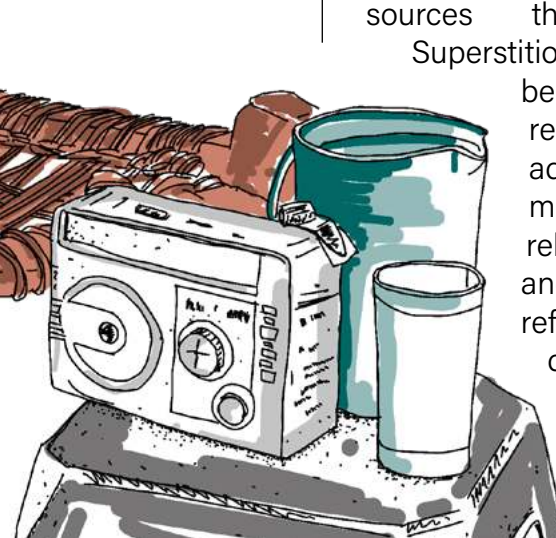
and detailed information, that other official channels tend to fail at delivering. Our research shows that community radio is seen as the source of information of reference in camps, but it is not clear whether this is because the information it provides is trusted or because it has become so heavily relied upon. Resistance Committees have gained popularity during Sudan's political transition and have become trusted channels of information and in meeting the various needs of communities, according to FGD data.

### THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION ON BELIEFS AND BEHAVIORS

Adherence to mask wearing was hampered by economic considerations as masks were considered too expensive by many and by the practice becoming socially mired in taboo. These taboos are linked with social class and status despite the continued practice of handshaking.

Information-seeking behaviors have had an impact on changing social power dynamics related to age, with younger people acquiring status as information sources through social media.

Superstitions around illness increased belief in rumors, as did religious beliefs undermine adherence to preventative measures, increasing reliance on local medicine and prayer. Perceptions of refugees as spreaders of disease abounded.





## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND HUMANITARIANS' ROLE IN THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Humanitarian sector's response to the pandemic was relatively well coordinated with the government's efforts. The high-level cooperation and coordination provide a useful precedent for future disaster response as Sudan transitions away from autocracy.

Humanitarians made particular efforts to contextualize communication methods and messages, for example through community drive-by announcements. Efforts to actively communicate with communities were hampered by remote working, continuing conflict and flooding, and an acute lack of data to guide the response. Partnerships with local actors, and especially trusted voices in the communities such as trusted youth actors, through resistance

committees or otherwise, was one-way these challenges were circumvented. These can be maximized to inform robust mechanisms to more effectively set up bi-directional communication activities with communities and should be expanded in the future.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

**Below is an overview of the main recommendations, with more specific detail provided in Section 7.**

### COVID-19 Governmental response

■ **Cover broad information needs**, including economic needs and socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, **rather than narrowly focus on COVID-19 statistics and public health**, including through a more closely integrated inter-ministerial approach and more consistent use of preferred channels in different parts of the country.

■ **Create a network of trusted information partners embedded in the community** such as training educated IDPs and refugees in camps or local doctors to be local health ambassadors.

■ **Prioritise decentralizing information sources** by working with displaced and other marginalized communities to contextualize information content, channels and transmission to hard-to-reach communities.

■ **Embrace the broad use of social media** and produce formats more easily shareable on these platforms.

■ **Avoid exaggerating the danger or the emergency:** continue daily briefings balanced by a measured tone of delivery that will not create a false sense of urgency not felt by much of the public, displaced or otherwise. ●●●



### COVID-19 Humanitarian Response and Programming

■ **Localize communications, especially for harder to reach populations:** aid actors should complement government initiatives where that response/reach is weakest (especially hard-to-reach communities in peripheral states) and work with trusted local community leaders to tailor communications response and outreach to local areas, rather than use communications tools from the center.

■ **Invest more in two-way communication** such as awareness days, community theatre with a question-and-answer session, collaborations with local youth or community centers and other formats that allow target groups to ask questions about COVID-19 information.

■ **Partner more extensively with local actors:** UN/INGOs should develop the capacity of local organizations, and citizens to engage with international aid

agencies within risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) work.

■ **Mutualize data and information** including periodically gathering data about how information is accessed and digested and pool data in a single database in collaboration with government response teams in order to fine tune the national response (and future responses to other outbreaks including cholera and chikungunya).

### MEDIA

■ **Support the growth of digital media:** official news sources and channels should invest in expanding and monetizing the digital space in order to encourage and give voice to a range of diverse media, particularly in conflict zones.

■ **Support context-specificity:** official media sources should train and work with local media personnel to design and produce context specific information for local consumption.

■ **Decentralize the supply of media:** local news media should be supported to produce media for national consumption to counter the centralization of news and localized echo chambers of information.

■ **Increase reach to displaced communities:** media actors should work with humanitarian actors to set up more community-driven content in camps, considering diversity of languages and informational needs.

### INFORMATION VERIFICATION MECHANISMS AND COMMUNITY RESPONSE

■ **Train youth and resistance committee members** through CBOs and NGOs to integrate information sharing and combatting misinformation and rumors through face-to-face or over-the-phone engagement with communities, whilst tracking these rumors to feed into communications messaging to counter misinformation.







■ **Information verification:** official Facebook pages, which some use to verify information, should employ the use of chat bots and WhatsApp business accounts (with automatic replies to large numbers of people) that provide a platform for users to get verified information.

■ **Establish independent (non-governmental) digital platforms:** Telecommunications companies to set up fact-checking that is also available to non-smart-phone users through free SMS messaging in a variety of languages and dialects, in both text form and as voice messages.

### CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN MEDIA SECTOR

■ **Establish accountability standards** related to contextualization of content in journalism training and explore opportunities for job training and capacity building on critical/investigative journalism that is responsive to local news needs.

■ **Invest in making local digital platforms informative and profitable,** now possible with Sudan's return to the world stage. This will enable better access to training courses in the region to learn from trusted sources there (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and UAE chiefly).

■ **Cultivate trust between people and local news sources** through establishing high-quality standards and setting up independent ratings bodies to monitor quality

■ **Create content that balances public interest with regional realities of COVID-19:** official media channels should work with state level TV and radio stations to do this.

### REACHING THE MOST VULNERABLE

■ **Prioritize non-verbal as well as audio-visual communication** methods through official channels and make these shareable on social media.

**Encourage more programming in different languages and build trust amongst marginalized demographics.**

■ **Community radio:** encourage more programming in different languages and build trust amongst marginalized demographics. Increase reach of FM radio by granting licenses to transmit across the country.

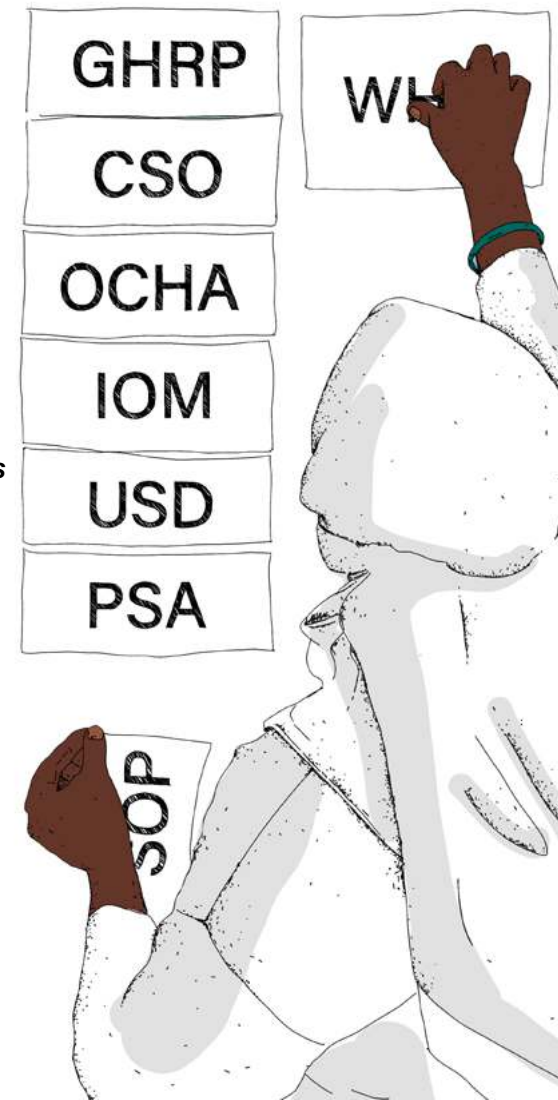
■ **Adjust the register of COVID-19 information:** this should be colloquial not clinical in order to permeate through more communities.

■ **Gender Analysis in risk communication:** Develop gender sensitive pathways to allow women greater access to information and greater ability to disseminate information. ●

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# LIST OF ACRONYMS

<p>■ <b>FFC</b> <i>Forces of Freedom and Change</i></p> <p>■ <b>FGD</b> <i>Focus Group Discussion</i></p> <p>■ <b>FMOH</b> <i>Federal Ministry of Health</i></p> <p>■ <b>FSP</b> <i>Family Support Program</i></p> <p>■ <b>GBV</b> <i>Gender-Based Violence</i></p> <p>■ <b>GHRP</b> <i>Global Humanitarian Response Plan</i></p> <p>■ <b>GoS</b> <i>Government of Sudan</i></p> <p>■ <b>HCE</b> <i>Higher Committee for Emergencies</i></p> <p>■ <b>HRP</b> <i>Humanitarian Response Plan</i></p> <p>■ <b>IDP</b> <i>Internally Displaced Person</i></p> <p>■ <b>IEA</b> <i>Information Ecosystem Assessment</i></p> <p>■ <b>IGAD</b> <i>Inter-Governmental Authority on Development</i></p> <p>■ <b>INGO</b> <i>International Non-Governmental Organization</i></p>	<p>■ <b>IOM</b> <i>International Organization for Migration</i></p> <p>■ <b>JPA</b> <i>Juba Peace Agreement</i></p> <p>■ <b>KII</b> <i>Key Informant Interviews</i></p> <p>■ <b>MDP</b> <i>Multi-Donor Program for Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists</i></p> <p>■ <b>MOH</b> <i>Ministry of Health</i></p> <p>■ <b>NCP</b> <i>National Congress Party</i></p> <p>■ <b>NGO</b> <i>Non-Governmental Organization</i></p> <p>■ <b>NPC</b> <i>National Press Council</i></p> <p>■ <b>OCHA</b> <i>United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs</i></p> <p>■ <b>PPE</b> <i>Personal Protective Equipment</i></p> <p>■ <b>PSA</b> <i>Public Service Announcement</i></p> <p>■ <b>RCCE</b> <i>Risk Communication and Community Engagement</i></p>	<p>■ <b>RSF</b> <i>Reporters Without Borders</i></p> <p>■ <b>SCP</b> <i>Sudanese Communist Party</i></p> <p>■ <b>SDG</b> <i>Sudanese Pounds</i></p> <p>■ <b>SGARTB</b> <i>Sudanese General Authority for Radio and Television Broadcasting</i></p> <p>■ <b>SJU</b> <i>Sudan Journalists' Union</i></p> <p>■ <b>SK</b> <i>South Kordofan State</i></p> <p>■ <b>SMOH</b> <i>State Ministry of Health</i></p> <p>■ <b>SMOI</b> <i>State Ministry of Information</i></p> <p>■ <b>SNBC</b> <i>Sudan National Broadcasting Corporation</i></p> <p>■ <b>SST</b> <i>State Sponsor of Terrorism</i></p> <p>■ <b>SUDO</b> <i>Sudan Social Development Organization</i></p> <p>■ <b>SUNA</b> <i>Sudan News Agency</i></p> <p>■ <b>TGoS</b> <i>Transitional Government of Sudan</i></p>	<p>■ <b>TMC</b> <i>Transitional Military Council</i></p> <p>■ <b>UN</b> <i>United Nations</i></p> <p>■ <b>UNESCO</b> <i>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</i></p> <p>■ <b>UNFPA</b> <i>United Nations Population Fund</i></p> <p>■ <b>UNICEF</b> <i>United Nations Children's Fund</i></p> <p>■ <b>UNHCR</b> <i>Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</i></p> <p>■ <b>USD</b> <i>United States Dollars</i></p> <p>■ <b>WD</b> <i>West Darfur State</i></p> <p>■ <b>WHO</b> <i>World Health Organization</i></p> <p>■ <b>Y-PEER</b> <i>Youth Peer Education Network</i></p>
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## INTRODUCTION

Information is a vital life force that is an essential component of people's lives. Without information, people are not able to understand the world around them and the events that shape their lives and choices. Information is essential for building resilient communities that can respond to continuously changing environments and improve their lives. For that reason, in order to build and sustain resilient communities, it is important to have information ecosystems that are strong. In other words, strong information ecosystems reinforce strong and resilient communities.

Information ecosystems are complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers. They are complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which

information moves and transforms in flows.<sup>1</sup> Information ecosystems are comprised of eight dimensions that include: Information Needs; Information Landscape; Production and Movement; Dynamics of Access; Use of Information; Impact of Information; Social Trust; and Influencers. Each of these dimensions is critical in understanding how information contributes to resilient communities, and constitute important components in the design of adaptive, effective and responsive systems that enable communities to respond to changes and challenges. Understanding this context informs the way we design and continuously adapt our programming.

In Sudan, the supply side of the information ecosystem tends to be formal and official, whereas the demand side is more fractured and informal. The

fractured and informal nature of the demand side of the ecosystem is due to the failures of the supply side to be relevant across linguistic, literacy, and geographical barriers. Increasingly, this failure to be relevant may potentially lead to breakaway ecosystems where both the supply and demand of information take on informal and unofficial forms. This report charts both the formal supply aspect of the ecosystem as well as the more informally driven demand side through the information gathering habits of displaced people. The formal supply of information is often not designed with displaced communities in mind, and they are therefore often excluded from meaningfully engaging with it.

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<sup>1</sup>*Internews Information Ecosystem Analysis*



# I. RESEARCH SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

## LEGEND

- Addressed
- Partially addressed
- Not addressed in this IEA

## 1.1. RESEARCH SCOPE AND MAIN 'BUILDING BLOCKS' OF THE IEA

### IEA

This Information Ecosystem Assessment documents how information around the COVID-19 pandemic is produced, consumed, and shared in **Sudan** in 2020-2021. The research will focus on how displaced populations, including Refugee and IDPs, as well as other conflict-affected people, communicate to access information about COVID-19 and related issues and how their use of online media intersects with their use of traditional media and other sources. The aim of this report is to help inform public health and humanitarian response agencies to better communicate key messages to the at-risk populations by providing an assessment of information needs and gaps, information sharing pathways, determinants and barriers to information access, as well as information dynamics that significantly impact vulnerable groups.

### GEOGRAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC COVERAGE

Full country

Targeted geographic area

Entire population

Focus on specific population groups

### RESEARCH THEMATIC SCOPE

#### INFORMATION SUPPLY

##### INFORMATION PROVIDERS

National media

Digital media and platforms

Community media

Non media information providers

Environment  
(economic, political and regulatory)

Media capacity and quality assessment

#### DYNAMICS AND INTERACTIONS

Trust (trusted channels, key drivers of trust)

Sharing and gatekeeping

Influence and impact of information

Linkages between different actors of the information ecosystem

#### INFORMATION DEMAND

Information needs and gaps

Preferred channels and sources

Barriers to information access

Information needs by humanitarians and other stakeholders

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Desk research (information supply)

Interviews with key Informants and community members

Listening groups / focus groups in the community

Quantitative survey (sample > 100)

Research led by the community (research assistants from the community)

Continuous feedback by panels of experts and community

Results dissemination and feedback from communities



### 1.2 PHILOSOPHY AND METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

**T**he people we seek to reach often live in diverse, noisy, risky and confusing news and information environments that present them with challenges – as well as choices – as

to what information they access, what they trust and what they share and act upon. Internews undertakes Information Ecosystem Assessments (IEA) to better understand unique and localized information needs, gaps, sources and patterns of access and use. Information Ecosystem Assessments (IEAs) offer an analytical framework to capture all

dimensions of the relationship between information consumers and information supply. Gaining precise high-quality insights into these interactions allows for the design of truly unique projects that meet people where they are to deliver information through the channels, platforms, formats or people that they prefer and trust. ●●●



This IEA research is based on Internews' four key principles:

**1- Putting the community at the core of the research** -- Internews seeks to be at the core of the communities it serves. For our IEAs, we endeavor to have the community itself do a large part of the research: we hire researchers and enumerators from the community, and we rely on community members to disseminate results and gather feedback. When context truly limits our ability to do so (as during the COVID-19 pandemic) we strive to design multiple ways to gather feedback from community members and representatives as a second-best alternative.

**2- Following a human-centered research design** -- We seek to develop a holistic understanding of people's information practices. We understand demand and supply in a broad sense,

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**We do not see Information Ecosystem Assessments as an “end product”. They are most often the first stage of our project design, providing invaluable context and a way to build a trusting relationship with the community we hope to work with.**

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not narrowly focused on media outlets or traditional media actors. Our scope of analysis is defined by how people actually access and consume information and not by pre-defined categories. We strive to understand both which practices are broadly shared and what are the specific needs and behaviors of groups, especially the most vulnerable ones.

**3- Marrying qualitative and quantitative data** -- We seek to combine different types of data to best understand both the supply and demand of information and how the two interact to produce a dynamic ecosystem. We go beyond traditional mapping and audience surveys. Our IEAs rely heavily

on a qualitative approach: understanding information practices requires getting up close and personal to people to figure out the best ways to reach them with good information.

**4- Integrating research and action** -- We do not see Information Ecosystem Assessments as an “end product”. They are most often the first stage of our project design, providing invaluable context and a way to build a trusting relationship with the community we hope to work with. They are always connected to recommended actions, whether our own, those undertaken by the communities or by our partners and other key stakeholders in the ecosystem. ●

### 1.3 DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE

**T**his assessment comprises a desk review and data collection from a variety of displaced and displacement-affected communities. The desk review is based on a review of mostly grey literature (reports from organizations, think tanks), some academic literature, and media sources, mostly accessed online. Sudan does not have a wide range of easily accessible information, but this research has benefitted from both a baseline IEA and an in-depth IEA, both carried out in the second half of 2020. Previous Sudan IEAs have also been consulted for provisional information though they do not cover the information ecosystems around displaced communities.

This IEA is based on empirical data from 5 states out of Sudan's 18 states, chosen for their displacement dimensions, namely

the presence of refugees and IDPs (in camps and outside of camps), migrants and host communities. The selected states are:

- Blue Nile
- Kassala
- Khartoum
- South Kordofan
- West Darfur

The data was collected through qualitative methods: through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) as well as a quantitative survey with a broad but representative sample of the displacement-affected communities within each state. In order to maintain research ethics, identified respondents were given the choice whether to continue with a questionnaire or to terminate. Only respondents 18 and over were chosen, in order to guarantee legal consent.

### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGD)

Over a relatively short data collection period of two weeks, a total of 8 FGD were held in each state, totaling 40 FGD.

Focus groups were made up of an average of between 12-15 people per session, identified through snowball sampling. Sessions were held in IDP and refugee camps (four sessions per state) and amongst members of the host community in urban, market settings (four sessions per state).

In order to ensure that voices of women and men were heard, FGD sessions consisted of two women-only sessions; two men-only sessions; and two mixed sessions with an eye towards intersectionality, ensuring good representation of specific groups such as young people, people with disabilities, members of different class or income brackets, as well as the inclusion of women who head households, and divorced women. ●●●





### KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS (KIIS)

A minimum of six KIIs were conducted per state for a total of 30 across all 5 states. The selection of interviewees was guided by Y-PEER volunteer's intimate knowledge of their home states. The criteria for the interviewees, outlined below, relied on characterizing those within communities who held leadership positions, customary, traditional or formal and who could speak to broader trends regarding engagement with information and information sources.

Of these interviews, two were held with women who are in a position of power locally, such as managers of community based revolving fund, heads of households or professionals such as teachers and officials.

Two interviews were held with young women and men – between the ages of 18-34 (allowing for the upper age

limit defined by the African Youth Charter, which has been adopted by the Government of Sudan). This consisted of one young woman, and one young man. The interviewees were selected amongst those who have finished high school and those who are socially and/or politically engaged.

Interviews were also held with two men per state, such as religious leaders, sheikhs of the camp, head of local the Sufi tradition or a non-religion-based community leader.

In recognition of the role that neighborhood resistance committees play in service provision and directly in assisting the government's pandemic response, members of these committees throughout the five states were also interviewed.

Interviews from those engaged in the COVID-19 response from humanitarian

organizations, governmental actors at the Ministry of Health and members of community-based organizations and national non-governmental organizations were also carried out. Media representatives at the national and subnational level were also interviewed (see table below for full list).

### QUANTITATIVE SURVEYS

A minimum of 250 surveys were conducted, 50 in each state over the two-week data collection period. Of the respondents, half were women and half men. Random sampling was used to identify respondents: every 6th person was selected using the walking sampling method that best suits such contexts. Respondents were chosen on market days or community gathering days to ensure a sufficiently large group and therefore a sufficiently random sample. All respondents were 18 years old and above to ensure that consent was legally given. ●

**Table 1. List of interviewees**

INFORMANTS	COLLECTION TOOL	SAMPLE	SPECIFICS
<b>International Actors Agencies and Humanitarian</b>	Interviews	3	OCHA (COVID-19/Emergency Coordination), UNHCR (Refugee public health and coordination) and MSF
<b>Government Authorities (Federal)</b>	Interviews	2	M of Health, M of Information, within each, head of communications and head of COVID-19 response
<b>Government Authorities (State)</b>	Interviews	5	Representative sample from all regions: sMoH or sMoI – head of communications or head of COVID-19 response
<b>Media</b>	Interviews	5	Journalists at state level through journalists' network (Radio Baladna, Radio Dabanga, Omdurman Radio) newspapers, TV– Mohamed Hashim (Head of Content, Sudan TV);
<b>Informal Representatives and Leaders</b>	Interviews	5	Sudia and SUDO (Sudanese NGOs); Justice Africa (Regional NGO, works with IDPs); Sadagaat (local CSO); Nafeer (volunteer-based organization)
<b>Individuals and Communities</b>	Kills	30	Community members in camps and outside of camps, in rural and urban settings (Y-PEER)
	Surveys	250	
	FGDs	8	
	Kills	10	Resistance Committee members, (YPEER). 6 interviews in Khartoum (Khartoum: Mayo and Burri; Omdurman: Um Badda, FitiHab Bahry; Mirghania and Haj Yousif) then one per remaining state.

## 1.4 LIMITATIONS TO THE RESEARCH

**A**t the time of preparation for data collection, particularly with officials in the center, Sudan was under two states of emergency: one related to the economy and one related to the annual flooding. In addition, there was significant instability in the east of Sudan related but not limited to the Tigray crisis in neighboring Ethiopia, as well as in the west of the country, where intercommunal fighting broke out in West Darfur in January 2021. The conflict impacted the pace of data collection and access to camps in east and west Sudan. This was resolved through obtaining special authorization in the Eastern refugee camps and close monitoring of data collection teams in West Darfur. On the whole, data collectors were well-placed to identify respondents and field sites. However, weaknesses amongst data collectors in language and familiarity with qualitative methods, somewhat hampered the quality of data.

A significant South Sudanese refugee population is in White Nile State, however due to the short timeframe of the IEA, South Sudanese refugees or displaced people (not all have refugee status) were surveyed alongside other refugee populations in Khartoum. In addition to all of these factors, the timeline for this assessment has also placed a limitation on the number of surveys to be conducted. ●

## II. COUNTRY PROFILE

### 2.1 COUNTRY PROFILE INDICATORS

Sudan		
Press related index	Civil liberties (including freedom of expression)	10/60
	Press freedom index 2019 (out of 180 countries)	175
	Press freedom index 2020 (out of 180 countries)	↑ 159

\* Source civil rights: freedom house global freedom status

\*\* Source index ranking: Reporters without borders

Freedom on the net	Obstacles to access (0=Worst; 25=Best)	5
	Limits on content (0=Worst; 35=Best)	12
	Violation of user rights (0=Worst; 30=Best)	8
	Freedom on the net score 2018	35
	Freedom on the net score 2019	↓ 25

\* Source: Freedom house freedom on the net

ICTs	Internet penetration rate	30.9%
	Mobile phone penetration	72.0%

\* Source: United Nations Human Development Reports

Key demographic, social and political factors	Total population (millions)	41.8
	Population in multidimensional poverty (% headcount)	52.4%
	Human development index (rank)	0.507 (168)
	Rural population (%)	65.4%
	Illiteracy rate**	46.5%
	Refugees by country of origin	722.5
	Elections	2023

\* Source: United Nations Human Development Reports

\*\* Literacy is understood as the ability to read and write a short simple statement of everyday life

COVID-19	Confirmed cases	30,205
	Deaths	1,870

\* Source: World Health Organisation <https://covid19.who.int/>

LEGEND	
<span style="color: red;">●</span>	Not free
<span style="color: pink;">●</span>	Partly free

Sudan has undergone major political changes since the revolution that ousted former president Omer al-Bashir. Following Bashir's fall, a Transitional Military Council (TMC) was set up and negotiated with civilian forces, led by the Sudan Professionals Association (a broad umbrella of unions and professional associations) and the Forces of Freedom

and Change (FFC) Alliance to negotiate a new political, transitional, set up. In August 2019, a bifurcated governance system was created with a Sovereignty Council of 11 members (5 from the TMC, 5 from the FFC, and 1 chosen through consensus of the two) as the collective head of state, and a civilian executive government under Prime Minister Abdalla

Hamdok. After the signing of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) in October 2020, political negotiations followed which resulted in a cabinet reshuffle in early February that incorporated the erstwhile rebels. The Sovereignty Council also adopted the terms of the JPA and has included 3 members from the former rebel groups, signatory to the agreement. ●●●

## II. COUNTRY PROFILE



●●● Sudan's is a chiefly import economy, despite its vast natural resource wealth, as well as the lack of foreign exchange in the country, has caused inflation rates to rise to 212% in September (Aljazeera, 14th October 2020) and later to 254% in December (Reuters, 10th December

2020). In February 2021, the government unified the official and parallel markets rates for hard currency, in a bid to curb smuggling and economic collapse. The move is unpopular with many political groups, and much of the public (including those surveyed for this report)

as in the short run, it has the potential to increase the price of goods markedly. As such, protests continue throughout Sudan, conflicts between armed groups have reemerged, and protection issues related to the different population groups – particularly vulnerable groups including women, IDPs and refugees – remain unresolved.

Conflict, political instability, sudden-onset disasters, and poor economic conditions contribute to Sudan's multifaceted crisis, which has left 9.3 million Sudanese in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>2</sup> Food insecurity, malnutrition, and a lack of access to basic services, predominantly health and medicine services are the drivers of most humanitarian needs. The crisis has led to the internal displacement of more than 2 million Sudanese since 2010. Additionally, Sudan is host to over 1.1 million refugees, including over 821,000 refugees from South Sudan. The recent influx of 55,000 Ethiopian, ●●●





chiefly Tigrayan, refugees into Kassala and Gedarf states<sup>3</sup> is also putting a strain on local service delivery in the East, an area already experiencing extreme marginalization and scarcity. In January 2021, inter-communal fighting broke out across West Darfur between Arab-identifying groups, who staged a sit-in, and the non-Arab Masalit group amongst whom is the mayor of Geniena, the state capital. The fighting resulted in the deaths of 83 and the injury of 160 people.<sup>4</sup>

Environmentally Sudan is prone to flooding and the 2020 rainy season (June-October) led to widespread flooding that destroyed homes and farmland, damaged infrastructure, triggered risk of water-related diseases, and obstructed humanitarian access, all during the COVID-19 pandemic. Desertification is progressively widespread, and drought strongly depreciates agricultural conditions and increases food insecurity, and conflict, across the country.

**The main impact of COVID-19 has been economic with “increased prices of basic foods, rising unemployment, and falling exports. The crisis has also highlighted the importance of safe water, sanitation, and hygiene practices, which remain inadequate”.**

The government was quick to institute a lockdown following the announcement that the COVID-19 virus was reaching pandemic levels. The lockdown began on March 16th and was lifted on September 26th. To date, the cumulative number of COVID-19 positive cases in Sudan was 30,205, with 1,870 deaths.<sup>5</sup> There have been relatively low numbers of deaths due to COVID-19 compared to other countries but, crucially, lower in comparison to deaths from other, often chronic diseases such as malaria.<sup>6</sup> The main impact of COVID-19 has been economic with

“increased prices of basic foods, rising unemployment, and falling exports. The crisis has also highlighted the importance of safe water, sanitation, and hygiene practices, which remain inadequate. The outbreak is anticipated to further challenge the country’s public health preparedness and response systems and adversely impact the economy.”<sup>7</sup> ●

<sup>2</sup><https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/unicef-sudan-humanitarian-situation-report-mid-year-2020>

<sup>3</sup>Sudan: People fleeing conflict in Ethiopia face new challenges in search of shelter <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-people-fleeing-conflict-ethiopia-face-new-challenges-search-shelter>

<sup>4</sup>Deutsche Welle (DW): Sudan: 83 killed in Darfur violence <https://www.dw.com/en/sudan-83-killed-in-darfur-violence/a-56253104>

<sup>5</sup>World Health Organization Update COVID-19 23 February 2021 <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/sd>

<sup>6</sup>In 2020 there were 1.1m cases of malaria in Sudan (WHO) with a total of 3,556 deaths (provisional figure), according to the District Health Information System, Ministry of Health Sudan.

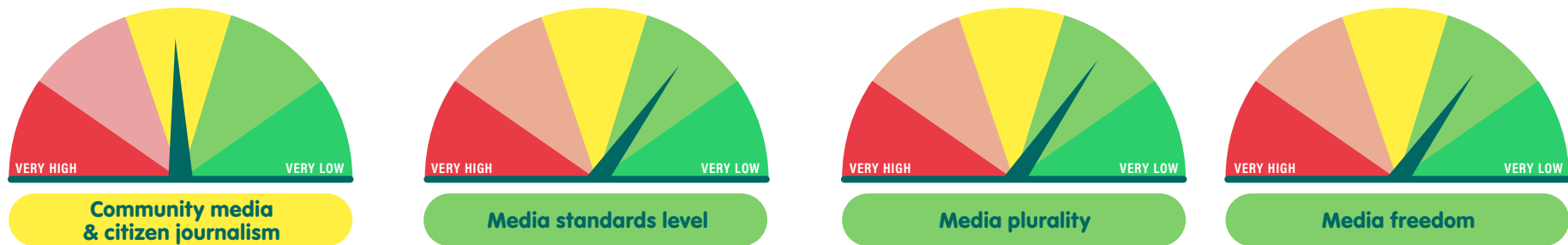
<sup>7</sup>World Bank press release “World Bank Group Provides Support to Help Sudan Manage the Health and Economic Impacts of the COVID-19,” September 30, 2020

### III. INFORMATION SUPPLY:

## information providers landscape review

(how information is produced and distributed)

Graph 1. Information landscape – supply indicators



### 3.1 MEDIA PROVIDERS

**S**udan has a broad and well-established, if limited, official and formalized media scene. This scene is top-down and hierarchical with the government able to systematically control the flow of information from official sources, and through official channels. The Sudan National Broadcasting Corporation (SNBC), also known as Sudan TV, is a government-owned and operated Arabic language TV station. Launched in 1962, it was the first of Sudan's now six TV networks. Before the advent of television, the Sudan National Radio Corporation, founded in

1940 was the country's first radio service and continues to broadcast on a range of topics from cultural programs, music and news. Successive regimes, military or otherwise, have sought to control the media through government regulators. This was particularly pronounced during the last 30 years of military rule under Omar Bashir.

Following the 2018 revolution, the newly-revitalized Sudanese General Authority for Radio and TV Broadcasting (SGARTB or the Authority) regulates content and oversees legislative reforms in TV and radio. The Authority is the official

government oversight of TV and radio and the liaising body with international actors. There is currently a draft law that aims to turn the SGARTB into a more independent body that functions as a public service broadcaster.

Most states also have local channels, often bearing the name of the state or region, that televise local, national and international news. In total there are 18 regional channels, not all of which have nationwide or international transmission. Only one of these, Blue Nile TV, is not entirely state-owned. There are eight free-to-air direct-to-home.<sup>8</sup>

### III. INFORMATION SUPPLY

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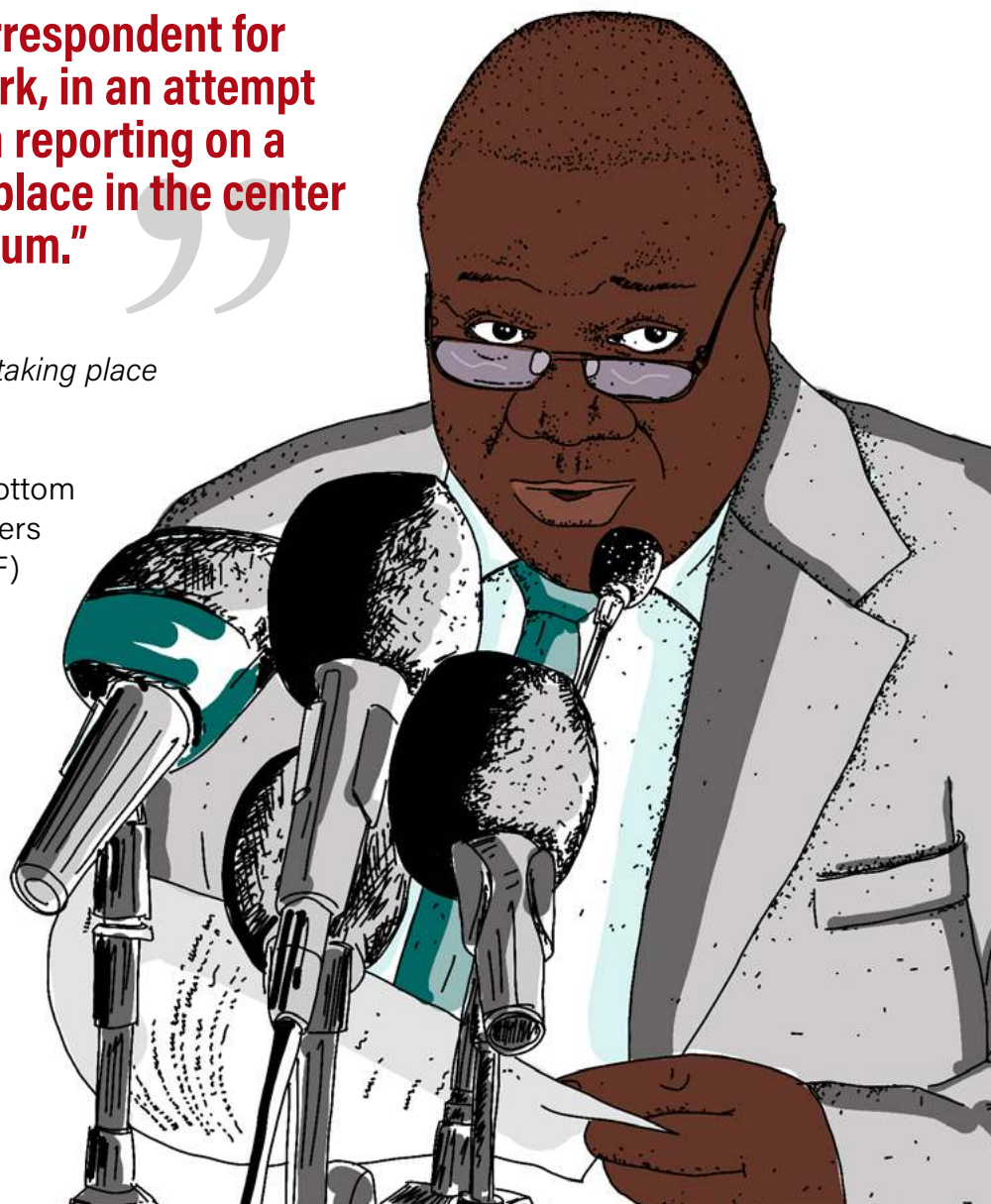
The Sudan News Agency (SUNA) is the only news agency and is state-owned. Several privately-owned newspapers are widely distributed, however rising prices are leading to a drop-in distribution. Radio is widely listened to throughout Sudan. The different regions have area-specific radio stations, like Dabanga Radio for Darfur. National and satellite TV are also broadly viewed, although the quality of the production of local stations varies widely.

Although freedoms are much improved since the transitional government took over, freedom of expression is still not fully granted. Some journalists still worry about being taken in for questioning, being asked to reveal their sources and being detained by security forces. In the protests of October 2020, *"security forces wearing plain clothes and carrying batons surrounded Saad Eddin Hassan, a correspondent for the Al-Arabiya network, in an attempt to prevent him from*

***"Security forces wearing plain clothes and carrying batons surrounded Saad Eddin Hassan, a correspondent for the Al-Arabiya network, in an attempt to prevent him from reporting on a demonstration taking place in the center of Khartoum."***

*reporting on a demonstration taking place in the center of Khartoum."*<sup>9</sup>

Sudan ranks among the bottom 10 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) annual press freedom index. RSF says persecution of the media during anti-government protests at the end of 2018 was "unprecedented in scale" and information indicates security risks are still high for journalists who speak out against the Transitional Government. ...





Under the Bashir regime, media freedoms were more openly constrained. Previously, amendments to the Press and Publication Act (2009), which had targeted print media, expanded the powers of the National Press Council (NPC), the party-controlled national press monitoring body, to include monitoring of online platforms in their remit. The amendments, made in 2018, included additional penalties and fines for individual journalists and writers, as well as editors-in-chief, making the latter criminally accountable for content published on their platform. Since the regime fell in 2019, Sudan has jumped up 16 places according to the Reporters Without Borders index. In 2020 UNESCO started a project with the SJU to begin reforming the press monitoring frameworks, laws and bodies in accordance with the Multi-Donor Program for Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists (MDP).

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**Since the regime fell in 2019, Sudan has jumped up 16 places according to the Reporters Without Borders index.**

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Financing in the media sector is largely dominated by the government and wealthy individuals, and advertisements remain the main source of revenue for print and TV media. Given the moribund state of the economy, many of the wealthy individuals behind media organizations have histories with the ancien regime or

benefited from its patronage networks. Previously, revenues from advertising were given only to regime loyalists, as incentives. This made media easy to control since the lion's share of capital was in the hands of party members. Owning media outlets or printing presses was expensive and required a special permit from the government. The transitional government is in the process of reforming the laws that restrict media production and distribution, a number of newspapers and TV stations have since been confiscated by the transitional government due to their links with the former regime. There are no independent rating bodies for any of the media platforms.

Distribution networks and links between stakeholders are very straight forward: either the stakeholder calls for a press conference to share their news or they send it in to SUNA for release. SUNA, in turn, shares it in news bulletins that are shared with all newspapers and TV. ●●●



### III. INFORMATION SUPPLY



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The papers and stations are then free to write about the news in-depth and contact the source for more details. Many factors affect the flow of information, the main one being poor media infrastructure in the states. Sudan's other 17 states often lack the capacity to print or run their own nationwide TV channels, because of the lack of infrastructure and investment in the 'peripheries.'

The national electrification rate in Sudan is only 32.6%, with rural areas having only 17.6% access to electricity.<sup>10</sup> With some glaring discrepancies with Khartoum, the availability and reliance on internet-powered news media is impacted. The official news flow is also very center-oriented meaning most of what is reported is reflective of events in Khartoum or seen *from* Khartoum. ●

<sup>8</sup> Arab Media Outlook 2011-2015 (PDF), 2012, p. 207.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sudan-security-forces-attack-journalists-and-obstruct-reporting-on-protests.html#:~:text=The%20Sudanese%20authorities%20have%20repeatedly,media%20freedom%20and%20union%20rights.&text=It%20introduced%20new%20legal%20provisions,the%20removal%20of%20press%20accreditations.>

<sup>10</sup> United Nations Environment Program - Sudan Energy Profile [https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/20596/Energy\\_profile\\_Sudan.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#:~:text=The%20national%20electrification%20rate%20in,\(World%20Bank%2C%202016\).](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/20596/Energy_profile_Sudan.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y#:~:text=The%20national%20electrification%20rate%20in,(World%20Bank%2C%202016).)

## 3.2 DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

### DIGITAL PLATFORMS

**D**igital media is a burgeoning sector in Sudan. However, it is much hampered by the infrastructural constraints surrounding access to electricity and payments for content. While print media is more expensive to run and many newspapers turned to online platforms during the COVID-19 lockdown, barriers to online payments caused, chiefly, by the US' State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST) designation of Sudan, nominally lifted in December 2020, mean that digital news has yet to fully take off. Google, YouTube and Facebook advertisements and online media and news websites do not show in Sudan due to the SST designation, meaning that sites, international or local, cannot make a profit from advertising in Sudan. Further, informative adverts or service announcements related to COVID-19 from the WHO and UNICEF which are available worldwide, are not accessible in Sudan.

International established media companies such as Aljazeera.net (in Arabic), BBC Arabic and Sky News Arabia, as well as news channels from the MENA region, are also available. Survey data shows that 71.8% of those asked access COVID-19 information on online news platforms such as these.

18% of respondents say they never use online media, the majority of whom live in South Kordofan. Given double marginalization of refugees by the Sudanese state, coupled with decades of neglect and conflict in South Kordofan, this is not surprising. This finding indicates that while many use their phones to access media online, a great number of people in more peripheral contexts use their phones for calling and texting only, which may be linked to poor internet connectivity.

### SOCIAL MEDIA AS A NEWS SOURCE

Social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, with both official and unofficial information, remain popular as they are free, mobile-friendly, and do not require a

strong connection to function adequately. According to the baseline IEA, there are only 13.39 million internet users in Sudan, that is 31% of the population, while 32.8 million people have mobile phones (72% of the population). Despite the relatively large numbers of internet users, given the constraints outlined above, there are only 1.3 million active social media groups.

Data collection found that 45% of respondents say they always use online media sources for information, with an equal level of response across the 5 states. A significant proportion (70%) of respondents say they access information, both official and unofficial, on COVID-19 through social media, marrying together overlapping information ecosystems. In Sudan, social media is growing as an independent platform attracting large audiences among, especially the urban younger generation. Online platforms benefit from the freedom found on the Internet and more activists, politicians, and journalists are using this space to express their views. ●

#### 3.3 MEDIA AND JOURNALIST ASSOCIATIONS AND REGULATORS

**T**he Sudan Journalists' Union (SJU, Arabic: Itihad al Sahafiyeen al Sudanyeen) has been the only union for journalists. Its membership requires the passing of board exams, after which membership cards are issued. As the main body representing journalists, it was consulted by the government regarding regulations and reforms of the media and is the only body that the government negotiates with about freedom of the press and the right to protect journalistic sources. The Union is currently inactive due to disagreements with the transitional government after its leadership was embroiled in dealings with the ousted Bashir regime. After the fall of Bashir, the SJU was targeted; its head Sadiq Ibrahim, who was perceived as loyal

to the former regime, was arrested and detained for several days.

The union neither advocates for journalists' pay, nor for improved working conditions as journalism is known to be a highly valued but low-paid career path. Journalists' pay tends to be regulated by the market, a symptom of the neo-liberal practices that epitomized the Bashir regime. This union is one of the remnants of the defunct regime and, based on the regime's Unions Law, all those who work in the media are part of the union, irrespective of their level of training. This law remains a challenge under the current transitional government but is being reviewed.

Sudanese journalists have well-defined but unwritten regulations, based on social norms that govern their self-censorship. These govern issues that are mostly considered taboo or in bad faith or taste, such as attacking family

members of politicians and showing pictures of the children of politicians. Successive governments have had complicated relationships with the SJU. They have availed land which has been developed into housing for card-carrying members of the union and have instituted official medical insurance programs for journalists. Conversely, governments have also treated journalists with suspicion, particularly those who are organized into the union. During the pandemic, there was a tension between the transitional government and journalists. In June 2020, the transitional government cracked down on 211 newspapers<sup>11</sup> considered to be loyal to the former regime, suspected of spreading misinformation. Many journalists therefore lost their income at a critical time, where the national lockdown increased the proportion of people nationwide slipping into poverty. ●●●



### III. INFORMATION SUPPLY



Sudanese General Authority for Radio and Television Broadcasting (SGARTB) regulates all radio and TV content, all of which draws news from official sources. Press is regulated through the National Press Council (NPC) a self-regulating body that is in practice heavily appointed and influenced by the government or often pro-government bodies such as the SJU. It has the authority to stop print and publications and revoke the licenses of media bodies. The most recent examples of the seizure of newspapers were in 2016, from June until the end of the year, as that period had seen sharp rises in prices and greater dissatisfaction with the NCP regime.

■ First, Akhir Lahza daily print was confiscated on June 30, 2016.

■ This was followed by the confiscation, on August 16 of four different daily newspapers – Al-Akhbar, Al-Ahram Al-Youm, Al Mihjar Al-Siyasi, Al-Sayha – for publishing interviews with rebel leaders.

■ On 11 October, Al-Watan daily newspaper prints were confiscated due to published stories on the doctor's strike and the general state of health in Sudan, which exposed the regime's lack of investment in public services.

■ On November 7, Al-Tayyar Al-Jareeda and Al-Watan were subjected to the same treatment when they printed stories on rising inflation and the subsequent speculation of the lifting of subsidies on key commodities.

■ On December 1, five newspapers were confiscated (Al-Jareeda, Al-Tayyar, Al-Youm Al-Taly, Al-Ayam and Al-Watan)

because they reported on the civil disobedience that had lasted three days and was a key demonstration of popular disgruntlement with the Bashir regime.<sup>12</sup>

■ The Aljazeera Khartoum Office was closed on June 3rd 2019, the day of the massacre at the sit-in protest site. This was a move by the TMC to curb the global attention on the revolution and to the government's violence that punctuated it.

For the transitional government, which retains many staff and behaviors of the Bashir regime, old habits die hard. Since the beginning of lockdown there has been a crackdown on journalists which has resulted in the closure of 21 newspapers. ●

<sup>11</sup>Sudan: Media crackdown escalates amid COVID-19 pandemic, June 2020 <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/sudan-media-crackdown-escalates-amid-covid-19-pandemic.html>

<sup>12</sup>Information Ecosystem Assessment (2016)





#### 3.4 LOCAL RELEVANCE OF INFORMATION

**U**nder the Bashir regime, media freedoms within both official and unofficial parts of the information ecosystem, were more openly constrained. Since the regime fell in 2019, Sudan has jumped up 16 places according to the Reporters Without Borders index. Amendments to the Press and Publication Act (2009), which had targeted print media, expanded the powers of the National Press Council (NPC), the party-controlled national press monitoring body, to include monitoring of online platforms in their remit. The amendments, made in 2018, included additional penalties and fines for individual journalists and writers, as well as editors-in-chief, making the latter criminally accountable for content published on their platform. UNESCO has started a project with the SJU to begin reforming the press monitoring frameworks, laws and bodies in accordance with the Multi-

Donor Program for Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists (MDP).

Access to local, relevant information is usually gathered through community correspondents who report local news, from local outlets/sources, to urban-based journalists, centralizing the information. The newspaper with the highest circulation is the daily tabloid *Al Dar*, which favors sensationalist stories of local crime stories that tend to capture the imagination of readers the longest. The reach of the newspaper is nationwide, and with the prospect of insecurity having been cultivated through the rhetoric of the former regime, *Al Dar* was utilized to hold the public's interest and acting as a convenient distraction from national-level politics.

Radio is very important across the country, in part, but not exclusively, because of low literacy rates. Sudan's traditionally oral culture makes radio, rather than print media, universally popular, even when radio ●●●



stations often use print media as the basis of their news, with many news programs engaging directly with newspaper headlines and report. In conflict contexts, radio also becomes an important social cohesion tool, marrying together different languages and cultures in programming. In Darfur, radio has also been useful for vulnerable populations, informing them of the location and intensity of fighting in nearby areas. Dabanga Radio, one such Darfur-radio station, provides breaking news from Darfur, through community correspondents, through it is based in the Netherlands, for security reasons.

Community media for local consumption is generally highly localized and disseminated through social media rather than official media channels. During the COVID-19 lockdown, these channels of communication helped transfer health messages to remote locations in record time. However, the information provided via these local community media, including

WhatsApp groups and unofficial Instagram news outlets, are not always the most reliable information especially when it comes to medical information. For example, during the early days of the outbreak it was rumored that drinking tea and eating mangos would prevent COVID-19 infection. That piece of information was circulated very quickly and widely, and it became difficult to stop the spread of it or, indeed, to disprove it.

Regarding the use of media to inform the public in conflict areas and with internally displaced people, key findings from Justice Africa Sudan's<sup>13</sup> COVID-19 awareness campaign revealed the following:

1. There was no government awareness program in El Obeid, especially among IDPs as the pandemic spread. The only measures taken by the government, such as lockdown and travel bans, were enforced in Khartoum.
2. There was an abundance of misleading information spread through rumors,

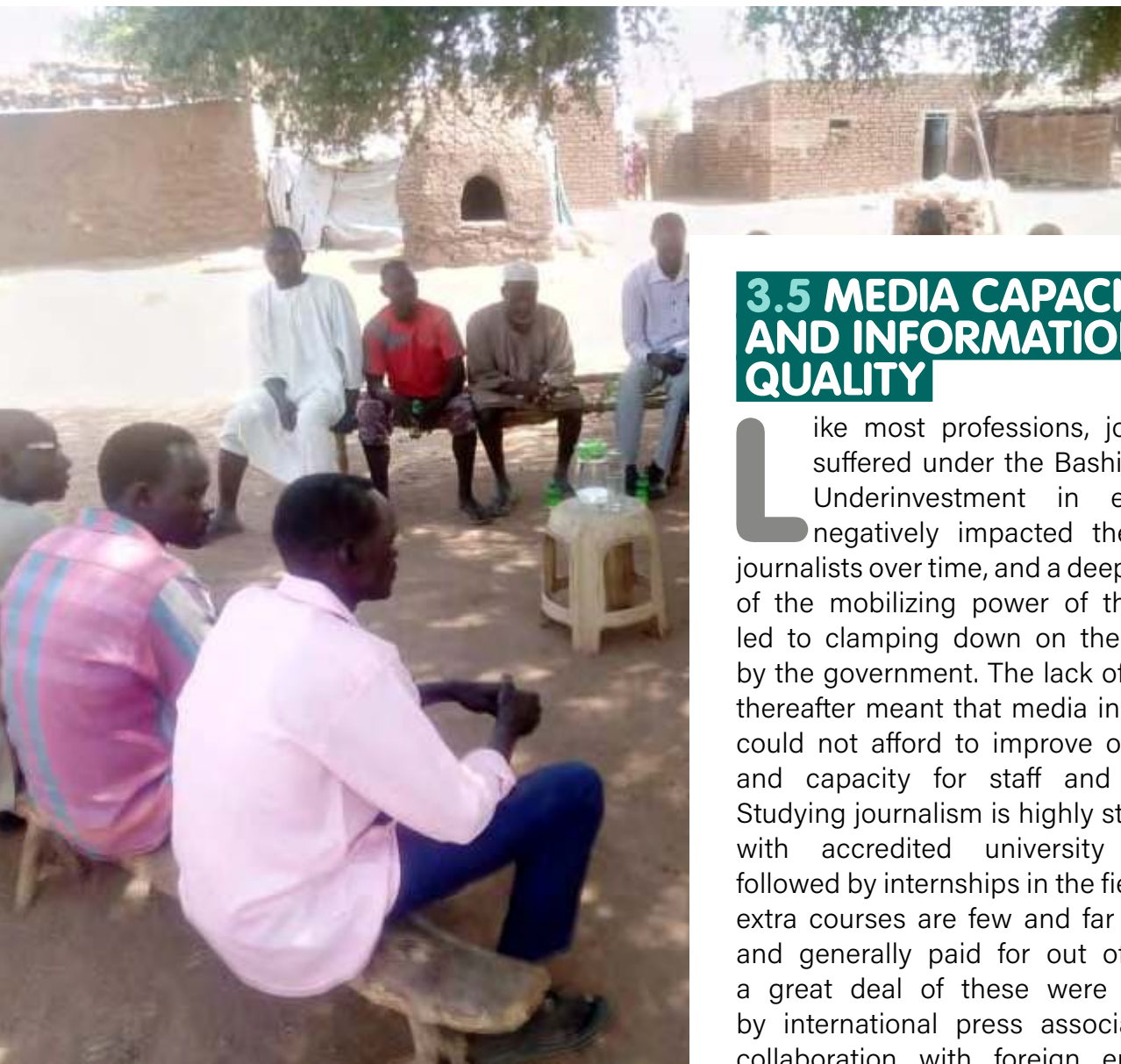
such as 'there is no COVID-19'. A lot of this misinformation was designed to scaremonger or to downplay the threat of COVID-19.

3. The COVID-19 emergency committee is no longer as active and there are currently no daily briefings or news conferences. However, the government is still running adverts through TV and Radio broadcasts. The discontinuation of the COVID-19 briefings the public the perception that COVID-19 has disappeared and that the government's engagement with the pandemic is politically motivated.

4. In remote areas of South Kordofan many people had never heard about COVID-19; the dissemination of information was so poor that even health workers were not informed about the pandemic. Focus group discussion data from South Kordofan and Blue Nile, where respondents reported not knowing about the pandemic well into the 2020 lockdown, support this. ●

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<sup>13</sup>Interview with Justice Africa Director, January 2021



#### 3.5 MEDIA CAPACITY AND INFORMATION QUALITY

**L**ike most professions, journalism suffered under the Bashir regime. Underinvestment in education negatively impacted the quality of journalists over time, and a deep mistrust of the mobilizing power of the media led to clamping down on the industry by the government. The lack of revenue thereafter meant that media institutions could not afford to improve on quality and capacity for staff and content. Studying journalism is highly structured, with accredited university courses followed by internships in the field. Many extra courses are few and far between and generally paid for out of pocket; a great deal of these were provided by international press associations in collaboration with foreign embassies

based in Sudan. For technical classes that require sophisticated IT equipment, journalists would almost always travel outside the country to receive the training.

Since the revolution, journalists have more capacity to verify and disseminate information, especially if the information in question is government or health-related news, as this can be corroborated through data checks and interviews carried out more freely. However, 18 months after the revolution, the Bashir-era practice of not deviating from official news and seeking corroboration of information and thereby risking censorship and crackdown still remains. With the changing operating standards, media actors are aware that they must pivot away from these internalized practices and operate differently to maximize existing opportunities. ●●●



However, engendering high quality standards may prove difficult, time-consuming and labor-intensive as the Islamist project, masterminded by the scholar and politician Hassan al-Turabi, entered the political sphere as a “civilizing project” intended to breakdown the structures that existed before the 1989 coup. The media industry will take time to recover from the structural deterioration of media standards and media freedoms. Sudan no longer has a culture of investigative journalism, with journalists tending to focus on editorials and opinion pieces. This is largely because media outlets are under-resourced and so do not invest in training programs. Due to the US’ State Sponsor of Terrorism designation (nominally lifted in October 2020, but as yet not finalized), it is difficult for media outlets to make money through digital platforms that they could then reinvest in training opportunities. In addition, Sudanese journalists and

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**Due to the US’ State Sponsor of Terrorism designation (nominally lifted in October 2020, but as yet not finalized), it is difficult for media outlets to make money through digital platforms that they could then reinvest in training opportunities.**

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broadcasters have been excluded from many international and online training opportunities.

During the NCP years, the political opposition consisted mainly of the Sudan Communist Party (SCP) and the Sudan Congress Party, both of which drew constituencies from urban, educated people, and the armed groups, notably the Sudan Liberation Army Abdel Wahid faction led by Abdel Wahid Al-Nur. These groups continue to produce the most

timely and targeted information, intended to rally people or instigate action, which means, however, it is not always the most accurate. This tradition has continued into the transitional period, with the deposed NCP now taking the role of political opposition through their newspapers, such as Al-Intibaha.

Self-censorship is practiced especially when it comes to scandals, be they financial or those within a politician’s private life, as these are seen to be firmly inside the personal rather than the political sphere. This notion follows the Hadith: ‘He who protects his Muslim brothers’ honor (or forgives his trespasses) God will forgive his trespasses in this world and the next’ (Muslim following Abu Huraira following the Prophet). For this reason, even the daily tabloid, Al-Dar, anonymizes names in exposés of private scandals and does not expose politicians’ personal scandals.●



#### 3.6 COVID 19 INFORMATION COORDINATION MECHANISMS

**D**uring the COVID-19 lockdown spanning the months of March to September 2020, the government appointed a media task force to the Ministry of Health to inform news outlets and the public directly of infection and death rates through daily press conferences at SUNA. This task force quickly ran out of funding, and daily briefings were taken over by the Ministry of Information. This modality of top-down information dissemination is reminiscent of Bashir-era information management practices. At the beginning of the pandemic, in early 2020, the transitional government had only been in power for five months and its attempts to inform the public on COVID-19 took place before it was able to strategize on effective communications.

The government formed a multi-sectoral Higher Committee for Emergencies (HCE) in early 2020 to lead on the pandemic

response. As part of this task force, the MoH and the Mol worked together to provide information to the public through the media in daily press conferences, led by the Mol. Despite challenges to inter-ministerial coordination faced by the transitional government, the handover of the COVID-19 briefings was relatively smooth. Data and directives from the conference were then disseminated through print and television media. Information was distributed and shared between media stakeholders and the messages covered the impact on the pandemic and the lockdown on the informal economy and precarious workers. The Minister of Information, who often gave the briefing, was candid about the potential destabilizing impact of the pandemic on the public's faith in the government and the transition towards democracy, marking a distinct departure from Bashir-era communications practices.

There were attempts to adapt information on COVID-19 to local interests and realities, for example, in addition to posters and leaflets handed out by the government in coordination with INGOs (e.g. Plan

International) and UN agencies (especially WHO and UNICEF), international NGOs such as Care International and Plan International instituted drive-by announcements in Khartoum and Omdurman (Khartoum State), Kassala (Kassala State), Kosti and Eldueim (White Nile) to inform people about how to take care of themselves. These messages resonated with both those with limited literacy and those who could not access written information and the public more generally as it tapped into Sudan's oral culture of storytelling. However, FGD respondents reported that the initiative was not carried out for long enough to have a longer-term impact on targeted communities, nor was there much effort to engage with communities on the information presented.

Investigative journalism regarding COVID-19 was not very strong in the beginning of the pandemic, with many rumors circulating regarding the prevention of the disease. This had led the MoH to start focusing on ad hoc fact-checking and spending time during press conferences correcting false information. ●

## IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

(information communities needs most and how they access it)

### 4.1 INFORMATION NEEDS AND GAPS

#### INFORMATION NEEDS

Information needs on the symptoms of COVID-19 and whether it has come to the local areas or not are usually addressed through informal means such as through social media. Information needs on a wider range of subjects such as what support is available are usually unmet through both official and unofficial channels.<sup>14</sup> Despite the lockdown's detrimental impact on the economy, information on rescue and stimulus measures, which was of grave importance to respondents, was missing in the daily government announcements. More than the threat of infection, the impact on livelihoods was keenly felt during both waves of the pandemic.<sup>15</sup>

Only some refugees living in camps felt informed about aid. However, no IDPs or refugees reported being completely

well-informed or having received good information about aid and access to humanitarian relief. Other vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities and the elderly reported the same. Migrant and host communities were better informed though they are often not the direct targets of such programming. This indicates a large gap in aid outreach.

In West Darfur where conflict-related curfews preceded and followed the lockdown, there was no respondents reported feeling "completely informed." This indicates that the government's crisis communications take on a similar modality for conflict as well as public health related communications.

#### GAPS

Many information gaps exist for displaced people and host communities. The biggest gaps reported across the five states were in information related to education and jobs during the pandemic.

Across all five states, respondents overwhelmingly reported that they were not informed on school openings, labor measures, or state aid towards employment support. This was acutely so in Kassala and Blue Nile states, where no respondents reported being "completely informed." This is despite the MOLSD's cash transfer program and social security support being rolled out across some of the states.

Survey data shows that the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 were understood by 34.6% of IDPs and 53.8% of members of host communities. However, only 3.8% of migrants and no refugees reported feeling completely informed on signs and symptoms of COVID-19. Similar figures are observed for knowledge of COVID-19 prevention measures. The most obvious reason for this is linguistic; most of the information disseminated on the pandemic was only communicated in Arabic. ●●●

## Graph 2. Information and People's Needs

In general, do you feel you have enough information to meet your needs?



While 73% of migrants and refugees are able to speak Arabic, many are not able to read it. A significant proportion of IDPs reported having very little (28.1%) or no (35.7%) understanding of signs of COVID-19 infection. Host communities were better informed about these, with 53.8% reporting that they felt completely informed. Meeting information needs is hindered by the unidimensional way that information has been disseminated. Only 2.8% of people felt fully informed by being able to ask questions or provide feedback about COVID-19 messaging. Similarly, 34.1% responding feeling not very informed and 18.8% not at all informed by being able to ask questions or provide feedback on messaging.

In Kassala, while there is sufficient information about COVID-19 as a disease, there remains an information gap in relation to accessing resources such as isolation centers. Furthermore, centralization of resources has led to a scarcity of pandemic measures and assistance for the secondary impact of the pandemic, namely the economic impact.●

<sup>14</sup>Sudan Corona Virus COVID-19 Country Preparedness and Response Plan CPRP <https://www.who.int/health-cluster/countries/sudan/Sudan-COVID-19-Response-Plan-2020.pdf?ua=1>

<sup>15</sup>Justice Africa Sudan runs many projects in North Kordofan and South Kordofan involving income generating activities in Al-Rahad town in North Kordofan, employing around 150 IPD women. In March 2020, Justice Africa's COVID-19 awareness program utilized a number of female activists to support the program's dissemination of information about COVID-19 and how to stop its spread through social distancing and hand washing.

### 4.2 ACCESS - CHANNELS AND RESOURCES

Official and formalized channels such as radio (67.8%), TV (75.5%) online platforms (70.9%), and mixed but informal social media (70%) and messaging applications (69.8%), are the main channels always or often used to access information on COVID-19 and are used concurrently. Data sets for responses to online media (mostly official) and social media (mixed) were nearly identical, likely because online media content is more easily shared on social media, demonstrating a key area of overlap between official and unofficial information ecosystems.

Newspapers are the least accessed medium, with the largest number of respondents saying that they never access information through newspapers.

Access through newspapers correlated strongly with distrust in government, with 61% of respondents who reported not accessing information through newspapers saying that they have little or no trust in government. Only 8% of newspaper readers have absolute trust in the government, perhaps due to the legacy of the NCP-era practice of government censorship of newspapers.

International channels, especially Arabic-language channels, appear to be more attractive to viewers for entertainment than local channels. This creates a skewing in the market and has led to closure of private media channels.<sup>16</sup> While many television channels are free and available to the public, access depends on affordability of television sets and, for international channels, satellite dishes.

Social media had gained popularity in Sudan during the years leading up to the Sudanese Revolution of 2018, where

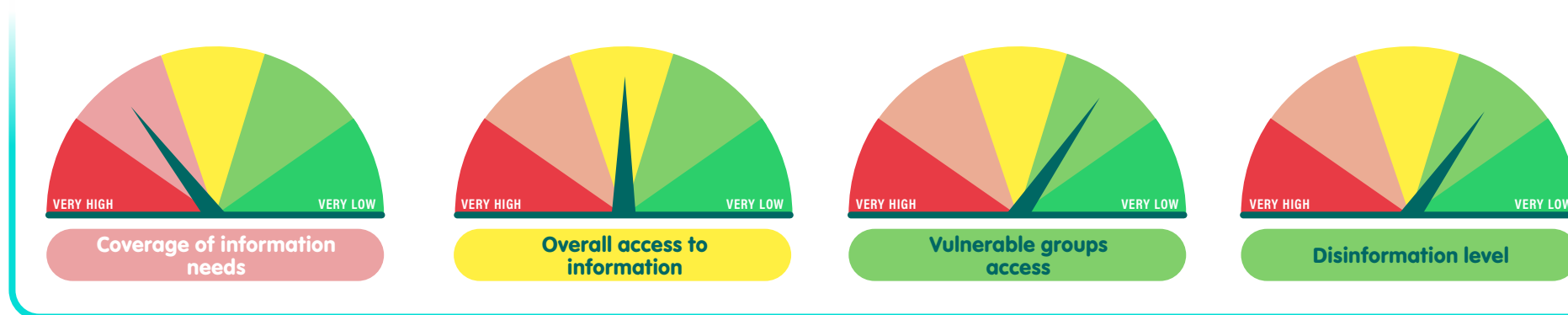
social media gained traction as a platform for activism and advocacy.

Across the states surveyed, informal channels, both face-to-face and using WhatsApp, were the highest ranked social channels of access amongst displaced and host communities. While these more socially-oriented access channels are oft-used, other similarly social channels, such as community events and communicating with religious leaders, were not. Data obtained from the survey show that 29.2% of IDPs and 12.5% of migrants do not access COVID-19 information through community events. Only 6.3% of migrants indicated that they always access information from community events compared to 18.8% of IDPs. This could be linked to the relative levels of comfort of migrants in attending community events, as they often travel further away from their own communities than IDPs.





**Graph 3. Information landscape – demand indicators**



...

Overall, IDPs rely as much on face-to-face communication with family and friends (54.7%) to access information about COVID-19 as not (52.8%), indicating that they use a wider range of access channels. In areas of recent displacement, we see high numbers of IDPs accessing data face-to-face. In West Darfur, where conflict broke out during data collection, 39.5% of respondents stated that they sometimes access information through face-to-face interactions with friends

and family, while 20.3% stated that they always do. Refugees are least likely to rely on face-to-face communication with family and friends for this, likely because not all refugees travel with close family members.

The highest rate of accessing information is seen in Kassala, perhaps due to the state's frequent outbreaks of Cholera, Dengue Fever and Chikungunya in recent years. This shows that while communication

seeking strategies may be difficult to engender initially, they can become part of the community coping strategies over the years. Refugee communities in Kassala live either in UNHCR camps or within the border town of Kassala where they are better able to access information than more peripheral towns in Blue Nile and South Kordofan states. ●

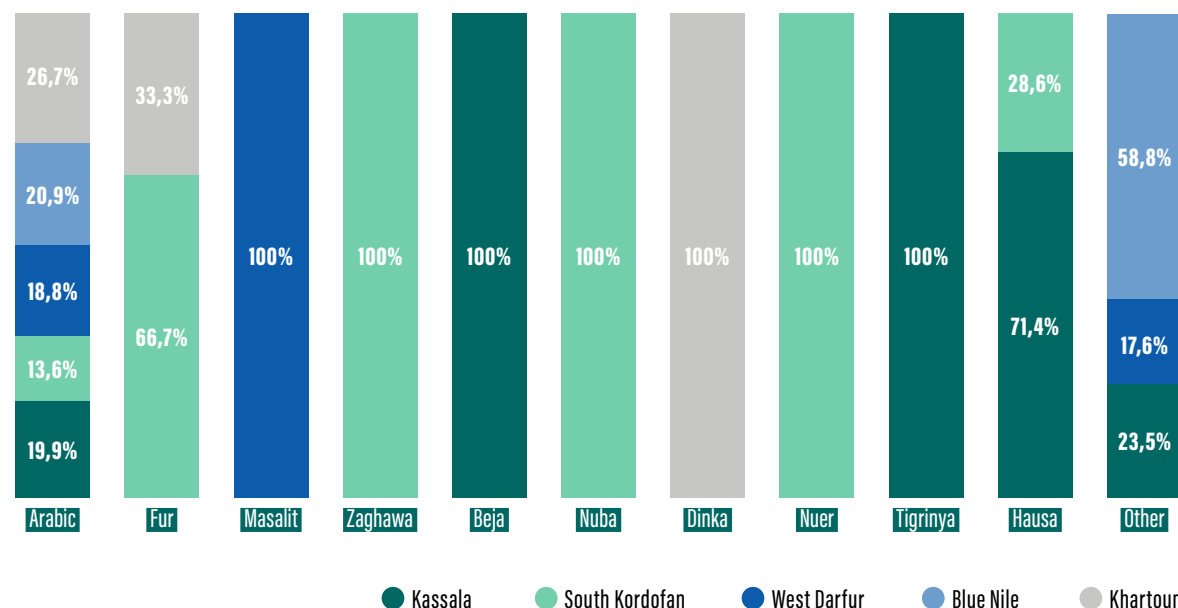
<sup>16</sup>Media Landscapes, Expert Analyses of the State of Media <https://medialandscapes.org/country/sudan/media/television>

### 4.3 MAIN DETERMINANTS AND BARRIERS TO ACCESSING INFORMATION

#### DRIVERS OF INFORMATION: LANGUAGE(S) AND LITERACY, CONTEXT AND CULTURE

Sudan is home to a high degree of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The languages of Sudan include Fur, Masalit, Zaghawa, Beja, Nuba, Dinka, Nuer, Tigrinya, Hausa, amongst others that include dialectical variants. Arabic is the predominant language in the country, the Lingua Franca, and the dominant language in communication and information dissemination. In the state of Kassala, there is a reported small, isolated proportion of those in refugee camp that speak tribal dialects who

**Graph 4. Which is the language most spoken at home?**  
(Grouped by state, in percentage)



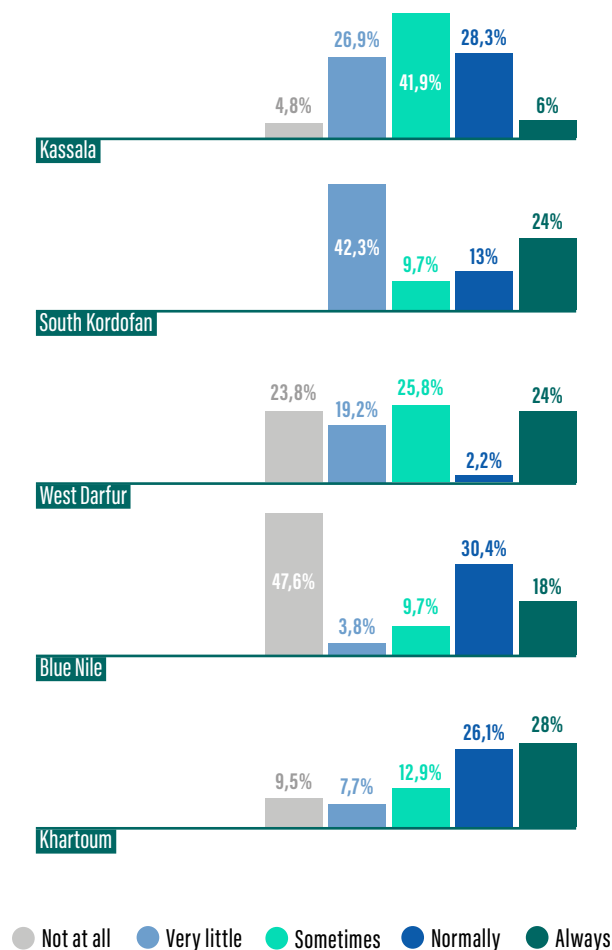
believe that there is no sufficient outreach to their community and that information is not filtered down in a way that is understandable.

In Blue Nile, less widely spoken languages such as Berta and Gumuz are less likely to be engaged with in public announcements, increasing dependence on higher Arabic

language literacy. Blue Nile has been a conflict zone since before Sudan's independence in 1956. Levels of literacy there, particularly around complex scientific or medical issues, may not be conducive to accessing information. The table below shows that Blue Nile respondents reported the highest rates for not getting information in their language of preference.

## IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

**Graph 5.**  
**I get all the information I need in my language of preference**  
(Grouped by state, in percentage)



For states like South Kordofan where there is the greatest variety in languages spoken, this can also translate to a lack of access to information, with a wider proportion of people requiring guidance in their own language. Data on accessing information in mother tongue languages corresponds to responses from host communities as they are the most able to do so. IDPs are the displaced group most able to get information in their language of preference. At the same time, significant numbers of IDPs also report receiving very little to no information in their language of preference. This is likely due to the vast geographic dimension with IDPs in Khartoum more likely to favor Arabic due to ease of access than those in South Kordofan. By contrast, the predominantly Zaghawa speakers in South Kordofan, indicated that the information they receive regarding COVID-19 covers very little of their needs, and a staggering 41.2% of Nuba speakers indicated that their needs are not covered at all.

### SERVICE AND INFRASTRUCTURE BARRIERS

The most prominent barriers to access to information are the unstable power supply – which differs in severity across the five states but is nonetheless a barrier in all states – and the rising costs of internet usage fees. Beyond the rising costs of utilities, extra costs associated with purchasing hardware to receive information are difficult to bear for many.

Perceptions of the veracity of information also constitutes a barrier. There is concern from displaced as well as host communities that the information provided may not be up to date and/or may be incorrect. This could be due to the prevalence of rumors and other unofficial information sources that circulate misinformation competing with official yet untrusted sources. •••

## IV. INFORMATION DEMAND



Context-specificity of information was another noted barrier. Certain publicized preventative measures, such as self-isolation and using hand sanitizers, were not tailored to local realities but instead based on western assumptions regarding living arrangements and needs. For example, fewer people live on their own in Sudan (as opposed to communal living) as do in the west where there

are also fewer concerns about access to services. FGD discussants remarked that social distancing was difficult to do in a refugee camp compared to apartment blocks and that such preventative measures largely excluded them.

In the state of Kassala, the lack of hardware for accessing information (phones, radios, TVs) is a huge barrier

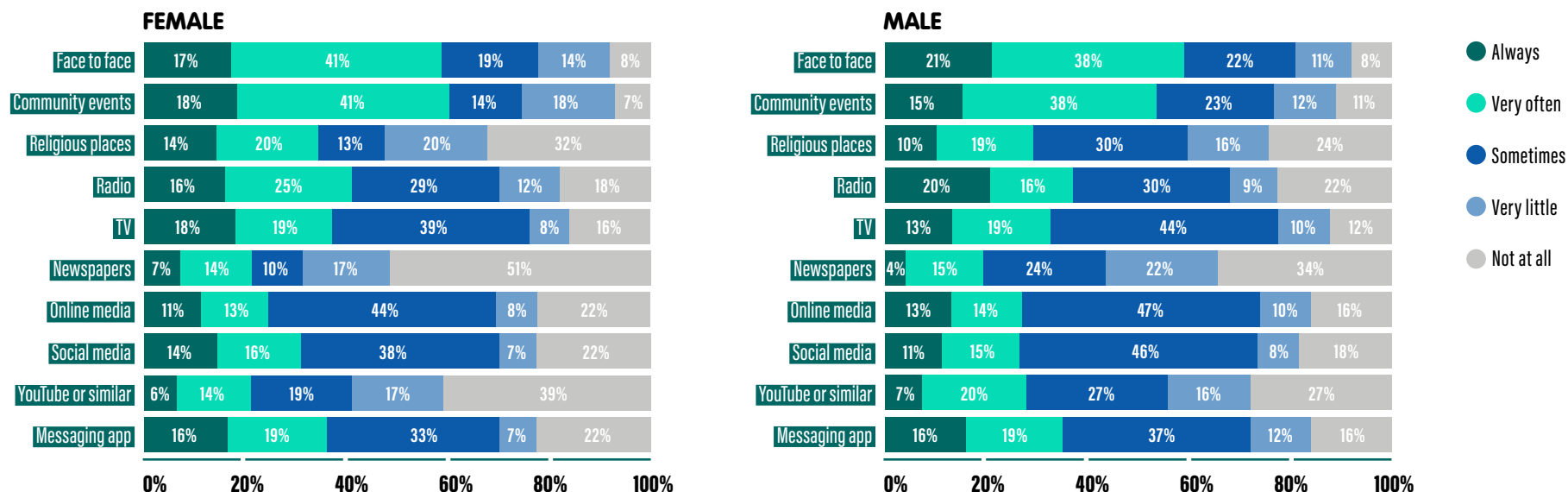
to accessing information. While in South Kordofan, those who do have phones heard the nationwide messaging on COVID-19 before every call made that was created through collaboration with telecommunications companies and has near universal coverage. For those who had little other information this provided only a limited and fairly abstract level of information.





## IV. INFORMATION DEMAND

Graph 6. Gender and Access to Information Sources



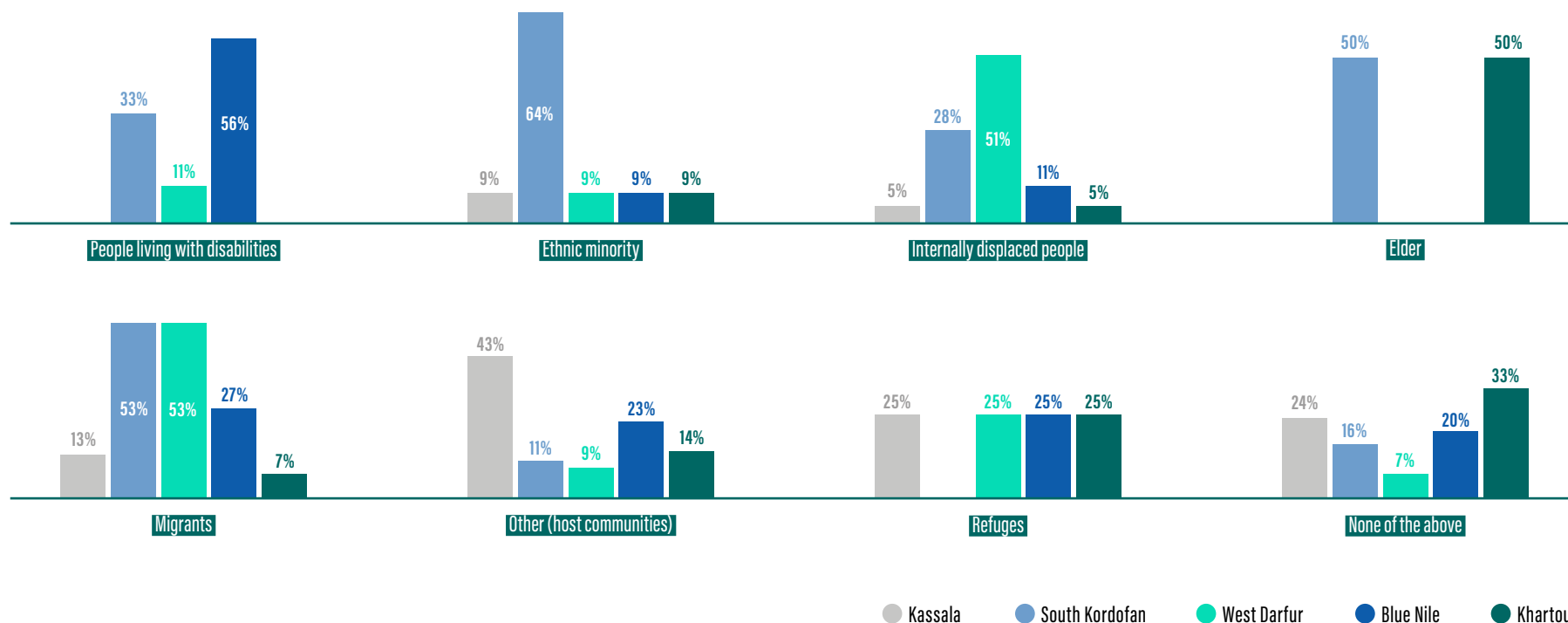
### GENDER AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION SOURCES

Gender segregation customs followed by certain ethnic groups, for instance in South Kordofan, disallow women from being present in places and gatherings where men are also present. In some awareness campaigns that involve public gatherings or those administered in a mixed-sex setting, women were not able to take part due to that custom.

Societal and cultural constructs of gender identity play a role in determining the types of information sources that are accessed by women. Sources of information that are traditionally viewed as “men’s talk”, like newspapers, are less frequently accessed by women. Many more men than women also access information in religious spaces. Women tend to access information through other, less formal, means, such as via

their social circles. Survey data show that women very often access information through TV, compared to a large number of men who do not. This speaks to the prevalence of gender roles, where women are viewed as more domestic and home-bound than men. As for radio, a large percentage of women indicated that they sometimes access information through radio, whereas it was the least preferred channel by men. ●

Graph 7. Vulnerable groups by state



#### 4.4 FOCUS ON VULNERABLE GROUPS

The survey data shows that 31.3% of IDPs indicated that they do not have enough information to meet their needs, while 4.5% of people with disabilities, and 10.4 % of ethnic

minorities, 6.8% of refugees indicated that few of their information needs are covered. 42.9% of IDPs, 8.2% of migrants and 4.1% of refugees indicated that they are not at all informed about ways to ask questions or provide feedback about COVID-19. Similarly, 30.7% of IDPs, 4.4% of migrants and 5.3% of refugees indicated that they

are not at all informed about aid access in relation to the COVID-19 lockdown. The higher percentages seen for IDPs' inability to access information on their needs related to aid and information on COVID-19 vis-a-vis other displacement groups, are arguably due to the higher likelihood of refugees to live in ...



camps, given Sudan's encampment policy, especially for refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia. In camps, access to both information and services is higher, and there is a more dialectical relationship with service providers, allowing for needs to be addressed more easily. IDPs live both within camp setting and outside and so may not have the same access across the IDP demographic that refugees have.

In West Darfur, barriers to behavior change around COVID-19 prevention can be linked to how the implementation of such changes may present an obstacle to livelihoods. There is a sense, from FGD data, that livelihood stability is threatened by adopting these behaviors, which is fueled by economic insecurity. People who work on wage labor or in the informal market (around 60% of the population according to UNDP Sudan<sup>17</sup>) saw that their livelihood challenges outweighed the dangers of COVID-19. Subsistence farmers were similarly

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### **In West Darfur, barriers to behavior change around COVID-19 prevention can be linked to how the implementation of such changes may present an obstacle to livelihoods.**

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impacted by lockdown, where farming essentially stopped, creating more food insecurity on a wider scale. This was a chief reason that no second lockdown took place, and that the first lockdown was not universally adhered to. In camp settings some of the refugees preferred to go to other camps in search of better services there. Many said that some other prevention measures, such as social distancing, were not possible in

camps. Other changes to behavior, such as buying soap, was not feasible for many and the messaging around COVID-19 prevention was largely conflict insensitive and did not fit the economic, social and displacement contexts.

High divorce rates due to lockdown also increased vulnerability for some. In Kassala, focus group discussants reported increased food insecurity amongst host populations linked to complications in family and social dynamics as respondents report higher rates of divorce due to loss of income. There is a strong gender dynamic involved since, as per social norms, men are the breadwinners for the family, and the difficulties created from food insecurity and economic hardships compromise the accepted traditional role of men in families, which creates strain on marriages and families. ●

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<sup>17</sup>UNDP Sudan- About Sudan <https://www.sd.undp.org/content/sudan/en/home/countryinfo.html>

## V. INFORMATION DYNAMICS

(how individual and communities interact with the information ecosystem and what do they do with the information they access)

### 5.1 TRUST TRUSTING INFORMATION SOURCES

There is a clear lack of trust in information from official sources and local leaders. Almost all information on COVID-19 comes from the government, drawn from information produced by the WHO and aligned with information transmitted by humanitarian actors. Despite this, half of people surveyed reported that having an official source for information on COVID-19 was not important or had very little importance for trust. Here again we see a split amongst IDPs and host communities, or more broadly Arabic speakers and non-Arabic speakers, with far less trust from refugees and migrants. The current fraught political climate is also driving information needs towards a demand or preference for political news sources. This has led to the conflation of COVID-19 news and unrelated political

news and created a polarized atmosphere of COVID-19 beliefs and attitudes. As proximity is important for trust, the absence of the state in Sudan can be linked to both the lack of trust in official sources and the consequently significant trust in loved ones as sources of information, with 57% of respondents reporting that having the information come from a loved one is important for trust.

Beyond socially-generated trust, significant numbers of people surveyed (75.5%) think that information that is corroborated by different sources is important for trust, with responses consistent across states and displacement status including host communities. There have been and continue to be few functional independent or government-led fact-checking outlets on COVID-19, let alone ones adapted to local interests and realities. This includes a lack of third-party verification of government data related to more clinical matters as well as

verification of broader themes related to the pandemic. This gap is likely related to the technically-focused MoH post-revolution, following the introduction of a deliberately technical cabinet, and that the new government is not well-linked to social discourses through robust information management. This is a hangover from the NCP regime that relied on intelligence to feel the public mood. SUNA's body of journalists and information distributors provide some additional information above what was shared by MoH. However, here too, there is no particular focus on fact checking as journalists tend to rely on their own sources for information.

The key aspects to a trusted source also include a high level of detail, which 78.9% of respondents agreed with. Information from official sources on COVID-19 tended to be sparse, with a focus on the basic information, whereas unofficial news sources tended to ●●●

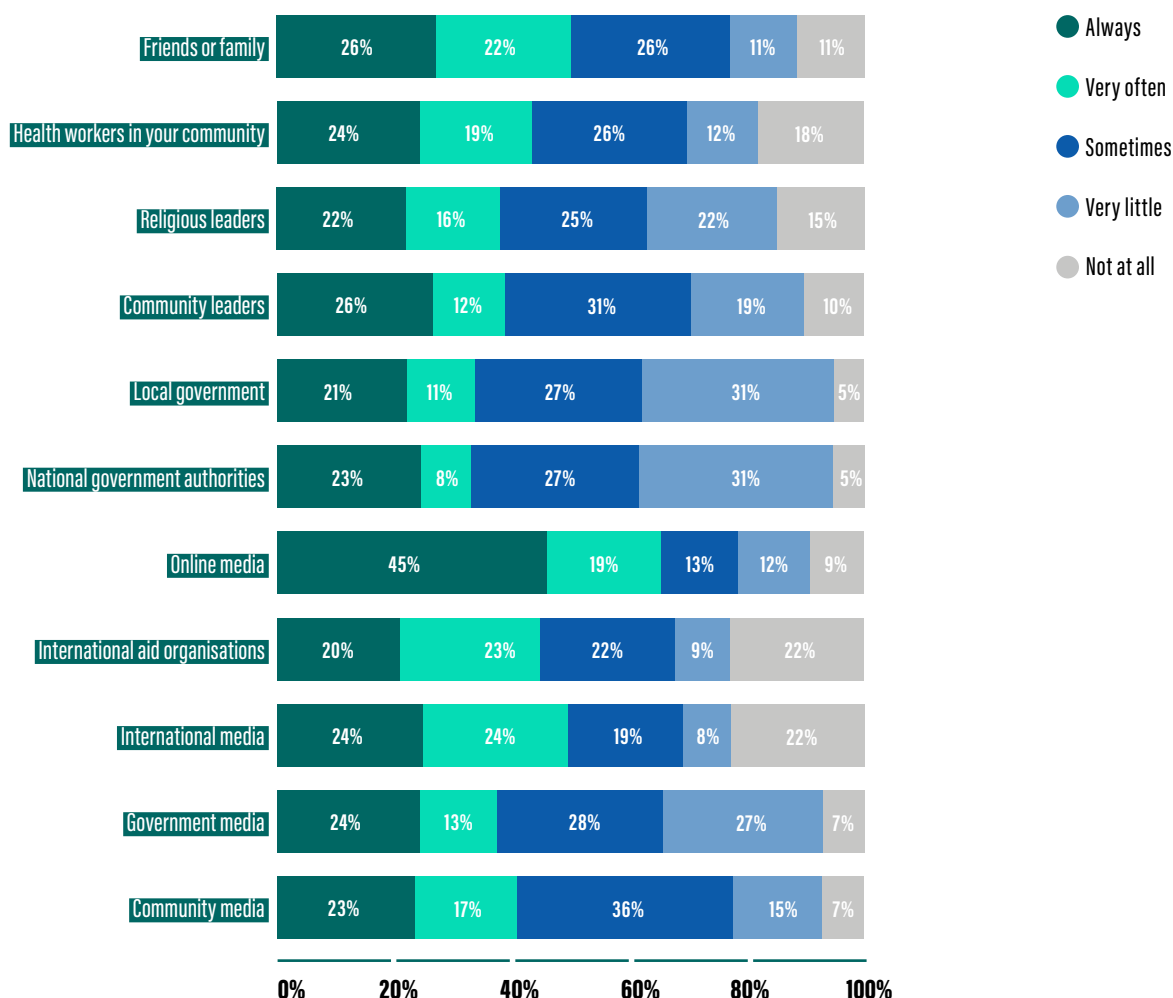




have far more details or embellishments and were more likely to be linked to people's immediate priorities. This has led to a great deal of knowledge of the virus (93.1%) but little engagement with the pandemic. Further, due to the clinical nature of the information received from the MoH, linked to prevention measures from the WHO, rumors related to the pandemic which are rooted in social or political issues were not addressed. Misinformation through social media is difficult to fact-check without scrawling through numerous pages or accounts, making what is accessed through social media is difficult to counter or disprove. Ironically, this has contributed to making social media a trusted source of information.

Rumors about the origin of the novel coronavirus were widely disseminated among respondents across all 5 geographic areas. 43.3% of respondents believe that the virus was human •••

### Graph 8. Criteria for trustworthiness and trusted sources



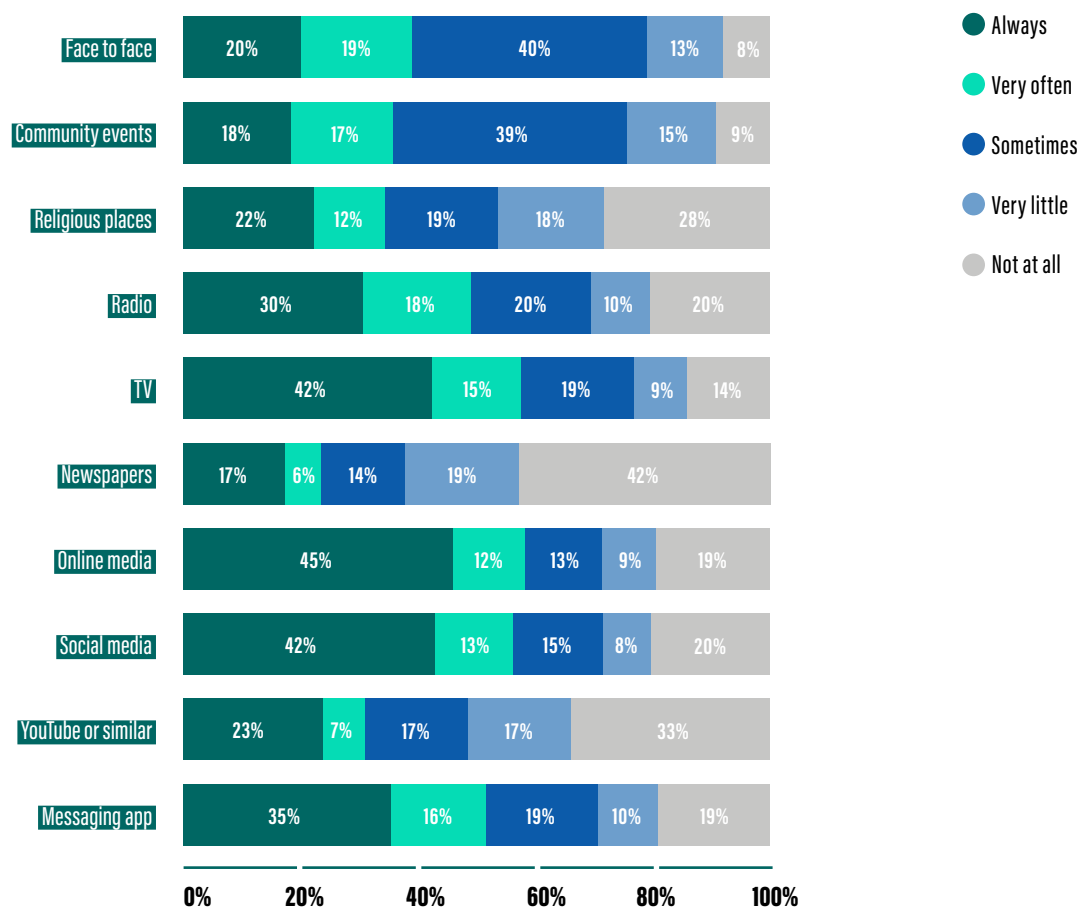


made in China, compared 41.8% who to consider it to be a rumor. This is why significant proportions of respondents (74.6%) report that they trust sources if they heard them on their own rather than from others. There was less ambiguity regarding the effectiveness of the vaccine, with 54.4% believing that the vaccine won't kill as many as the virus, and 22.6% believing it will. There was a clear regional divide with Kassala and West Darfur respondents more likely to consider this rumor true than Khartoum respondents.

### TRUSTING INFORMATION CHANNELS

The FGD data shows that a general mistrust in the government-led response to the pandemic grew because, while infection rates may have been higher than reported (due to fewer tests of live infected people), all deaths are recorded, and many more corpses tested for COVID-19 giving a more accurate reading of COVID-19 ...

Graph 9. Trust in information channels





related deaths. To date<sup>18</sup> (African Union, Centre for Disease Control), rates of infection and deaths linked to COVID-19 are far lower than other countries but also far lower than the messaging around the virus would indicate. Though official COVID-19 deaths are low, mistrust of official sources is so pronounced that the numbers of cases presented by the federal MoH is considered by some to be a pathway to obtaining more aid. This had set up a difficulty for the transitional government made up of, at the time, technocrats who relied on a globalized response to a global pandemic.

Because of this, however, respondents reported on a public discourse that claimed that COVID-19 is a politically mediated disease designed to cover up political issues, tensions, and failures. Much-publicized political issues at the MoH, including the firing of the Minister of Health Dr Akram Al-Tom, also adversely impacted public perception. Some Islamists, now

out of power but still in possession of many media outlets, would continue to publicize such claims, largely built around the former minister's political affiliation (Sudan Communist Party). There was also a perceived hypocrisy around what was seen as selective lockdown rules for the public while government officials continued with publicized governmental events. While this undermined trust in the government's narrative around the dangers of COVID-19, there was also a pressure for the transitional government to show that it was working. Though these stories widely gained traction, the public awareness campaign and its legitimization through the private sector and international actors, as well as news reports from other contexts, ensured

that people believed that a virus did indeed exist. However, there remains the supposition that it was not as deadly as claimed and may be a way for the cash-strapped government to secure international funding. ...





Although radio and TV transmit official news, which is less well-trusted, FGD data suggest that radios and TV, as well as social media (where much radio and TV content is shared) are the most trusted information channels. This contradictory finding is likely due to the limited availability of official news sources outside of the government; people have to have some level of trust in TV and radio as those are the most reliably accessible channels, even though they don't entirely trust the source of the information. The repetition of information can also lend these mediums more credibility. Many people rely on official news sources to triangulate what they have heard through informal news channels, a residual behavior from Bashir-era engagement with media. Not all triangulation finds consistency, however. A women's focus group in South Kordofan in the age group of 25-40 years stated that there is contradicting information presented in various media outlets which feeds the information distrust dynamic.

Another legacy of Bashir's Islamist regime is that religious leaders are not a trusted channel for information. Only 14.6% of respondents indicated that they absolutely trust religious leaders, while 21.8% indicated "not at all", and another 25.3% of respondents indicated they have "very little trust" in religious leaders. Conversely, religious places (i.e. Mosques and churches) are somewhat trusted, with 21.8% of respondents indicating that they always access information from religious places. There is, therefore, a distinction between religious places as information hubs, and religious leaders as information providers.

Only a year after the revolution, Sudan went into lockdown. At this point, the public widely trusted (and mostly continues to trust) neighborhood resistance committees. This is in large part due to their continued provision and distribution of services to their communities, and because of their erstwhile mistrust of

the government (tellingly, the resistance committees have not dropped the work "resistance" from their name). People continue to see the resistance committees as a separate governance structure, distinct from the government, though the two have worked together on several issues, particularly during the COVID-19 response, communicating information of symptoms and preventative measures throughout neighborhoods. 68.9% of respondents reported that community spread of information is important for trust. The presence of alternative governance structures reflects the poor efforts on the part of the government to establish trust with local communities.

Focus group data shows that international media channels tend to be trusted more than local media channels on issues relating to COVID-19. Survey data backs this up with 72.5% absolutely or partially trusting international media and 69.1% reporting that





...

information is trustworthy if it comes from a foreign source. Al-Hadath and Al-Arabia channels (both Saudi Arabian) are better trusted as they are thought to be able to access information from global sources. Community media has very little to no public trust (50.5%) with only 6.5% reporting absolute trust. Conversely, our research shows that community radio is seen as the source of information of reference in camps, but it is not clear whether this is because the information it provides is trusted or because it has become so heavily relied upon. Communities have expressed that they overwhelmingly prefer localized, well-defined and detailed information, that other official channels tend to fail at delivering.

### GENDER AND TRUST OF INFORMATION CHANNELS

Women overwhelmingly trust friends and family as channels of information. This leads some women to verify information

from men relatives. Some women report being denied information by other men. Trust may be controlled by factors of existing gender norms, societal customs, and established familial hierarchies. Men are less likely to trust family members, a trend that is linked to societal norms that foster the independence of men in seeking out formal information sources. Where men do trust more informal sources these tend to be religious leaders.

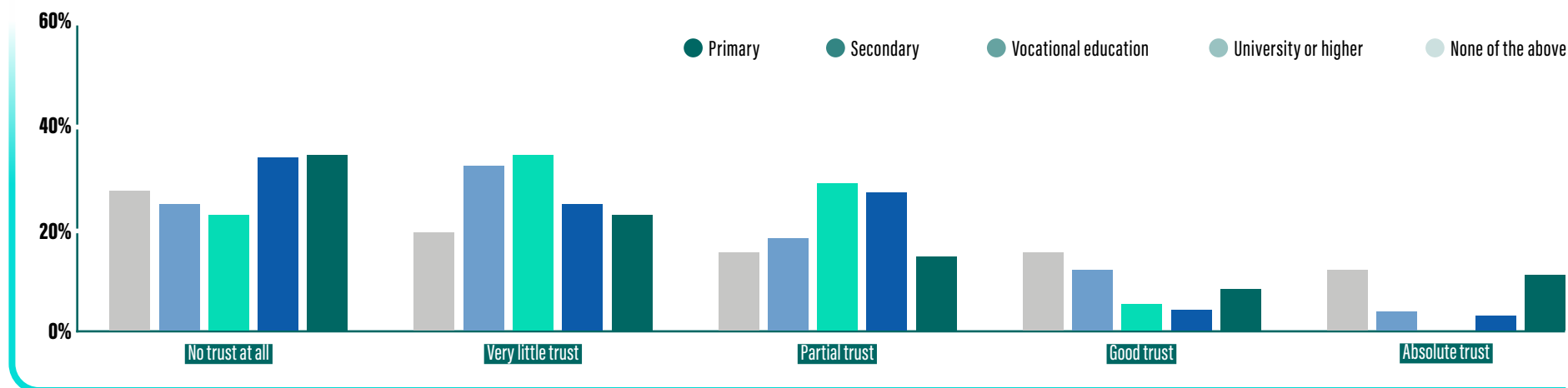
A higher number of women claimed to have absolute trust in community media as information channels compared to men. However, survey data suggest this is evenly split between the genders. When it comes to trust of government media channel, there is a higher tendency of men than women to have good trust of those, correlating with differences in newspaper (overwhelmingly sourced from official sources) readership between the genders. Similarly, more men tend to have a higher level of trust of international media compared to women. ●

**Graph 10.**  
**Trust in community media**



<sup>18</sup>As of March 22, 2021

Graph 11. Educational level and trust in government sources



## 5.2 TRANSMISSION

Informal transmission of information is substantial. Sudanese cultural customs and traditions have played a significant role in shaping the flow and exchange of COVID-19 information. Historically, verbal and oral tradition has played a pivotal role in relaying information and teachings to families and communities throughout the ages. This pattern of information flow has also contributed to dubbing the term *shamarat*, which is colloquial for “gossip”, more than word of mouth, exchanged within close

social and/or family circles. Information is shared informally on individual social media to friends, even if it comes from formal, official government sources. Oftentimes, information is reproduced, filtered and re-circulated in a manner that reflects the personal views of the person sharing the information, or it could also offer supporting information. In this way, there is more comfort when it comes to sharing political news.

Within the context of COVID-19, this may be heightened. For instance, in Khartoum people are more likely to believe

information and subsequently share it if it comes from close family or close social circles. There is great discrepancy across states and this difference can be explained by the social and conflict dynamics in each state: Kassala is the only state that has mostly refugee displaced populations, who may or may not have fled with friends and family members. In West Darfur, community-based transmission of information is high with people most likely to believe information if they hear it from a trusted social source, such as a close family member, a circle of friends, and community.



WhatsApp messaging has been influential in delivering COVID-19 related information, conveying and relaying all types of information relating to news, recent developments in treatments and vaccines, and indiscriminately, pandemic misinformation influx such as hoax medicines, cures, and causes. WhatsApp videos are being shared widely and have cultivated trust in the method of transmission even if the content of the

media is questioned. 34.9% of respondents indicated that they always use WhatsApp messaging to access information about COVID-19.

Educational level is a contributing factor to the way information is transmitted. Across educational levels, people are less likely to trust government sources such as stamp-bearing documentation from MoH and state TV. ●

### 5.3 INFLUENCE

**S**ocial networks which include circles of friends and neighbors remain the most influential means of information when it comes to the retention of information. This is likely due to the repetition of information that chiefly happens within discursive circles, and the dialectical elements that allow for interaction on the subject.

Information that is passed on is filtered through individual beliefs and experiences or those of trusted close social connections. This is directly related to the absence of localized media, that allows for local discourses to take shape independently of facts. However, local discourses do not need to rely on national or international media as Sudan's expansive diaspora networks play a big role in disseminating information. This trusted extension ...







of the circle of family and friends also act as triangulators to check the veracity of information across international borders.

Within local circles, doctors have the most local influence by virtue of both their status within communities and the medical nature of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, local leaders/family who speak the local language or dialect are seen as more influential sources. In both these scenarios the state is conspicuously absent. In camp contexts, educated people are the biggest influencers as they are perceived as being able to tell truth from fiction by virtue of their exposure to learning.

Aid organizations are able to leverage influence by capitalizing on one key weakness of the government: reach and dialogue. Camp-dwelling displaced communities have reported that when information-givers come to engage the target group rather than the other way

around, they are more trusted by the community. Therefore, poor government reach directly correlates to poor government trust and influence.

The emergence of COVID-19 as a novel disease in Sudan has created a milieu of irreconcilable attitudes, beliefs and coping mechanisms all of which influence how information is digested. Because the COVID-19 virus is relatively new and unfamiliar, people have either resorted to spiritual beliefs citing divine intervention or to familiar means of coping which were used with familiar diseases like malaria. A respondent from South Kordofan for instance, dismissed COVID-19 as another type of illness that is like malaria, drawing inference from the effectiveness of traditional medicine for the treatment of the COVID-19 virus.

The influence of the familiar has also led to a particular refrain from West Darfur: "Corona does not affect us Africans,"

**"Corona does not affect us Africans."**

a statement that reflects a coping mechanism that relies on perceptions of the burdens of their politicized identity and social condition. Communities in West Darfur have been consistently marginalized by central government since before Sudan's independence. Since then, they have borne the impact of racialized exclusionary politics and the pandemic's greater impact on Khartoum and other urban areas in the politically strong center, has rebalanced some of that burden, with those in Khartoum least able to manage the outbreak. For many, perceptions of the danger of COVID-19 pale in comparison to those of Malaria, which is considered far more deadly than COVID-19, with verifiable deaths of loved ones for many respondents. ●

### 5.4 IMPACT ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES

**T**hough Sudan has its fair share of communicable and tropical diseases annually, the novel and unknown nature of COVID-19 produced some resistance to complying with information and advice on how to deal with the pandemic. For example, despite the availability to a large proportion of respondents of facemasks, only some respondents reported that they wore a mask throughout the height of the pandemic 2020 and beyond. Part of this could be down to economic reasons, masks used to be priced at 50 SDG, out of the price range of many. However, recently masks have been priced at 20 SDG but that has not changed the practice of not following the information and advice on prevention of infection. Mask wearing

itself became a point of contention within neighborhoods; those who wore masks would be thought to be stigmatizing those who do not, underpinned by an assumption that the mask-less had already contracted COVID-19, conferring pariah status.

An estimated 90% in the neighborhood would not wear masks, according to respondents and only those with jobs in Khartoum would wear masks, either because they feared higher infection rates in town, because it was a job requirement, or because the trend of conforming to COVID-19 guidance was in vogue. Many of these attitudes dovetail with class and social status, even though other restricted social practices such as hand-shaking have continued as usual amongst most groups. The decrease in the price of masks could be that the stipulation for many restaurants and public-facing businesses to open, staff were obligated to wear masks increasing demand. Ironically, ending lockdown increased adherence with prevention

measures although due to necessity rather than belief.

Information-seeking behaviors have had an impact on changing social power dynamics related to age. It is mostly younger kids (not surveyed) who have access to WhatsApp and disseminate information to others. Younger people within the community have also become leaders in behavioral change and adherence to some preventative measures. However, older respondents said that information relayed was often done without differentiating between truth and rumor. Older community members believe in some superstitions (and are less exposed to internet and varied sources), leading to greater likelihood in believing rumors about causes and cures. In mosques, some Imams spread useful information about symptoms and infection (and banned people from congregating), some did not. This behavior correlated strongly ●●●



with political affiliation and support for the former regime. Overall, community radio serves as the most trusted channel for information and engendering behavior change, according to FGD data. People tend to believe community leaders more in rural areas, as balance between official and unofficial information ecosystems is more easily limited and controlled, due to poor infrastructure and distance from the political center.

In the state of South Kordofan, the costs associated with preventative practices are a concern for many, so there is a demand for less costly protection measures. New practices regarding hand washing, social distancing, and mask wearing have been adopted or neglected according to social or economic contingencies, such as livelihoods or social status.

There is a significant value placed on the interplay between preventative measures and religious beliefs, regarding especially

fate. Sudan's Sufi religious traditions mean that there is a reliance on the will of God trumping all infection scenarios: whether someone gets infected with COVID-19 is entirely in God's hands so wearing masks or sanitizing hands is not necessary – what will be will be. Though there exist other scripture and jurisprudence about not exposing one's self to harm, these are largely ignored, perhaps because there is a financial burden attached to advocating for this. Religious beliefs, therefore, influence the processing of information and perceptions regarding the sources and the types of information provided. For example, when mass prayers are prevented but trips to the market are allowed, it raises concerns regarding the state's position on faith, particularly under the new government. According to many respondents in focus groups, faith practices, such as prayer and supplications, are considered sufficient for preventing any illnesses, including COVID-19.

Similarly, local rather than mainstream medicine is preferred due to accessibility, cost and perceived reliability. The astringent 'Garad' (Vachellia Acacia Nilotica plant), which is usually used to treat flu-like symptoms, has been heavily relied upon for overcoming COVID-19 infections.

People's attitudes are also affected by earthly considerations. These can see claims of the spread of the virus intersecting with people's attitudes towards refugees. For example, Kassala state is believed to be an easier target and fertile ground for the rampant spread of COVID-19 due to views regarding Kassala as an influx point for refugees fleeing war and conflicts from neighboring countries. Additionally, considering the epidemiological landscape of Kassala in the history of the diseases it has previously harbored, it is perceived as an easier target for the rampant spread of COVID-19 and a vector of disease. ●

## VI. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION



### 6.1 NATIONAL COVID-19 RESPONSE PLAN

**T**he national COVID-19 response plan was articulated in March by the Health Minister, who has since been dismissed (in July). It included: shutting down the airport; an initially 18-hour (later 12-hour) curfew

that was strongly enforced in more urban areas; requiring masks to be worn in all public places; and the banning of gatherings of more than four people who are non-family members. The MoH, alongside international humanitarian actors and CSOs, led the COVID-19 response plan's messaging while the Higher Committee for Emergencies led the planning and logistics. Since the

start of lockdown, on March 16, Sudan has had 3 ministers of Health, which has weakened the leadership of the response.

In a marked difference with disease response under the Bashir regime, the transitional government was very welcoming of the support from international actors. Many ministers and undersecretaries had worked ...





within the aid sector or for the UN prior to assuming office and many had relationships with key aid actors that they were able to leverage to accelerate funding and in-kind support. The government, in turn, facilitated access to remote areas in the Jebel Marra region, that had been previously very difficult for international actors to enter. This is despite the lingering control of the security apparatus in both government and high-risk areas. NGOs and international actors involved in the COVID-19 response were given authorization and passes so they could move around during curfew.

In May, coinciding with the fasting month of Ramadan, the Ministry of Labor and Social Development, through the neighborhood Resistance Committees, instituted a food drive to deliver food packages to 565,000 families in Khartoum State that were classified as very vulnerable (designated Group C). Those classified as moderately

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**The neighborhood-level resistance committees were put in charge of informing the public, passing down messaging from the government's COVID-19 response, related to daily updates and curfew information, at their neighborhood level.**

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vulnerable (Group B) were given a one-off cash transfer of 3,000 SDG (officially 55 SDG to the US dollar, 110 USD on the parallel market, which decides prices of goods). This also served as a pilot to the government's recently launched Family Support Program (FSP) which aims to lessen the economic shock presented by the lifting of fuel and wheat subsidies planned for the last quarter of 2020. Those who were considered economically comfortable, assigned group A, according to a crude and not very well data-backed method that cross-matched income (through taxation data) and occupational data through the National ID number data, did not receive direct support from the government during lockdown.

Communications, coordination and community engagement were included in the planning of the response. As key changemakers during the revolution and due to their presence across localities, the neighborhood-level resistance committees were put in charge of informing the public, passing down messaging from the government's COVID-19 response, related to daily updates and curfew information, at their neighborhood level. This was a rare coming together of the transitional government and the resistance committees who struggle to find practical common ground.

Some IDPs in South Kordofan have received support from the Ministry of Labor and Social Development ●●●



through welfare provisions to support access to food supplies and cash transfer programs, however it is not sufficient to cover and meet their needs. Aid provided is not exhaustive of all groups, and distribution of aid is inconsistent and not sustained. Those who live in towns may have been disadvantaged during the lockdown as they have less access to services compared to those in camps, where administration of health, education and amenities is more assured.

The GoS received donations from the governments of China, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which were well-televised. However, respondents felt that the impact of this was not felt, sowing mistrust about government distribution of this aid. There is precedence for this in Sudan. For instance, the contents of a Qatari plane delivering humanitarian relief during the floods of 2013 had disappeared and distribution and utilization of its contents was neither made transparent, or visibly

used to mitigate the flood devastation. In the wake of these deadly floods, the previous regime, dismissing the floods as an act of God, showed negligence in the utilization of aid to effectively remedy the effects of the floods which had killed 38 and injured dozens of others.

This inherited legacy of mistrust has fostered a sentiment of disenfranchisement when it comes to foreign aid received by the GoS, and people question to what ends the foreign aid received for responding to COVID-19 was used for. In other words, while the aid received from foreign donors was visibly televised, the utilization of that aid remained in question due to the poor level of COVID-19 response coverage, and the absence of transparency and accountability mechanisms for the distribution and use of the aid received. For example, in West Darfur, respondents stated that there is a lack of two-way communication between the

government and the locals evidenced by the absence of sustained efforts on the part of the government in distributing aid equitably; there is also poor coordination in communication mechanisms between locals and government.

The government is not seen as being able to enforce punishment for the breaking of lockdown rules, showing how its reach is limited. The repercussions faced by those who break lockdown measures are not enforced equitably, and this discriminatory administration of lockdown measures feeds the sentiments of distrust towards government entities and law enforcement. For example, government officials on television are seen not following social distancing measures by attending mass televised events, while informal laborers (sometimes from displacement backgrounds) are denied the opportunity to work due to the restrictions brought about through COVID-19 prevention measures. ●●●

## VI. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION



At the federal level, coordination of humanitarian COVID-19 response worked well considering the involvement of international NGOs as stakeholders. A key informant representing an international NGO stated that their organization was once part of the COVID-19 response, however, COVID-19 has ceased to be a standalone activity.

Some organizations were contacted by the FMoH and others initiated the contact on their own in order to be involved in the COVID-19 humanitarian response. Despite the involvement of both international, regional, and local organizations and agencies in delivering the COVID-19 humanitarian aid, a response from a Blue Nile focus

group indicated that there are poor coordination mechanisms between local NGOs and international aid agencies for the procurement of COVID-19 related aid, attributing it to the reduced capacity of local organizations in meeting the requirements for partnerships with international organizations, and also because the selection process for partnership is very strict.

Across the targeted states, responses from KIIs and FGDs suggested that the quality of coordination was not receptive or responsive to people's needs. In Blue Nile state there were claims that the government did not provide sufficient resources, that there should be facilitation efforts to access aid for COVID-19 prevention and protection, that distribution of aid did not involve participation of locals, and that aid was only centralized at the federal level. ●

### 6.2 HUMANITARIAN ACTORS ACTIVE ON COVID-19 RESPONSE

**T**he MoH and the WHO are the main stakeholders in the COVID-19 humanitarian response in the country. All international organizations working in Sudan switched to the COVID-19 response as of March. National (Nafeer, Sadagaat etc.) and regional organizations (such as AU and the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development, IGAD) had also shifted their focus to prioritize the pandemic, especially awareness raising. Community organizations focused on educating the public and enforcing social distancing and mask wearing. UNICEF, which is one of the most well-resourced and well-staffed UN agencies in Sudan, took the lead in implementing the Global Humanitarian Response Plan's Pillar Two, focusing on risk communication

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**Community organizations focused on educating the public and enforcing social distancing and mask wearing.**

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and community engagement. They hosted weekly coordination meetings online, which included UN stakeholders (chiefly WHO, UNHCR, UNFPA); INGOs (such as PLAN International, Save the Children, Care International); Sudanese NGOs, and representatives of the government. UNHCR is one of the key actors in planning and coordination of the COVID-19 response efforts, and is part of the weekly COVID-19 meetings with WHO.

Regional organizations managed to organize awareness-raising campaigns in 10 slums within the capital of Khartoum,

in addition to IDPs in North Kordofan. Targeting around one million people, this campaign was done in partnerships with other local organizations such as the Sudan Marginalized Women Alliance, and groups for Sudanese marginalized youth and other activists. The campaign focused on disseminating information on adopting safety measures, such as mask wearing, regular handwashing, and maintaining social distancing. MSF used to be part of the COVID-19 response. However, as COVID-19 is no longer addressed as a standalone effort, there is no clear actor to address COVID-19 as a project. ●●●



## VI. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION



Humanitarian organizations with different areas of expertise worked together on Sudan's COVID-19 response. The relevant organizations were put in charge of providing medical personnel with PPE and other medical equipment. Each hospital with quarantining facilities were assigned an organization that would be responsible for providing all that facility's needs. Involved humanitarian organizations either contacted, or were contacted by, the MoH in order to support the COVID-19 response. Subsequently they were included in the panel of INGOs who helped set up isolation centers, provide them with supplies, PPE, and other equipment.

UN OCHA published an addendum to their Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) to incorporate COVID-19 responses from March until December 2020. The COVID-19 Country Preparedness and Response Plan

(CPRP) supported the government's efforts in preparing for and responding to the pandemic. It was also aligned with the Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP). The government and the international aid actors also collaborated on indirect impacts of the pandemic, such as Plan International's work with the Combatting GBV Unit at the Ministry of Labour and Social Development. Gender-based violence (GBV), which has been recognized as a major risk, particularly for women, during lockdown was also tackled through the messaging. This collaboration saw the production and dissemination of public service announcements (PSA) on domestic abuse during lockdown. These announcements, frequently broadcasted on television, were followed by details of how to seek help and shelter in such situations, including the numbers for several hotlines dedicated to combatting GBV. ●



### 6.3 RISK COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**W**ithin the context of COVID-19, Risk Communication is defined as an interactive process of exchange of information and opinion on risk among risk assessors, risk managers, and other interested parties.<sup>19</sup> The GPRP is organized around nine pillars, with Pillar 2 focusing on Risk Communication and Community Engagement.<sup>20</sup> The exchange of information within the context of COVID-19 messaging is facilitated through activities conducted by key sectors to support preparedness and response for COVID-19, namely the sector partners in education, where the key sectoral activities to support the COVID-19 response focus on

risk communication and community engagement through schools and media. One of the key activity requirements for risk communication and community engagement is engaging with existing community-based networks, media, local NGOs, schools, local government and other relevant sectors, using a consistent communication mechanisms and to develop the capacity of community-based networks for COVID-19 prevention through training.

Although 74% of the population were reached by COVID-19 messaging 15, it has not resulted in widespread compliance with COVID-19 directives, suggesting two things: 1. the need for more engagement and involvement of other stakeholders from more sectors, and 2. that rumors are possibly more prevalent, as the population struggles with denial and misinformation.

Pillar 2 prioritizes the dissemination of messages and materials in local languages and context specific communication channels. In addition, it led to the development of COVID -19 implementation guidelines to benefit more population groups, including IDPs and refugees.

More than 25 million people have been reached with campaigns to raise awareness to prevent COVID-19 transmission. In places that were understood to have high illiteracy rates, the IOM rapidly began disseminating messaging via megaphones (driving around IDP camps and informal settlements) to provide COVID-19 prevention information. Humanitarian organizations conducted risk communication surveys in camps to see how risk communication is received and coordinated with other actors to adjust messaging around COVID-19. ●●●

## VI. HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION



The main problem facing the response to COVID19 was the lack of coordinated communication between the different stakeholders, which has led to poor response from and misinformation among many groups. Additionally, it has contributed to non-compliance with the prevention protocols imposed by the government, such as the lockdown, social distancing and other prevention measures.

The National Emergency Committee and the Ministry of Health use TV, Radio, and posters to disseminate their awareness messages. Disagreement between the Minister of Health and some senior members of the National Emergency Committee weakened the government messages. Some religious sectarian leaders, especially some who still affiliate with previous NCP regime, used their mosque platform to spread misinformation regarding COVID-19, which also hindered government efforts.

Efforts to disseminate COVID-19 related information to vulnerable groups was also targeted at IDPs and refugees. In Kassala, a number of refugee respondents reported receiving the information translated to their languages and the refugee camps had extensive support to deal with pandemic. The recent Tigray crisis has meant camps in the East of Sudan have seen an increase in funding and have been better able to support the refugees there. This is not the case in other states, where many reported that information was not made available in preferred languages. Across the country, the information was disseminated through community billboards and via community leaders. Hygiene and cleanliness were the main topics addressed. Groups involved in the COVID-19 response are linked to each other by area and interest, and they receive health-related information relevant to their activities. The flow of information is controlled by the



government. It is shared with entry points and, in Kassala at least, has been tailored to specific community needs. ●

<sup>19</sup>Risk Communication <https://www.who.int/foodsafety/risk-analysis/riskcommunication/en/>

<sup>20</sup>Sudan Corona Virus COVID-19 Country Preparedness and Response Plan CPRP <https://www.who.int/health-cluster/countries/sudan/Sudan-COVID-19-Response-Plan-2020.pdf?ua=1>

### 6.4 RUMOR TRACKING AND COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

**D**espite the lack of clearly defined rumor tracking mechanisms, there are some feedback mechanisms. For instance, in Kassala state, the state MoH utilizes verification mechanisms that include physically visiting the sites and performing COVID-19 tests to verify if rumored cases are indeed true. Rumor tracking, which was established for Cholera, has established a precedent for similar methods for COVID-19.

In the state of Khartoum, the main and most suitable entry point for rumor tracking is the call center that was established by the FMoH for the purposes of not only tracing COVID-19 cases and providing guidance, but also to serve as a way for tracking rumors and controlling misinformation. However, a key informant from the FMoH

stated that the call center is not fully functional. Therefore, there are no clearly defined rumor tracking mechanisms other than those established by UNICEF and the WHO through their partnership with the MoH and their sub-offices. Feedback mechanisms exist despite the reduced capacity of rumor tracking mechanisms.

The vast majority (81.2%) of respondents said that they were worried about the spread of rumors in their areas, while 85.9% stated that they (always to sometimes) felt confident that they would be able to tell the difference between fact and rumor. This broadly correlates with other data on how much respondents felt they were informed about the pandemic. Refugees reported very low levels of confidence on differentiating between fact and rumor and low levels of being informed, whereas host communities reported the opposite. Those who reported always feeling confident in being able to tell the difference were more likely to always access information through social media. This indicates that the way that content travels in the informal

information ecosystem via social media – shared by close friends and family, repeated and interactive (or a discussion starter) – increases the perception that the content is true.

In terms of the confidence in telling the difference between right and wrong or false information, 44.4% of respondents in West Darfur, 33.3% in South Kordofan, and 22.2 % in Khartoum indicated that they are not confident at all. People do not know how to tell the difference between or the veracity of competing narratives around COVID-19, which increases vulnerability to misinformation and rumors. This is not held by trust deficiency or the lack of context-specific information. An estimated 24% of respondents in the state of Kassala indicated that they cannot correctly identify at least two pieces of misinformation, compared to 28.3% in South Kordofan, 21.7% in West Darfur, 13% in the Blue Nile, and 13% in Khartoum. In West Darfur, 50% of respondents indicated that they do not know, compared to 11.1% in the Blue Nile and 27.8% in Khartoum state. ●

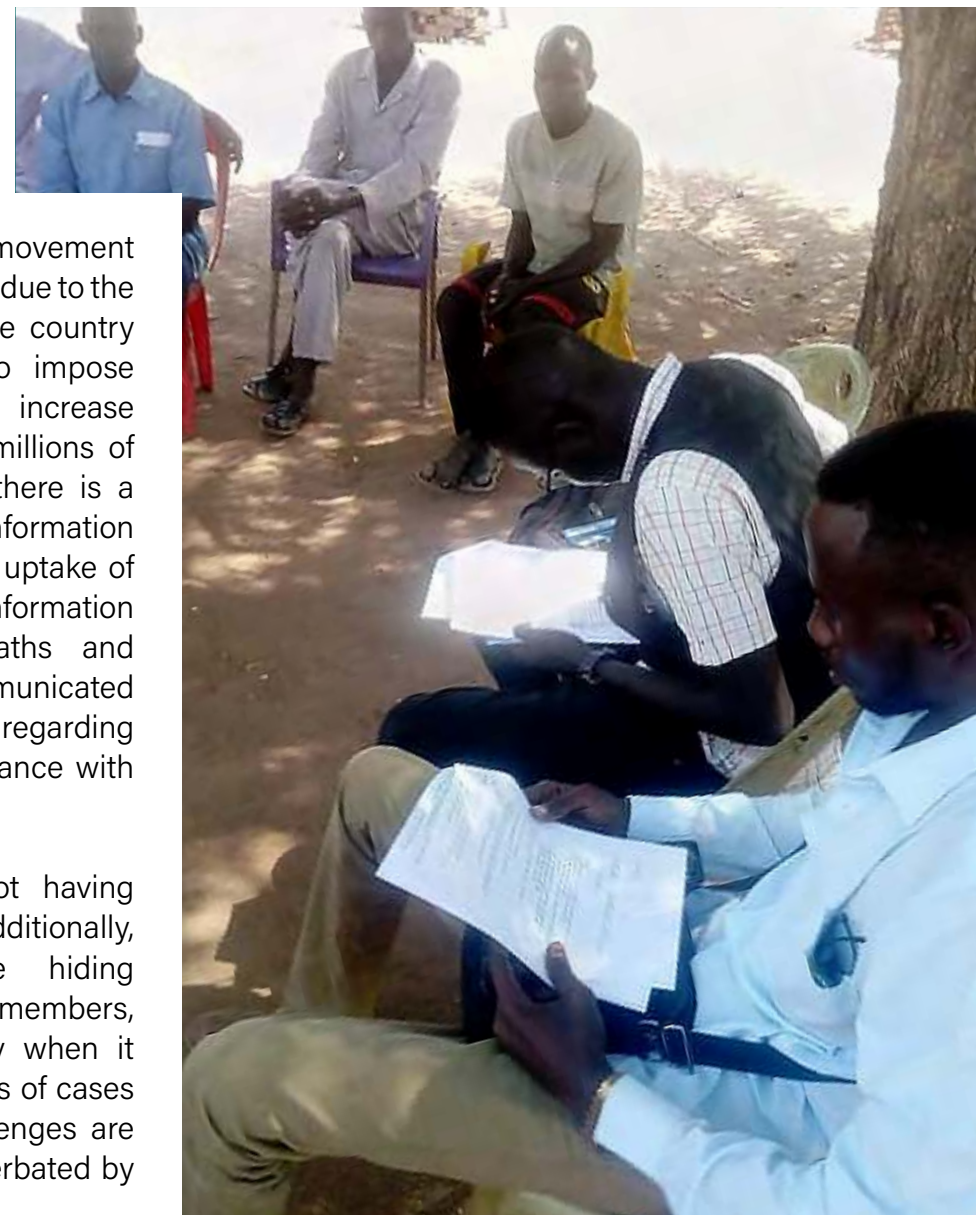
### 6.5 IDENTIFIED GAPS IN INFORMATION NEEDS AND PROGRAMMING

One of the key gaps in information needs and programming is uncertainty regarding information received about the number of COVID-19 cases provided by the hospitals to the MoH. This suggests a need for an assessment on the impact of COVID-19 in different population groups.

Despite the fact the government utilizes the media to disseminate messages to the public regarding the threat of COVID-19, many people do not take such messages seriously. With the second wave of COVID-19, reports show an increased rate of daily infections, especially in Khartoum. This is made worse by the fact that the government is not able to take any extra measures, such

as lockdowns or restricting movement between different states. This is due to the economic difficulties facing the country the government is unable to impose any measures which might increase the hardships already facing millions of Sudanese people. Therefore, there is a need for new tactics to fill the information gap and to support the public uptake of messaging. It is critical that information about the numbers of deaths and infections are effectively communicated to the public to raise awareness regarding the seriousness of non-compliance with the prevention measures.

Another gap identified is not having accurate data to rely on. Additionally, cultural norms of people hiding information about sick family members, contributes to more obscurity when it comes to the reported numbers of cases of infection. While these challenges are not new, they have been exacerbated by the pandemic. ●





## VII. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS – Towards a healthier information ecosystem

### 7.1 KEY FINDINGS ON THE INFORMATION LANDSCAPE AND COMMUNITIES' INFORMATION PRACTICES

#### FOUNDATIONS TO BUILD ON FOR A HEALTHIER INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

■ Social media has facilitated transmission and access of information, which is of great importance to sharing COVID-19 messaging: 71.7% of respondents reported accessing information on COVID-19 via social media. However, the inability of many to be able to tell the difference between fact and rumor, without official verification methods, either on online or analogue platforms, means social media dissemination is a double-edged sword.

In addition, displaced people (refugees, IDPs and migrants) are less likely to rely in social media for access than radio. This is likely due to electricity supply and the expense of smart phones.

■ Resistance committees gained popularity during Sudan's political transition and have become trusted actors in meeting the various needs of communities, a role that can be harnessed further for sharing information regarding COVID-19. According to FGD data, the involvement of resistance committees in governmental efforts to reduce the economic impact of the lockdown have engendered their greater popularity.

■ Awareness campaigns on telecommunications involving local communities' engagement have an established footing and have contributed to raising awareness about mask wearing and handwashing.

### MAIN CHALLENGES ACROSS THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

■ Lack of trust in official sources may lead marginalized groups to solicit informal sources of information, if official information sources and channels do not adapt to different contexts

■ With the predominance of Arabic as the main language of communication and information sharing, COVID-19 information is not localized to minority languages, which prevents vulnerable communities from accessing COVID-19 information that they need.

■ In hard-to-reach communities, people do not rely on otherwise trusted sources of information, and thus may not have the ability to differentiate rumors from facts.







- Context-specificity and sensitivity as well as community-driven content is not part of the training for journalists which makes it challenging to communicate and report COVID-19 information in a manner that is relevant and in preferred languages.

- Displaced communities reported that the unidimensional way that information is disseminated through television as well as governmental sources was not conducive to the dialogue format of information sharing that they prefer.

- The political opposition continues to produce timely and targeted information, intended to rally people or instigate action. However, for these same reasons, it is not always the most accurate.

- The current political climate of a contested transition period fraught with

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### Youth can be a loop in information ecosystems and help inform their social circles, friends and families of COVID-19.

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tensions and perceived government failures is driving information needs towards a demand or preference for political news sources. This has led to the conflation of COVID-19 news and unrelated political news and created a polarized atmosphere of COVID-19 beliefs and attitudes.

### OPPORTUNITIES AND POTENTIAL FOR INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM HEALTH IMPROVEMENT

- The educational systems can support capacity development of journalism. There are several schools that offer four-year degrees in journalism, which allows for room to incorporate facets of both formal and informal information ecosystems and two-way communication and community-led content creation in humanitarian information sharing as part of capacity development, building up two-way communications and community-driven media and creative content creation.

- Youth are considered a highly influential and active segment of society and are viewed as role models. Youth can be a loop in information ecosystems and help inform their social circles, friends and families of COVID-19.



## VII. KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



■ The government neglected to contextualize the messaging around the virus to the different geographic, linguistic, and social communities across Sudan. This is an indication that the centralist mode of governance seen throughout Sudan's post-independence history continues. Investing in inclusive messaging around use of language is a key opportunity to improve access and uptake of messaging.

■ The highest rate of accessing information was seen in Kassala. This may well be related to the state's recent and frequent outbreaks of Cholera, Dengue Fever and Chikungunya. This shows that while communications seeking strategies may be difficult to engender initially, they can become integral to community coping strategies over the years.

### RISKS TO MITIGATE AND NEGATIVE TRENDS TO CONSIDER IN ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHENING EFFORTS

■ Continued circulation of rumors and a lack of well-established rumor tracking mechanisms can stifle efforts to fight COVID-19 misinformation and contribute further to disbelief and distrust of the realities of COVID-19.

■ There has been a crackdown on journalists during the pandemic which resulted in the closure of 21 newspapers. Closure of newspapers, which are still considered a credible source by some and one of the most preferred sources for accessing information for those in Khartoum, compromises availability of sources, increasing the prevalence of COVID-19 misinformation and rumors. ●

### 7.2 KEY FINDINGS ON HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND INFORMATION DYNAMICS

#### FOUNDATIONS TO BUILD ON FOR A HEALTHIER INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

- The key strengths of the humanitarian sector's pandemic response were the coordination of humanitarian efforts with the government, as well as some efforts to contextualize communications methods.
- Humanitarian organizations have quickly built good relationships with the newly formed Government of Sudan and there is increased collaboration and granting of access to humanitarian zones.

- The new government's readiness to work with international actors opens the doors for greater collaboration on content creation and sharing.

#### MAIN CHALLENGES ACROSS THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

- Emergency response planning commenced following the confirmation of the first case of COVID-19 in Sudan, not before. This called for rapid coordination between the Government of Sudan and international aid agencies, most of which occurred remotely (online) due to lockdown.
- The continuation of conflict in some areas affected the delivery of supplies and hindered movement.
- Shortly after the COVID-19 lockdown

was eased, widespread flooding created another humanitarian emergency, soon followed by frequent cholera outbreaks. These took attention and resources away from the COVID-19 response.

- Despite collaboration between government and aid actors, there was little to no data sharing between them, nor sufficient efforts made to create such a mechanism.

#### OPPORTUNITIES AND POTENTIAL FOR INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM HEALTH IMPROVEMENT

- The goodwill and level of high-level cooperation and coordination also provides a useful precedent for future disaster response as Sudan transitions away from autocracy. Further, the security apparatus, ●●●



a hangover from the Bashir era, may now view humanitarian actors with less suspicion than before and this should allow aid actors to work more closely with government at state levels and in conflict-affected/prone areas.

- Youth actors, through resistance committees or otherwise, who are trusted by local communities can form a readily available support system to help spread information about COVID-19 in humanitarian settings.

### **RISKS TO MITIGATE AND NEGATIVE TRENDS TO CONSIDER IN ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHENING EFFORTS**

- Recurring intercommunal fighting and tribal clashes continue to create internally displaced people, which makes it challenging to mobilize

information ecosystem strengthening initiatives, and lead to high health risks.

- The international humanitarian response to COVID-19 in Sudan was widespread but not as comprehensive as was needed due to shortages in funding. The transitional government has, through different funding mechanisms, such as the Friends of Sudan Partner Conferences, been able to raise funds to plug economic gaps and fund policies, such as the Family Support Program, although this has been slow to materialize. The June Berlin Partners Conference saw \$1.8bn pledged publicly by donors but so far little has been disseminated. The capacity of the aid sector to respond fully was also hampered by capacity: the number of INGOs working in Sudan is considerably less than the needs require. These challenges were

further heightened by the transitional government's own limited capacity.

- Gender segregation customs followed by certain tribes disallow women from being present in places and gathering where men are present. Women were not able to take part in certain awareness campaigns due to this custom. Gender-sensitive information access pathways or interventions need to be designed so that women are ensured access to information.

- There is a need to strengthen the capacity for participatory engagement of citizens across the states, especially vulnerable groups as key stakeholders in developing healthier information ecosystems and utilizing a local systems approach for incorporating their input in creating effective programming and humanitarian response. ●

### 7.3 SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

#### COVID-19 Governmental response

■ Cover broad information needs rather than narrowly focus on COVID-19 statistics and public health: MoH's public health approach needs expanding to include socio-economic information. One government approach is needed where TGoS should have an integrated inter-ministerial approach through the HCE.

■ Develop a governmental policy for crisis communications that will serve the transitional government beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Key features must include the development of two-way communication channels with affected communities and co-production of key messages. The support needs to be engendered through a variety of media including radio, social media and in urban areas newspapers. These channels need to have a dialectical component that will have public engagement as a central component.

■ Prioritise decentralizing information sources by working with displaced and other marginalized communities to contextualize information content, channels and transmission to hard-to-reach communities.

■ Create a network of trusted information partners: state level MoH and aid providers should work together to recruit and train local health ambassadors to be trusted vectors of local, informed sources of information, delivered in local languages or dialects. They should be trained to conduct fact-checking in order to help combat misinformation.

■ Use radio and social media to create sharable content in order to both inform hard-to-reach groups and minimize misinformation. MoI should work with MoH to produce easily digestible messaging, in verbal and non-verbal forms.

■ Reduce false narratives: The HCE must coordinate with inter-governmental and aid

partners to create daily news conferences with a focus on infection and death numbers as well as longer term impacts of COVID-19. This should be balanced by a measured tone of delivery that will not create a false sense of urgency.

■ Demonstrate learning: The MoH, WHO, and other aid partners must learn from the impact of misinformation around COVID-19 and mobilize resources to fight disinformation on the approved vaccine for Sudan. MoH, in collaboration with local universities, should conduct evaluations of the efficacy of public health messaging to feed into governmental communications strategies.

■ Leverage the role of resistance committees as facilitative agents in strengthening community uptake of information, and serve as a strong loop in community feedback and response for creating healthier information ecosystems.



### COVID-19 Humanitarian Response and Programming

- Localize information: Aid actors should complement TGoS initiatives and support in hard-to-reach communities in peripheral states, facilitating access to camps and remote areas, and working with trusted local community leaders to tailor communications response and outreach to local areas.
- Work with local resistance committees to localize communications to communities: Drive by announcements to sensitize communities to the pandemic, backed up by face-to-face channels of information. Center the localization of news and information in the agenda for humanitarian risk communication.
- Invest in two-way communication: Aid actors should invest in dialectical modes of information sharing, such as awareness days and community theatre with question-and-answer sessions, collaborating with local youth or community centers to work on locally-relevant messaging and provisions for increasing the participation of women.
- Increase collective response: Develop the capacity of local organizations and citizens' representation and engage with international aid agencies within risk communication and community engagement (RCCE) work to bring locally driven solutions.
- Enhance communication between communities, humanitarian and development actors, and media by providing the media with specialized courses to enhance the quality of news and information. This could result in stronger local accountability and the production of demand-driven information, potentially decreasing misunderstandings between humanitarian organizations and local communities.
- Develop data collection and assessment methodology: Aid actors should periodically gather data about how information is accessed and digested and pool data in a single database in collaboration with government response teams. There is a need for an assessment on the impact of COVID-19 in different population groups, paying close attention to women and other vulnerable groups.
- Strengthen aid actor linkages with local communities through local media: Aid actors should work with locally relevant access channels to inform local communities of aid available.
- Prioritise contextually-sensitive information and standardize level of information across camps and other displacement affected contexts.



### Information Localization Mechanisms and Community Response:

- CBOs and NGOs to train youth and resistance committee members to integrate information sharing, combatting misinformation and rumors. Work with MoH/MoI/HCE to set up independent information sharing and localization mechanisms that offer verifiable, localized information and monitor and evaluate information needs and track rumors.
- Verify information: MoH and MoI should utilize chat functions on social media platforms and WhatsApp business accounts, providing verified information and instilling trust in government sources. In addition, independently verified platforms should be made available, set up by civil society and media organizations. These chat functions should be programmed to respond to education and linguistic variations and would be best served by human verifiers who can provide contextualized information and prevention measures in local dialects.
- Localize and contextualize information: Telecommunications companies should establish independent digital platforms for fact-checking that are also available to non-smartphone users through free SMS messaging in a variety of languages and dialects, in both text form and as voice messages.

### Reaching the most vulnerable:

- Create communication models that are more inclusive: of different languages and dialects and which do not always rely on literacy. Use a language register that avoids clinical language and focuses on communication styles that permeate easily throughout communities. Content should be shareable on social media. Increase reach of FM radio by granting licenses to transmit across the country.
- Gender Analysis in risk communication: Develop gender-sensitive pathways to allow women greater access to information and greater ability to disseminate information. Risk communication programming should include a gender analysis and consider ways to circumvent the customs and traditions that hinder women's access to information.





### Capacity Development in Media Sector:

- SJU to establish accountability standards related to localization of content in journalism training through universities. Courses should focus on capacity building on: critical journalism and verifying fake news and misinformation; risk communication, humanitarian reporting, especially in conflict zones; and health journalism.
- Make local digital platforms informative and profitable by utilizing Sudan's rescission from the State Sponsor of Terrorism; send journalists on training courses in the region to learn from trusted sources there (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and UAE chiefly).
- Cultivate trust between people and media through establishing high quality standards. Set up an independent ratings bodies to monitor quality.
- Create content that balances public interest with regional realities. Regional TV stations are well-placed to reflect local needs and address gaps in information on COVID-19.
- Establish media outlets which offer communities alternative information channels with multi-lingual reporting, resulting in better-informed and confident communities.
- Local media to establish channels for two-way communication, encouraging dialogue with local communities. By listening and responding to local communities' information needs, local journalists can build trust and produce more relevant reporting.
- Local media to integrate practical verification processes to ensure trustworthy and reliable information, while rolling out rumor-tracking toolkits and partnering with other local media development agencies to tackle misinformation and fake news. ●

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**Photographs:** Focus group discussions with community members, Sudan - Y-Peer Sudan, 2021

## **The Insight Strategy Partners team**

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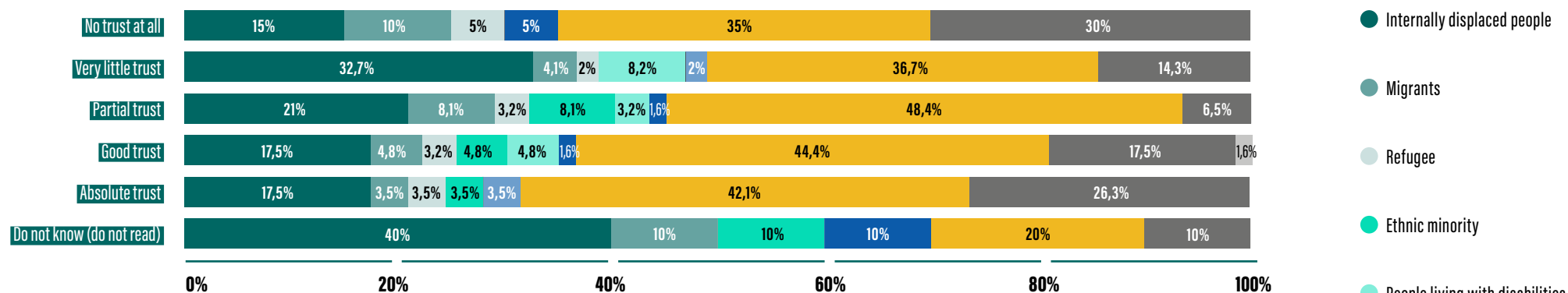
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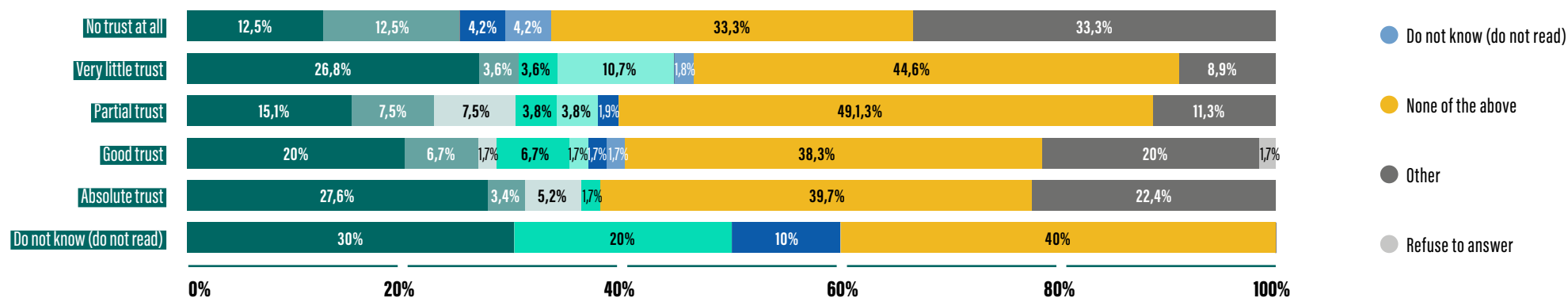
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## TRUST IN DIFFERENT SOURCES BY GROUP

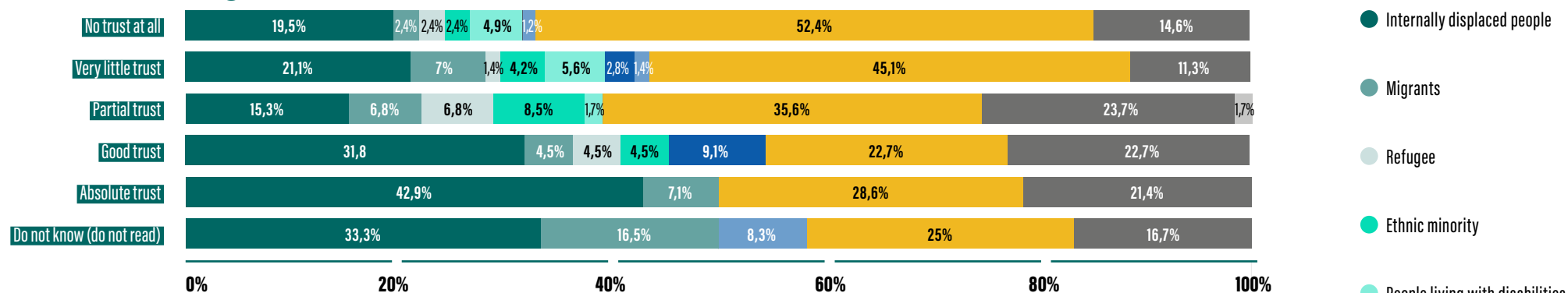
### International media



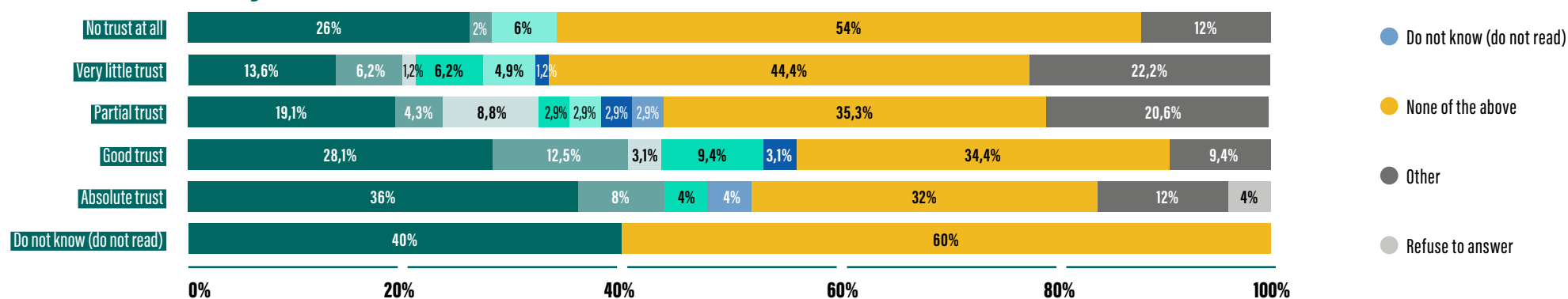
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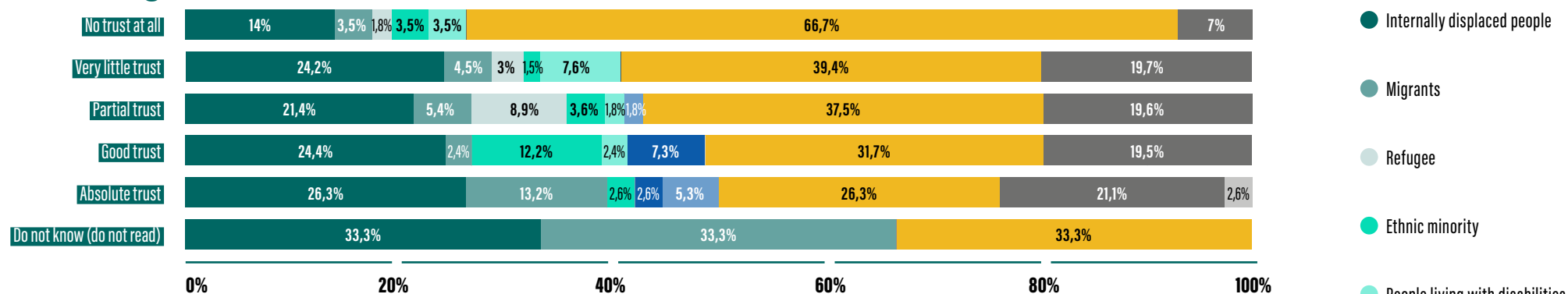
## National government authorities



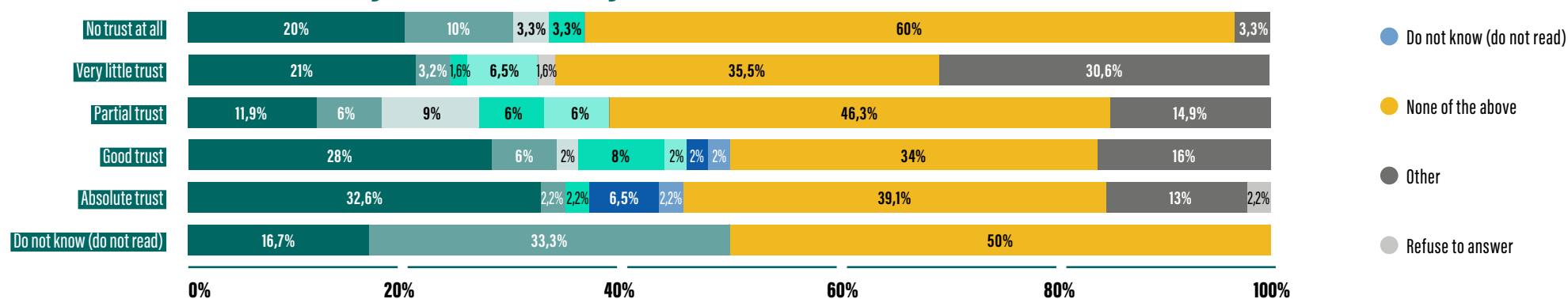
## Community leaders

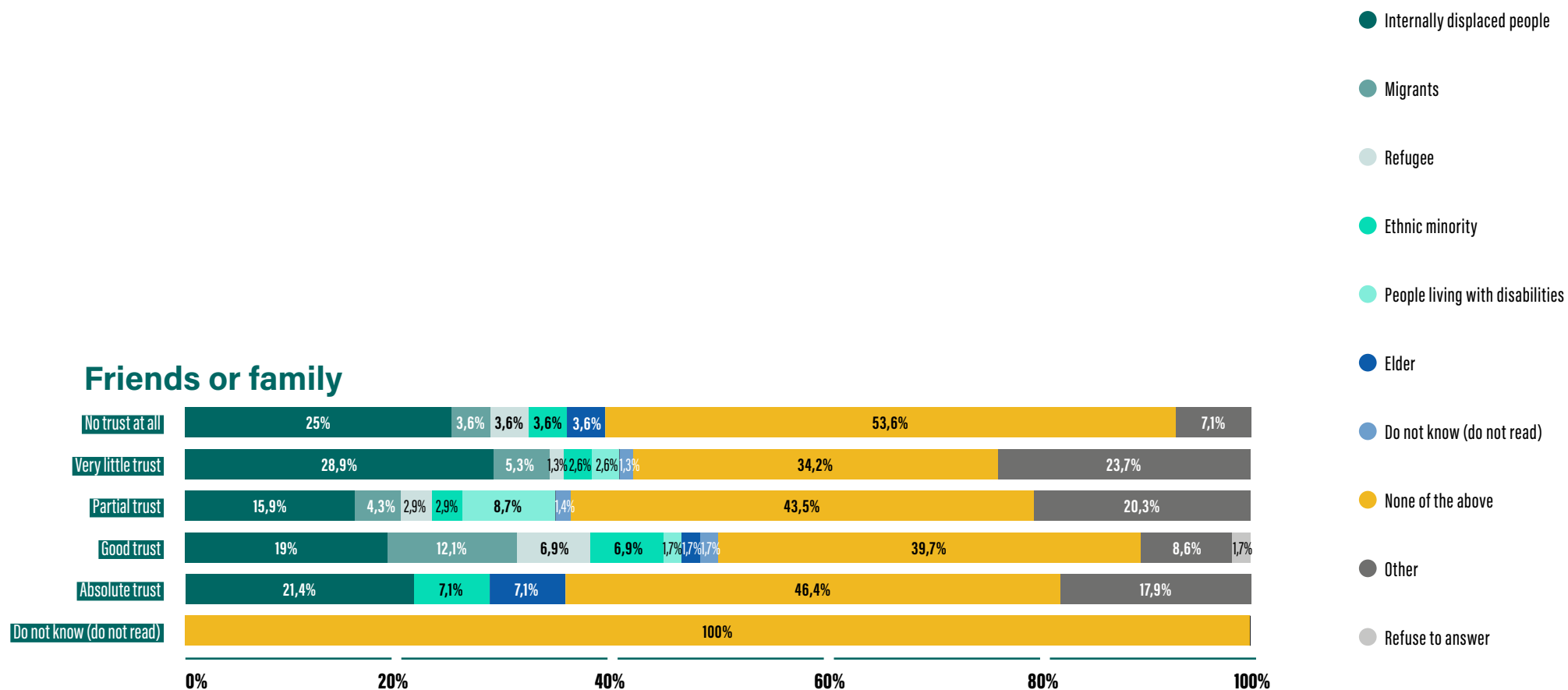


## Religious leaders



## Health workers in your community







## INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS PRINCIPAL INTERACTION NODE

		AVG MEDIA
UN agencies	INTERNATIONAL	2.67
Multilateral organisations (other than UN)	INTERNATIONAL	2.25
Countries (other States donors)	INTERNATIONAL	1.00
Other international	INTERNATIONAL	2.25
Ministry of information/ Communication	NATIONAL	2.50
Ministry of Health	NATIONAL	3.75
Ministry of Disaster Management (or similar)	NATIONAL	3.25
Other Ministries or executive bodies	NATIONAL	1.75
Regional/local level authorities	NATIONAL	4.25
Media regulatory authorities	NATIONAL	2.00
Other public bodies	NATIONAL	1.25
Community media representatives	MEDIA	3.25
Media associations	MEDIA	3.50
Public media	MEDIA	4.50
Commercial media	MEDIA	4.75
Community leaders	CIVIL SOCIETY	2.75
Religious leaders	CIVIL SOCIETY	3.00
Online platforms (private sector) – search engines	CIVIL SOCIETY	3.50
Key constituencies (women, youth)	CIVIL SOCIETY	3.25
Other private	CIVIL SOCIETY	1.75



Source: Internews 2020

# ROOTED IN **TRUST**

## **MISINFORMED**

Sudan's centralisation  
problem & the pandemic

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SUDAN - MARCH, 2021