

ISSUE BRIEF

MARKET MONITORING AND LOCALISED RESEARCH IN EXTREME CONFLICT

Learning from Darfur

SPARC

Introduction

Trade is the lifeblood of the economy and people's livelihoods in Sudan's Darfur region. Goods are exchanged between different livelihood and ethnic groups, and between urban and rural populations for their food security. This interdependence is also how social relationships are forged and sustained. Darfur has long been a major engine of Sudan's national economy, particularly through long-distance trade and the export of its agricultural and livestock commodities (SPARC, 2025a).

Systematic monitoring and analysis of trade and markets in Darfur has therefore been important for development and humanitarian policy and programming for decades. This has been conducted on an ongoing basis through the respective state ministries, and in times of crisis with the additional contribution of international actors. It has played a critical role in early warning of deteriorating food security and in the planning and targeting of humanitarian assistance.



The war that broke out in Sudan in April 2023 plunged the country into the worst nationwide conflict and the most severe humanitarian crisis in its modern history. Yet there has been a dearth of data and analysis, especially from some of the most conflict-affected parts of the country, such as Darfur, which have experienced some of the worst violence and upheaval. Extreme insecurity and the failure to negotiate safe access have severely restricted the physical presence of most international humanitarian actors. National actors that have become the frontline responders rarely have adequate resources or capacity to provide life-saving assistance as well as fill the data void. Although there are important initiatives to monitor food prices and market functionality, for example the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI) run by REACH for the Cash Working Group,¹ there has been a notable gap in local knowledge and analysis reaching international humanitarian actors, few of whom are in Darfur.

The Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent Crises (SPARC) project – *Understanding markets and trade in a context of extreme conflict and humanitarian crisis, with limited access, in Darfur, Sudan* – has sought to step into the breach. Its aims are twofold: (1) to pioneer different approaches to data collection and analysis and to listen to local voices when access has been so constrained; and (2) to contribute to understanding and analysis of food insecurity and inform market-oriented and conflict-sensitive humanitarian programming.² (See Box 1 for a summary of the project.)

This brief addresses the first question of the *Understanding markets* project: How can market monitoring and data collection be adapted, with flexibility and sensitivity, to at least partially fill the information gap in Darfur – a context of extreme conflict, insecurity and constrained access – through local actors? It describes how the project has pioneered a locally led approach to data collection, analysis and research in the very challenging context of Darfur, over a nine-month period from October 2024 to July 2025. It draws out the key points of learning from this experience, transferable to other conflict contexts. These range from an alternative model to market monitoring, based on a small number of senior researchers on the ground carrying out qualitative information collection and analysis that focuses on causality, to an iterative and adaptive approach to project management. Above all, it demonstrates an approach to locally led market monitoring and research that benefits as much as possible from the knowledge and experience of those living through the conflict.

The context of extreme conflict

A violent civil war broke out in Sudan in April 2023 engulfing most of the country. It was triggered by a vicious power struggle between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary group originating from Darfur and associated with the *Janjaweed* militia that emerged during the Darfur conflict

BOX 1 SUMMARY OF THE UNDERSTANDING MARKETS PROJECT

This issue brief is part of a 12-month SPARC project, *Understanding markets and trade in a context of extreme conflict and humanitarian crisis, with limited access, in Darfur, Sudan*.

It sets out to address three research questions:

1. How can market monitoring and data collection be adapted, with flexibility and sensitivity, to at least partially fill the information gap in Darfur – a context of extreme conflict, insecurity and constrained access – through local actors?
2. How has trade in agricultural and livestock commodities adapted, positively and negatively, to the current context of extreme conflict in Darfur, how is trade affecting the conflict, and what are the implications for social cohesion and for conflict-sensitive programming by humanitarian actors?
3. How can a deeper understanding of markets and trade in food commodities contribute to improved understanding of the severity of food insecurity in Darfur?

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-joint-market-monitoring-initiative-jmmi-market-overview-july-2024>.

² Ruling elites in Sudan, including armed actors, have long depended upon an extractive approach to the economy, controlling trade in valuable commodities, such as livestock and cash crops, as well as gold. Trade can thus fuel the war economy in Darfur/Sudan, and poorly informed market-based interventions can inadvertently contribute to this and to rent-seeking behaviour.

from 2003. The RSF quickly gained control of most of Darfur with the exception of El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur State. So far, El Fasher has remained under control of the SAF and the allied Joint Forces,³ although it has been heavily besieged by the RSF since May 2024.

Both the RSF and the SAF have their designated so-called 'humanitarian offices' to register and approve the presence and work of both national and international humanitarian actors. This is the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) in the case of SAF, and the Sudan Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO) in the case of the RSF. However, there is a long history in Sudan of the securitisation and politicisation of the humanitarian administration, at both federal and state levels, that continues to this day (Assal, 2016).

Markets have become a target for attack by both sides in the war. This is principally because they are places where combatants of different armed groups are likely to gather, especially on market days, but also they are where each side can seek to disrupt economic activity in territory controlled by 'the other side'. At times, the conflict has taken an ethnic dimension, and the market in a town or village associated with a particular ethnic group perceived as supporting the 'other side' has been deliberately targeted. Markets are usually attacked by the SAF through aerial bombardment (for example, Torra, El Kuma and Mellit markets in North Darfur during 2025), and by the RSF through artillery shelling (for example, the livestock market in El Fasher, and frequent shelling of the markets in Abu Shouk and Zamzam camps in and near El Fasher respectively, in 2024/25). Large numbers of civilians have been killed as well as infrastructure damaged and markets disrupted.⁴

There has been localised violence and insecurity in markets as well, including armed robbery, shootouts between hostile groups, the kidnapping and ransom of individual traders, gender-based violence and rape, and arson. Many markets in Darfur have thus become dangerous locations, for traders and consumers alike, causing a sharp decline in market activity.

Market fragmentation has been exacerbated by the breakdown of communications across Sudan, and in Darfur in particular. Telecommunications infrastructure was an early target in the war with the destruction of the mobile phone network in January 2024. This has caused a major telecommunications blackout that continues to this day, only partially relieved by the installation of Starlink by traders and those who can afford it. However,

the use of Starlink has subsequently become a focus of control by both the RSF and the SAF as communication and the exchange of information are treated with deep suspicion by both sides. In Darfur, Starlink sets have been confiscated, stolen, and in some places their use closely monitored by the RSF, and in El Fasher by the SAF. When the flow of information is curtailed, commodity trading is further constrained.

The starting point for designing a system for understanding markets in Darfur

How can a market monitoring system be adapted to this highly insecure context where the physical marketplace may be in the crosshairs of the conflict, telecommunications limited and closely monitored, and the collection and transmission of any type of information treated with great suspicion? The starting point was the Market Monitoring and Trade Analysis (MMTA) system, established during the Darfur conflict that began in 2003. This project covered an eight-year time span from 2008 to 2016 (when funding dried up).⁵ At the MMTA's peak, over 70 markets were monitored by local Sudanese enumerators on a weekly basis across all five Darfur states. The MMTA was managed by a national non-governmental organisation (NGO), in partnership with the Feinstein International Center (FIC) of Tufts University which supported design, analysis and reporting. In addition to regular market bulletins, the MMTA produced a series of in-depth studies analysing trade dynamics in Darfur's main agricultural and livestock commodities.⁶

How could this approach be adapted to the context of nationwide war and the greater dangers and much more limited mobility within Darfur after 2023? And how could it complement the work of others, such as the JMMI which focuses primarily on collecting and analysing quantitative data, particularly price data? With a small team, a limited research budget, and the experience of the MMTA we concluded that the *Understanding markets* project would add greatest value by concentrating on the collection and analysis of predominantly qualitative data, with a focus on causality: the how and why of changes in trade patterns and control of trade. This has worked well as a way of drawing on the knowledge, experience and wisdom of local researchers as well as traders. The project was cautious in what it promised over a 12-month period: two briefing notes on key findings, and one policy brief with more in-depth analysis.

³ Armed groups from Darfur that were signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement.

⁴ Over 50 in the case of airstrikes on Torra market on 25 March 2025 (<https://www.darfur24.com/en/2025/03/25/57-killed-200-injured-as-sudanese-army-launch-airstrike-on-market-in-north-darfur/>).

⁵ See <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/markets-and-trade-in-darfur/>.

⁶ See <https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/markets-and-trade-in-darfur/#in-depthtradestudies>.

An alternative model: a small team of researchers and a network based on trust

A small team of senior researchers rather than enumerators

The conventional model of market monitoring usually depends upon a number of enumerators collecting data according to predetermined questionnaires. Data analysis is usually centralised, conducted by more senior researchers/analysts, often far from the markets where the data was collected. This approach underpinned the MMTA with the data analysed in El Fasher. However, it quickly became apparent that this would not work well in the current context of Darfur. There was little possibility of providing meaningful training or working with enumerators in person,⁷ nor openly and safely asking in-depth questions about how trade and markets have been affected by the conflict.

Instead, we decided to recruit senior and experienced researchers living in Darfur. Those recruited early on had input into the selection of topics to be monitored (see next section). All collect qualitative data on a monthly basis as well as carrying out their own preliminary analysis. In this way, the project is based on a locally led approach, leveraging experienced expert opinion on the ground. It also ensures that long-established research expertise within Darfur is supported, valued and given a line of communication to international decision-makers operating outside Sudan. This in turn benefits universities in the region by maintaining and supporting local research capacity, over time empowering the universities to understand and address the pressing challenges facing local communities.

The Darfur team comprises six senior researchers. One researcher has been recruited for each Darfur state with the exception of North Darfur where there are two researchers: one covering besieged El Fasher and one covering key rural localities close to El Fasher. The researchers are from a range of different disciplines.

There are a number of advantages to this approach. First, the researchers know and understand the context well, particularly the wider political economy, so can situate the information they are gathering. Second, having lived and worked through 20 years of conflict in Darfur prior to the current war, they are experienced and skilled in navigating a highly insecure environment marked by deep suspicion and significant risk. For a project that cannot by necessity be centrally managed in person due to the extreme conflict, the researchers are well equipped to operate independently, exercising sound judgement and adaptability in the face of challenging conditions.

Third, all the researchers have trusted relationships and can therefore establish rapport with merchants who have a long history of trading in Darfur, and with other private-sector actors. This enables them to go deeper in their interviews, exploring more sensitive topics and capturing traders' perspectives. Notably one researcher is himself an active trader, bringing first-hand experience and insight into the dynamics of local markets. Fourth, all the researchers work or have worked in public universities in their respective states, an indication of their analytical capacity, also earning them recognition and trust in their communities. Combined, these factors have been key to contributing to the researchers' safety while doing their work, and to their ability to gather in-depth and valuable information.

The network of researchers in Darfur is in turn supported by a small research team of Sudanese based in Cairo and one non-Sudanese researcher based in the UK (with four decades of experience of working in and on Darfur). It was quickly clear that the team outside Sudan should comprise the same set of qualities as that in Darfur: highly skilled and experienced, well able to piece together and conduct in-depth analysis taking account of the complex political economy and power dynamics within Darfur and war-torn Sudan, well-networked with civil society leaders and academics, and able to self-manage.

The Cairo team includes an eminent civil society leader, a distinguished university academic, and a skilled and experienced community-based development practitioner.

Learning: As an alternative/complementary model for locally led market monitoring and analysis, consider a small and well-supported team on the ground of experienced researchers who have deep understanding of the conflict context, and are well-connected and trusted in their local communities. If the researchers have the scope to raise issues beyond topics that have already been determined, this model can provide compelling and insightful analysis based on local knowledge.

Trust as the key ingredient

In an environment where there is so much fear and suspicion, trust has emerged as a critical factor for the successful implementation of the project. This has meant capitalising on existing relationships and trust between the individual researchers in Darfur and the traders and key informants from whom they are gathering information, as explained above. Ensuring high levels of trust between the members of the project team has also been key. This partly builds upon previous connections and working

⁷ For the MMTA, three in-person trainings were held for enumerators over a five-month period. Each training usually lasted three to four days. See Barrows and Buchanan-Smith (2017).

relationships (in some cases spanning decades) between team members, especially between those outside Sudan (Cairo and the UK) and those inside Darfur. It has been critical to sharing information and to open conversations, often exploring sensitive issues such as how trade is controlled and manipulated by armed actors.

Building trust among the network of researchers in Darfur, some of whom did not know each other and had not previously worked together, has also been a crucial component of success. This has been carefully and consciously facilitated and nurtured by the Sudanese team operating out of Cairo, for example through shared WhatsApp messaging and regular and open communication.

Learning: In a conflict environment characterised by deep suspicion and distrust, know who you are recruiting and consciously build and nurture relationships of trust.

Gender imbalance

A key challenge has been the failure to recruit female senior researchers within Darfur. This is mainly because of the physical dangers for women spending time in the market in a war characterised by widespread sexual abuse and gender-based violence. It is compounded by the scarcity of female senior researchers in Darfur's universities, and the fact that many educated women were among the first to leave Darfur when war erupted because of the gender-based nature of the violence.

Consequently, all the researchers in Darfur are male. This is an obvious limitation and necessitates further efforts to ensure the perspectives and experiences of female traders are adequately captured. This remains a challenge for the project.

How data collection methods and analysis have been adapted to the Darfur context: methodological learning

Scope and flow of information

Each month the researchers in Darfur compile as much information as possible against a checklist of six broad areas:

1. the geographical location of marketplace activity and changes in the 'normal' (i.e. pre-war) hierarchy of markets

2. price trends and liquidity issues affecting trade in cereal crops, cash crops and livestock
3. trends and changes in quantities of commodities traded, sources of supply and trade routes
4. access to trading activity, including changing trader profiles, how traders perceive and rank the constraints they face and solutions they may identify
5. information on daily labouring, including demand levels, types of activities and prevailing wage rates, serving as an indicator of purchasing power
6. information on cross-border trade.

For each of these, the focus is on change from what was considered 'normal' pre-war, and also compared with previous months, always asking the question why. More than just recording changes, the researchers follow probing lines of questioning along with observations and their own contextual familiarity to understand the dynamics driving change. The researchers in Darfur also provide an overview analysis of key changes in patterns of trading activity and the location of markets in their respective Darfur state (or at least the parts of the state for which they can access information).

They also have the scope to expand the range of topics if other significant issues arise, for example on local taxation practices, the movement of people, smuggling and traders' storage practices. If there are sudden or particular issues of concern, the researchers may alert the wider project team in real time.

Monthly reports are submitted by each Darfur-based researcher to the team outside Sudan through whatever means of communication is available and safe for them to use. In practice this has ranged from typed reports sent through email, to handwritten reports photographed and sent by WhatsApp, to WhatsApp voice messages.⁸ Members of the team outside Sudan then follow up with WhatsApp calls to each of the researchers in Darfur at a time of their convenience and in a way that ensures their safety. This is to explore key issues (including new information or emerging patterns, and/or where there is lack of clarity or ambiguity), thus expanding and deepening the analysis.

Learning: Maintain a focus on the reasons for change in trade dynamics, always drawing on local understanding of the context.

⁸ In establishing the project and how to work and communicate safely with researchers in Darfur, the team was informed by the early experience in Sudan of the ESRC-funded project on 'Digitalising food assistance'. See <https://digitalisingfood.org/>. For safety, the researchers may delete whatever they have communicated after it has been transmitted.

Importance of adaptability and flexibility

Adaptability and flexibility have been key to the approach. For example, the checklists were adapted after the first two months of data collection to ease and simplify the monthly reporting, analysis and communication by the researchers, taking account of their very difficult living and working conditions, yet also ensuring some standardisation.

Flexibility has also been important when the researchers in Darfur have shared significant information beyond the checklist of topics that relate to markets. For example, the two researchers in North Darfur – in El Fasher and Dar ALSalaam localities respectively – have alerted the team outside Sudan on numerous occasions to the deepening humanitarian crisis in and around El Fasher, based on their first-hand knowledge and lived experience.

Recognising the seriousness of the crisis and the inadequacy of the humanitarian response, especially the international response, the focus of the project has, on occasion, pivoted to providing an urgent, updated analysis of the deteriorating humanitarian situation, targeted at international humanitarian actors. To complete these analyses all members of the team have reached out to key informants within El Fasher and other localities within North Darfur, beyond traders, to broaden and deepen the evidence base and understanding of the crisis.

Learning: Allow the dynamics of the context to dictate the focus, frequency and nature of outputs, as well as the project's original plan.

Triangulation and analysis

Sometimes the information and analysis shared by the researchers in Darfur has been particularly significant or sensitive. In that case, the research team outside Sudan has either triangulated or deepened the analysis through interviews with key informants unavailable to the researchers within Darfur. These interviews have included community leaders and civil society actors, staff of international and national NGOs, Sudanese traders now based outside Sudan (e.g. in Cairo), and other researchers and academics. Drawing on this wider network has been key to the analysis as well as for the purposes of verification.

Having to work remotely has its limitations, particularly for the interpretation of data and sharing of knowledge beyond what is written in the monthly reports. Indeed, in-person oral collective analysis was key to the success of the MMTA, particularly the in-depth trade studies. Although this is no longer possible for the whole research team in the current context, the team members living

outside Sudan do meet in person in Cairo for a four-day workshop at least every four to six months. This collective oral analysis has proved invaluable to identify gaps in the data and information collected, refine the analysis by helping to contextualise it, and especially to discuss its implications for international humanitarian actors, and thus formulate recommendations.

As there are no easy humanitarian solutions to Darfur's crisis, the team has taken the opportunity to meet with other Sudanese academics and practitioners in Cairo, as a kind of peer group, to discuss, tease out and test emerging recommendations.

Learning: Complement written analysis by the local researchers with collective oral analysis where possible, drawing on the knowledge and wisdom of a wider locally informed network.

The challenges of data storage and sharing

With a growing database of predominantly qualitative data from all five Darfur states, a challenge yet to be resolved is how best to organise and store this information, and if/how to make it available to others while protecting information sources.

An iterative and non-conventional approach to project management

Adaptive management in practice⁹

'Learning by doing' and constant adaptation have been key to the successful establishment and implementation of the project. While the project has remained true to the research questions set out in the original proposal – see Box 1 – much experimentation and creativity have gone into devising ways of working in the current conditions in Darfur, and to overcoming some of the challenges of working remotely with very limited connectivity. Adapting the focus of the project to reflect the dynamic context of Darfur has been critical, as explained above, to raise awareness of the deepening humanitarian crisis. It has also meant an iterative approach to selecting topics for the market briefs according to emerging priority issues. These have included the impact of the RSF trade embargo (imposed in October 2024) on long-distance trade into and out of Darfur, and analysis of how trade is funding and fuelling the conflict and aspects of the war economy.¹⁰

In short, conducting a monitoring and research project of this nature in a context of extreme conflict has required constant reflection, navigation, ingenuity,

⁹ See Buchanan-Smith and Morrison-Métois (2021) for key features of adaptive management.

¹⁰ See SPARC (2025a); SPARC (2025b).

initiative, and flexibility regarding aspects that are often 'planned out' and overly rigid according to conventional project management. It is to the credit of the SPARC research programme, and especially to MercyCorps who have managed the project, that such agility, room for manoeuvre and adaptability have been possible, characterised by a supportive 'can do' management approach and a high level of trust.

There has also been a welcome simplicity to the project management arrangements, whereby the international team has had one main interlocutor within the SPARC/MercyCorps consortium, with whom a strong working relationship was established early on. This has significantly reduced transaction costs and freed up the team outside Sudan to be 'Darfur-focused' rather than 'funder-focused'.

Learning: In a highly insecure conflict context, conventional approaches to project management, whereby inputs and outputs are planned and scheduled in a linear and relatively inflexible manner, and internal reporting and compliance demands are high, are inappropriate and unlikely to succeed. Instead, provide space to reflect, and freedom and flexibility to reallocate resources and change direction when needed.

The human dimension of working in a war zone

The researchers in Darfur are living and working in very challenging, often dangerous conditions with limited communication. For example, a few months into the project one of the researchers became displaced. Another had part of his house shelled and his laptop destroyed. A third had his laptop stolen when his house was broken into. Being fully aware and responsive to these conditions has been essential, ensuring that implementation of the project's work is led by what the researchers are able to do safely rather than by a detailed work plan and logframe. When individual researchers have been unable to deliver their monthly reports on time, the first concern of the international team has been to check on their safety and well-being as a priority, trusting that they will make contact and deliver their analysis when they are able to do so. Once again this is based on a high degree of trust.

For the Sudanese team members working out of Cairo, all are supporting relatives and their local communities within Sudan and in the wider region, sometimes through major crises, for example when villages are attacked and relatives are displaced. All are dealing with human and family tragedies of varying dimensions on an ongoing basis. Having the flexibility to work in a compassionate

and supportive way, taking these deeply human and emotional realities into account has been critical, as opposed to working in a more conventional and bureaucratic way according to strict deadlines.

At the project planning stage, this meant being conservative in the number of outputs promised so that team members have longer time periods to complete them than might be offered in more peaceful conditions. Additional time and space has been provided when needed, always making a point of enquiring about and supporting researchers' well-being. The team outside Sudan has in turn provided important emotional and practical support to team members within Darfur.

Under such conditions, the work itself can be a relief, empowering team members to contribute to a resolution, rather than feeling the work to be a burden and additional stress. Such organisational conditions are key to facilitating the team's full creative and intellectual capacity in a chaotic and bewildering environment.

Learning: When designing a monitoring and research project to be conducted in a harsh conflict environment, do not assume full capacity at all times, nor plan as if conditions are 'normal'. Instead, build in buffer time, and ensure the well-being of team members always takes priority over reporting deadlines.

Localisation of research in practice

The *Understanding markets* project is an example of 'localising research'. Building on the earlier experience of the highly localised MMTA, the project was designed and co-created by Sudanese civil society leaders and researchers working together with an international (non-Sudanese) researcher familiar with the Darfur context, and with whom most of the researchers already had a working relationship. This has meant collaboratively identifying the research questions and constantly adapting and refining the approach.

Working with experienced researchers who have chosen to stay in Darfur has ensured their voices and analysis can feed into decision-making about the international humanitarian response, much of which is taking place outside the country. The commitment of these researchers to the project cannot be overstated. It is evident in the lengths to which some have gone to gather information and ensure it is communicated to the Cairo-based research team.¹¹ This in turn reflects

¹¹ For example, one researcher travelled over 70 km by donkey to reach a town where he could find a safe Starlink connection to transfer his data and analysis when his own Starlink set was looted. Another ensured he travelled outside the state capital to broaden the geographical area from which he collected data.

the researchers' commitment to support and protect the communities they belong to and the value they feel the project can have in informing critical humanitarian decision-making.

As mentioned above, the project maintains and supports critical research capability and capacity both inside and outside Sudan, when universities are no longer operating and much research funding has dried up.¹² In a context where mutual aid organisations, predominantly funded by the Sudanese diaspora, are at the heart of the humanitarian response, the importance of providing an income to Sudanese researchers and civil society leaders should not be underestimated. Moreover, the approach is grounding the knowledge and bringing it closer to local communities.

Yet working closely with an international NGO, as part of an international research consortium, also has benefits. It has opened up channels of communication for dissemination of the project's findings and recommendations, with opportunities to influence the international humanitarian response in Darfur.

Instead of the familiar output-based contractual arrangement between international and national actors, the project team has been given a creative and exploratory space to design and implement the project. For this reason, it has felt more like a genuine partnership based on mutual respect and trust. Nurturing and valuing this very human dynamic has produced unique insights into how markets in Darfur have adapted and function under the constraints of the ongoing civil war.

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

¹² Recognising such challenges, some international organisations have developed programmes for funding at-risk scholars.

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