



Policy Brief

June 2023

Addressing the Health Crisis in Sudan: Urgent Actions and Policy Recommendations



Approach

This policy brief is based on a webinar hosted by the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET), moderated by EMPHNET's Senior Technical Officer, Ms. Asma Qannas. The panel of speakers included Dr. Dalya Eltayeb, Director of Primary Health Care Directorate at the Federal Ministry of Health in Sudan, Dr. El-Mughira Ahmed, Director of Curative Medicine at the Federal Ministry of Health in Sudan, and Team Lead Epidemiology WHO Health Emergencies Sudan, Dr. Ali Raja. These experts offered invaluable insights into the ongoing health crisis in Sudan, the impact on the population and the healthcare system, and the interventions and support needed from international and regional partners. Their collective understanding of the situation and suggested solutions form the basis of the recommendations outlined in this brief.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing conflict in Sudan has created a public health emergency, characterized by disruptions in healthcare services and the destruction of health infrastructure, which have magnified the suffering of the civilian population. This policy brief, derived from the insights and discussions of a webinar organized by the Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET), examines the severe effects of this conflict on Sudan's healthcare system and proposes a series of urgent actions and policy recommendations.

The conflict has impeded the delivery of healthcare services, with essential health facilities destroyed, patients and staff forced to evacuate, and medical supply chains disrupted. Preventive health services, such as immunization programs, have been suspended, and health support for communicable and non-communicable diseases is severely constrained.

This brief highlights key actions needed to restore and maintain health services, including strengthening the health workforce, providing emergency medical supplies, rebuilding health infrastructure,



enhancing communication networks, and implementing strategies to support the health of internally displaced persons and refugees. It also underscores the urgent need for support from international and regional partners, both in terms of resources and policy intervention, to help Sudan recover from this crisis.

The outlined policy recommendations are geared towards international and regional health partners, with an urgent call to enhance their support mechanisms and prioritize the health crisis in Sudan in their agendas. If left unaddressed, the current situation could lead to a major public health crisis, both within the country and across the region.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict zones around the world present significant challenges for the provision of healthcare services, with Sudan currently being a prime example. The nation is now in the grip of a devastating conflict that began on April 15, 2023. The internal strife between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has left the citizens of Sudan in a state of shock and deprivation, with their access to basic necessities of life including food, water, education, and crucially, healthcare services, severely disrupted.

The distressing scene unfolds across various states, most significantly in the capital city of Khartoum. Countless citizens have been forced to abandon their homes in search of safety, while others have endured the heartbreaking loss of their homes due to ongoing conflict. The crisis is further complicated by infrastructural damage to critical services like water supply, electricity, and communication. A deeply concerning aspect of this crisis is the strain on Sudan's healthcare system, which is currently unable to provide essential services to those in desperate need.

PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACT

The ongoing conflict in Sudan has not only threatened security and stability but has also triggered a severe public health crisis. Prior to the conflict, Sudan experienced various

disease outbreaks, including waterborne and vector-borne diseases, as well as the ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19 and other vaccine-preventable diseases. The situation has significantly deteriorated since the conflict escalated, introducing alarming statistics with over 1,000 deaths and 11,000 injuries in a span of two months.

The occupation of the National Medical Supplies Fund (NMSF) has raised concerns about an impending medication shortage. This is further exacerbated by the significant reduction in partner support for running health facilities (HFs) due to the volatile security situation, resulting in even fewer resources available for medical supply provision. With only 20% of the facilities fully operational, the healthcare system is severely strained.

Healthcare surveillance systems, especially in hotspot states, have been disrupted. This breakdown in surveillance, combined with increased population movement and overstretching of the health system, raises the likelihood of outbreaks of various diseases, including cholera, vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue fever, and COVID-19.

The depletion of resources, commodities, and services due to massive population movements, which includes over 1.1 million refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs, are also straining the health system. The system is further compromised by logistical constraints resulting from insecurity in most states, making

the movement of supplies and commodities difficult. Moreover, frequent attacks on healthcare have led to an outflow of qualified medical staff, leading to exhaustion and shortages of trained medical personnel. The overstretched health system struggles to maintain operations, exacerbating the health crisis.

The interruption of vector control efforts to contain diseases such as dengue fever and malaria is a significant concern. With the suspension of these programs, the risk of worsening outbreaks is imminent. The crisis has also affected the population's nutritional health, with the risk of malnutrition escalating due to the inability to access or afford local markets and the pause in WFP operations.

Lastly, the ongoing violence and insecurity have put 3.1 million women, girls, and vulnerable populations at increased risk of life-threatening gender-based violence. Additionally, the psychological wellbeing of children in the conflict areas is in a critical situation.

In summary, the conflict has triggered a complex public health emergency, with severe immediate and long-term impacts. Swift and effective action is needed to mitigate these impacts and protect the health and wellbeing of the Sudanese population.

ELEMENTS TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

Element 1. Immediate Ceasefire and Respecting the Geneva Convention:

With millions displaced and a severely affected healthcare system, immediate cessation of hostilities is paramount. Parties involved should adhere to international humanitarian laws to protect civilians and infrastructure. The nation has been ravaged for decades primarily by local military groups and the conflict has worsened significantly since April 15. Efforts should focus on mitigating the crisis through humanitarian intervention, developing lists of needed supplies and medicines, and creating alternative means of financial support and resource availability. Efforts should also

include the activation of Health Emergency Response committees at various levels.

Element 2. Ensuring Continuity of Healthcare Services:

The Ministry of Health in Sudan, along with its health partners, must work towards restoring and maintaining essential healthcare services. This includes provision of critical supplies to health facilities, facilitation of treatment for chronic and communicable diseases, and the re-establishment of routine health programs like immunizations. The situation has worsened significantly since the conflict, overwhelming medical facilities with the influx of internally displaced persons and straining already scarce resources. The healthcare system has been further hindered by the occupation of military groups. Special arrangements might be needed to ensure the safe transport and delivery of medical supplies, given the current insecurity.

Element 3. Strengthening Emergency Medical Services:

In times of conflict, access to immediate and effective emergency medical services can save countless lives. Strategies must be put in place to improve the reach and functionality of ambulances, facilitate faster response times, and protect emergency medical workers from attack. Ambulances currently face difficulties in reaching those in critical condition due to the security situation and infrastructural damage.

Element 4. Support for the Healthcare Workforce:

Health workers are on the front lines of this crisis, risking their lives to provide care amidst dangerous conditions. Measures are needed to ensure their safety, provide them with the necessary resources and support, and address any threats or violations against them. In spite of the challenges, remarkable support has been demonstrated by local communities and the Sudan Doctors Association who have played a crucial role in providing assistance, including mobilizing resources, transporting staff, and supporting patients.

Element 5. Establishment of Safe Humanitarian Corridors:

The creation of safe humanitarian corridors is crucial to ensure the safe evacuation of civilians, the delivery of humanitarian aid, and the transportation of the injured and the dead. This has become even more important in the face of current challenges, with humanitarian organizations facing harm to their staff and an increasing number of people in urgent need of assistance. It is essential for both national and international bodies to work together to facilitate the establishment and respect of these corridors.

Element 6. Mobilization of International Support:

Given the scale of the crisis, international cooperation is vital. International and regional partners should provide resources and support to assist the Sudanese health system during and after the conflict. While organizations have already begun contributing to the relief efforts, a lot more is needed. There is an urgent need for adequate funding, enhanced security measures to protect healthcare facilities and workers, and improved access to medical resources to mitigate the impact of the conflict and provide essential healthcare services to the affected population.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **International Assistance:** Encourage international organizations and countries to offer immediate humanitarian aid to Sudan, focusing not only on health resources such as medical supplies and medicines but also on addressing severe funding shortages across all pillars of the health system. Assistance could include financial aid, provision of medical supplies, technical expertise, or logistical support to bolster the health response in the midst of conflict.
2. **Safety of Health Workers:** Strengthen the protection of health workers and facilities, as they are key to maintaining essential health services during conflicts. This can be facilitated by ensuring adherence to international laws and norms that prohibit

the targeting of healthcare facilities and personnel in times of conflict.

3. **Strengthening Infrastructure:** Support efforts to rebuild and repair health infrastructure damaged by the conflict. This includes hospitals, clinics, and other healthcare facilities.
4. **Healthcare Accessibility:** Improve access to healthcare services for all affected populations, with special attention to vulnerable groups like children, the elderly, women, and displaced individuals. This can involve mobile health clinics, telehealth services, or other innovative solutions that bypass traditional barriers to healthcare access.
5. **Support for Non-communicable and Communicable Diseases Management:** Prioritize the continuity of services for the management of both communicable and non-communicable diseases. This includes ensuring the availability of necessary medications and the continuation of vaccination programs.
6. **Integrated Psychosocial Support:** Incorporate mental health services into the overall health response, considering the immense psychological toll conflicts can have on individuals. Given the heightened risk of life-threatening gender-based violence amidst the violence and insecurity, there is an urgent need to provide comprehensive support for the psychological wellbeing of the affected population, particularly women, girls, and vulnerable groups.

REFERENCES

Social Science in Action. (2023, June 1). As conflict escalates in Sudan, three urgent health issues need addressing. <https://www.socialscienceinaction.org/blogs-and-news/as-conflict-escalates-in-sudan-three-urgent-health-issues-need-addressing/>

Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance. (2023, June 15). Sudan conflict leaves health system in total collapse. <https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/sudan-conflict-leaves-health-system-total-collapse>

ABC News. (2023, June 19). Sudan conflict: African country's health system nears breaking point amid armed standoff. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/sudan-conflict-african-countrys-health-system-nears-breaking/story?id=99564797>

Chatham House. (2023, April 30). Resolving Sudan's crisis means removing those fighting. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/resolving-sudans-crisis-means-removing-those-fighting>

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). (2023). Restrictions and insecurity obstruct vital medical care in Sudan. <https://www.msf.org/restrictions-and-insecurity-obstruct-vital-medical-care-sudan>

GHD|EMPHNET: Working Together for Better Health

The Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET) is a regional network that focuses on strengthening public health systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) and beyond. EMPHNET works in partnership with ministries of health, non-government organizations, international agencies, private sector, and relevant institutions from the region and the globe to promote public health and applied epidemiology. To advance the work of EMPHNET, Global Health Development (GHD) was initiated to build coordination mechanisms with partners and collaborators. Together, GHD|EMPHNET is dedicated to serving the region by supporting efforts to promote public health policies, strategic planning, sustainable financing, resource mobilization, public health programs, and other related areas.

GHD|EMPHNET ■ Shmeisani, Abdallah Ben Abbas Street, Building No. 42, Amman, Jordan
■ Tel: +962-6-5519962 ■ Fax: +962-6-5519963
www.emphnet.net