Contagious Fragility: A Case Study on Responding to the Sudan Crisis from Chad

world relief®

Discussion Summary

World Relief reflects on a year of responding to the humanitarian crisis in Sudan following the onset of the April 2023 conflict and identifies the factors that made this possible and principles we have learned from it. Despite the incredibly fragile situation, World Relief has been able to continue working at scale and even grow our humanitarian work in Sudan. In one year of response during the conflict we have served over **996,000 people** with humanitarian services.

Success Factors

Well-established program – There are a few key components to this that anyone working in Sudan should consider, including adopting a community based approach, integrating short-term humanitarian and long-term development programs, establishing multiple field office locations, employing a diverse staff, seeking contextually experienced leadership, and maintaining strong donor relations.

Decentralized and flexible control models – This is critical to continuing work during a conflict with significant access and communications limitations. For us, this looks like trusting in a strong team since before the conflict began; allowing for rapid decision making, including a quick pivot to running operations for western Sudan out of Chad; and utilizing both private and public flexible funding.

Providence – World Relief was certainly the beneficiary of what we consider to be providence, though some might call it "luck." There were certain aspects of the response that we did not plan at all but were critical to the continuation of the country program. For example, we established an office in Chad in late-2022, we were able to maintain access to banks that were relatively functional in Sudan, and we had a good balance of presence in both the east and the west of Sudan.
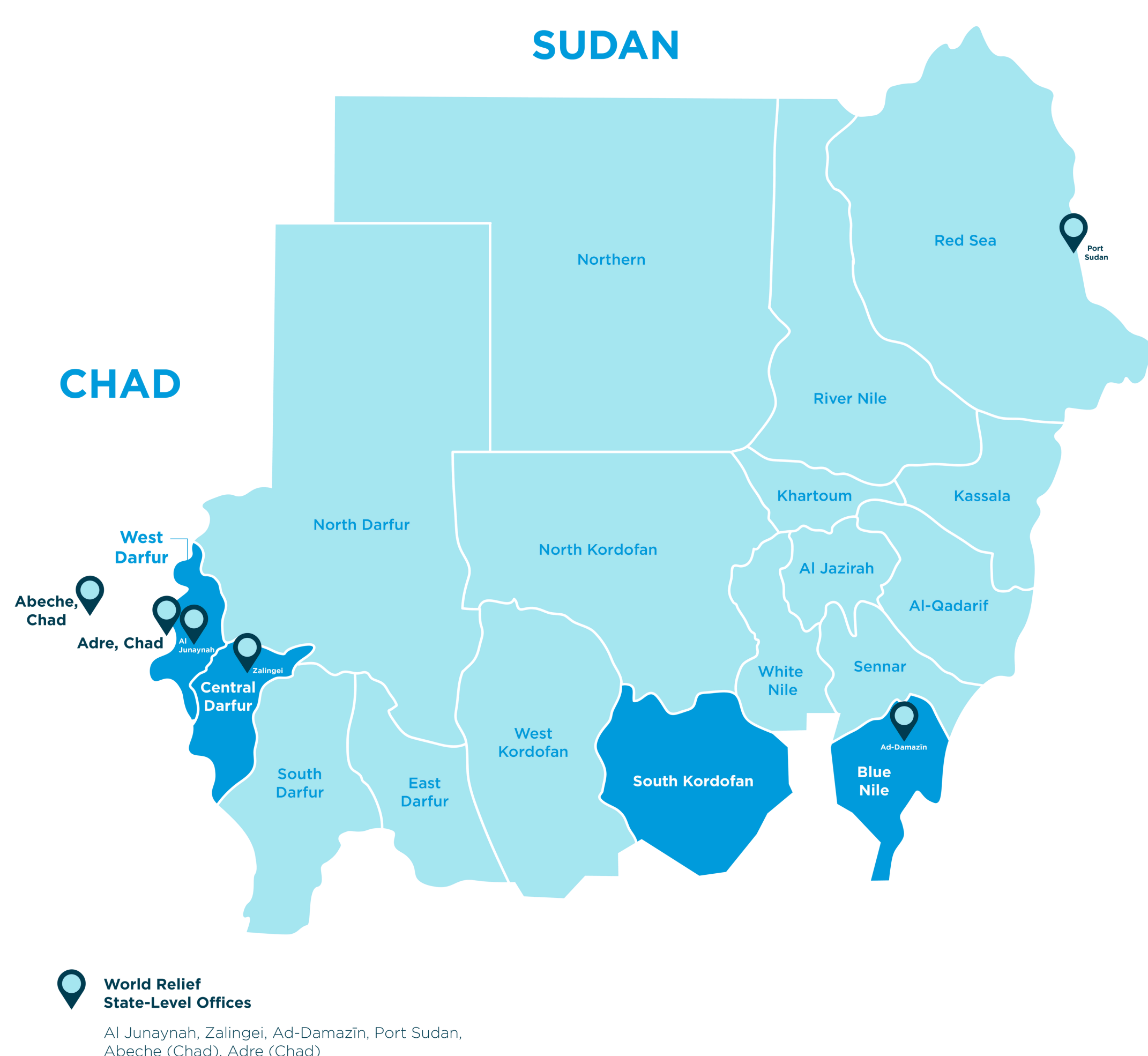

Our programs reach across four states - West Darfur, Central Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan, and our country office is now based in Port Sudan. We take a collaborative, community-based approach focusing on the following sectors:

- Health
- Nutrition
- WASH
- Agriculture
- Food Assistance
- Food Security and Livelihoods
- Protection
- Peacebuilding

Key Principles Learned

1. **Fog of war** – In this context, complex "command and control" systems usually breakdown. It is important to be able to utilize simple communications and approval systems that are not reliant on the ability to transmit massive amounts of information to a central "command" hub.
2. **Push decisions as far down as possible** – When there is the breakdown of systems, push decisions as far down the chain of command as is reasonable to do while maintaining sufficient accountability. In the midst of chaos, it is often a human tendency to strive for increased control and information flow. In our organizations, we have to combat this urge or we might stifle the possibility of thriving in fragility. To do this well, we must practice allowing these decisions to be made at lower levels during "normal times" as well as during the crisis.
3. **"Good enough"** – We must combat the urge to have perfect systems in place. The pursuit of perfection in our systems can be the enemy of our ability to actually serve people at times. We should ensure that "good enough" systems are in place, which means they work and they meet our minimum standards of accountability, even if they do not reach our ideals. We, as organizations, must cultivate a risk tolerance that allows us to be comfortable operating with "good enough" systems.
4. **Presence** – We must be cognizant of when a remote solution is an inadequate replacement for a physical presence. This is especially important in highly relational working environments where processes and procedures are secondary to the trust developed through regular interaction.
5. **Single-source UN supply chain is inadequate** – Relying on a single-source supply chain for humanitarian supplies was a mistake. While it seemed like a workable solution given the fragility of the context before the conflict, as a humanitarian community we should have been working in advance to create alternatives so that there would not be a breakdown in the supply chain.
6. **Do no harm principles in Chad** – When fragility causes a crisis in one area (a country, state, locality, etc.) it usually has knock-on effects for those neighboring the original crisis. We must also address the knock-on effects, otherwise we are contributing to the contagion of fragility.

SUDAN

CHAD

Northern
Red Sea
Port Sudan
River Nile
West Darfur
Abeche, Chad
Adre, Chad
North Darfur
Khartoum
Kassala
North Kordofan
Al Jazirah
Al-Qadarif
Central Darfur
White Nile
Sennar
West Kordofan
South Darfur
East Darfur
South Kordofan
Blue Nile

World Relief State-Level Offices
Al Junaynah, Zalingei, Ad-Damazin, Port Sudan, Abeche (Chad), Adre (Chad)