

Sudan's Hunger War:

Access, Markets, and the Displacement Multiplier

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(Muhammed Emin Canik - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook argues that Sudan's crisis cannot be understood through isolated categories such as conflict, hunger, and displacement. Instead, it shows how these dynamics operate as a single interconnected system in which the breakdown of humanitarian access, commercial flows, market functioning, and basic services steadily erodes the conditions for civilian survival. As reachability and predictability collapse, households lose not only food security, but the ability to remain in place, turning displacement into a survival strategy rather than a secondary outcome of war. By placing access at the centre of analysis, the author shifts attention away from the abstract language of “more aid” and toward the more urgent question of continuity: who can still be reached, by what means, and for how long. In this sense, the paper presents famine in Sudan not simply as a humanitarian emergency, but as a broader crisis of governance, stability, and survival.

The conflict that erupted in Sudan on April 15, 2023, between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) plunged the country not only into a security crisis but also into a systemic crisis that [eroded](#) the “infrastructure” of civilian life. Three lines defining people’s capacity for daily survival were simultaneously broken: humanitarian access, commercial supply/market functioning, and the continuity of basic services.

This policy outlook argues that hunger and displacement in Sudan are not separate crises but part of a single interconnected system. As the conflict disrupts reachability and predictability, aid breakdowns, supply chain failures, collapsing markets, and declining services threaten household survival and force mobility. UNHCR data [shows](#) that by March 16, 2026, there were 11,642,505 forcibly displaced persons in Sudan: 4,487,604 were recent arrivals outside Sudan, and 6,881,913 were internally displaced.

Crucially, this outlook identifies access—here defined as the continuity and predictability of aid, markets, and services—as the binding constraint within this system. While conflict initiates the crisis, it is the breakdown of these access regimes (systems that ensure the consistent provision of essentials) that determines where and when hunger translates into displacement.

Reading Sudan as a Famine-Displacement System

In Sudan, hunger is called a “humanitarian situation,” focused on food shortages, while displacement is labelled a “side effect of war,” meaning population movements due to conflict. Yet, it’s more accurate to see these issues together in a mutually reinforcing loop: conflict fragments areas, reducing access and making aid and trade flows patchy. This erodes markets and services. When households run out of options, forced movement becomes the last resort, further straining remaining resources. This is not a linear process; as displacement increases, pressure mounts on access and available services in receiving areas—reproducing the original crisis.

This framework is not a “conceptual preference,” but an explanation of the sharp differentiation on the ground. In Sudan, the risk of famine is not “evenly distributed”; it is concentrated in areas of access. Therefore, the aim of this article is not so much to retell the scale of the crisis, but to make visible the conditions under which hunger produces displacement and to shift the intervention area from the language of “more aid” to the language of “continuity and access architecture.”

The Contrast That Matters: Famine, Access, and Where the System Breaks

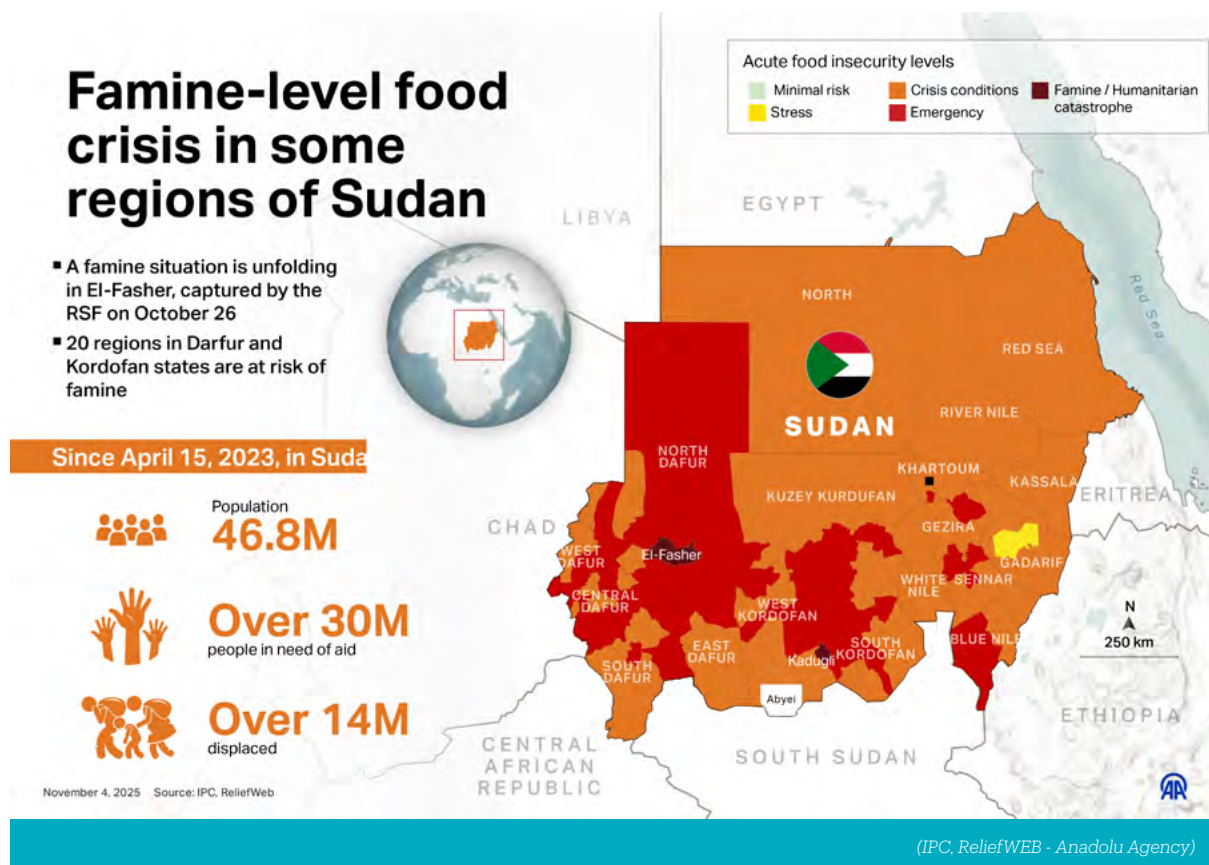
The IPC’s Famine Review Committee (FRC) [findings](#) show that acute food insecurity in Sudan is not a “widespread” deprivation, but rather concentrated along fractures of conflict and access. As of September 2025, the towns of El Fasher (North Darfur) and the besieged town of Kadugli (South Kordofan) were classified [Famine \(IPC Stage 5\)](#) with “reasonable evidence,” and these conditions are expected to persist until January 2026. The same assessment specifically notes that conditions in the besieged town of Dilling may be similar to Kadugli; however, due to insufficient data, Dilling could not be included in the IPC classification.

This confirmation must be read in conjunction with a broader “ring of risk.” According to the IPC, uncertainty regarding the course of the conflict increases the risk of famine in 20 areas, particularly in North/South/East Darfur and West/South Kordofan, where displaced populations are expected to arrive. This risk becomes apparent not just in the “most likely scenario,” but also under a realistic “worsening scenario” involving escalating conflict and additional restrictions on humanitarian access and the movement of goods/services.

In September 2025 (at the peak of the famine), 21.2 million people nationwide—45% of the population—were facing IPC Stage 3 and above conditions; of these, 6.3 million were at Stage 4 (Emergency) and 375,000 at Stage 5 (Catastrophe – household level). This total is expected to fall to 19.2 million (approximately 40%) in the post-harvest period (October 2025–January 2026); however, the IPC emphasises that the “mitigating effect” of the harvest will be limited due to conflict and insecurity in North Darfur and the Western Nuba Mountains.

More importantly, the fact that the total appears to be 19.1 million (41%) in the February–May 2026 projection does not automatically mean recovery. According to the IPC, this “apparent decrease” is largely due to the inability to classify areas of great concern: due to volatility and uncertainty, the towns of El Fasher and Kadugli, along with Dilling and some settlements/provinces (approximately 841,000 people in total), cannot be classified in the second projection. Therefore, the decrease in numbers is related not to a softening of conditions in some areas, but rather to the analytical ‘falling off the map’ of the most critical areas.

For this reason, the IPC table requires reading the hunger crisis in Sudan not as “general deprivation,” but as a breaking point determined by the dynamics of access and conflict: while some regions show limited signs of



recovery (with relative stability and improved access), active conflict and restricted access in Greater Darfur and Greater Kordofan are breaking the system most severely.

This contrast shows that hunger is not just about food shortages but reflects a system breakdown due to reduced access. When famine is confirmed in places like El Fasher and Kadugli, and the risk of famine rises in 20 regions, it underscores the impact of conflict and access constraints. Some critical areas can't even be classified due to volatility. This raises key questions for crisis management in Sudan: Who is being reached, how often, and with what consistency? The next section examines the issue of reachability and predictability—why humanitarian and commercial flows now multiply displacement in Sudan.

Access as the Binding Constraint

While factors such as agricultural disruption and climate variability contribute to food insecurity, they do not sufficiently explain the spatial concentration and volatility of famine conditions observed in Sudan. These patterns are better accounted for by differential access—specifically, the breakdown in the continuity and predictability of aid, markets, and services across conflict-affected areas. In Sudan, the determining variable in the hunger crisis is

often not the “level of need,” but accessibility. Access here does not just mean “the ability to get aid,” it means the regular delivery of aid, the uninterrupted flow of supplies, and the continuation of essential services.

OCHA's access summary for Sudan clearly [notes](#) that conflict-induced violence and attacks on aid workers remain major constraints on access. Such constraints not only reduce aid but also deplete households' “waiting” capacity by disrupting continuity. In conflict zones, people often find it harder to live with uncertainty than with scarcity, because uncertainty obscures the possibility of the next distribution, convoy, or supply line.

The WFP's January 15, 2026, statement embodies this “window” logic in access: the [WFP reported](#) that in the last six months it has delivered regular monthly aid to approximately 1.8 million people in famine or at-risk areas; it says this has helped push back hunger in nine locations. However, the same text also emphasises that the “breakthroughs” (e.g., the joint UN convoy to Kadugli in October) offered a narrow and fragile window of access, meaning they did not create a continuous access regime.

At this point, access ceases to be a “technical” issue; it becomes a governance variable determining civilian survival. When the access regime is weak, aid and trade flows become an “ad hoc” arrangement, which amplifies the pressure of displacement.

Sudan's El-Fasher faces intense RSF attacks amid months-long siege

El-Fasher, the capital of North Darfur in western Sudan, is under intense attack by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which has been fighting the Sudanese army for over 30 months and has besieged the city since May 2024

El-Fasher

Serves as the **administrative center of the Darfur region**.

Located at geographically strategic point.

Seen by both the army and the RSF as the key to controlling the region.

Besieged on five different fronts.

267 attacks have been carried out on the city so far.

The RSF claimed to have seized **command of the Sudanese Army's 6th Infantry Division in El-Fasher**.

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From Hunger to Movement: The Household Survival Threshold

At the household level, displacement is not an immediate response to scarcity but the outcome of a threshold process: only when coping mechanisms fail under conditions of disrupted access and uncertainty does mobility become the dominant survival strategy.

Thus, when access breaks down, hunger becomes a “displacement producer” at the household level through three channels.

First, purchasing power collapses. In conflict zones, famine is not just about a lack of food; it is often about food becoming unaffordable. Supply disruptions and shrinking markets raise prices, while incomes and credit decline. Households try to cope by selling assets, borrowing,

and cutting back on meals, but as access worsens, their survival strategies are depleted. Migration becomes a desperate last resort when survival is no longer possible.

Second, the collapse of basic services exacerbates hunger. The WHO’s Public Health Situation Analysis [document](#) dated January 6, 2026, notes that health facilities are widely destroyed/looted or operating with severe shortages of staff, medicine, and equipment; this deepens the health crisis. When the health system is weakened, malnutrition becomes more deadly; When combined with illness and WASH (Water, Safety, and Environment) disruption, the risk of death sharpens. In this situation, households seek not just “food,” but a food, health, and safety package, and mobility accelerates.

Thirdly, the loss of predictability brings the “moment of decision” forward. When it becomes uncertain when aid will arrive, how open the market will be, or whether clinics will be open, households begin to manage the next week, not the next month. This psychological and material contraction triggers displacement at an earlier stage, rather than as a “final stage.”

Policy Implications: Restoring Reachability

If access and continuity constitute the binding constraints within the famine–displacement system, then policy responses must prioritise restoring predictability and reachability rather than simply increasing aggregate aid volumes. In this sense, the following is not a conventional list of recommendations, but a set of implications that emerge directly from the underlying mechanism. At their core, these measures share a common objective: to restore reachability by systematising access and continuity.

■ **Making access measurable and establishing triggers.** Access restrictions often remain “narratives.” However, a framework that automatically activates alternative route/modality plans and high-level access diplomacy when indicators such as attacks, delays, route closures, and access restrictions exceed threshold values reduces ad hoc management. (The rationale for this approach is that access restrictions are decisive in determining continuity.)

■ **Making deconfliction a “calendar” rather than a “window.”** As the WFP describes in the Kadugli example, narrow access windows save lives but are not sustainable. The aim should be to institutionalise verifiable, repeatable delivery windows rather than a one-off “breakthrough.” Predictability is one of the most tangible buffers that reduces the pressure of displacement.

■ **Pipeline protection: shifting from short-horizon funding to multi-quadrant continuity.** WFP’s stock and ration alerts show that a loss of continuity can lead to lethal consequences within a few weeks. Unless donor logic shifts from “responding to urgent calls” to “preventing pipeline breaks,” the system remains fragile even if access is restored.

■ **Making route diversification the default design.** An architecture dependent on a single corridor repeatedly produces “resets” in environments like Sudan’s. Route diversification is not just logistics; it is a continuity policy: aid and supply should not completely stop when one line closes.

■ **‘Survival package’ approach: food + nutrition + health combination.** The collapse of health infrastructure increases the lethality of starvation. Therefore, in famine-risk areas, the approach should not be limited to food; it should include nutritional therapy, basic medical/health support, and WASH components. Otherwise, food aid alone will not be enough to compensate for the rapidly collapsing health risk in the field, and the pressure of displacement will not decrease.

Reversal as Evidence: Famine is not Fate

There is a crucial point often overlooked in the Sudan narrative: if conditions have improved to a certain extent in some places, the spread of famine is not fate; it is a product of specific conditions.

The WFP's January 15, 2026, [statement](#) says that regular monthly aid has helped push back hunger in nine locations, but simultaneously notes that these gains are fragile. This "reversal" narrative is not a success story; it is a diagnostic tool: the binding constraint is not just agricultural production, but access and sustainability. Therefore, "reducing the risk of famine" and "reducing displacement" are linked to the same policy problem: restoring reachability.

Financing Continuity: When the Pipeline Breaks, Movement Accelerates

The second element, as critical as access, is pipeline continuity. In an environment like Sudan, the question of whether funding is "uninterrupted" is as crucial as whether it is "sufficient."

The WFP's warning in its January 15, 2026, [statement](#) is very clear in this respect: the organisation states that it has been forced to reduce rations to the "absolute minimum for survival" and that food stocks in Sudan could run out if emergency additional funding does not arrive by the

end of March. The same [statement](#) indicates that \$700 million USD is needed for operations from January to June 2026. When the pipeline breaks, it doesn't just reduce the amount of aid; it shatters households' assumption of "survival" in the future, accelerating mobility.

Conclusion: Why the Mechanism Matters

The famine in Sudan is an urgent humanitarian catastrophe, but it is also a governance and stability problem. Because the conflict not only produces loss of life, it produces an access regime that determines "who can access, who can reach, who can stay in place?" The confirmation of famine in El Fasher and Kadugli, the emphasis on risks in 20 additional areas, and the picture of acute food insecurity affecting 21.2 million people [show](#) where this regime has broken down. The WFP's ration/stock [warnings](#) reveal how the loss of continuity can create a multiplier effect within a few weeks.

Therefore, famine and displacement in Sudan should be read as a single system: when access collapses, markets and services erode; when the household threshold is broken, mobility accelerates; mobility carries the pressure of the crisis to a wider area. The next part (Piece 2) will focus on the transboundary consequence of this system - how mobility generates new tensions in neighbouring countries regarding border politics, protection regimes, and regional stability.

More broadly, Sudan illustrates how contemporary crises are increasingly governed not only by the presence of conflict, but by the structure of access regimes that determine the distribution of survival itself.



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