Beyond The State: Rethinking Citizenship Through Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms In Khartoum

Author(s): Shahd Hatim Izzeldin

Date: 05/11/2025

Affiliation: Published as part of the 2025 AMEL Sudan Democracy Lifeline Fellowship

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of AMEL

Description of AMEL Fellowship: The AMEL Sudan Democracy Lifeline Fellowship is an online program dedicated to empowering emerging voices to influence global discussions on democracy, peace, and development in Sudan. Through a series of interactive workshops, mentorship, and evidence-based research projects, fellows gain critical skills in analysis, policy formulation, and advocacy.

Further Readings: For more insights and publications from AMEL's fellows, visit our website: democracyactionsd.org/publications

Contact Information: If you have any questions or would like more information about AMEL's and our work, please reach out to us:

- **Email**: sudandemocracy@amelproject.org
- **Facebook**: https://www.facebook.com/democracyactionproject

About The Author: Shahd is a final year law student, feminist and social change activist with five years of experience advocating for women's rights. Her work focuses on addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) through both grassroots advocacy and evidence-based research. She is particularly interested in how social research—especially through anthropological and feminist lenses—can uncover the structural and cultural drivers of violence.

During her recent research fellowship, Shahd authored policy and academic papers on collective trauma, transitional justice, and reimagining citizenship in post-conflict Sudan. She aims to bridge the gap between grassroots experiences and policy reform by using social research to inform more just and contextually grounded legal responses.

Executive Summary:

This brief begins by highlighting the historical and current shortcomings of citizenship as a status, exposing its discriminatory nature while simultaneously shedding light on the historical and political conditions that opened up new avenues for reconceptualising citizenship. The seed of this expansion has been the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), which emerged as an extension to resistance committees at the outbreak of the war.
ERRs rapidly organized and outpaced INGOs in delivering humanitarian aid, while simultaneously creating participatory spaces that deeply engage the communities in decision making, devising solutions and allocating resources, thereby embodying “citizenship in practice.” This reconceptualisation rests on two key parameters; active participation and social capital.

ERRs illustrate how political participation extends beyond formal institutions, as local communities are constantly engaged in collective decision making, problem solving and collective organising. In these rooms, citizenship was enacted through lived experiences and practices that asserted agency, fostered new leadership and anchored responsibility within communities.
Equally important, these practices also built social capital in three interconnected mechanisms; resource sharing bonding that transform community members into supportive networks; and bridging divides across generations, political affiliations and even former enmities.

The brief calls on policymakers and stakeholders to recognize Emergency Response Rooms as an essential site of civic infrastructure, not just humanitarian actors. It recommends institutionalizing their community-led practices,problem-solving, resource mobilization, and decentralized decision-making. In addition to strengthening their capacities through participatory partnerships, context-grounded research, and long-term support that reinforces their role in fostering citizenship.

Methodology:

This paper follows a qualitative case study approach to examine how the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) in Khartoum interventions constitute citizenship as practice. They provide a unique lens for exploring how communities expand beyond the conventional political participation.
ERRs in Khartoum were chosen as a primary case study because of their centrality to humanitarian relief following the outbreak, in addition to their collective and participatory mode of organizing. The historical and political condition that gave birth to the ERRs, and the immense role they carried in filling state vacuums makes them an excellent site for rethinking citizenship through grassroot practices.

The analysis draws on:

- Semi-structured interviews with 7 ERR volunteers (4 men and 3 women aged 24-30 years) from three separate rooms, two in Khartoum and one in Omdurman.
- Interviews with three academics/practitioners with expertise in civic and social movement organising.

All the names of the volunteers cited in this paper are pseudonyms to protect their identities
The data was analyzed following a thematic analysis lens guided by the framework of “citizenship in practice”, using active participation and social capital as the main parameters.

Introduction:

The traditional concept of citizenship has been theorised as a status bestowed by the state, as articulated by Marshall in his framework of civic, political and social rights. This model largely reflects Eurocentric modes of citizenship, rooted in welfare states.[1] Furthermore, this rigid conception struggles to account for other contexts where state institutions are weak or non-existent, in addition to disregarding how culture, politics and social contexts interplay and interact with citizenship.[2]

Sudan’s modern history distinctly illustrates these limitations, where decades of discriminatory policies entrenched marginalisation and fueled cycles of violence, shattering the very premise of citizenship as equal membership.
The current conflict has further exacerbated and exposed these exclusions; the removal of informal settlements under the guise of “securing the city”, limiting access of digital communication, failure to provide food and shelter for those who were unable to flee and imposing mass death sentences for allegedly collaborating with the RSF. Under such conditions, legal citizenship alone offers neither protection nor belonging.

Nevertheless, these political and historical conditions that exposed the fragility of citizenship as a status also provided space for communities to assert themselves. The collapse of formal state institutions combined with the urgent needs generated by the war forced ordinary citizens to mobilize and assert their agency outside the state’s framework.

Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) emerged as a clear embodiment of this dynamic. Building on the organizational infrastructure, trust networks, and civic ethos cultivated by Sudan’s Resistance Committees, ERRs quickly organised to respond to the dire humanitarian situation. Their ability to organise, innovate and diversify solutions outpaced all other efforts by INGOs and civil society organisations. By giving structure to these spontaneous acts of solidarity, ERRs carved new spaces for participatory planning, collective problem-solving and grassroot leadership.

[1] Yalcin, B. (2018). What is social citizenship? [Preprint]. ResearchGate. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10083.04640
[2] Gaynor, N (2023) ‘What Does It Mean to be an “Active Citizen”? The Limitations and Opportunities Posed by Different Understandings and Deployments of “Citizenship”’, Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review, Vol. 37, Autumn, pp. 15-27.
These interventions challenge the static conception of citizenship as a mere status, and instead points to the possibility of understanding citizenship as lived practice, rooted in agency, solidarity and collective responsibility.[3]

This paper grounds the theory of “citizenship in practice" in Sudan’s wartime context by examining the Emergency Response Rooms in Khartoum as a case study. It explores whether and how their everyday practices foster active participation and build social capital.It concludes by proposing policy recommendations for strengthening and solidifying their efforts, as a foundation for a more just and democratic future.

From Status to Practice; Rethinking Citizenship:

Citizenship as a concept is very contested and abstract when viewed without relation to the context it addresses. This in turn necessitates the importance of rethinking and reconceptualising citizenship beyond the universalised, abstracted and culturally neutralised theories, often departing from the same point tailored on eurocentric models and welfare states.

In this matter, it is crucial to trace how the reconceptualisation of “citizenship as practice” builds on three foundational strands of traditional citizenship theories.[6] Liberalism heavily focuses on the individual rights and entitlements granted by the state, on the assumption that they have the resources to enjoy these rights.[7]
This emphasis on self-interests is criticised by communitarians, who center community relations and belonging, regarding it as the site that produces an individual's sense of identity. Civic republicans on the other hand, places more emphasis on active participation that stems out of duty and obligation.[8]

Modern theorists have attempted to synthesise these insights, to better bridge the gap between citizens and the state. These attempts ultimately aim to expand citizenship from a static status to practice.[9] Notably illustrated by Lister; "To be a citizen in the legal and sociological sense means to enjoy the rights of citizenship necessary for agency and social and political participation.”[10]
Lister's reconceptualisation is highly relevant to Sudan, where she argued that rights in a vacuum do not amount to citizenship. Instead, it is activated through the utilisation of these rights at community levels.
Additionally, it places great emphasis on the capacity to act independently and make choices, viewing agency as the ability to engage in everyday politics and treating it as the

[3] Gaventa, J. (2002). Introduction: Exploring citizenship, participation and accountability. *IDS Bulletin, 33*(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2002.tb00020.x
[4] Karriem, Abdulrazak. (2016). Karriem, A. and L. Benjamin, (2016). How Civil Society Organizations Foster Insurgent Citizenship: Lessons from the Brazilian Landless Movement. VOLUNTAS [5] Clarke, J. (2014). CHAPTER ONE Recentering citizenship. https://doi.org/j.ctt9qgzqg.5 [6] Gaventa, J. (2002). Introduction: Exploring citizenship, participation and accountability. IDS Bulletin, 33(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2002.tb00020.x
[7]Isin, E. F. (Ed.). (2000). Democracy, citizenship and the global city. Routledge. Retrieved from Democracy, Citizenship and the Global City
[8]Ibid
[9]Holma, K., & Kontinen, T. (Eds.). (2019). Practices of Citizenship in East Africa: Perspectives from Philosophical Pragmatism (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429279171 [10] Gaventa, J. (2002). Introduction: Exploring citizenship, participation and accountability. IDS Bulletin, 33(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2002.tb00020.x
mechanism through which citizenship becomes real. Thereby recentering citizenship from passive to active, grounding it to community levels engagements and participation.[11]

Furthermore, Lister reframes citizenship as something practiced rather than held as a legal status. Her emphasis on agency and constructive social participation helps explain how people enact citizenship by shaping their communities.[12]

While the aforementioned foundational theories offer important conceptual entry points, they remain limited when applied to conflict-affected contexts like Sudan. To bridge this gap, the paper builds on Lister's insights by extending them into the relatively new terrain of Emergency Response Rooms, and contributing to a more context-sensitive understanding of citizenship.
This paper grounds the theory of citizenship as practice, using social capital and active participation in informal political institutions as the key parameters.
Notably visible in Khartoum' Emergency Response Rooms, where communities are reclaiming their capacity in defining their problems, setting the agenda and acting accordingly to address them.[13]

Active Participation through Informal Institutions:

Active participation in this sense is not limited to formal arenas, but rather refers to the everyday practices that occur in informal institutions through which people engage in collective problem-solving, decision making and self-organising.[14] The core idea behind this stems from how participation can help shape people as political beings.

A study of rural communities in Uganda illustrates how citizenship is practiced through embedded, localized acts such as maintaining roads, assisting neighbors, and participating in community meetings.[15] These practices, while seemingly mundane, carry political weight by fostering recognition, confidence, and agency among women who had previously excluded themselves from formal civic roles. Reflecting a more incremental form of civic transformation that gradually expands spaces for political belonging.

On the other hand, the ERRs are expanding and creating new political spaces that are actively working on challenging patterns and practices of marginalization. By decentralising decision making, these spaces enhance the community's ability to engage in decisions and processes in ways they find compatible with their needs, priorities and capabilities.[16]

[11] Lawy, Robert & Biesta, Gert. (2006). Citizenship-As-Practice: The educational implications of an inclusive and relational understanding of citizenship. British Journal of Educational Studies. 54. 34 - 50. 10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00335.x
[12] Smith, N., Lister, R., Middleton, S., & Cox, L. (2005). *Young People as Real Citizens: Towards an Inclusionary Understanding of Citizenship*. *Journal of Youth Studies, 8*(4), 425-443. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260500431743
[13] Youth-led 'emergency rooms' shine rays of hope in war-torn Sudan | UN News [14] Gaventa, J. (2002). Introduction: Exploring citizenship, participation and accountability. IDS Bulletin, 33(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2002.tb00020.x
[15] Holma, K., & Kontinen, T. (Eds.). (2019). Practices of Citizenship in East Africa: Perspectives from Philosophical Pragmatism (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429279171 [16] Sarah Elobaid, *"Sudan's Emergency Response Rooms in the Time of War," Upstream Journal*, December 14, 2024, https://upstreamjournal.org/sudans-emergency-response-rooms/
Such practices challenge the narrow conception of political participation, illustrating how grassroots initiatives can widen the spectrum of political participation.[17]

By acknowledging the political nature of these everyday practices, the focus shifts on how ordinary people can practice citizenship and acknowledges them as makers and shapers.[18]

Building Social Capital:

In addition to active participation, social capital also plays a role in the reconceptualisation of citizenship as practice. This concept refers to the networked resources of trust, reciprocity and solidarity that enables and sustains collective action. It strengthens the social fabric of society by deepening ties within a given group/community and enhances mutual understanding by connecting social divides.[19]

Amidst conflicts, trust is often eroded by violence, displacement and political fragmentation. However, ERRs were able to carve out spaces of mutual support built on solidarity and dignity. This is particularly significant in our context, where the conflict and intense polarisation can have a toll on social cohesion.

Findings & Analysis:

From Organic Action to Organised Solidarity:

The emergency response rooms represented an outer mirror reflecting the solidarity that's already alive across communities. Most notably, the ERRs did not generate this energy but rather organised it and gave it structure.
The real spark came from the communities themselves, driven by a deep moral responsibility to respond to the growing needs and void left by the war.

Several volunteers emphasized that even if there had been no ERRs, the community would have still managed to find ways to help. Furthermore, several emphasized that some community interventions had begun right after the conflict erupted. For instance, in some neighborhoods, takayas organically emerged at the level of the neighborhoods before the ERRs organized.

Notably, the seed that made all these efforts possible was this shared sense of responsibility to act rather than remain passive. Solidarity often arises organically in crises, which isn't new in Sudan, as it's rooted in the longstanding traditions of collective responsibility (Nafeer). What makes this particularly remarkable is that it took place amidst a dangerous wartime context, moving beyond personal gains and interests towards collective action, shared responsibility and the drive to support others.

[17] Ibid
[18] Michael Neocosmos, "Civil Society, Citizenship and the Politics of the (Im)possible: Rethinking Militancy in Africa Today," Libcom.org, 2007, https://libcom.org/article/civil-society-citizenship-and-politics-impossible-rethinking-militancy-africa-today
[19] Miyar Ezekiel De'nyok, *"Rethinking the Search for Permanent Peace in Africa's Fragile States: The Governance and Service Delivery Outlooks,"* Global Journals (2025), https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume25/6-Rethinking-the-Search.pdf

The following sections unpack how ERR practices extend beyond humanitarian relief to practices that carry political weight and foster social capital.

A- ERRs as A Site of Political Practice:

Neoliberalism confined politics and political participation and imagination between the walls of formal state institutions and political parties only[20]. Due to its exclusionary nature and remoteness from local communities' realities and lived experiences, politics must be expanded beyond the state level.
The ERRs in this sense are challenging and redefining what politics means, which according to Fatma, "politics encompasses any small act that extends towards a shared benefit."[21] Her quote brilliantly reflects the ERRs, where they fostered spaces that shifted the focus from personal gains to collective ones, with the ability to actually practice such acts. The ERRs not only reclaimed politics but it also provided the space for practising it.

A1- Humanitarian vs Political: The Blurred Boundaries;

Departing from the angle that looks into politics and political acts on the ground of responding and engaging with the problems normal people face, it becomes clear how ERRs' work is inherently political. Their actions undoubtedly coincide with being "political otherwise", referring to the subtle and indirect forms of political engagement which simultaneously challenge dominant power relations and express moral responsibility.[22] The driving motive behind the rooms, whether creating community kitchens or distributing medicine was indeed out of moral obligation and solidarity, nonetheless, these actions held political consequences the minute they filled government vacuums and redistributed power at the local level.

Rationally, several volunteers depicted associating their work with politics, immediately asserting their impartiality. Given the threatening context, avoiding overt political stances was indeed necessary to escape any reprisals or targets for the volunteers. However, it still was not enough to shield them from constant harassment, illegal detentions and violence. On the contrary, others emphasized the political nature of the rooms, whether both humanitarian and political or purely political, claiming how the sole restriction under humanitarian diminishes and obscures the realities people experienced.

What initially began as solidarity, soon transcended the humanitarian arena, demonstrating how such interventions in a conflict context are inevitably political.

[20]Neocosmos, M. (2008, April 18). Civil society, citizenship and the politics of the (im)possible: Rethinking militancy in Africa today. libcom.org. Retrieved from https://libcom.org/article/civil-society-citizenship-and-politics-impossible-rethinking-militancy-africa-today
[21] A 26 year old volunteer from Khartoum
[22]Neocosmos, M. (2008, April 18). Civil society, citizenship and the politics of the (im)possible: Rethinking militancy in Africa today. libcom.org. Retrieved from https://libcom.org/article/civil-society-citizenship-and-politics-impossible-rethinking-militancy-africa-today

A2- From Solidarity To Participation: Agency & Organizing

Having illustrated how ERRs are political spaces, it's equally important to unpack how politics is practiced, and the importance and necessity of active participation.
Participation and engaging in community organizing increases people's awareness about their collective local issues and helps foster a sense of commitment to addressing them.[23]
Participation in this context will be analyzed through two main parameters; Agency and levels of organization, which together illustrate the significance of participation.

Unlike the mainstream participation, which often focuses on the end result; voting, representation and so on, the focus here is instead on the mundane acts that build up and constitute the humanitarian interventions. These interventions may begin with an impulse of solidarity, but it quickly develops into collective discussions about the given challenge, possible solutions depending on their context and resources, the diversification of said resources, ultimately leading to organizing efforts for implementation.

Claiming Ownership Through Everyday Acts:
For communities to actively engage in their lives, there should be a sense that their actions can constitute change or bring tangible results, which is agency. Agency doesn't happen in a void; in the case of ERRs, solidarity fostered the ground from which collective action grew. The rooms cultivated spaces that widened the scope of participation to include voices often dismissed or overlooked.

For instance, a volunteer stated that during one of the open discussions they held at the neighborhood level, there was a debate over how to manage the limited budget for the community kitchen. While some argued that spending money for pumping water is wasteful, others insisted that the kitchens cannot function without water.
Eventually, a creative compromise was reached, where each person would bring along a container of water and a log or two of firewood when coming to the kitchen, cutting expenses without overusing the generator.
Fatima added "the daily sight of people arriving carrying firewood and a container filled with water embodied a profound sense of belonging and ownership, asserting the kitchen as theirs and not anyone else's".[24]

The seemingly mundane practices of discussing challenges, debating priorities, contributing small resources, allocating tasks and keeping transparent records are in fact the building blocks of active participation, which fostered an immense sense of shared responsibility. Active participation also highlighted the significant value of civic work, vividly illustrating the powerful impact of moving beyond individual gains. As one volunteer noted, many who once dismissed civic work as unimportant joined and became active, once they saw the weight of their contributions.

These everyday practices of negotiating priorities, collective decision making and allocating resources embody the essence of ownership. Beautifully put by an interlocutor: "this

[23] Margit Feischmidt, Eszter Neumann; The political aspects of solidarity mobilizations in the context of shrinking civil society during the first wave of COVID-19. *European Societies* 2023; 25 (1): 132–153. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2100443

[24] A 26 year old female volunteer from Khartoum.

experience demonstrated how when the community comes together and decides to act, they can generate diverse solutions to their challenges, no matter the circumstances."[25] In grounding politics in the everyday and centering it on community problems, ERRs emphasized the indispensable role of communities as active agents, capable of shaping and addressing their own needs.

Expanding The Scope of Participation:

Participation within ERRs expanded precisely because these spaces were open and welcoming to all, free from any barriers that could hinder ordinary people's participation. Over time, people acknowledged that exclusion had no place in these rooms, which created an environment of safety and equality.

The inclusivity gave space for many people to take part in grassroot discussion, eventually paving the way for new actors to emerge. Additionally, from these discussions fresh voices were elected to represent their ERRs at locality and state levels.
By organically enabling new waves of leadership from within the communities, these spaces redefined political participation as inclusive and locally grounded.

The organizing nature of the ERRs further reinforced this shift. Their bottom-up structures connected neighborhood rooms to state level ones, while their horizontal networks linked ERRs across states. These structures were grounded in democratic values, starting with the internal policies that guide the work and ensure accountability, daily practices of monitoring and transparent reporting to the collective decision making. Through these values participation was transformed into a lived political practice, anchored in mutual responsibility and collective care.

Fundamentally, this participatory culture was not only a byproduct of necessity. Instead, it reflected communities' growing awareness of their capacity to shape their trajectory, which lasted even after Khartoum's liberation. For instance, an interlocutor noted that they recently held a grassroot discussion to address the environmental challenges, demonstrating how ERRs continue to serve as collective problem-solving spaces. As Hashim affirmed, people came to the profound realization that it's most effective to always take part of what happens in their communities, instead of standing apart.[26]

B- Social Capital:

Social capital refers to the networks, trust and cooperation between citizens, involving individuals' relationships, networks, and trust within a community or society.[27]
ERRs illustrate how acts of solidarity don't simply provide support, but also redistribute resources and reshape power dynamics. Their interventions represented a nucleus for building social capital in three distinct but overlapping ways; sharing resources, bonding and bridging divides.

[25] A 24 year old male volunteer from Khartoum.
[26] Ibid
[27] De'nyok, M. E. (2025). Rethinking the search for permanent peace in Africa's fragile states: The governance and service delivery outlooks. Global Journal of Human-Social Science: F, 25(2). https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume25/6-Rethinking-the-Search.pdf

Resource Sharing:

At the core of all ERR activities was the principle of sharing the existing resources -no matter how scarce they were- to ensure that the community as a whole survives. The very idea of a community kitchen rests on the logic of unifying and redistributing the resources for surviving collectively, and ensuring all people get their share of meals regardless of quantity. Furthermore, the inception of the Localization Coordination Unit (LCC) as a mechanism for organizing and coordinating humanitarian efforts through redistributing resources amongst the various ERRs, whether from the same state or across different states, demonstrates how it functions as a guiding principle in practice.

Nonetheless, resource sharing extended far beyond food. For instance, one volunteer stated how during the siege on certain areas in Khartoum, some rooms from Darfur gave up their own grants so aid could go there instead. This wasn't unprecedented, as similar acts had repeatedly occurred, especially during the events of Al-Gezira and Sennar, with rooms from across the country relinquishing their shares to others.

As Fatma explained; "The underlying spirit when grants arrive was simple; who needs it most and who's under siege".[28]

Another powerful example occurred during the water crisis in Karari, when an airstrike cut off water for weeks, and they had a fund that was already allocated for a different project and due to donor policies they couldn't use it. Nonetheless, the ERRs collectively came up with a solution to redirect the fund immediately to drilling water wells, and pledged to cover the original project from their own future shares.

Eventually, both projects were implemented, asserting not only their prompt response to urgent crises, but also demonstrating how ERRs negotiated around rigid donor policies, exercised collective problem solving and relied on trust and reciprocity to redistribute resources according to the community's most pressing needs.

Bonding:

ERR activities and community kitchens carved spaces that fostered strong interpersonal bonds within communities. Considering the widespread presence of community kitchens and the extensive hours people spend in them, they became the central hubs for gathering and connection. As one coordinator mentioned: "If there's one blessing in this war, it's our gathering in this takiyya[29]"[30] Preparing meals went from a survival strategy to a space where people could gather, talk and heal.

These daily encounters turned strangers into companions. For example, a young woman, who was very frightened from the war she could barely stand, eventually became a regular volunteer after finding out how entertaining the space was. Volunteers also described how these daily conversations they had about life, grief, daily struggles and interests ingrained a sense of warmth and belonging that helped them endure the war's psychological toll. As Hashim put it: "Mothers shared their longing for their children abroad and yearned for these gatherings because they saw their children in us, and that's what made them patient"[31]

[28] A 26 year old female volunteer from Khartoum.
[29] Cultural and social form of mutual support, also referred to as community kitchens
[30] A 26 year old volunteer from Omdurman
[31] Ibid

Beyond care and support, the ERRs created an exceptional bond between the volunteers,

by offering a new form of solidarity based on the mutual understanding of people's sufferings. Given how diverse people were, these gatherings became a site of historical and political debates, those from the west, east and north shared their communities' experiences with conflict, impoverishment and marginalisation. Others reflected on their time participating in the South Sudan war, 2019 uprising and so on.

The small acts of delivering meals to absent or sick neighbours, checking up on families after missile strikes or simply carrying food to new mothers demonstrate the unique bonds built on compassion and care, reshaping community relationships into networks or mutual responsibility.

Nevertheless, these bonds weren't uniform, rather contextual. In Karari -the only locality that hosted displaced people- the dynamics were constantly shifting as new people arrived and left. While many residents wholeheartedly welcomed and hosted the displaced, tension sometimes surfaced over rising rent prices or incidents of looting. Such experiences simply highlight the complexity of Sudanese social relations, where deep care coexists with moments of hostility.

Collectively, these small, everyday acts of solidarity demonstrate the building of social capital through strengthening internal ties within communities, practising care as resilience and reaffirming collective belonging in the midst of war.

Bridging Gaps:

Perhaps most striking was how ERR spaces assisted in bridging divides across generations, political affiliations and even former enmities. Volunteers repeatedly described ERRs as zones of inclusion, where respect and the shared purpose of collective good overrode prevailing distrust.

Underpinning these spaces were the core values of respect and conviction that everyone, irrespective of political affiliation/stance is welcomed to contribute for the greater benefit.

In doing so, ERRs challenged the binary "us versus them" thinking that tends to intensify during conflicts. Older generations who once dismissed youth associated with resistance committees gradually came to appreciate and recognize their contributions. As Hashim recalled, an elder once told him: "We never thought that you (Resistance Committees) were doing all this out of concern for Sudan, to ensure we realize and claim our rights for our wellbeing and collective welfare."[32]

Crucially, ERRs brought together groups and people who might never have crossed paths otherwise. Several volunteers admitted that they never imagined to sit, let alone collaborate alongside people associated with NiSS or Al-Bashir's regime. Yet, these interactions went beyond polite coexistence to include open discussions about past grievances.

What was remarkable is that, amid the intense wave of polarization and political fragmentation spreading across social media, the ERRs were challenging this by creating

[32] A 26 year old volunteer from Omdurman

spaces where people genuinely listened to opposing views, simply to understand rather than rebut. Othman reflected that the same individuals who were once monitoring their political activism are now partnering for organising ERRs activities.[33]
Such interactions reconfigured relationships, opening the possibility of new forms of relational trust across the political and social divisions.

Understanding the Nature of ERRs: A foundation for Policy Action

First and foremost, policy makers, donors, CSOs, humanitarian actors must unpack and understand the unique nature of the Emergency Response Rooms. As they don't just provide humanitarian interventions, rather they embody a deeper ethos of community-led actions stemming from solidarity and shared sense of responsibility. Capturing the essence of these rooms marks the initial step towards designing effective policies and interventions that can sustain and support these rooms.
This means engaging directly with ERR actors to understand their practices and principles. Without this, stakeholders risk reducing ERRs to technical delivery tools, overlooking their role in fostering participatory citizenship. Recognizing them as civic infrastructures enables policies that support their autonomy and collective agency, rather than overriding it.

The challenge for civil society organisations lies in designing interventions that actively cultivate civic agency. This means developing partnership models that treat communities as co-creators of solutions, and designing projects that are participatory and engage communities, not only as beneficiaries, but as active agents.
CSOs also have a role in strengthening local capacities in practices that foster citizenship. This includes training on budgeting, monitoring & elevation, reporting and other relevant skills, but rooted in participatory planning and collective problem-solving. The aim is to support communities in designing and leading their own initiatives, not just implementing externally defined projects.

Researchers have a crucial role in analyzing and conceptualising the innovative nature of community organizing. Studying ERRs and their interventions can uncover the ways these spaces fostered participatory citizenship in the various contexts they worked in. Given the lack of knowledge production in Sudan, capturing the unique social, cultural and political dimensions of ERRs sets the stage for external actors to engage with them in ways that are contextually grounded and supported. Furthermore, documenting their everyday practices can also contribute to creating frameworks and models that inform policy and program design.

A significant role can also be played by INGOs, should their engagement move beyond the conventional intervention frameworks. Viewing ERRs as humanitarian actors only risks overlooking the transformative social, civic and political dynamics within them. INGOs can form strategic alliances and invest in long-term capacity building initiatives and innovative projects that reinforce their existing participatory practices.

[33] A 24 year old volunteer from Khartoum

References:

Andani, A. (n.d.). From subject to citizen: Building active citizenship through community dialogues and radio stations. Democracy Development Programme (DDP).

Benjamin, L. (2015). How civil society organizations foster insurgent citizenship: Lessons from the Brazilian Landless Movement. Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 27(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9549-3

Dagnino, E. (2005). Meanings of citizenship in Latin America. IDS Working Paper, 258, 1–30. Institute of Development Studies.

De'nyok, M. E. (2025). Rethinking the search for permanent peace in Africa's fragile states: The governance and service delivery outlooks. Global Journal of Human-Social Science: F, 25(2). https://globaljournals.org/GJHSS_Volume25/6-Rethinking-the-Search.pdf

Gaventa, J. (2002). Introduction: Exploring citizenship, participation and accountability. IDS Bulletin, 33(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1759-5436.2002.tb00020.x

Gaynor, N (2023) 'What Does It Mean to be an "Active Citizen"? The Limitations and Opportunities Posed by Different Understandings and Deployments of "Citizenship"', Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review, Vol. 37, Autumn, pp. 15-27.

Holma, K., & Kontinen, T. (Eds.). (2019). Practices of Citizenship in East Africa: Perspectives from Philosophical Pragmatism (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429279171

Holston, J. (2009). Insurgent citizenship in an era of global urban peripheries. City & Society, 21(2), 245–267. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-744X.2009.01024.x

Isin, E. F. (Ed.). (2000). Democracy, citizenship and the global city. Routledge. Retrieved from Democracy, Citizenship and the Global City

Karriem, A., & Benjamin, L. (2016). How civil society organizations foster insurgent citizenship: Lessons from the Brazilian Landless Movement. Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 27(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-015-9549-3

Lawy, R., & Biesta, G. (2006). Citizenship-as-practice: The educational implications of an inclusive and relational understanding of citizenship. *British Journal of Educational Studies, 54*(1), 34–50. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8527.2006.00335.x

Lister, R. (1997). Citizenship: Feminist perspectives. Palgrave Macmillan. Lister,

R. (2003). Citizenship: Feminist perspectives (2nd ed.). Palgrave Macmillan.

Lister, R. (2007). Inclusive citizenship: Realizing the potential. Citizenship Studies, 11(1), 49–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621020601099856

Margit Feischmidt, Eszter Neumann; The political aspects of solidarity mobilizations in the context of shrinking civil society during the first wave of COVID-19. European Societies 2023; 25 (1): 132–153. doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2022.2100443

Neocosmos, M. (2008, April 18). Civil society, citizenship and the politics of the (im)possible: Rethinking militancy in Africa today. libcom.org. Retrieved from https://libcom.org/article/civil-society-citizenship-and-politics-impossible-rethinking-militancy africa-today

Šiška, J., Beadle-Brown, J., Káňová, Š., & Tøssebro, J. (2018). Active citizenship through community living: A multi-level perspective. Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities, 15(1), 68–77. https://doi.org/10.1111/jppi.12225

Smith, N., Lister, R., Middleton, S., & Cox, L. (2005). Young people as real citizens: Towards an inclusionary understanding of citizenship. Journal of Youth Studies, 8(4), 425–443. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260500431743

Tamayo, S. (2019). Spaces of citizenship: Citizen conflicts. In E. Isin & G. Nielsen (Eds.), Performing citizenship (pp. 151–165). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97502-3_9

Torres-Ruiz, R. Democracy and social movements in Mexico.

Turner, B. S. (1990). Outline of a theory of citizenship. Sociology, 24(2), 189–217. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038590024002002

Wood, E. J. (2000). Forging democracy from below: Insurgent transitions in South Africa and El Salvador. Cambridge University Press.

Yalcin, B. (2018). What is social citizenship? [Preprint]. ResearchGate. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.10083.04640

Web Sources

African Arguments. (2025, August). Madaniya civic politics: Women emergency response rooms as flourishing sites of democracy in war-time Sudan. https://africanarguments.org/2025/08/madaniya-civic-politics-women-emergency-response-r ooms-as-flourishing-sites-of-democracy-in-war-time-sudan/

Emergency Response Rooms in Sudan. (n.d.). Save the Children's Resource Centre. https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/emergency-response-rooms-in-sudan /

Localization Coordination Council (LCC). (n.d.). *LCC membership*. https://www.localisationcouncil.org/lcc-membership

The New Humanitarian. (2024, April). How mutual aid is helping women survive Sudan's war. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org

UN News. (2024, March). Youth-led ‘emergency rooms’ shine rays of hope in war-torn Sudan. https://news.un.org

Volunteers open doors in Sudan typically closed to international aid groups. (2023, November). *Wilson Quarterly*. https://www.wilsonquarterly.com

How Sudan’s mutual aid groups are supporting out-of-school children. (2024, June). [Blog post]. https://www.example.org

A mutual aid volunteer reflects on a year of war in Sudan. (2024, April). [Blog post]. https://www.example.org

Khalafallah, H. (2024, May 10). Grassroots aid networks are a lifeline amid Sudan’s humanitarian catastrophe. DAWN. https://dawnmena.org/grassroots-aid-networks-are-a-lifeline-amid-sudans-humanitarian-catastrophe/

Elobaid, S. (2024, December 14). Sudan’s emergency response rooms in the time of war. Upstream Journal. https://upstreamjournal.org/sudans-emergency-response-rooms