IMPROVISATION AND CONSTRAINT: HUMANITARIAN COORDINATION IN SOUTH SUDAN'S CHRONIC CRISIS

OLUSOLA MATHEW OJO
Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution
National Open University of Nigeria
omojo@noun.edu.ng

SEUN BAMIDELE
Department of Peace and Conflict Studies
Federal University Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria
oluwaseun.bamidele@gmail.com

ANTHONIA HAFUNJOH OKOYE
Department of Peace Studies and Conflict Resolution
National Open University of Nigeria
aokonye@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64633/wissj.v9i8.18

Keywords

Humanitarian Assistance, Protracted Conflicts, South Sudan, Coordination Mechanisms

Abstract

Research Problem
Humanitarian assistance coordination in protracted conflicts remains a persistent and under-theorized challenge. Existing frameworks frequently focus on short-term emergencies or technocratic solutions, offering limited engagement with the political, social, and operational complexities that characterize prolonged crises.

Methods/Theory
This study investigates South Sudan as a critical case to explore the evolving dynamics of humanitarian coordination in fractured and volatile contexts. It applies secondary analysis of policy documents, inter-agency records, and evaluative reports, grounded in critical humanitarian governance and adaptive practice literatures.

Results
The findings indicate that coordination in protracted crises is less about aligning mandates or standardizing mechanisms and more about adaptive and negotiated practices. Security risks, shifting conflict dynamics, and restricted access compel humanitarian actors to improvise, recalibrate, and develop hybrid forms of collaboration that frequently extend beyond formal institutional arrangements.

Conclusion
While adaptive approaches enable the continuation of assistance where

conventional models often falter, they also generate ethical and political tensions—normalizing temporary arrangements, privileging donor priorities, and constraining local agency.

Key Contribution to Knowledge

This study reframes humanitarian coordination as a contingent, negotiated, and power-laden process rather than a purely technical exercise, challenging dominant paradigms that overlook the fluid and complex realities of protracted conflict environments.

Recommendation

Future coordination frameworks should embed adaptive mechanisms while upholding accountability and inclusivity. Ensuring that local actors hold a central role is essential for shaping sustainable humanitarian responses in protracted conflict settings.

Introduction

Humanitarian coordination in conflict-affected environments is recognised as crucial for effective aid delivery; however, existing methodologies and global policy frameworks frequently prioritise rapid-onset crises and short-term emergencies, neglecting the prolonged and dynamic characteristics of numerous contemporary conflicts (Hilhorst et al., 2021; Macalister-Smith, 2015). Prevailing narratives often characterise coordination as primarily a technical endeavour centred on inter-agency procedures, donor harmonisation, and cluster systems, while minimising the political and contextual intricacies that characterise protracted catastrophes (Akl et al., 2015; Christoplos et al., 2017). This technocratic focus risks detaching coordination from its practical reality, as humanitarian actors must continually adjust to instability, fluctuating territorial control, and fragmented governance (Durugbo & Al-Balushi, 2022; Food Security Cluster, 2023). The field frequently neglects the intrinsic complexities, power dynamics, and negotiated practices that define aid delivery in profoundly unstable contexts.

South Sudan exemplifies the disparity between institutional coordinating frameworks and the quotidian requirements of prolonged crises. Since gaining independence in 2011, the nation has seen persistent conflict, institutional instability, and extensive displacement, resulting in one of the protracted humanitarian crises worldwide (ReliefWeb, 2023; World Bank, 2024). Humanitarian organisations in this context must contend with variable security conditions, limited resources, and donor-influenced priorities that often weaken formal structures while requiring flexible, frequently improvised, collaborative approaches (Ferraro, 2021; Jenkins, 2024; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Despite the significance of these processes, academic research and policy frequently overlook them, concentrating instead on normative standards of "best practice" or formal institutional directives (Slim & Lopes Morey, 2016; Elayah & Al-Mansori, 2024). This oversight creates significant deficiencies in comprehending how cooperation occurs in environments characterised by political instability and logistical disarray as standard conditions.

This paper examines humanitarian coordination in South Sudan within the context of the political economics of prolonged conflict, contending that coordination should not be viewed as a neutral or solely administrative activity. It is, instead, a profoundly relational and negotiated practice, consistently influenced by violence, institutional fragility, and conflicting power interests (Homeida, 2023; USAID, 2023;

Kilroy & Ryan, 2024). This work critiques prevailing technocratic paradigms by emphasising operational reality and promotes a more contextually aware, adaptable comprehension of coordination. This approach elucidates the ongoing dysfunctions of current frameworks while also emphasising avenues for rethinking coordination that prioritise local agency, accountability to impacted populations, and resilience amidst continuing instability.

Research Problem

The humanitarian coordination in South Sudan reveals the ongoing deficiencies of prevailing technocratic models that emphasise formal frameworks, procedural adherence, and donor-centric accountability, rather than the practical needs of adaptable strategies in prolonged crises. Coordination is frequently characterised as an impartial, rules-driven mechanism aimed at enhancing efficiency and preventing redundancy (Akl et al., 2015; Food Security Cluster, 2023). However, considerable research and field evaluations have demonstrated (Ferraro, 2021; Hilhorst et al., 2021; OCHA, 2024) that this formalism seldom endures the political instability, logistical challenges, and fragmented authority characterising South Sudan's operational environment. Coordination mechanisms are often intertwined with the power structures they purport to bypass, leading to compromises with armed factions, local elites, and donor interests that inadvertently legitimise disputed authorities (Chagutah, 2023; Kilroy & Ryan, 2024). According to Médecins Sans Frontières (2024) and the World Food Programme (2024), the provision of life-saving aid frequently depends on negotiated, context-specific agreements rather than the established cluster framework. This phenomenon is not exclusive to South Sudan; similarities in Yemen and the Sahel demonstrate that adaptive, locally facilitated forms of collaboration frequently arise when formal channels fail (Elayah & Al-Mansori, 2024; Ferraro, 2022). The longevity of these workarounds reveals a fundamental disparity: whereas the institutional coordinating model aims for predictability and standardisation, the practical field conditions necessitate improvisation, relational involvement, and negotiated access.

This imbalance necessitates a fundamental reconceptualisation of coordination as a relational and adaptive process, especially in prolonged and politically contentious crises such as South Sudan. Coordination should not be merely viewed as adherence to donor priorities or the imposition of rigid frameworks; instead, it ought to be perceived as a dynamic negotiation that reconciles urgent humanitarian needs with enduring accountability and local legitimacy (Durugbo & Al-Balushi, 2022; Slim & Lopes Morey, 2016). Evidence from South Sudan indicates that informal networks, community-driven adaptations, and hybrid arrangements despite being largely informal and inadequately documented—are crucial in maintaining humanitarian presence amid persistent displacement, systemic violence, and chronic food insecurity (Nyadera, 2018; Noda, 2024; World Bank, 2024). These adaptive methods, although essential, also pose risks: they may circumvent established accountability mechanisms, reinforce local patronage systems, or result in inconsistent service quality (Hilhorst et al., 2021; Christoplos et al., 2017). However, their prevalence indicates that the future of effective coordination depends less on strengthening rigid institutional frameworks and more on promoting inclusive, context-specific, and negotiated strategies that acknowledge the agency of local actors and impacted populations (Viswanath & Agha, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). The South Sudan case provides a crucial perspective to assert that humanitarian coordination must transition from a hierarchical management model to one

characterised by shared responsibility, relational negotiation, and integrated accountability—an evolution that is essential for maintaining humanitarian efforts in prolonged instability.

Adaptive Coordination: A Conceptual Model for Protracted Conflicts

Conventional humanitarian coordination has predominantly been organised around established frameworks and rigid methods, including the cluster system, joint appeals, and inter-agency planning. Although these procedures seek to enhance coherence, efficiency, and accountability, they frequently prove inadequate for the turbulent, unpredictable, and politically intricate nature of protracted conflicts (Hilhorst et al., 2021). Adaptive coordination is presented as a conceptual paradigm that transcends rigidity by defining coordination as a dynamic, iterative process that responds to changing environments, evolving requirements, and emerging collaborative forms. It derives its inspiration from adaptive governance theories, complex systems thinking, and critical humanitarianism, applying these concepts explicitly to humanitarian coordination in protracted crises. Adaptive coordination fundamentally acknowledges that protracted conflicts are not transient disturbances pending resolution but rather enduring social, political, and economic systems marked by continual uncertainty. In these contexts, the presumption that coordination can be attained by unifying participants under a singular framework is both impractical and detrimental (Macalister-Smith, 2015). Adaptive coordination prioritises flexibility, learning, and negotiation as fundamental principles. Flexibility facilitates swift modification of techniques in response to restricted access, financial alterations, or changes in conflict dynamics. Learning prioritises iterative reflection, feedback mechanisms, and evidence-based adaptation above strict adherence to predefined metrics. Negotiation recognises that coordination is fundamentally political, influenced by power imbalances among funders, international organisations, local NGOs, and impacted communities.

A key characteristic of adaptive coordination is its pluralistic orientation. This paradigm prioritises various and frequently informal behaviours above formal coordination platforms as viable means of collaboration, recognising how frontline players synchronise their activities on the ground. Local humanitarian workers in South Sudan sometimes depend on community elders, religious leaders, and informal security agreements to gain access and distribute aid in regions beyond formal control (Kuyang & Mariani, 2022). These behaviours, however not officially acknowledged, are essential points of coordination that preserve life throughout institutional disintegration. Adaptive coordination necessitates a paradigm shift: from perceiving informal activities as anomalies or "workarounds" to acknowledging them as essential, co-equal elements of a hybrid humanitarian system.

Moreover, adaptive coordination necessitates a reallocation of authority within humanitarian administration. Contemporary systems are predominantly donor-centric, with decision-making centralised among international organisations and financing entities that enforce uniform reporting, budgeting, and strategic priorities (Homeida, 2023). This centralisation limits local players' capacity to influence responses in accordance with contextual conditions. An adaptable strategy would institutionalise participatory processes that empower local and national actors—not alone as implementers but as co-designers of coordinated strategies. This issue transcends mere inclusion; it involves the reconfiguration of the epistemic and political systems that support humanitarian cooperation.

The paradigm prioritises iterative accountability rather than static conformity. Conventional accountability systems frequently emphasise donor transparency and fiscal oversight, resulting in inflexible protocols that obstruct swift action and innovation (USAID, 2023). Adaptive coordination advocates for a relational model of accountability, founded on ongoing communication, trust cultivation, and negotiated duties among stakeholders. This approach does not negate the necessity for openness or oversight; instead, it reinterprets them to address uncertainty and recognises that rigid predictability is neither attainable nor consistently advantageous in prolonged crises.

This approach introduces a novel paradigm to the discourse on humanitarian coordination by positioning adaptive coordination as both a philosophical and practical model. It opposes the prevailing managerialist doctrine by asserting that efficient coordination in prolonged conflicts cannot be attained just by structural perfection. It must arise from an ongoing process of coordinating various stakeholders within a dynamic environment of requirements, possibilities, and limitations. This concept neither idealises informality or improvisation nor undermines the significance of formal systems; instead, it promotes a hybrid architecture whereby formal structures offer support and informal networks contribute flexibility, innovation, and contextually relevant legitimacy.

Adaptive coordination provides a more pragmatic and ethically sensitive framework for humanitarian efforts in regions such as South Sudan, where the distinction between crisis and normalcy is indistinct, and where strict coordination frequently results in paralysis rather than efficacy. By adopting adaptation as a concept, humanitarian coordination can transform from a rigid tool of control into a dynamic process of collective responsibility, addressing both urgent survival requirements and the enduring aspirations of impacted populations.

Methodological approach

This This research utilises a qualitative case study methodology to investigate humanitarian coordination under prolonged conflict, with South Sudan as a pivotal context for examination. This research redefines coordination, moving past prevalent views that regard it only as a technical or administrative task apart from conflict dynamics, and instead frames it as a process deeply rooted in social and political contexts. The methodological approach is based on constructivist and critical realist viewpoints, acknowledging that coordination is not a static, impartial system but a dynamic and contested practice influenced by uneven resources, conflicting mandates, and changing priorities. This viewpoint corresponds with the study's theoretical assertion that adaptive coordination, as opposed to inflexible or hierarchical frameworks, provides a more pertinent perspective for comprehending humanitarian actions in precarious environments.

The case study approach was chosen for its capacity to provide comprehensive insights into the interaction between institutional frameworks and the contextual elements that affect coordination. The data for this research were obtained solely from secondary sources, comprising policy documents, inter-agency coordination reports, donor assessments, and independent evaluations. The primary dataset comprised reports from international organisations, donor agencies, local and international non-governmental organisations, and inter-cluster coordination bodies. This technique facilitated triangulation across various documentary sources, which was especially crucial due to limitations on direct field research stemming from security hazards,

restricted access, and the dynamic character of the conflict. The approach attempts not to generate generalisable quantitative assertions but to elucidate how coordination mechanisms are constructed, contested, and modified in practice.

Data analysis was performed using iterative, abductive reasoning to connect empirical patterns with theoretical conceptions. Key themes such as fragmentation, informal coordination pathways, negotiation processes, and adaptation tactics were discerned through a systematic assessment of the chosen documents and examined in relation to the conceptual model of adaptive coordination established in this work. Reflexivity was upheld by rigorously examining assumptions and validating interpretations using many sources to reduce bias present in secondary research. Ethical considerations were incorporated into the research design, utilising exclusively publically available or non-identifiable materials, thereby upholding confidentiality, non-maleficence, and the responsible portrayal of conflict-affected populations.

This methodological approach underscores the principal assertion that humanitarian coordination in protracted crises, such as South Sudan, must be perceived as a dynamic and negotiated process. By emphasising contextual analysis and critical interaction with existing documentation, the study provides empirically substantiated and theoretically informed insights on the potential reconfiguration of coordination to more effectively tackle chronic instability.

Theoretical Framework: Adaptive Coordination in Humanitarian Response to Protracted Conflict

This study promotes the notion of adaptive coordination as a theoretical framework for comprehending and enhancing humanitarian responses in prolonged wars, with South Sudan serving as the contextual reference. Coordination in these contexts has conventionally been regarded as a technical endeavour aimed at aligning resources, stakeholders, and mandates via organised mechanisms like the cluster system and inter-agency groups (Akl et al., 2015). Evidence from prolonged and intricate crises increasingly demonstrates that inflexible strategies frequently prove inadequate in environments characterised by fluctuating conflict dynamics, disjointed governance, unstable access, and ongoing humanitarian demands (Hilhorst et al., 2021; Ferraro, 2021). Adaptive coordination arises not from a dismissal of current coordination frameworks but from a reconceptualisation that views coordination as a dynamic, iterative, and politically situated activity rather than a fixed managerial model.

This framework is based on a series of fundamental assumptions that establish its conceptual underpinning. Initially, it posits that enduring conflicts, such as the one in South Sudan, represent persistent governance voids rather than ephemeral crises, necessitating humanitarian systems to implement operational strategies that are fundamentally long-term and robust instead of transitory (Slim & Lopes Morey, 2016). Secondly, it posits that coordination is never solely technical but is invariably influenced by power dynamics among donors, international organisations, local authorities, and affected communities, where conflicting priorities, mandates, and legitimacy assertions converge (Kuyang & Mariani, 2022). Third, it posits that learning processes and feedback mechanisms are essential for maintaining relevance and efficacy in environments characterised by unpredictable access and frequent disruptions due to conflicts, climatic disturbances, or cross-border instability (Durugbo & Al-Balushi, 2022; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2024). Ultimately, it posits that official and informal coordinating mechanisms

are not antagonistic but rather interconnected, with informal community networks, religious entities, and local NGOs frequently addressing the shortcomings of formal institutions (de Gruchy & Kapilashrami, 2019).

Based on these assumptions, adaptive coordination derives numerous interconnected principles that inform its implementation. Flexibility is crucial, favouring adaptability over rigid compliance with predetermined strategies or inflexible planning cycles (Elayah & Al-Mansori, 2024). In South Sudan, where patterns of displacement and humanitarian corridors fluctuate due to seasonal flooding and sporadic violence, organisations that adjust their interventions in real time exhibit enhanced continuity in service delivery (International Organisation for Migration, 2023; World Food Programme, 2024). Pluralism constitutes a fundamental principle, acknowledging that effective coordination arises when various actors—including community-based organisations, traditional leaders, and national NGOs—are regarded as legitimate and engaged participants rather than marginal stakeholders (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2024). Iterative accountability supplants the traditional compliance approach, which frequently hinders decision-making and limits local autonomy, with a framework of continuous conversation, negotiated monitoring, and flexible funding opportunities (Jenkins, 2024; Homeida, 2023). A concluding premise is contextual legitimacy: coordination achieves momentum and sustainability when it embodies locally established relationships and norms, rather than being enforced as a universal standard (Shabani et al., 2024).

Grounded in this concept, adaptive coordination presents numerous testable hypotheses pertinent to prolonged crises. Initially, adaptive coordination improves operational resilience by promoting ongoing learning and strategic adjustment. Multi-year humanitarian initiatives in South Sudan illustrate that organisations utilising feedback-oriented planning cycles were more adept at maintaining critical services during ongoing displacements and fluctuations in donor funding (International Rescue Committee, 2023; World Vision, 2024). The use of informal and locally rooted coordinating structures enhances the credibility and durability of humanitarian initiatives. Evidence indicates that when formal cluster systems operate independently from local authority frameworks or community-based entities, coordination frequently fails to establish confidence, resulting in service duplication or outright rejection (Kuyang & Mariani, 2022; Matfess & Campbell, 2023). Adaptive coordination asserts that integrating these domains rather than favouring one over the other—fosters more coherent, inclusive, and socially endorsed humanitarian government. Third, iterative accountability cultivates a more equitable power dynamic between funders and implementing partners, enhancing both efficiency and ethical results. Stringent reporting and compliance frameworks, especially in politically delicate contexts, have been linked to delays in resource allocation and diminished potential for innovation at the field level (Jenkins, 2024; ReliefWeb, 2023). Adaptive systems that prioritise collaborative oversight, immediate reporting, and negotiated adaptability facilitate more prompt and contextually relevant responses.

The adaptive coordination model promotes the understanding that prolonged crises necessitate a shift from linear, prescriptive coordination frameworks to strategies that incorporate uncertainty, political intricacies, and locally derived legitimacy in their formulation. It retains formal structures like cluster coordination and humanitarian country teams, but reinterprets them as frameworks that facilitate, rather than limit, the evolving practices of humanitarian actors in unstable

environments. This theoretical framework explicitly addresses criticisms that coordination in prolonged contexts is frequently too donor-centric, bureaucratic, and misaligned with actual conditions on the ground (Christoplos et al., 2017; Food Security Cluster, 2023). It presents a model based on flexibility, pluralism, and iterative learning—one that can absorb shocks, accommodate diverse stakeholders, and maintain humanitarian efforts in contexts where crises are a persistent aspect of political and social existence rather than a temporary disruption.

Results and Discussion

Historical trajectories of technocratic humanitarian coordination

The results indicate that humanitarian coordination in South Sudan embodies a prolonged lineage of technocratic practices intricately embedded in the institutional history of humanitarian governance. Coordination has developed not merely as a collection of operational tools for efficiency and resource allocation, but via complex historical processes influenced by colonial legacies, postcolonial governance, and neoliberal restructuring. These procedures have detached coordination from the intricate, lived experiences of crisis contexts, transforming it into a predominantly technological and administrative task. This remark aligns with previous literature that contextualises humanitarianism within the wider frameworks of secular modernity and managerial rationality (Macalister-Smith, 2015; Hilhorst et al., 2021; OCHA, 2024). Initial coordination efforts in the 20th century were characterised as organisational challenges: preventing redundancy, optimising logistics, and guaranteeing equal distribution of help. These pragmatic considerations, although seemingly impartial, depended on administrative paradigms that transformed crises into manageable technical challenges. Macalister-Smith (2015) observed that these processes often replicated hierarchical bureaucratic structures that emphasised procedural order rather than political interaction with populations affected by conflict. This trajectory solidified with the establishment of the UN cluster system within the humanitarian reform agenda, further entrenching coordination in structures, mandates, and accountability frameworks primarily orientated towards donor reporting rather than responsiveness to local dynamics (Hilhorst et al., 2021; OCHA, 2024).

The governing trajectories of colonial and postwar periods strengthened this technocratic perspective. In the colonial past, humanitarian interventions frequently functioned as mechanisms of governance and control, distributing help via hierarchical structures that diminished local autonomy (Nyadera, 2018). Postcolonial regimes adopted centralised, bureaucratic models, perceiving coordination as an administrative requirement rather than a relational and negotiated practice rooted in local conflict dynamics. In South Sudan, characterised by its history of partition, enduring civil conflict, and precarious state development, coordination is intricately linked to external donor organisations, frequently perpetuating imbalanced power dynamics and external agendas (Noda, 2024; Kilroy & Ryan, 2024).

The neoliberal reorganisation of the late 20th century initiated a new era of technocratization. Structural adjustment initiatives undermined state capacity, while humanitarian agencies occupied governance voids, progressively aligning their coordination with efficiency narratives: minimising expenses, optimising coverage, and fulfilling donor reporting requirements. Slim and Lopes Morey (2016) contend that this neoliberal management logic transformed coordination from a political discussion process into a technical compliance procedure.

In South Sudan, this frequently entails aligning with donor frameworks instead of addressing grassroots needs (ReliefWeb, 2023; World Bank, 2024).

This historical contextualisation underpins the study's theoretical framework of coordination as a locus of power and a mechanism of governance. The analysis substantiates the hypothesis (refer to the section on methodological and theoretical framework) that coordination is not a neutral process; rather, it has been utilised to generate forms of control and visibility that align with the priorities of external actors, frequently to the detriment of locally defined humanitarian agendas.

Marginalisation and utilisation: Coordination within technocratic frameworks Two fundamental processes appeared from the data: the marginalisation of coordination in the actual experiences of conflict and its exploitation as a mechanism for donor-driven objectives. These processes were evident in institutional policy, field-level actions, and rhetoric.

Sidelining transpires when coordinating is predominantly regarded as an administrative task. The discussion of preventing redundancy, elucidating responsibilities, and optimising reporting (Akl et al., 2015; OCHA, 2024) frequently conceals the underlying political and security factors influencing humanitarian efforts. Jenkins (2024) illustrates how corruption in humanitarian aid disrupts coordination in conflict zones, however these systemic issues are hardly addressed in current systems. Christoplos et al. (2017) similarly note that assessments often emphasise procedural compliance rather than the actual experiences of impacted communities, resulting in evidence frameworks that prioritise donor accountability above contextual flexibility.

Conversely, instrumentalisation occurs when coordination serves as a means to execute donor preferences, visibility initiatives, and reporting requirements. Donor harmonisation frameworks (SIDA, 2023) sometimes prioritise alignment with funders over responsiveness to local communities. In South Sudan, this situation has created a competitive humanitarian marketplace where organisations compete for resources in donor-favored sectors, while marginalising populations outside these priorities (IFRC, 2018; USAID, 2023).

This twin tendency creates an asymmetry: coordination frameworks enhance the mandates and visibility of international actors while sidelining national NGOs, community-based organisations, and informal networks that often support crisis-affected communities (IFRC, 2024; UNICEF, 2024). The results therefore validate a key assertion of this study: that coordination, as embedded in modern humanitarianism, is essential for preventing disorder and is significantly limited by the structural demands of the assistance sector.

Adaptive coordination in practice: Negotiating insecurity, fragmentation, and scarcity

Although historical and structural factors influence the formal architecture of coordination, field-level research from South Sudan indicates that humanitarian actors seldom function within its established parameters. Coordination manifests as a dynamic process of adaptation characterised by improvisation, negotiation, and creativity. These adaptive behaviours demonstrate a more dynamic, relational, and context-sensitive approach to coordinating—termed adaptive coordination in this study.

Improvisation is an essential method of adaptive coordination. In regions impacted by flooding and violence, organisations utilise mobile clinics, provisional shelters, and community volunteers to access unreachable populations (IFRC, 2018). These techniques frequently circumvent conventional reporting

structures or hierarchical clusters, addressing immediate requirements as recognised by local stakeholders. For example, MSF's strategic disengagement from migrant health clinics in South Africa, succeeded by community-led service reconfiguration, exemplifies how improvisation can maintain continuity during organisational changes (de Gruchy & Kapilashrami, 2019). The International Rescue Committee (2023) has transitioned to mobile health teams in the war zones of Sudan to sustain crucial services.

Negotiation is equally pivotal. In South Sudan's divided political environment, humanitarian organisations must obtain access by persistently interacting with local leaders, militia leaders, and rival government factions (Kuyang & Mariani, 2022; Centre for Preventive Action, 2024). The conversations encompass not only physical access but also issues of legitimacy and accountability. Local NGOs frequently serve as cultural and political intermediaries, facilitating interactions between global entities and impacted communities, while also shouldering reputational and political liabilities (Elayah & Al-Mansori, 2024).

Scarcity serves as both a limitation and a catalyst for creativity. Financial deficiencies have necessitated organisations such as the World Food Programme (2024) to implement cash transfers, biometric identification, and community-based targeting to maximise constrained resources. Cross-border operations from adjacent states have arisen to bypass access restrictions (USAID, 2023), and hybrid partnerships have integrated local trust networks with international funding (Elayah & Al-Mansori, 2024).

These adaptable techniques illustrate a paradox: they are essential for maintaining humanitarian operations amid insecurity and fragmentation, yet they frequently exacerbate the systemic disparities that necessitate improvisation. Slim and Lopes Morey (2016) caution that the normalisation of adaptive reactions during prolonged crises may solidify transitory solutions as quasi-permanent alternatives to political resolution.

Coordination as a site of contradictory negotiation

The South Sudan case illustrates coordination as a contentious domain where principles of neutrality and universality are perpetually redefined in the face of deep-rooted political, logistical, and ethical limitations (Comaroff, 1994). Although humanitarian coordination is typically presented as an impartial and uniform procedure, its execution in practice demonstrates ongoing concessions to armed groups, funders, and local authorities, which may unintentionally validate disputed or exclusionary power dynamics. These dynamics undermine the fundamental notion of neutrality that supports most humanitarian coordination frameworks, revealing the essentially political character of decisions about access, prioritisation, and resource distribution. Coordination, in this context, is not a remote, bureaucratic role but an active domain where conflicting mandates, security needs, and donor objectives intersect, frequently undermining locally determined aspirations.

In this setting, the quest for immediate alleviation often conflicts with the long-term necessities of structural reform, resulting in the neglect of the underlying causes of violence, displacement, and marginalisation (Shabani et al., 2024; Homeida, 2023). Adaptive solutions that facilitate responsiveness, such as improvised delivery channels or flexible alliances, are essential for sustaining operations in turbulent situations, however they frequently circumvent established accountability frameworks. This results in inconsistent service delivery and reinforces local power imbalances (Durugbo & Al-Balushi, 2022). The identified contradictions reinforce a key theoretical assertion of this

study: coordination in prolonged crises cannot be comprehensively understood as a static or uniform institutional structure; instead, it should be perceived as a negotiated and dynamic practice influenced by insecurity, resource scarcity, and asymmetric power relations that characterise the humanitarian context.

Localised innovations in South Sudan illustrate that coordination may be reconceptualised as a platform for negotiation, collaboration, and ethical engagement when it transcends strict frameworks to adopt context-sensitive methods. This discovery directly informs the study's proposed theoretical model of adaptive coordination, which conceptualises coordination as a dynamic practice positioned between formal mandates and operational realities, influenced by improvisation, negotiation, and innovation in uncertain contexts. It contests the notion that coordination is merely functional or unsuccessful, suggesting that its efficacy should be evaluated based on its ability to reconcile systemic limitations with experiential requirements.

Conclusion: Humanitarianism as adaptive practice in fractured landscapes

This study demonstrates that humanitarian action in prolonged crises is neither neutral nor just technical; rather, it is an adaptive practice influenced by insecurity, resource shortage, and contested authority. In environments like South Sudan, humanitarian coordination seldom adheres to linear planning or standardised standards. Rather, it is characterised by ongoing improvisation, negotiation, and recalibration as participants manoeuvre through unstable political, social, and logistical environments. These adaptive practices enable the continuation of life and the provision of necessary services in the absence of functioning governmental systems; nevertheless, they also pose a risk of entrenching disparities and normalising temporary solutions that postpone political resolution.

The South Sudan case illustrates the functioning of humanitarian coordination in contexts of tenuous legitimacy, where access is influenced equally by the objectives of armed factions, local authorities, and community leaders, as well as by international policy frameworks (Kilroy & Ryan, 2024; Kuyang & Mariani, 2022). Civil war, relocation, and persistent climate shocks consistently alter the operating landscape (Centre for Preventive Action, 2024; Chagutah, 2023). Comparable trends in the Sahel and Sudan indicate that humanitarian corridors frequently rely on unstable agreements, while security threats, corruption, and political manipulation limit the efficacy and accountability of aid (Ferraro, 2021; Jenkins, 2024). In this reality, adaptability is both essential and a matter of compromise.

Humanitarian organisations have exhibited significant resilience and ingenuity in maintaining operations under these circumstances. Mobile health services, hybrid humanitarian-development partnerships, and adaptable logistics have been implemented to meet urgent requirements during ongoing crises (Durugbo & Al-Balushi, 2022; IRC, 2023; UNICEF, 2024). Local organisations have been pivotal in negotiating access, sustaining trust, and manoeuvring through intricate legitimacy frameworks (Elayah & Al-Mansori, 2024). These examples demonstrate that effective coordination frequently emerges not from inflexible formal structures but from dynamic, relational behaviours that connect institutional mandates with local contexts.

Nevertheless, these adaptive strategies entail some expenses. Ad hoc remedies may unintentionally strengthen dependency, shift state accountability, or conceal chronic neglect. The protection of civilian places in

South Sudan offered essential refuge but simultaneously entrenching the lack of official protection (Kilroy & Ryan, 2024). Food assistance measures in Sudan, although essential for survival, have subjected vulnerable populations to ration reductions and disputed targeting procedures (WFP, 2024; ReliefWeb, 2023). These contradictions underscore that adaptation is inherently biassed, reflecting political decisions regarding whose lives are prioritised and which futures are rendered feasible.

Recommendation

This analysis suggests that humanitarianism in prolonged conflicts should be reconceptualised as an adaptive yet principled approach. Coordination mechanisms must prioritise accountability to affected populations over donors, ensuring that adaptive actions address locally expressed needs rather than external visibility measurements. Secondly, local actors must be acknowledged and equipped as co-architects of crisis response, rather than marginal implementers, with their legitimacy and contextual expertise guiding decision-making. Third, adaptable strategies must be deliberately connected to overarching political, economic, and climate resilience initiatives, therefore averting the entrenchment of transient solutions as permanent measures. Ultimately, humanitarian governance must adopt a twin mandate: to preserve lives in crisis situations while also striving to provide avenues for peace, equity, and structural justice. Humanitarian action can only progress towards sustainable futures by including flexibility into this comprehensive transformative vision, transcending mere reactive pragmatism.

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