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Issue Brief

Conflict, Cross-border Movement and Food Insecurity in Sudan

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Summary

Food insecurity in Sudan is driven by civil war, climate shocks, border disputes and restrictions on seasonal cross-border labour migration from Ethiopia. Sudan's recovery will depend on restoring stability, rebuilding agricultural systems, and creating more predictable frameworks for regulated cross-border seasonal labour mobility.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that Sudan remains a major refugee-hosting country in Africa, currently sheltering an estimated 1.1 million refugees.[1] These refugees are mostly from Eritrea and Ethiopia, countries facing internal crises. Ethiopia and Sudan share the longest border. Along this border lie the fertile regions of Gedaref, Sinnar and Blue Nile, which have the highest agricultural output in Sudan.[2] The most important crop here is sesame, as Sudan is the world's largest sesame producer, with its market estimated at US$ 7.5 billion in 2023.[3] Since this region lies along the border, many Ethiopian migrants come to work on these Sudanese farms.

However, the 2023 civil war in Sudan has affected the labour movement, creating a labour shortage. This, alongside the famine, has created a food shortage[4] and rising inflation[5] in Sudan. According to UNHCR, the April 2023 war and climate change together have internally displaced approximately 13 million people in Sudan.[6] According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO),[7] erratic weather, shifting seasons and environmental degradation have led to crop failures, affecting livelihoods. Sudan also has a boundary dispute with Ethiopia in the Al-Fashaga region. All these have collectively caused a shortage in agricultural output, resulting in food insecurity.

Cross-Border Migration in Sudan

Ethiopia and Sudan share a porous boundary, contested for over a century. In 1902, when Sudan was still under British rule, the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902 attempted to demarcate the boundary. This attempt was followed by a unilateral British effort to demarcate it in 1903. However, it was rejected by Ethiopia. After Sudan's independence in 1956, the two countries sought, in 1972, a negotiated border demarcation through the Exchange of Notes.[8] Despite these efforts, the 874 km-long border between Ethiopia and Sudan remains disputed.

[1] **"Sudan"**, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees India.

[2] **"Special Report: 2023 FAO Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission (CFSAM) to The Republic of The Sudan"**, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 19 March 2024, pp. 16–25.

[3] **"Sesame Seed Market Size & Share Analysis - Growth Trends and Forecast (2026-2031)"**, Mordor Intelligence, 2026.

[4] **"Food and Nutrition Crisis Deepens Across Sudan as Famine Identified in Additional Areas"**, UNICEF, 24 December 2024.

[5] **"Sudan Economic Outlook"**, African Development Bank Group, 2024.

[6] **"Sudan Emergency"**, USA for UNHCR, 2026.

[7] **"Sudan at Glance"**, FAO in Sudan, Food and Agriculture Organization.

[8] **"Facts on Ethio-Sudan Boundary Issue (February 16, 2021)"**, Embassy of Ethiopia, Washington D.C., 16 February 2021.

This region is home to the Nuer, Murle and Anyuaa (Anyuak/Anywaa) ethnic groups, who engage in agriculture and animal husbandry. Of these, the Anyuaa are an agrarian group, controlling the right and left banks of the rivers and arid zones for their land cultivation practices. These groups sharing similar cultural, linguistic and pastoral traditions have facilitated cross-border farming, livestock herding and local trade.[9] Agriculture has long underpinned livelihoods in border regions, with seasonal farm labour serving as a vital income source for communities on both sides. Sudanese farmers, in particular, have relied on Ethiopian migrant workers during peak planting and harvesting periods, with cross-border movement (both formal and informal) highlighting the strong economic interdependence of these borderland areas.

A key site of cross-border farming and seasonal employment is the Al-Fashaga triangle, a long-disputed region spanning roughly 243,000 hectares of fertile land nourished by the Tekeze, Atbara and Angereb rivers. Claimed by both Sudan and Ethiopia, it attracts large numbers of seasonal workers. Farmers from Sudan's Gedaref State and Ethiopia's Amhara and Tigray regions compete for access to farmland and grazing. Due to these overlapping claims, control is fluid, with land cultivated by Ethiopian farmers in one season often shifting to Sudanese communities in another.[10] This has led to problems in calculating regional agricultural output and in further assessing regional food security.

The regional seasonal migration schemes attract over 600,000 participants.[11] Additionally, around 80,000 people arrive in Sudan every year to find work on farms in Gedaref State, where labour demand is high.[12] Therefore, seasonal migration became essential to Ethiopian livelihoods and Sudan's agriculture, increasing Sudan's reliance on Ethiopian labour to sustain output.

Another factor that contributed to increased dependence on Ethiopian seasonal labour was South Sudan's independence. Before 2011, alongside Ethiopian seasonal labour, Sudan relied on internal seasonal labour from the southern states.[13] The volatile borders between the two nations have reduced seasonal labour from South

[9] Moreda Tsegaye, **"Cross-border Seasonal Migrant Labour and Agricultural Commodity Production in the Ethiopia–Sudan Borderlands"**, *Agriculture and Human Values,* Vol. 42, 26 February 2025, pp. 2437–2453.

[10] Ibid.

[11] **"Ethiopian Refugees in Sudan: A Briefing Note to the UNHCR and UN-OHCHR on the Human Rights Situation of Ethiopian Refugees in Sudan"**, African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, 21 September 2022.

[12] **"Sudan and Ethiopia Met for the First Time to Discuss Improvements to Seasonal Labour Migration"**, Newsletter, *Better Migration Management: Horn of Africa*, March–September 2018, pp. 2–3.

[13] Ahmed Gamal Eldin, **"Forgotten and Neglected, War-Torn Sudan Has Become the World's Leading Displacement Crisis"**, *Migration Information Source,* The Online Journal of The Migration Policy Institute, 16 July 2025.

Sudan, contributing to the current labour shortage in Sudan and exacerbating regional food shortages.

With the onset of internal unrest in Sudan, many farmers were internally displaced. The Sudanese government had also stopped issuing entry permits to the Ethiopian seasonal labourers on the grounds of 'national security', leading to lower agricultural production. Many youth have also migrated to urban centres such as Khartoum and Port Sudan, reducing the local pool of available farm labour.[14] Together, these factors have created a structural labour shortage in Sudan's agricultural sector, making Ethiopian seasonal workers indispensable to sustaining agricultural production and rural livelihoods.

The 2023 Conflict and Food Security

The conflict in 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has had a devastating impact on the lives of the people. The capture of large parts of Greater Khartoum has been especially consequential. The capital region is not only home to roughly one-eighth of Sudan's population, but also houses many of the country's leading universities and key state institutions.[15] When fighting engulfed the city, it quickly disrupted the core of Sudan's political and administrative life. Within weeks, the central government was largely incapacitated, forcing the remaining functioning authorities to relocate operations to the coastal city of Port Sudan.

Agriculture, which once constituted the backbone of the Sudanese economy, has nearly collapsed in recent years. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), "famine conditions have been confirmed in Al Fasher and Kadugli, with the risk of famine in 20 additional areas across Greater Darfur and Greater Kordofan".[16] It further stated that "more than 12 million people – one in three Sudanese – forced from their homes by the conflict". Amongst the displaced people, the majority are farmers, thereby reducing agricultural produce, especially sesame.

Investments by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Sudan have also displaced the farmers. Over the past two decades, the UAE has been vying to seize control of Sudan's farmland and water resources to produce food for export. Seeking to secure its own long-term food supplies, the UAE has invested more than US$ 6 billion in

[14] **"Empowering Sudanese Youth: Pathways to Peace, Stability, and Prosperity"**, UNDP, 15 July 2025.

[15] **"Sudan Country Profile"**, *BBC News*, 13 September 2023.

[16] **"Sudan"**, World Food Programme, 2026.

Sudan, channelling funds into foreign reserves, large-scale agricultural projects and plans for a Red Sea port.[17]

Even as conflict loomed, two Emirati companies, International Holding Company (IHC), the country's largest listed firm, and Jenaan, were cultivating over 50,000 hectares of farmland in Sudan.[18] Just weeks before the conflict erupted, IHC signed a major agreement with the DAL Group, owned by one of Sudan's most prominent business figures, to develop an additional 162,000 hectares in Abu Hamad in northern Sudan.[19] The ambitious project, supported by the Emirati government, is designed to link this vast farming area to a newly planned coastal port through a 500km road.

The port itself is set to be constructed and operated by the Abu Dhabi Ports Group, further embedding the UAE's economic footprint in Sudan's agricultural and maritime infrastructure. These investments by the UAE government, in collaboration with private groups, are largely seen as land-grab schemes that exacerbate the regional hunger crisis.

Assessed through the FAO's food security framework, the consequences are compounding. For instance, according to World Bank Group data, Sudan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) peaked in 2022 at US$ 48.06 billion.[20] In 2024, as the conflict escalated, the GDP declined to US$ 29.18 billion. As agriculture, including forestry and fishing, contributed the most to the GDP, it can be said that it was the most affected sector. For instance, in 2022, this sector contributed US$ 16.04 billion to the GDP.[21] This number has substantially decreased in the subsequent years to US$ 13.65 billion in 2023 and US$ 12.61 billion in 2024.[22]

Sesame is the most-produced crop in the region, directly affecting per capita income. In 2022–23, the sesame production amounted to about 740,000 tonnes.[23] In 2023–24, its production was about 600,091 tonnes, down 19 per cent from the previous year.[24] For 2024–25, production is estimated at 626,173 tonnes, around 4 per cent

[17] Zaidan Yasir, **"Abu Dhabi is Prolonging the War By Arming the Brutal Rebels of the Rapid Support Forces. The International Community Must Stop Giving It a Pass"**, *Foreign Policy*, 29 August 2024.

[18] **"Land and Power Grabs in Sudan"**, Grain, 11 March 2025.

[19] Ibid.

[20] **"GDP (constant 2015 US$) – Sudan"**, World Bank Group.

[21] **"Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, Value Added (constant 2015 US$) – Sudan"**, World Bank Group.

[22] Ibid.

[23] **"Special Report: 2022 FAO Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission (CFSAM) to The Republic of The Sudan"**, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 20 March 2023, p. 26.

[24] **"Special Report: 2023 FAO Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission (CFSAM) to The Republic of The Sudan"**, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 19 March 2024, p. 22.

higher than the previous year.[25] Yet the production was 38 per cent lower than the five-year average.

According to the World Bank,[26] Sudan's inflation stood at 164 per cent in 2021–22. It briefly declined between 2022 and 2023 to 65.8 per cent; however, since the advent of conflict in April 2023, it soared to 170 per cent in 2023–24. It is believed that this increase was due to deficit monetisation. The report projected the inflation to decline in the coming years, provided the conflict ends. However, it is still expected to remain in double digits.

Overall, the FAO's food security framework highlights a deeply deteriorating situation in Sudan, where conflict has simultaneously undermined stability, availability and accessibility. Declining GDP and agricultural output reflect structural economic damage, while reduced sesame production signals weakened food availability. Surging inflation further erodes purchasing power, limiting access to food. Unless the conflict subsides, these interconnected pressures are likely to sustain and intensify food insecurity across the country.

Restricted Cross-border Movement

The flow of seasonal migrants from Ethiopia to Sudan, alongside trade, has been most affected by the conflict in northern Ethiopia and the SAF's concurrent takeover of Al Fashaga. These developments led to the intermittent closure of the key Metema–Gallabat border crossing for nearly two years, from late 2020 to 2022, disrupting overland trade and transport between the two countries.[27]

As a consequence, movement of people and goods across the border has become costlier and far riskier. The main highway has mostly stayed under government control, with checkpoints operated by state-affiliated or officially approved authorities. However, armed militia groups have set up their own informal checkpoints in more isolated areas. These are often located along feeder roads, narrow back routes, or in rugged terrain, where limited oversight creates space for smuggling and other illicit activity. Consequently, the trade and cross-border movement of seasonal labour has been limited.

The extended closure of the Ethiopia–Sudan border during much of 2021 and again periodically in 2022 dealt a severe blow to much of the seasonal labour movement.

[25] **"Special Report: 2024 FAO Crop and Food Supply Assessment Mission (CFSAM) to The Republic of The Sudan"**, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, March 2025, p. 29.

[26] **"Sudan Economic Update: May 2025"**, World Bank Group, May 2025.

[27] Soliman Ahmed and Elise Lannaud, **"Securitizing the Ethiopia–Sudan Border: How Cross-border Conflict is Shaping Trade and the Control of Land"**, Chatham House, 4 April 2024.

Still, cross-border exchange did not stop entirely—many people adapted by using unofficial routes, which are often riskier to enter Sudan. Satellite imagery of the Metema–Gallabat crossing captures road and foot traffic at three checkpoints on both sides of the border, offering a glimpse of persistent movement despite formal restrictions.[28]

In September 2024, the Sudanese authorities had briefly closed the border with Ethiopia after the Fano militia in the Amhara region encroached on the border with El Gedaref.[29] Presently, the cross-border movement is restricted, as there were reports of "Ethiopia hosting a secret camp to train thousands of fighters for the RSF paramilitary group".[30] A statement from Sudan's foreign ministry claimed that drones launched from Ethiopia have been striking locations inside Sudan and warned Addis Ababa of unspecified consequences.[31] These developments have curtailed seasonal labour flows, contributing to emerging labour shortages and food scarcity.

Sudan's agricultural sector, highly dependent on cross-border seasonal labour migration, has been severely impacted by the cross-border restrictions and conflicts in both countries. These restrictions interrupted the seasonal flow of labour needed for planting and harvesting, increased transport costs, reduced market integration, and further undermined both producer incomes and food access.

Policy Challenges

Sudan has domestic immigration control policies that include provisions on entry visas, work permits (including for refugees), residence permits, exit permits and special laws for Sudanese migrant workers. For issuing work permits to non-Sudanese nationals, the requirements include: a letter stating that the employer is responsible for the applicant; a preliminary work permit issued in line with Article 7 of the Employment of Non-Sudanese Act, 2001; and the firm's certificate of registration and its certificate of renewal, as required under Article 9(3) of the Alien Affairs Regulation, 2006.[32]

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[28] Ibid.

[29] **"Sudan Closes El Gedaref Border Crossing with Ethiopia"**, Relief Web, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), 3 September 2024.

[30] Paravicini Giulia and Levinson Reade, **"Ethiopia Builds Secret Camp to Train Sudan RSF Fighters, Sources Say"**, *Reuters*, 10 February 2026.

[31] **"Sudan Warns Ethiopian Authorities Against the Entry of Drones Into Sudan from Ethiopia and Their Use Against Targets Inside Sudan"**, *Sudan News Agency*, 2 March 2026.

[32] **"An Assessment of Labour Migration and Mobility Governance in the IGAD Region: Country Report for Sudan"**, Free Movement of Persons and Transhumance in the IGAD Region: Improving Opportunities for Regular Labour Mobility, International Labour Organization, 2020, p. 35.

Under the Asylum Regulation Act of 2014, refugees have the right to work. Article 18 provides that refugees may work after obtaining a work permit from the labour office. The refugees may be authorised to work in agricultural schemes if the Commissioner for Refugees approves a request made by the relevant authorities or farm owners. Such employment is temporary, as refugees are not permitted to hold permanent positions and their work permits are issued only for a fixed period.[33]

While, in principle, these laws enable the cross-border movement and employment of refugees, they have limitations. Firstly, these systems are difficult to navigate, involving several administrative steps and requiring various permits and authorisations. The legal provisions are unclear regarding the fees associated with different permits and access to information regarding the same. The Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Labour do not provide accessible English-language resources on their websites, limiting the availability of information. Although some Sudanese embassies publish visa fee information in English, broader regulatory details remain difficult to obtain. Additionally, individual Sudanese states may apply their own regulations concerning migrant employment, but these frameworks are not widely available in the public domain.[34] This lack of clarity creates uncertainty for employers, investors and migrant workers, ultimately constraining labour mobility.

The international community has also made active efforts to increase the mobility of seasonal labour, albeit with limited progress. For instance, in June 2018, representatives from Sudan and Ethiopia discussed the challenges of labour migration under the Better Migration Management (BMM) Programme.[35] The BMM Programme also facilitated a bilateral cross-border workshop in Khartoum. The representatives met again in September 2018 to agree on a regulated system for recruitment agencies, the establishment of information centres at the borders, capacity-building for border management bodies, and enhanced coordination and information-sharing between the Ethiopian and Sudanese authorities.[36] The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has also proposed several pathways to facilitate cross-border migration in support of agriculture and capacity-building.[37] Their effectiveness ultimately depends on sustained implementation by member states.

[33] Ibid., pp. 37–38.

[34] Ibid.

[35] **"Sudan and Ethiopia Met for the First Time to Discuss Improvements to Seasonal Labour Migration"**, no. 12.

[36] Ibid.

[37] **"An Assessment of Labour Migration and Mobility Governance in the IGAD Region: Country Report for Sudan"**, no. 32, pp. 1–62.

In terms of agricultural policies, the Gezira Scheme is at the centre of Sudan's irrigated agriculture. The scheme has largely supported the country's agriculture through its irrigation systems. The RSF occupation of the country in 2023 led to the widespread collapse of the agricultural infrastructure. Among the hardest-hit areas was Al-Haiwawa, the Gezira Scheme's major canal and one of the 117 main canals in the scheme, supporting more than 2,360 farmers across 48 villages.[38]

Overall, while Sudan's legal framework formally permits migrant and refugee labour, administrative complexity, limited transparency and conflict-related disruptions have significantly constrained cross-border labour mobility, negatively affecting agriculture. At the same time, the destruction of key agricultural infrastructure has further weakened the sector, underscoring the urgent need for institutional reform and post-conflict reconstruction.

Conclusion

Sudan's declining agricultural output reflects a complex set of challenges that intersect migration dynamics, governance constraints, and conflict. In Sudan's eastern breadbasket, war and the securitisation of the Ethiopia–Sudan border have disrupted the seasonal labour flows that underpin planting and harvesting, reducing agricultural output, depressing rural incomes, and worsening food insecurity through both lower food availability and weaker purchasing power. In addition to the internal conflict in Sudan, territorial disputes with Ethiopia have further constrained mobility and economic activity across the frontier. Climate change has also exacerbated the displacement in the region.

Addressing these challenges will require policies that facilitate more predictable and regulated cross-border migration, particularly for seasonal agricultural labour. Existing social, linguistic and cultural ties among border communities provide an opportunity for cooperative approaches. Strengthening local collaboration through information sharing, skills exchange and capacity-building could support agricultural recovery while also contributing to greater stability and cooperation in the border regions.

[38] **"SUDAN 2025. Gezira Scheme's Major Canal"**, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 29 April 2025.

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