

# South Sudan NGO Forum // Challenges to Safe and Dignified Returns and Relocations in Light of COVID-19

## // May 2020

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### 01. BACKGROUND

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The South Sudan **NGO Forum advocates for a principled and evidence-based response to displacement in South Sudan, in order to support communities to achieve safe, dignified and informed solutions to their displacement without discrimination.** All communities in South Sudan are affected by displacement and mobility, either as a livelihood or coping strategy or as part of historical responses to local emergencies.

The current, unprecedented Coronavirus (COVID-19) emergency has resulted in a number of increased risks for displacement affected communities, both as a direct result of COVID-19 and due to COVID-19 prevention measures. The NGO Forum Working Group on Durable Solutions has been monitoring and **identifying a number of issues facing individuals' ability to seek solutions to their displacement in light of COVID-19.** This document **highlights key issues related to movement in light of COVID-19** to promote a common understanding of risks, and provides NGO members with reporting options. The NGO Forum Working Group on Durable Solutions is available to provide national level advocacy and guidance, in coordination with other key stakeholders and authorities as feasible.

### 02. KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

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- **International border closures**, in place since 24 March, have clearly impacted people's ability to move across key border crossings. The Working Group has identified however, that following the restrictions **people are using illegal crossing points, and much less secure routes**, putting them at increased risk of protection issues. **Similar risks are true for cross-county movement** following increased restrictions after the first COVID-19 case was declared in South Sudan.
- Of **spontaneous refugee returnees** who returned before the border closures, the majority interviewed by NGO Working Group members have noted family and friends remain in countries of asylum with the intention to return when restrictions are lifted. The Working Group therefore **anticipates that there will be a short peak of spontaneous refugee returnees when the border restrictions are lifted** by both South Sudan and neighboring country authorities.
- Due to the acknowledged **increased risk of COVID-19 in congested locations**, such as IDP sites and Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites, some IDPs have sought to return to their areas of origin or habitual residence, or relocate to less congested locations than e.g. Juba or Wau. Such **movements, as a result of fear of COVID-19, could in many cases be premature, and lead to increased vulnerability.**
- Social exclusion and stigmatization of displaced households who have returned is also at risk of increasing. With households arriving either from a country of asylum or from an internal displacement site, reports of **stigmatization as host communities fear the spread of COVID-19 have increased.** Such stigma can lead to discrimination and other protection concerns, and provides a **challenge to re/integration of displaced persons**, both in key locations such as Juba, and in less urban locations across the country.
- NGO members of the Housing, Land and Property Technical Working Group have identified **increased risk of evictions and HLP disputes as a result of COVID-19, see [here](#).** These risks will have a longer-term impact on the ability of displacement affected populations to achieve sustainable solutions to their displacement.

- The increase in **inter-communal violence** including cattle raiding in April-May 2020 is being closely monitored as a protection issue by clusters, and is seen as exacerbated by Governance vacuums in part due to the COVID-19 emergency. Working Group members have identified that such incidents, in addition to direct protection threats, are also **impacting the ability of households to return from locations of displacement**.
- Both direct violence, and the **resulting interruption and inaccessibility of support services during COVID-19** risk causing a gap in the response to key issues, further compounded by the absence of Government structures, enhancing impunity. Such issues will hugely affect peoples' return to areas of origin.

### 03. ROLE OF NGO FORUM MEMBERS

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- **NGO Forum members in field sites have a key role** in monitoring risks and challenges to population movement including return and relocations and promoting the use of core protection-focused principles and messages. Identification of risks should be done in collaboration with the communities, relevant clusters and working groups (including the Solutions Working Groups, if present).
- **To alert the NGO Forum to risks identified** on return or relocation movements as a result of COVID-19, please contact the NGO Forum Working Group via Mat Gai [nngo-fp@southsudanngoforum.org](mailto:nngo-fp@southsudanngoforum.org) Anna Salvarli [anna.salvarli@drc.ngo](mailto:anna.salvarli@drc.ngo) and Yasmine Maydhane [yasmine.maydhane@nrc.no](mailto:yasmine.maydhane@nrc.no)