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## Conflict-Sensitive Returns and Integration in South Sudan

March 2024

This research was conducted by Irina Mosel and Prof. Dr Leben Nelson Moro with support of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) colleagues, between November 2023 and March 2024. The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility supports conflict-sensitive aid programming in South Sudan, is funded by the EU, UK, Switzerland, Canada and Netherlands Donor Missions in South Sudan, and is implemented by a consortium of NGOs including Saferworld and swisspeace.

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## Acknowledgements

It takes the effort of many people for a report of this kind to be successfully completed. Needless to say, it is not feasible to fully acknowledge the contributions of all the people and institutions to the production of this report. However, there are a few persons who made substantial inputs that we would like to thank:

First and foremost, we send our heartfelt thanks to all the people, including returnees, refugees, IDPs, members of host communities, as well as the key informants including government officials, aid workers, civil society representatives, donors and others who were interviewed in various locations across South Sudan. We enormously appreciate them for generously sharing their knowledge, stories, experiences, and opinions. We hope that this report, in one way or another, will support the government and its partners to make their lives and those of the communities hosting them better.

We are grateful to the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, in particular its director, Alexandra Blaise Balmer and her colleagues David Otim, Ranga Gworo, Diing Kuir Diing and Natalia Chan from Saferworld for working closely with us throughout the execution of this research project and the many useful discussions, ideas and inputs throughout.

We would also like to express gratitude to the members of the reference group, particularly Martina Santschi and Rebecca Kinahan, for their continued engagement and valuable comments, which greatly shaped our thinking about the key issues contained in the study.

We would like to thank our research team, namely Mr Gai James Dor, Mr John Wiyul Gatkouth, Mr Lul Ruach Rom, Ms Elizabeth Aker Aguer, Ms Achan Akoi, Mr Okidi Richard, Ms Victoria Dusman Friday, and Mr Kuichthok Deng who carried out the fieldwork together with us, and, within a short period of time, generated substantial information. Their work played a crucial part in the implementation of this study.

Lastly, we express our appreciation for representatives from across the South Sudan aid sector [NNGOs, INGOs, UN agencies and Donors] and the participants in the inception meetings conducted at the launch of the project for their input and time which contributed significantly to the framing of the research.

## Abbreviations and Acronyms

ABL	Area-Based Leadership
CAR	Central African Republic
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRA	Commission for Refugee Affairs
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
CSRF	Conflict Sensitive Resource Facility
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ERC	Emergency Relief Coordinator's Flagship Initiative
FHH	Female Headed Household
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
GOSS	Government of Southern Sudan
HDP	Humanitarian, Development and Peace
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
HNRP	Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan
ICLA	Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MHADM	Ministry for Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psycho-Social Support
NFI	Non-food items
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NMPACT	Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation
OCHA	Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PfPRR	Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience
PIN	People in need
PoC	Protection of Civilians
PoCs	Protection of Civilian Sites
PoH	Pockets of Hope
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
RRR	Return, Reintegration and Recovery Section
RSRTF	Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund
R-TGoNU	Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition
SSRRC	South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMIS	United Nations Mission in Sudan
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
WFP	World Food Programme

## Executive Summary

Since fighting flared up in Sudan in April 2023, an estimated 8.2 million Sudanese have been forcibly displaced, out of which 1.7 million are hosted by neighbouring countries, including 588,711 people by South Sudan.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, an estimated 997,743 ‘spontaneous’ returnees have come back from neighbouring countries to South Sudan between 2018 and September 2023<sup>2</sup> and significant numbers of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) (1,696,633) have also returned from within South Sudan. While the number of ‘returns’ has grown, an estimated 2,027,331 people remain internally displaced within South Sudan and 2,220,551 South Sudanese refugees remain displaced within the wider region.<sup>3</sup>

People fleeing the war in Sudan or returning to South Sudan from neighbouring countries are arriving in South Sudan at a challenging time. Key aspects of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which was signed in 2018, have not yet been implemented, amidst pervasive violent conflicts at the local or subnational levels over land and other issues, a steep depreciation of the national currency and skyrocketing prices, continuous flooding and other climatic shocks as well as pervasive food insecurity across many areas of the country. At the same time, donor funding has been drastically cut and the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) is only 17% funded.

This research aims to provide actors across the humanitarian, development and peace sectors and donors, with a stronger understanding of the risks and opportunities associated with ‘returns’ and ‘integration’ in South Sudan, as well as highlight opportunities for conflict-sensitive (re)integration and early solutions activities. The research also highlights key lessons learned from previous returns and reintegration experiences that can inform current approaches.

Officially, ‘returns’ to South Sudan from a third country are not yet supported by the international community, as conditions in return locations are still deemed unfavourable for returns. At the same time, organisations and the government are currently responding to an emergency influx of people (from Sudan) as if it was partly a ‘return’ movement; yet, many of the building blocks that a successful return and (re)integration approach would entail are not yet in place. As a result, many people are partially supported as ‘returnees’, based on certain assumptions about ongoing connections to kinship networks and Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) in their ‘home’ areas. However, this focus on ‘returns’ without the corresponding reintegration and early solutions support risks not only increasing individual vulnerabilities but also drawing entire hosting communities into crisis conditions.

Key lessons from previous returns around how (re)integration – including urban (re)integration – programming could and needs to be concurrently initiated and support the absorptive capacity of communities in a conflict-sensitive way have not yet been applied. Current durable solutions initiatives are plentiful, however, these seem to not yet have been sufficiently connected to the current emergency response and are operating in parallel, often under different coordination structures. Due to lack of funding, ongoing initiatives are still largely concerned with previous groups of IDPs displaced by the 2013 and 2016 violence, as well as large numbers of vulnerable host communities, and have

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2024) ‘Sudan Situation: Regional Displacement Update as of 04 March 2024.’

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107056>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2023a) ‘South Sudan: UNHCR Overview of Spontaneous Refugee Returns (as of September 2023).’ ReliefWeb, September 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-unhcr-overview-spontaneous-refugee-returns-september-2023>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR (2023b) ‘Regional overview of the South Sudanese refugee population.’ September 2023.

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/62?sv=5&geo=0>

been unable to expand to include the significant numbers of new arrivals from Sudan and elsewhere into ongoing programming.

There are real risks with the current assistance model, which focuses on cash or food assistance at the point of departure and transportation support only, including that people will disappear into communities and will only be picked up by the humanitarian 'system' if there are large numbers of people returning to one place or if their area deteriorates to significant food insecurity. This is partly due to serious coordination challenges, massive funding cuts and a difficult operating environment that makes tracking people's movements and widespread aid actor presence extremely challenging. The currently very limited support beyond transportation and initial food/cash assistance will likely result in those already vulnerable deteriorating significantly, while others, including vulnerable communities that are hosting returnees risk becoming future humanitarian caseloads due to increasing food insecurity.

Much of the reintegration burden falls on so called 'host' communities who themselves are extremely vulnerable, and often have a similar, and very recent history of displacement. They are forced to share the very limited food and existing services with the new arrivals, putting a huge burden on what are already very strained resources. At the same time, selection approaches - despite being needs-based - continue to single out particular groups of people for assistance rather than employing creative methods that can support whole communities to increase their absorptive capacity, while preserving important kinship and social assistance networks. This is already creating potential for conflict in many areas; yet, as resources shrink and areas become more and more food insecure, conflicts will likely be exacerbated even more. Categories such as 'IDPs', 'returnees' 'refugees' have long been criticised for not adequately reflecting people's lived experiences. But they especially do not work in contexts like South Sudan with an omnipresent history of displacement across the different population groups. Individual or category-based selection in this context risks putting further strain on social relations and undermining people's tenuous support networks that are often based on sharing and reciprocity between different members.

Increasing urbanisation trends will inevitably bring an expansion of informal or slum settlements that are not currently sufficiently in the focus of the response nor of ongoing solutions initiatives. Within towns, many people are joining relatives in the former Protection of Civilians (PoC) camps or other displacement sites, as they have nowhere else to go or land is unavailable in the town. However, in many of these sites humanitarian assistance has drastically reduced, meaning returnees are joining already overcrowded and volatile environments with significant food insecurity, and criminality. Youth gangs – though by no means new to South Sudan – are becoming an increasing problem not only in the former Protection of Civilian Sites (PoCs) but across many South Sudanese towns. There are indications that disillusioned youth in South Sudan are being joined by newcomers from Sudan, Uganda and elsewhere who are equally desperate.

Land unsurprisingly emerged as the key conflict issue and issue that is affecting returnees, IDPs and hosts alike. Conflict over land is not only happening at the individual level – over multiple allocation of land titles and land grabbing - but also among and between communities at the *payam*, county and state levels, as well as between South Sudan and its neighbours in numerous locations. Malakal town in particular is a complicated and potentially explosive set-up where multiple groups are claiming ownership rights, yet, one of these ethnic groups – the Shilluk – have not yet returned.

The durable solutions architecture is fractured and lacking a joint coordination space for exchange and critical thinking. While the national durable solutions architecture is not yet in place at the state level, area-based leadership coordinators are working on state-level roadmaps for solutions, though it is unclear how these will be connected to the national level, and, more crucially, donors or government planning and financing.

## **Key messages:**

**Funding:** It is crucial that donors step up funding not only on returns in areas that are conducive to conflict-sensitive resettlements, but also for concurrent (re)integration/early solutions support to affected populations in these areas.

**Return and Reintegration:** Real opportunities are being missed to provide early, conflict-sensitive, social cohesion-building reintegration/early solutions support – including activities like start-up capital, skills matching between returnees/hosts, linking people to service providers, markets, jobs, that can prevent people slipping into food insecurity and violence – based on lessons learned.

**Selection:** There is an important opportunity to use more innovative selection methods that focus on community-wide and area-based approaches, as well as network-based approaches to assistance where people can distribute assistance through their own networks. It is crucial that assistance supports people's own choices and networks rather than undermine them or set them up in competition.

**Urbanisation, former PoCs and wider dynamics of movement:** It is critical to look at the wider dynamics of ongoing movements in terms of increasing urbanisation and movements to informal settlements and former displacement sites: specialist support will be needed to support government at various levels in the conflict-sensitive integration of former displacement sites and informal settlements into the urban landscape. Urban innovation and focusing on the interdependence between rural and urban areas and mobility between them are other critical areas to support.

**Land:** There are significant opportunities to engage government and other actors at different levels in discussions around how to increase access to land for everyone, regardless of their place of origin, in a conflict-sensitive way. There is a need to work in a more concerted way on solving land-related conflicts and supporting solutions to disputes, in particular, in urban areas and considering opportunities for returning refugees and IDPs as well as women's access to land. It will be important to consider existing conflict dynamics carefully, in order not to exacerbate tensions, for example, in already extremely tense and complicated settings such as Malakal town.

**Youth:** It will be critical to design interventions focused on young people – both resident youth as well as those arriving – to open-up viable perspectives and opportunities for future livelihoods and avoid young people seeing gangs as the only option for survival. These should include interventions aimed at increasing livelihoods/life skills, social cohesion and integrate peace building approaches to harness the different skills that different population groups bring and encourage learning from one another.

**Humanitarian/Development/Peace Nexus:** It is necessary to explore ways to support integrated programming that can address immediate needs and support social cohesion and resolution of conflicts at the same time as building and supporting asset creation and livelihoods for different populations.

**Durable Solutions:** There is a key opportunity to come together and rebuild a space for coordination, critical thinking and action around durable solutions.<sup>4</sup> It will be important to work on an inclusive architecture for durable solutions that can connect initiatives from the national level down to the state level and vice versa and, crucially, link to government mandates, planning and financing.

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<sup>4</sup> According to respondents, such a space was previously provided by the Partnership for Peace, Reconciliation and Resilience (PfPRR), though this was not its original intended purpose and the space was also not inclusive of everyone.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

South Sudan is gradually recovering from civil war as the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which was signed in 2018, is being implemented. However, key aspects of the R-ARCSS have not yet been rolled out, amidst pervasive violent conflicts at the local or subnational levels over land and other issues, a steep depreciation of the national currency and skyrocketing prices, continuous flooding and other climatic shocks, and the fall outs of the ongoing war in Sudan.

Since fighting flared up in Sudan in April 2023, an estimated 8.2 million Sudanese have been forcibly displaced, out of which 1.7 million are hosted by neighbouring countries.<sup>5</sup> South Sudan is estimated to be hosting 588,711 people who fled from Sudan, 120,412 of them originating from Sudan and 463,960 are South Sudanese forced to head back to South Sudan. The conflict is not expected to end any time soon and UN agencies are anticipating the arrival of at least between 400,000 and 500,000 people on top of those who have entered the country. Although United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international organisations continue to uphold an official advisory not to facilitate large-scale, organised returns to South Sudan,<sup>6</sup> individual people or groups of people have started to spontaneously return since the signing of the peace agreement. These 'spontaneous' returnees have accumulated to significant numbers - an estimated 997,743 between 2018 and September 2023.<sup>7</sup> Most of these came from Uganda and Ethiopia, followed by smaller numbers from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Kenya and the Central African Republic (CAR). At the same time, a significant number of IDPs from within South Sudan are also returning - 1,696,633 IDPs who are joining returning refugees in various places.<sup>8</sup> While numbers of returns continue to increase, it is important to highlight that 2,027,331 people remain internally displaced<sup>9</sup> within South Sudan and 2,220,551 South Sudanese refugees remain displaced within the wider region.<sup>10</sup>

The influx of forcibly displaced populations from Sudan is complicating the already dire situation in South Sudan. The majority of people coming to South Sudan enter through Wunthow (Juda) in Upper Nile State, followed by Panakuach in Unity State and Majokynthiou in Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal State as well as Abyei Amiet. Smaller numbers are entering through Kiir Adem and Jaar in Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal State as well as Raja town in Western-Bahr-el-Ghazal. Their flight from Sudan has been mired by severe human rights abuses. Inside South Sudan, they are grappling with many hardships, especially food insecurity.

Echoing the grim situation resulting from the fighting in Sudan, WFP warned of a looming 'largest hunger crisis' in Sudan, South Sudan and Chad.<sup>11</sup> The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projects, for the period from April to July 2024, 7.1 million South Sudanese (56 % of the

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<sup>5</sup> UNHCR (2024) 'Sudan Situation: Regional Displacement Update as of 04 March 2024.'

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/107056>

<sup>6</sup> This is due to the conditions in return areas not yet deemed conducive for large scale, organised returns.

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR (2023a) 'South Sudan: UNHCR Overview of Spontaneous Refugee Returns (as of September 2023).' ReliefWeb, September 2023. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-unhcr-overview-spontaneous-refugee-returns-september-2023>

<sup>8</sup> IOM (2023) 'South Sudan — Mobility Tracking Round 14 Atlas (March - April 2023).' <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/south-sudan-mobility-tracking-round-14-atlas-march-april-2023>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> UNHCR (2023b) 'Regional overview of the South Sudanese refugee population (unhcr.org).' September 2023.

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/62?sv=5&geo=0>

<sup>11</sup> WFP (2024) 'Sudan's war risks creating the world's largest hunger crises, warns WFP chief.' News Release, 6 March. <https://www.wfp.org/news/sudans-war-risks-creating-worlds-largest-hunger-crisis-warns-wfp-chief>



population) will likely face crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse acute food insecurity, and 79,000 people will likely be in catastrophic (IPC 5) acute food insecurity, out of which 28,000 are South Sudanese returnees spread across the country.<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, many refugees and South Sudanese returnees interviewed for this study expressed a desire to move to other countries, where there is hope for better living conditions. Donors' and international partners' interventions will increasingly fall short of expectations in the context of severe funding cuts of up to 50 % or more. The 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) is seeking funding for six million people out of nine million that need assistance, amounting to 1.8 billion USD.<sup>13</sup> However, the HNRP is currently just 17.3% funded.<sup>14</sup>

Reflecting the slow implementation of the R-ARCSS, the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) has not yet come up with a coherent and comprehensive plan of return, including the establishment of the Special Reconstruction Fund that was stipulated in R-ARCSS. The government is still developing strategies and plans to facilitate the return of South Sudanese refugees in neighbouring countries as well as IDPs from within South Sudan, while at the same responding to needs of people who voluntarily, or have been forced, to return.

Interventions of the government and its partners are also hampered by the existence of multiple strategies around durable solutions and a lack of clarity around how to operationalise the already approved national framework and action plan, which is currently being revised again. As an interviewee for this study correctly pointed out: 'in South Sudan, we have more pilots than Lufthansa (the second largest airline in Europe).' The gap in and confusion around policies extend to the issue of land, which many research respondents consider a crucial aspect of durable solutions. Currently, the government is working on a land policy, which has courted controversy. The Legislature of Central Equatoria State rejected a clause in the draft policy that says 'all Land in South Sudan belongs to the people' instead of 'land belongs to communities.' It claimed that the policy aims at justifying and institutionalising the 'crime of land grabbing and migration of some communities to specific selected regions in the country.'<sup>15</sup> The draft policy is therefore creating more challenges to efforts to settle IDPs and returnees in some places. At the same time, there is already very limited administrative capacity around land, and any land policy – even if approved – would take a long time to be rolled out to the state/county level due to financing and capacity constraints.

This study therefore comes at a critical time in South Sudan and aims to provide actors across the humanitarian, development and peace sectors and donors with a stronger understanding of the risks and opportunities associated with 'returns' and 'integration' in South Sudan. The research focuses mainly on 'returns' from Sudan as well as other neighbouring countries; it also looks at the interaction of some current attempts at returning and integrating existing IDPs with these ongoing return movements. The study did not, however, focus explicitly on the assisted returns for IDPs as coordinated by the state-level task forces. Key lessons learned from previous return and (re)integration processes are highlighted and suggestions made around how interventions, including for (re)integration and durable solutions can be made without causing more conflicts within South Sudan.

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<sup>12</sup> IPC (2023) 'IPC Acute food insecurity and malnutrition analysis for September 2023-July 2024.' 6 November 2023.

<https://www.ipcinfo.org/ipc-country-analysis/details-map/en/c/1156668/?iso3=SSD>

<sup>13</sup> UNOCHA (2024) 'South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 (Issued November 2023).'

<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2024-issued-november-2023>

<sup>14</sup> OCHA Financial Tracking Service (2024) 'South Sudan. Country snapshot for 2024.'

<https://fts.unocha.org/countries/211/summary/2024>

<sup>15</sup> Mark, C. K. (2024) 'CES objects 'land belongs to people.' *No. 1 Citizen*, 4(1105), February 16.

## 1.2. Methodology

**The key research questions that this study sought to address are the following:**

- What do the terms ‘refugee’, ‘returnee’ ‘IDP’ and ‘(re)-integration’ mean in the current context of South Sudan?
- What lessons are there from previous aid engagement responding to returns and (re)integration in South Sudan?
- What opportunities, risks and dilemmas should aid practitioners and policy makers consider when responding in areas where there are currently high numbers of returnees?
- What are some of the different dynamics at play in different areas of South Sudan that are experiencing high numbers of returns? What is different and what is common to different locations?
- What opportunities are there for durable solutions in this context?
- What approaches, actions or principles would improve coherence between humanitarian, development, peacebuilding programming in South Sudan to support conflict-sensitive ‘returns and integration’?

Research methods consisted of a mixture of Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), field-based interviews with refugees, returnees, IDPs and hosts, a literature review as well as ongoing stakeholder convening and discussions.

**A total of 213 interviews** with individuals (refugees, returnees, IDPs, hosts, aid workers, faith-based actors, local leaders, government officials and civil society representatives) and seven Focus Group Discussions were held in the following 14 locations, selected to represent different return and conflict dynamics: Central Equatoria (former PoCs, Mangateen, Lemon Gaba, and Gorom Camp), Eastern Equatoria (Magwi), Upper Nile (Renk and Malakal) Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal (Aweil, Gokmachar and Wedwil) and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal (Wau), Unity State (Bentiu and Rotriak) and Jonglei (Akobo). Information was collected both by research leads and a team of researchers (women and men from different ethnic backgrounds in the various locations).

**In addition, 35 KIIs** were conducted with international and local NGOs, UN representatives, faith-based organisations, representatives of civil society, donors as well as government officials at national and state-level capitals. KIIs were conducted in person in Juba and Nairobi as well as over the phone.

Concurrently, **a literature review** of relevant published and grey literature, especially covering past returns and reintegration processes and key lessons learnt, and more recent works including on durable solutions, was undertaken. This included academic literature but also other literature such as agency research reports, government documents and other NGO-type publications.

**An inception workshop with key stakeholders** was convened in Juba at the beginning of the research to discuss the scope and relevance of the research as well as agree on potential research locations.

A reference group, consisting of representatives from international and local NGOs and donors, was convened to provide advice and guidance on the overall research. A preliminary findings workshop was held with the reference group to discuss the findings prior to the start of the drafting stage. Research sites were selected after discussions during the stakeholder workshop in Juba and further discussions with the reference group and the CSRF teams. In the end, research sites where large numbers of returnees and refugees are arriving from Sudan were complemented by other sites of return that can convey different dynamics of return and (re)integration.

## 2. Historical Experiences of Returns and (Re)integration and lessons learned

South Sudan has a long experience of violent conflicts, mass human displacement and repatriations of displaced persons as well as hosting refugees. Lessons can be learned from these past returns to inform ongoing and future returns and reintegration activities:

### 2.1 Returns and (re)integration after the Addis Ababa Agreement

The First Sudanese War (1955-1972) displaced a large portion of the then Southern Sudan's estimated six million inhabitants. About 500,000 of them hid in the bush, and another 180,000 sought safety in settlements and other locations mainly in Uganda, present DR Congo, Ethiopia and the Central African Republic by the time the war came to an end in 1972.<sup>16</sup> As the war was ending, the Sudanese Government led by Jaffar el Nimeiri made efforts to repatriate and reintegrate refugees, including establishing a special fund for resettlement and appealing to the then UN Secretary General to support return activities. Demonstrating its political will, the Sudanese Government contributed to the special funds more than what was expected of it.<sup>17</sup> South Sudan thus experienced one of the first mass repatriation campaigns of 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa that was state-led – a process, it has been argued, that meant that 'civil war ideas, staff and techniques were recycled into an apparently benevolent and "peacebuilding" project of Relief, Repatriation and Rehabilitation (RRR).'<sup>18</sup>

The Nimeiri Government, a close ally of the USA, invested the special funds in the development of basic structures, including road networks and other basic services, to create a conducive environment for return of displaced persons. The good image of the government, resulting from peacefully ending the 17-year war, attracted a plethora of international organisations, which supported returnees and development projects. However, an academic observed that the 'foreign agencies took over many of the functions of local government, including education, health, veterinary care, water provision, agricultural extension, road building and the like. These agencies enjoyed far greater levels of resourcing than government departments and undermined the legitimacy of local government.'<sup>19</sup> Sudan relapsed into another round of fighting in 1983, which caused the displacement of over 4.5 million people.

In the late 1980s, IDPs from the Bahr-el-Ghazal region who had sought refuge in Northern Sudan moved back to their home areas where security had (temporarily) improved. This return movement put pressure on the limited resources in the area: 'They have represented an additional and substantial burden on the meagre resources of the existing population and, although the incomers are people returning to their home areas, they are arriving with virtually nothing but a sincere belief that relief in terms of food and seeds are awaiting them.'<sup>20</sup>

### 2.2 Returns after the CPA

In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed, ending hostilities and paving the way for the return and reintegration of IDPs and refugees. In the run up to the 2011 referendum, around two million people returned to South Sudan - in what were both large scale, government and

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<sup>16</sup> Holborn, L.W. (1972) 'The Repatriation and Resettlement of the South Sudanese.' *Journal of Opinion*, 2(4): 23-26.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Kindersley, N. (2017) 'Subject(s) to control: post-war return migration and state-building in 1970s South Sudan.' *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 11(2): 211-229.

<sup>19</sup> De Waal, A. (1997) 'Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism.' London: African Rights.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations and Lifeline Sudan (1990) 'An Investigation into Production Capability in the Rural Southern Sudan: A Report on Food Sources and Needs.' Page 46. <https://www.csrfsouthsudan.org/repository/investigation-production-capability-rural-southern-sudan-report-food-sources-needs/>

international community assisted, organised returns, as well as unassisted, so called ‘spontaneous’ returns.<sup>21</sup>

### **Lack of focus on increasing the absorptive capacity of host communities**

One key lesson from the post-CPA organised returns, which is very relevant for today, was that support to IDPs and refugees did not focus enough on reintegration components and particularly on increasing the absorptive capacity of host communities. Instead, most capacities and resources were taken up with the organisation of a huge returns programme.<sup>22</sup> Some of the activities that were undertaken focused mainly on the construction and rehabilitation of schools, medical facilities and boreholes but were of ‘uncertain sustainability’, due to agencies generally shying away from covering recurrent costs, such as staffing or the supply of medicines, given limited governmental capacity.<sup>23</sup>

### **Government and international community focus on returns rather than integration**

The Government of Southern Sudan’s (GoSS) priorities at the time were very much the returns of people to their respective areas, ahead of the census and the referendum. Its focus was mainly on larger-scale infrastructure and security, leaving community level integration as well as addressing returnees’ needs mainly to the international community.<sup>24</sup> The government launched the ‘taking the towns to the people’ initiative, meant to support resettlement to rural areas of origin, rather than in towns. The Southern Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (SSRRC) took the lead for returns and reintegration within the government at the time, though suffered from low capacity and difficult relations with the line ministries.<sup>25</sup>

There were few longer-term investments, including those that aimed at removing the barriers to sustainable integration, such as programmes focusing on land or land disputes.<sup>26</sup> One of the responses suggested by Duffield (2008) to free up resources for integration from the very expensive transportation programme was, for example, to look for alternatives, less resource and time-consuming ways of supporting returns, including through a more extensive use of cash grants for transport where feasible.

### **Individual-focused programmes rather than community-based approaches to (re)integration**

Programmes that were individual-focused rather than taking a community-based approach tended not to be effective given the importance of kinship networks and social connections for ongoing support. Both the returnee support after 2005, as well as the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programme for ex-combatants took individualised, short-term approaches that were very much focused on rural areas. Most of the programmes did not focus on increasing the absorptive capacity of communities or attempt to work in a more holistic way by supporting people’s social connections and (re)integration into communities, thereby often undermining the very support networks people had to rely on and at times exacerbating tensions.<sup>27</sup> It was highlighted how this was a missed opportunity, as community-focused programmes could have had positive effects on social cohesion – where returnees or ex-combatants would benefit from local communities’ knowledge,

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<sup>21</sup> IDMC (2021) ‘Recommendations for Addressing Internal Displacement and Returns in South Sudan.’ Geneva: IDMC.

<sup>22</sup> See Bennet, J. et al. (2010) ‘Aiding the Peace: A Multi-donor Evaluation of Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities in Southern Sudan 2005–2010.’ ITAD Ltd.; Maxwell, D. et al. (2012) ‘Livelihoods, basic services and social protection in South Sudan.’ London: SLRC; Duffield, M. (2008) ‘Evaluation of UNHCR’s returnee reintegration programme in Southern Sudan.’ Geneva: UNHCR.

<sup>23</sup> Duffield, M. (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Pantuliano, S. et al. (2008) ‘The Long Road Home: Opportunities and obstacles to the reintegration of IDPs and refugees returning to Southern Sudan and the Three Areas: Report of Phase II.’ London: ODI.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Bennet, J. et al. (2010).

<sup>27</sup> Wiggins, S. et al. (2021) ‘Livelihoods and markets in protracted conflict: a review of evidence and practice.’ London: ODI; Brethfeld, J. (2010) ‘Unrealistic Expectations: Current Challenges to Reintegration in Southern Sudan.’ Small Arms Survey, HSBA Working Paper 21; Pantuliano, S. et al. (2008).

skills and support and vice versa and where economic recovery could benefit the whole community rather than exacerbate tensions.<sup>28</sup>

### **Holistic or multi-dimensional approaches to (re)integration worked best**

(Re)integration programmes that were more successful were often those that took a holistic approach or looked at multi-dimensional support. These included, for example, NRC's Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) project which worked in a holistic way to address a number of key issues and barriers to integration, such as access to land, connections to training or finance opportunities, as well as other support networks or supported joint returnee and host community access to services and asset creation. Others included those that attempted to ease tensions between IDPs/returnees and hosts, for example, through cash for work programmes for returnees, which alleviated the burdens on hosts while at the same time constructing services that were accessible to both.<sup>29</sup> Another good example of a multi-dimensional project that addressed issues related to employment, infrastructure and peace building was PACT's Early Warning Project in Upper Nile, which combined the provision of physical infrastructure (buildings and equipment) and access to water, with livelihoods training for youth and capacity-building for local government and legal institutions, while at the same time establishing a forum for community dialogue and reconciliation. This provided employment opportunities and skills to build useful infrastructure to unemployed youth who could have otherwise engaged in disruptive behaviour.<sup>30</sup>

### **Not undermining local support/kinship networks through selection approaches**

Other key lessons revolved around selection mechanisms and the potential disruption to social and kinship networks. Understanding the importance of local support networks and endeavouring to not undermine these through humanitarian interventions, such as cash transfers, is equally key to supporting integration. Including local conceptualisations of vulnerability and selection interventions in a way that does not undermine social networks by, for example, allowing people to continue to meet sharing obligations through the provision of sufficient cash to bridge the gap between emergency and early recovery is one example. The most vulnerable may not necessarily be the most obvious ones (e.g., Female Headed Households (FHH)) but often those without social connections or those that are having to support large families.<sup>31</sup>

### **(Re)integration as a complex process that needs longer-term, area-based support**

Other examples include the concurrent focus on meeting immediate needs, such as food and shelter, while at the same time supporting longer-term objectives. The Nuba Mountains Programme Advancing Conflict Transformation (NMPACT) food security approach focused on capacity-building over external inputs and focused on addressing the constraints to food security (such as barriers to access to land, or markets) from the beginning of an intervention.<sup>32</sup>

Understanding (re)integration as a complex process, which has legal, social, cultural, political and economic dimensions that need a longer-term strategy, was also a crucial lesson learnt. For these different dimensions to be addressed, area-based approaches, which can help promote social integration and cohesion as well as support skills transfer and learning from different population groups, were key recommendations of previous return and reintegration processes after the CPA.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Brethfeld, J. (2010).

<sup>29</sup> Bennet, J. et al. (2010).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Humphey, A. et al. (2019) 'The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan.' Washington DC: Mercy Corps.

<sup>32</sup> Alinovi, L. et al (eds.) (2008) 'Beyond relief: Food security in protracted crises.' FAO.

<sup>33</sup> Pantuliano, S. et al. (2008); Martin, E. and I. Mosel (2011) 'City Limits: Urbanisation and Vulnerability in Sudan: Juba case study.' London: ODI.

### **The urban dimension of (re)integration and post-conflict urbanisation**

Much of the reintegration support at the time was focused on rural areas. A much stronger focus on urban support to address rapid, post-conflict urbanisation and town expansion, including support to solving land issues, urban and informal settlement management, was equally highlighted as a key neglected area in the last returns.<sup>34</sup>

### **(Re)integration support lacked overall strategic direction, coordination, and leadership from the aid agency and the government side**

The United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) Return, Reintegration and Recovery Section (RRR) was mandated to coordinate the overall return and reintegration activities but was often overwhelmed by the coordination of the returns operation alone. While there was a UN Return and Reintegration Policy developed in 2006 as well as a Framework Reintegration Strategy adopted in 2007, a shared conceptual understanding and framework for reintegration, which could have supported more strategic partnerships around reintegration, was absent.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, a weak point on both the government and the aid agency side was that there was no central coordinating body that could have supported cross-sectoral coordination for reintegration.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, what comes out strongly from existing literature on displacement in South Sudan is the cyclical nature of displacement and return and the importance of recognising mobility as a key coping strategy that has allowed people not only to escape from insecurity and violence but also build new trans-local and transnational support networks.<sup>37</sup> As such, returns in South Sudan can be more usefully seen as ‘in most cases one step in existing mobility patterns, rather than a meaningful step towards solutions’ and any interventions need to be mindful of this.<sup>38</sup>

Many of these lessons learnt and good practices continue to be highly relevant today and could present useful guidance for designing ongoing responses to returns, integration and durable solutions.

## **3. Key Findings on Current Returns and Reintegration**

### **3.1 Focus on return and transportation with limited conflict and context analysis**

#### **The current humanitarian response to those fleeing the Sudan conflict**

From the start of the response, there has been a huge focus on transportation and movement of people to return to their ‘home’ areas with very limited attempts at supporting early reintegration/early solutions initiatives. This is in many ways reminiscent of previous return movements in South Sudan since the CPA. While there are several solutions initiatives ongoing – and (re)integration programmes seem to have been conceptually subsumed under the ‘durable solutions’ language – these seem to not yet have been sufficiently connected to the current emergency response but are operating in parallel. Due to lack of funding, ongoing initiatives are still largely concerned with previous groups of IDPs displaced by the 2013 and 2016 violence, as well as large numbers of vulnerable host communities, and have been unable to expand to include the significant numbers of new arrivals from Sudan and elsewhere into ongoing programming.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Pantuliano, S. et al. (2008); Duffield, M. (2008).

<sup>36</sup> Duffield, M. (2008).

<sup>37</sup> Bakewell, O. (2008) ‘Research beyond the categories: the importance of policy irrelevant research into forced migration.’ *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21: 432–453; REF and Samuel Hall (2023) ‘South Sudan’s decades of displacement: Understanding return and questioning reintegration.’ London and Nairobi: EUTF; Kindersley, N. and CSRF (2019) ‘Returns and Peace in South Sudan: Challenges, opportunities and the way forward.’ CSRF.

<sup>38</sup> REF and Samuel Hall (2023).

The focus on returns was strongly informed by the governments' early stance to avoid the establishment of any new camps at the border with Sudan or within South Sudan – a directive that humanitarian agencies seem to have largely followed – as well as due to previous experiences with the Protection of Civilian Sites (PoCs) that turned out to be expensive to maintain and have in many cases become permanent settlements in their own right. Security concerns with large contingents of armed groups present around the porous border between Sudan and South Sudan also played a role in decision-making. Aid actors successfully resisted initial attempts by the government to enforce that people should only go to their original home areas; instead, people are only asked where they want to go for transportation purposes, not where their original 'home' area is, except to inform the movement monitoring systems. The scale of the crisis, the logistical and financial difficulties of having to move such large numbers of people away from the border quickly, were initially largely underestimated.

People are being moved through a combination of road, boat, and air transportation, depending on their chosen destination. Around 3,000 people a week have been moved out of Renk, but the pace of movements is reportedly slowing to try and stretch out funding, given continued significant funding shortfall for the operation.<sup>39</sup> Overall, at the time of writing, over 205,000 people have been moved onwards to their various destinations by humanitarian partners, with the majority heading to Unity State, Central Equatoria and Upper Nile.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, a significant number of people (66,934) have remained in Renk – both at the transit centre and others settled among the community. Many others are staying in various transit and informal sites in Malakal, waiting to be moved onwards or trying to settle within the town.

People are provided with transportation to the state capital of their chosen destination. They then receive the equivalent of 20 USD in cash for onward transportation to their final destination, which they have to organise by themselves. The World Food Programme (WFP) and partners provide some multi-purpose cash or in-kind food support at the point of departure only. Reportedly, there were initially deliberations by several agencies to provide assistance to returnees at the point of destination, rather than at the point of departure. However, these plans were discarded due to the logistical complexity and the limited ability to monitor people's movement. The amount of money people receive is based on market assessments and agreed upon by the cash working group. How long people receive assistance depends largely on funding and other logistical constraints – in 2023, the intention was to provide at least three months of cash assistance, which is unlikely this year due to funding cuts<sup>41</sup>. Many of the people interviewed in different locations reported assistance being sporadic and haphazard, with many of those interviewed in Renk and Malakal receiving 14,000 SSP only once (initially).

### **Change in vulnerability profile of people arriving from Sudan**

Several key informants noted a significant change in the make-up of the populations arriving from Sudan. While many of those who came in the first few months after the outbreak of the conflict in April 2023 still had some means and connections and were able, for instance, to afford transportation, interviewees noted that those arriving in recent months are much more vulnerable and destitute. Many children who are arriving reportedly have no history of vaccinations, suggesting that those arriving now were already marginalised in Sudan. Key informants highlighted that their assumption is that those arriving now lacked the means to move to safety early on and stayed on in Sudan until the increased insecurity and violence forced them to move.

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<sup>39</sup> Key informant interviews.

<sup>40</sup> IOM/UNHCR (2024) 'IOM/UNHCR Movement Dashboard.' Accessed 04/03/24.

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoizTMwNTJlNWYtYmVhYi00ZGI2LTgwYzAtN2UyNDZmZTRlNjBkliwidCI6IjE1ODgyNjkLTlZmItNDNiNC1iZDZlLWJlZTQ5YzhINjE4NiIsImMiOiIj9&pageName=ReportSection95859b8850a76994e6fb>

<sup>41</sup> Key informant interviews.

### **Limited analysis around the complexities and conflict dynamics around return**

Many of those interviewed highlighted the overarching attention, time and resources that a complex, large-scale and time-sensitive transport operation swallows up in a difficult operating environment that is South Sudan. This has, however, at times been at the expense of a deeper understanding of the complexity of the returns process, including a lack of analysis around the impact the initiated return movements may have on conflict dynamics in areas of return. There has also been limited analysis around those who do not want to move from Renk or cannot return to their original areas for a variety of reasons.

Those who prefer to move quickly or can be moved easily are not necessarily the rightful owners of the land in their destinations and may therefore complicate durable solutions pathways in the future. For example, they may exacerbate existing tensions by occupying land that is in fact someone else's. While aid actors cannot choose who they move to which destination and why, they can pay more attention to those who are not moving and try and initiate potential solutions pathways for their predicament. Renk, for example, continues to host 66,934 returnees who remain for a variety of reasons – around 32,469 who remain in the transit centre while another 34,465 have self-settled within the town, often according to ethnicity.<sup>42</sup> Interviews suggest people remain due a mixture of reasons – some have not yet been moved, others fear insecurity, yet others are waiting for family members to arrive from Sudan; some want to remain at the border to see if the security situation improves in Sudan. Some of these are reportedly Shilluk, who do not want to or cannot return to their home areas either within Malakal or their traditional homelands outside of Malakal town due to fear of insecurity as well as unresolved issues around land and property. Around 37,000 Shilluk also remain in the Malakal PoCs – the only remaining 'official' PoCs in South Sudan, and that is hosting only one ethnic group after Nuer residents left during a fight in 2023. Around 1,000 Shilluk also remain in Bulukat transit centre within Malakal town due to lack of trust in the security environment as well as ongoing HLP issues. Many of those interviewed mentioned the continued deployment of police forces that they felt were not ethnically represented, as their key security concern.

### **How to support people who have nowhere to go**

Others in Renk include refugees who do not want to be transported to Maban and prefer to stay in Renk, as well as other groups from Upper Nile, Jonglei and Unity State who cannot or do not want to go to their home areas due to insecurity and ongoing conflict, flooding, lack of services or a combination of these factors. Hence the key question becomes how to support people who have nowhere to go, without forming a camp or settlement at the border?

Support in Renk itself is intended to be for a few days only, and thereafter the plan is for onward movement. Most interviews in Renk depicted amicable relations between returnees and hosts in Renk. Some returnees have reportedly found work on some of the mechanised farms around Renk and are able to support themselves in that way. Others suggested that aid agencies had recently started to distribute more aid that also includes at least 30% for the hosts. However, as increasing numbers of returnees and refugees arrive in Renk and with continuous funding cuts to assistance, this precarious balance might shift and this could lead to conflicts over resources and assistance.

### **Limited transparency around conditions in return areas**

There are some concerns<sup>43</sup> around whether aid actors are being transparent enough to affected populations, such as returnees in Renk, about the often very difficult conditions in potential return areas. While people often have their own very efficient networks to access information in return areas,

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<sup>42</sup> IOM/UNHCR (2024) 'IOM/UNHCR Movement Dashboard.' Accessed 04/03/24.

<https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoizTMwNTJlNWYtYmVhYi00ZGI2LTgwYzAtN2UyNDZmZTRlbnBkIiwidCI6IjE1ODgyNjJkLTlzMitNDNiNC1iZDZlLWJjZTQ5YzhlnjE4NiIsImMiOiJh9&pageName=ReportSection95859b8850a76994e6fb>

<sup>43</sup> These concerns have reportedly also been discussed in cluster coordination groups.



in particular in areas where cross-border movement is common,<sup>44</sup> this cannot be assumed to be the case for all of those forcibly displaced from Sudan, who often left at short notice with very limited resources. Failure to provide adequate information based on which people can make informed decisions could lead to more secondary movements, as well as expose people to greater hardship through risky movements in search of better living conditions. Similar concerns were raised by key informants around greater transparency of what people can expect in the refugee camps in Uganda or Kenya, where a number of those interviewed are headed.

### **Women’s access to land as an impediment to return**

Gender dimensions are also key to consider when thinking about who may not be returning and why. For example, women often find it harder than men to access or reclaim land in South Sudan, in particular those who are widowed or married to someone outside their community. Customary practices often make it difficult for women to own and inherit land despite more progressive provisions in the interim constitution. At the same time, customary practices meant to support widows with gaining access to their late husbands’ land are breaking down in urban areas.<sup>45</sup> A female returnee interviewed in Wedweil explained the difficulties of accessing land within her community as she is married to a Sudanese: *‘I don’t have land because as a lady once you got married you are no longer your father/mother’s problem and my husband was born in Sudan and doesn’t have a land here.’*

### **Differences in return dynamics across different locations**

Much attention is being paid to the influx of people coming across the border with Sudan, whose movement would more accurately be described as ‘forced displacement’ rather than ‘returns.’ Yet, as key informants pointed out, ‘returns’ are also happening on the border with Ethiopia as well as on the border with Kenya and Uganda due to different underlying dynamics. These are receiving much less attention. While movement across the border is often part of pendular movements to visit relatives, assess the security situation or access services, respondents highlighted that current movements were more ‘pushed’ than voluntary in nature due to a deterioration in the security situation in the camps in Ethiopia – in particular Anyuak – Nuer conflicts, as well as a reduction in humanitarian assistance in the camps.<sup>46</sup>

In Magwi, we found that ongoing returns are part of a long history of back-and-forth movement across the border by individuals trying to weigh risks and opportunities, including establishing livelihoods on both sides of the border and splitting families across locations, often to access education. Many of those that we interviewed had done multiple (at times in the double digits) attempts at returning and settling in South Sudan and recounted how they were again displaced due to insecurity, in particular government and opposition factions fighting in the area as well as conflicts between displaced cattle keepers and farmers that had prevailed until 2022. The most recent returns were often precipitated by a reduction in food rations in the camps in Uganda as well as general reduction in the quality of living conditions there. Returnees often joined existing IDPs in places such as Magwi town. It was suggested in interviews that uncharacteristically, many widows were coming back from Uganda, while the men were still in the camps. This was reportedly due to the reduction in food rations in Uganda which makes life hard in the camps for those with limited family support networks.

## **3.2 Integration support as a missed opportunity**

While there is much focus on transport, very limited support is provided from the beginning and concurrent to transport assistance to assist people with (re)integration – largely due to significant funding gaps. This is a key missed opportunity to provide early solutions support that could help bridge

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, REF and Samuel Hall (2023).

<sup>45</sup> Deng, D. (2021) ‘Land, Conflict and Displacement in South Sudan.’ CSRF.

<sup>46</sup> See also REACH (2024) ‘Emergency Situation Overview: Gambella – South Sudan Cross-Border Displacement.’

the gap between the emergency response and longer-term integration/solutions programming, as well as help avoid a relapse into the humanitarian caseload.<sup>47</sup>

### **Early solutions/integration support is key to avoid relapse into the humanitarian caseload**

The current response is divided into three phases: the first is the emergency response, which covers the multi-agency response and includes the returns operation, including transit centres and reception centres. The second phase, in principle, focuses on humanitarian needs of those who are at least as vulnerable, if not more than their host communities, in their locations of return. The third phase focuses on reintegration/recovery. In practice, as many of those interviewed highlighted, the response is stuck in phase one and it is unclear how and when the phased approach would be implemented. Ongoing durable solutions initiatives are often operating in parallel, under a different coordination architecture. Similarly, while humanitarian actors should rightly focus on the emergency response, solutions-oriented thinking and good practice highlight the crucial need to support displaced populations' resilience and include early solutions thinking early on through collaboration of humanitarian, development, and peace actors. The 2024 HNRP explicitly states that it aligns with ongoing durable solutions initiatives such as the Flagship Initiative and other initiatives and envisages collaborative efforts towards community resilience.

While, in principle, once at their destination, the most vulnerable should be picked up by HNRP partners and development actors in the area alongside vulnerable IDPs and hosts<sup>48</sup> after for example registering with the RRC in their location - in practice this is unlikely to happen unless there are large numbers of people returning to an area, or the food security situation deteriorates significantly to warrant emergency assessments. As key informants noted, while dashboards and ongoing flow monitoring is giving some indications of where people have moved to, data is more or less accurate at county level, but much less so at *payam* or even *boma* level. There are reportedly also high levels of secondary movements which mean that humanitarian partners simply don't know where the most vulnerable displaced people are or will end up. At the same time, significant funding cuts mean agency presence is extremely reduced, and priorities are shifting to the most food insecure areas in line with the 2024 HNRP cluster activity prioritisation: WFP for example has cut the county presence this year from 70 counties to only the 38 counties that have been assessed to be at Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 4 (Emergency) or Phase 5 (Catastrophe). There are also significant challenges across the coordination architecture, and gaps in understanding who is operating where and at what scale. Hence in practice, returnees may receive some support at the point of departure and then nothing for a long time. The gap between the emergency response and the start of reintegration/durable solutions initiatives is too long and will likely result in those already vulnerable deteriorating further, and those 'most in need' – including host communities' becoming future humanitarian caseloads. There is also an implicit assumption that if we do not see people again they have 'reintegrated' on their own - which misses key opportunities to support whole communities to absorb newcomers and as a result emerge as more resilient, and underestimates the significant strain the arrival of a large number of people is putting on even communities that are not in the most food insecure areas.

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<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the ReDSS solutions framework. <https://regionaldss.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ReDSS-Framework-One-Page-Narrative.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> The 2024 HNRP has conducted rigorous prioritisation exercises to support the most affected geographic locations, based on severity rankings. Within those locations, those most in need will be prioritised by clusters – these include activities for IDPs in camps and camp-like settings requiring sustained assistance and protection for survival, returnees who arrived since January 2023 with high vulnerabilities, and highly vulnerable resident populations recorded under the lowest World Bank poverty band and surviving below \$1.98 a day.

### **Referrals for mental health and trauma of key importance**

Another key issue is how people will be followed up for referrals, including for mental health and the significant trauma that many of those fleeing Sudan have experienced. As also documented by others<sup>49</sup> many of those displaced from Sudan interviewed have witnessed traumatic events, including the deaths of family members and children as well as significant sexual and gender-based violence, including rape by military actors at various checkpoints on the way to the border. Many also have physical trauma and severe injuries such as gunshot wounds and other injuries that need appropriate follow up and treatment.<sup>50</sup> Others are traumatised by physical assaults and looting and have lost everything in the process of trying to reach the border with South Sudan. There are also very high numbers of separated families with women and children travelling alone, with children having experienced significant traumatic events. As these young refugees explained in Malakal: *'Most of us came from Khartoum to Medani. On the way we are asked to provide our documents like passports or nationalities, and when one fails to provide these documents, you get beaten by the soldiers...We all have trauma, we spent days without eating, but the children and the women who have no husbands and relatives are exposed to starvation. So, women and children are more vulnerable.'*

In some cases, women who have lost several children on the way to the border are reportedly fearing blame and stigma by their husbands' family for the loss of the children, potentially making integration in their communities difficult.<sup>51</sup> While a number of partners are offering mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) support at the different border sites, many of these conditions require longer-term follow up and care, including long-term psychological support. While at border points individuals may receive some ad hoc counselling, follow up will be crucial but in practice difficult to ensure given the lack of follow up on where people travel to and eventually end up.

### **'Hosts' are left responsible for (re)integration**

In practice, once people are moved to the destination of their choice – people are left to their own devices, and the burden of integration falls on the hosts. As this female aid worker and host community member from Malakal explained: *'The [International Organisation for Migration] IOM is much focusing on transporting these returnees to their respective areas. So, the issue of integration is the hosts dealing with it. And no support is shown to us yet who are accommodating the relatives living in our homes hoping to settle.'* This means that those who have no relatives or connections are at high risk of vulnerability. But also given the current extremely dire economic situation in South Sudan, hosts have very limited assets and there is a high risk that returnees relying solely on hosts will sooner or later deplete their assets, pushing the entire community into an emergency situation.

While interviews show that in most cases, in all locations 'hosts' are still emphasising that they are welcoming the new arrivals and happy to assist those returning given the hardship they went through, it is clear from interviews that host communities are being put under extensive strain. In several locations people highlighted the challenges they are facing while assisting those returning, and the significant impact this has had with whole communities running out of food. In Aweil East, for example, in Wale Awad, a key informant reported that the community had run out of food and had been seen approaching the government and humanitarian actors as the burden was too much. This comment by a young female host in Gok Machar is typical of the comments received in different locations: *'we have more than 1,000 returnees and refugees from all over Sudan (...) for the hosts we are really affected because you can find one household having 30 or more members and have no food at all for all these people and shelter. NGOs are trying to donate food to the community, but it is not for all.'*

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<sup>49</sup> ReDSS (2024) 'Developing Early Solutions Approaches for those displaced by the Sudan Crisis in South Sudan' (forthcoming).

<sup>50</sup> Key informant interviews.

<sup>51</sup> Key informant interviews with protection actors.

### **Communities' extremely precarious food security situation likely to lead to future conflicts**

In a context where assistance is shared between hosts and returnees many people do not understand why only some people receive assistance and others, often equally vulnerable do not. Similarly, for those 'returnees' who still have kinship networks – though not all have these – assistance provided only to one group over another risks undermining these and other support networks.

There are already a few indications that returnees are being blamed for the difficult food security situation and the increasing strain of services, though this was so far not the majority of cases: for example, as an elderly female refugee who settles with her sister in Mangateen, said: *'sometimes we are called "Khartoumers". My intention is to relocate to Kakuma in Kenya, but I lack transport money because heard that there is free education. People are complaining that we are the reason for rising prices in the market. Moreover, interaction with locals is limited due to language barriers. Here, no physical fight but it happened in Malakal where locals complained that we (Khartoumers) were spoiling infrastructure and led to a fight until police intervened.'*

### **Land conflicts as a significant impediment to (re)integration**

Land conflicts are evident at multiple levels and, if unaddressed, will continue to become a significant impediment to (re)integration. Land conflicts currently manifest at multiple levels - at the individual level, there are conflicts around returning individuals and issues of restitution, land grabbing and illegal occupations, and problems with double or triple allocation of land titles that make it difficult for people to settle once they return. There are also conflicts over land and resources, including taxation and other revenues between different states as well as counties, *payams* and *bomas*; In some instances, conflicts over land have escalated communal violence that has caused human displacement as well as losses of lives and properties. For example, the conflicts involving communities in Warrap with neighbouring communities in Abyei Administrative Area, Lakes State and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal State have resulted in deaths and injuries, destruction of properties and displacement of people. In Mathiar boma of Manyang county, which is claimed by different Dinka communities of Warrap and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal in a conflict that is fuelled by politicians on both sides, over 100 people have died since November 2023, according to key informants. When the army is sent to intervene, they split along ethnic lines and start fighting each other. Needless to say, returnees from Sudan and other areas originally from those areas are unable to settle in these conflict-affected locations. Lastly, there are many unresolved land issues between South Sudan and its neighbours – including Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and DRC, periodically also leading to violent incidents such as in Kajokeji in 2014.<sup>52</sup>

### **People's own (re)integration priorities**

Across locations, people's own priorities for reintegration support were clearly articulated: Immediate food assistance and livelihood and non-food items support to enable them to settle somewhere (small business support, tools for farming, fishing nets, etc.) together with access to land and shelter were often mentioned as key first priorities. It was striking how much food insecurity was reported across the different locations visited – with this clearly being the key issue affecting both returnees, hosts and IDPs in the various locations. Security and deployment of integrated and trained security forces, rather than those from one tribe only were equally mentioned across locations. Many said they had some access to water and healthcare – albeit facilities were often inadequate, dirty or overcrowded. Education was most often mentioned as absent, with children, for example, in Malakal roaming the streets. This was due to a mixture of education being too expensive to afford and schools being inaccessible or overcrowded. Yet education was also mentioned as a key determinant of movement – with many highlighting that they would move to access education for children – even if this meant going to the refugee camps in Uganda or Kenya to access free education.

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<sup>52</sup> CSRF County Profile: Kajokeji county. [https://www.csrfsouthsudan.org/county\\_profile/kajo-keji/](https://www.csrfsouthsudan.org/county_profile/kajo-keji/)

### 3.3 Categorisations of people for the purposes of the response do not correspond to reality

Despite the fact that humanitarian actors highlight that the current response is needs-based, the response, including the type and form of assistance that people receive, continues to be shaped by certain assumptions around the characteristics of people who are coming to South Sudan. South Sudan citizens crossing from Sudan into South Sudan are not categorised as ‘refugees’ or ‘displaced persons’, but as ‘returnees’ and are told they will receive transport assistance to return ‘home’ or to a location of their choice. At the same time, agencies such as UNHCR, IOM and UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) have different definitions of what a ‘returnee’ is.<sup>53</sup> However, many left South Sudan when they were young and lived their whole lives in Khartoum, at times marrying Sudanese citizens. Some may no longer have connections to the kinship and the HLP system in South Sudan. Many led an urbanised lifestyle, integrating into Khartoum’s outskirts in one of the sprawling informal settlements, and are no longer used to village life or farming. As a result, when they ‘return’ to South Sudan, they often face uncertainty and hardship in an area they are unfamiliar with and with very limited integration support beyond an initial cash payment that is meant to last anywhere between one to three months. Others are used to different levels of development and want to move on to Juba, joining other IDP returnees or move to other countries.

#### **Support to a forced displacement situation as if it was partly a ‘returns’ movement**

Officially, ‘returns’ to South Sudan from a third country are not yet supported by the international community, as conditions in return locations are still deemed unfavourable for returns. At the same time, organisations and the government are currently responding to an emergency influx of people as if it was partly a ‘return’ movement, yet many of the building blocks that a successful return and (re)integration approach would need are not yet in place. As a result, people are partially supported, based on certain assumptions about ongoing connections to kinship networks and HLP in their ‘home’ areas. However, this focus on ‘returns’ without the corresponding reintegration and early solutions support risks not only increasing individual vulnerabilities but also drawing entire hosting communities into crisis conditions.

#### **Refugees are supposed to go to camps**

Refugees on the other hand – those with Sudanese nationality - are told to go to one of the available refugee camps - mainly Maban in Upper Nile State, which already pre-existed the current crisis, as well as Wedweil in Northern-Bahr -el-Ghazal and Gorom in Juba - to receive support there. While UNHCR and the government are not forcing refugees to move to the camps, neither are they facilitating their movement to places where they would like to go. In a number of instances, we found cases where families were split and the husband was told to go to the camps while the wife was told to go to the village with the kids. These cases have also been documented by others.<sup>54</sup> While certainly not the majority, these cases fall through the cracks of humanitarian assistance. In practice, aid agencies are struggling to make movements happen to Maban, as people are voting with their feet and prefer to remain in Renk or Malakal, or move onto Juba rather than join Maban camp. This is partly due to difficult living conditions in the camp and the absence of services, as well as due to the

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<sup>53</sup> IOM defines a returnee as, “Someone who was displaced from their habitual residence either within South Sudan or abroad, who has since returned to their habitual residence”. However, IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) restricts the category of returnee to individuals who returned to the exact location of their habitual residence, or an adjacent area-based on a free decision. In contrast, UNHCR defines returnees as “former refugees who have returned to their country of origin spontaneously or in an organized fashion but have not yet been fully (re)integrated”. Therefore, UNHCR would also count as returnees, persons who returned from abroad and find themselves in a situation of continued displacement (IOM would consider someone in this situation to still be an IDP) or who have chosen a new habitual residence (IOM would consider someone in this situation to be relocated).

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Francis, O. and Deng, J. (2023) ‘A South Sudanese returnee’s story, from Khartoum to their childhood home.’ *The New Humanitarian*, 9 August 2023.

ethnic and political make-up of Maban. Others have relatives and family members who are in Juba or elsewhere and would like to join them. We found many Sudanese refugees clustered at a mosque in Malakal, who do not want to go to Maban but equally do not have the means for onward transportation.

Lastly, we found that often ‘hosts’ or those most recently termed as the ‘resident population’ in the 2024 HNRP have often not resided much longer in the location than the ‘returnees’ or ‘refugees.’ Many have a long history of displacement within South Sudan and their most recent ‘return’ is only one movement in a history of movements.

For the 2024 HRP, there was an agreement to ‘re-categorise’ some groups as part of a prioritisation exercise in a context of diminishing funding: someone can only be categorised as a ‘returnee’ if he/she came after January 2023 in an attempt to reduce overall numbers of People in Need (PIN) in the context of extremely limited resources. However, these categorisations, even if necessary for the purposes of funding appeals, miss the point that groups are experiencing similar vulnerabilities and supporting each of them individually rather than focusing on community-based responses in the places they reside is likely counter-productive to communities’ support networks that have already been severely undermined by years of war, displacement and humanitarian assistance. Agency’s categorisation is often at odds with how communities categorise people. As this host in Gok Machar said: *‘I personally categorise them as my brothers and sisters who come back to their homeland, but international agencies have their own language of calling them. I think solutions that are needed is to balance them because they all need support with land, food, NFIs and so on just to sustain their lives.’*

### **Different treatment for different ‘categories’ of people is creating jealousy and potential for conflict**

In Wedweil, for example, host community members have perceived refugees to have unfair advantages over returnees and hosts. In contrast in Malakal, refugees perceive returnees to receive better assistance, in particular onward transportation to a location of their choice: As a middle-aged male refugee in Malakal said: *‘The agencies consider me as a refugee. I don’t feel good about being considered a refugee. Assistance is not the same – throughout the journey from Renk to Malakal both returnees and Sudanese are given biscuits and 14,000 SSP but since their arrival, returnees have been receiving better assistance.’* A female refugee from South Darfur said: *‘We are treated differently compared to returnees - the returnees are getting better assistance, they are given a better place to stay and they get transported to other places.’*

According to interviews, many agencies continue to adopt ‘status-based selection’ based on the particular displacement status of individuals, e.g., returnee, refugee even if at times they do include the ‘host’ community (e.g., in Renk with around 30% to hosts after selecting only returnees led to conflict), rather than focus on community- and area-based responses. This is partly due to constraints related to donor funding and reporting, where often a certain ‘number’ of a particular ‘category’ are stipulated. The cyclical nature of displacement and return in South Sudan that has been well-documented by others<sup>55</sup> means that people have similar experiences of displacement, mobility and return and are experiencing similar levels of vulnerability; assigned categories do not represent people’s lived experiences and risk creating community divisions and conflicts rather than enhance social cohesion in an already resource-scarce environment.

In places such as Akobo, there are overlaying ‘categories’ of people – recent returnees and refugees from Sudan, recent returnees from Ethiopia and recently returned IDPs who are all staying within the town and competing over existing resources. Unsurprisingly, this is rapidly leading to depleted food stores and hunger. Exacerbating this situation is the inability of people to move outside of the town to cultivate or collect firewood – largely due to continued insecurity due to Nuer/Murle conflicts in

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<sup>55</sup> See REF and Samuella Hall (2023), for example.

the outskirts as well as ongoing cattle raiding and criminality. In this context, the introduction of assistance for only one category of people over another can quickly lead to feelings of unmet needs or insecurity. This carries significant potential to generate perceptions of unfairness and grievances towards both the aid sector and prioritised groups, which can drive conflict in the future. There was also some indication in interviews that competition had already started with recently returned IDPs complaining of a shift of attention towards returnees from Sudan and recent arrivals from Ethiopia, complaining they are not getting enough support.

In Magwi, we also found returnees, IDPs and hosts with similar experiences of mobility, displacement and trauma staying together within the town, due to continued fear of insecurity in their original *payams* outside of the town. This case study epitomises this well:

A man returned from Uganda with his family due to the drastic reduction in food assistance within the camps there. They initially came with the kids, but then sent them back to Uganda as it was too hard to support them and their education, whereas in Uganda they had continued access to education in the camps. On the way from Uganda, his wife was abducted by unknown gunmen. This experience makes him not sleep at night. She has now joined the kids back in Uganda. This is his eighth attempt at coming back and settling in South Sudan. Previous attempts always ended with having to go back across the border due to insecurity. He had a land title for his land, which is surveyed land within the town, and when he returned, he found the land is settled. He now lives with his new wife, an IDP from Agoro, one of the surrounding *payams* of Magwi town. She was displaced to the town by the conflict with internally displaced cattle keepers that took place in 2022. Cattle keepers' cows trampled on farmland in the area and when they got chased away by the farmers they came back and took revenge on some of the villages. They burned houses in the *boma* and her husband was killed in the process. She is still traumatised by the experience. When she came to town, she met her new husband (the man returned from Uganda) and they are now staying together, but life is hard, and she is not feeling well. The man was injured in an accident and many of his carpentry tools were stolen. He now is in poor health and cannot work.

### 3.4 People are going to towns and joining existing displacement sites

Aid actors have noted key changes in the dynamics of movement, compared to the first few months of the operation. As several key informants mentioned, during the early movements most people stated that they wanted to go to their original areas – mostly in Upper Nile, Unity State and Bahr-el-Ghazal. However, by end of July 2023, there was reportedly a marked change in trends where people regardless of ethnic origin and original destination said that they intended to go to Juba. Since then, numbers for people going to Juba and Wau have increased significantly.<sup>56</sup> Respondents attributed this early change to feedback that was coming back from those who had gone to their villages, reporting on the lack of services and perspectives in those areas, prompting others to go to towns. Others interviewed stated that they were making their way to refugee camps in Uganda and Kenya due to a perception of better services, and in particular access to free education. The reasons to move to town are multifold and due to a mix of land issues, conflict, and insecurity in home areas, as well as a perception of increased opportunities in towns. As these youth returnees said: *'We need development to take place. We want to see schools and hospitals but for this place to be the way we want it; it will take a long time. We cannot wait for it.'*

Interviews with different populations as well as key informants also reveal significant secondary movements to towns, though exact numbers are hard to come by as they are only captured in a limited way by ongoing tracking mechanisms.

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<sup>56</sup> IOM/UNHCR Movement Dashboard.

### **Overcrowded and insecure conditions in displacement sites, including former PoC camps**

In urban areas, we heard across the different research sites that people are either joining relatives in existing informal urban settlements or slums (except for a small minority that have the financial means to rent or set up their own places in town) or are joining relatives in IDP camps. Ex-PoC camps in Juba, Wau, Bentiu, and (the only existing PoCs) in Malakal are reportedly filling up with people again, while the government and aid actors are engaged in various strategies aimed at ‘emptying’ the PoC camps of the IDPs from previous conflicts that still remain.<sup>57</sup> Due to government policies hoping to ‘transition’ the ex-PoC camps, there is currently very limited humanitarian support in these sites, despite the obvious humanitarian need and the often squalid conditions inside. As an elderly male returnee in Juba’s PoCs 3 explained:

*‘I came to South Sudan from Al gaya camp in August 2023. I visited the border four times to see whether some assistance was there to move us to Juba. The UN and some NGOs brought us to Renk, where we were put in buildings belonging to Upper Nile University. We were moved on a boat to Malakal after spending two weeks there, in September 2023. We spent ten days in Malakal, waiting for flight. Our relatives received us at the airport and took us to PoCs 3. After three weeks, we received a call from UNHCR to bring the cards we were given in Renk. We presented in October 2023. We were given some food items and NFIs, including a big tent in November. We never heard again from UNHCR. It is now three months’. Now, we live in PoCs 3 but want to move if we get land. I will go to my original place if a [durable] solution to flooding is found. I do not feel good being called a returnee because it does not show my full identity. Moreover, it has implications for assistance as one gets less assistance compared to refugees and IDPs. Living in PoCs 3 is not sustainable and also there are thieves and communal conflicts.’*

Many of these sprawling sites have overcrowded conditions with limited services, high food insecurity and criminality, including the presence of youth gangs. Some of those interviewed in PoCs 3 explained how the hardship they experienced meant they were now looking to move further to neighbouring refugee camps in Uganda or Kenya in search of better services and living conditions. Others are remaining in the former PoC camps or squatting on land in informal settlements around the sites, in the hope of later gaining access to land titles should the PoC camps be integrated into the formal town structure in the future. However, this may not happen because of the serious land disputes in the urban spaces. Instead, squatting in informal settlements could turn out to be a recipe for future conflicts over the land.

### **Land disputes in urban areas and land grabbing by powerful actors**

Juba city and neighbouring areas face serious land disputes, some of them linked to actions of cattle herders from other states and government soldiers. The displacement of cattle keepers from Jonglei State by worsening flooding has resulted in significant violence in areas around Juba and other locations in the Equatoria region.<sup>58</sup> During a recent radio talk show, the Governor of Central Equatoria State argued that land grabbing in the state, especially in Juba County, was one of the biggest challenges facing his administration.<sup>59</sup> According to some local officials, soldiers and other powerful people are behind some the land grabbing cases. For example, on 28 February 2024, the Juba County Commissioner called for the arrest of members of the army who fought with community members of a neighbourhood of Juba City over land.<sup>60</sup> He claimed that the ‘land grabbers attacked the people at night, where they burnt down two houses.’ Without doubt, such violence affects the capacity of host communities to absorb newcomers in their communities and the willingness of returnees to settle in

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<sup>57</sup> Exact numbers of people joining the camps are difficult to come by; the 2024 HNRP assumes that at least 20% of new ‘returnees’ from Sudan in 2024 may join existing IDP sites throughout the country.

<sup>58</sup> Moro, L.N. (2022) ‘Flood Assessment in South Sudan.’ Juba: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.

<sup>59</sup> James, J. (2024) ‘Adil, Wani discuss how to address Juba land disputes.’ *City Review Daily* 879, 20 February 2024.

<sup>60</sup> James, J. (2024) ‘Wani decries persisting land grabbing in Juba.’ *City Review Daily* 888, 1 March 2024.



certain locations. This also makes it hard for the government and local communities to allocate land to returnees and IDPs, which is reported by many respondents as a durable solution.

Malakal in Upper Nile is a hotbed of conflicts involving members of Shilluk (Chollo), Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups who claim the same land. Yet, the Shilluk have not yet come back to their places but are still residing in the PoCs due concerns to over security. At the same time, the state government has started allocating land to individual returnees coming to Malakal and has settled a group of Nuer who came out of the PoCs during a fight in 2023 in Bulukat, adjacent to the transit centre, on what is purportedly government land. Government actors are saying they will honour individual land titles and pre-existing ownership, but many houses have been completely destroyed due to fighting and other plots are occupied by third parties in the absence of their original owners. Nearly all people interviewed in Upper Nile mentioned disputes over land in Malakal as a major challenge which aid organisations needed to be aware of during planning and carrying out interventions. Well-intentioned intervention assisting returnees require careful considerations of their implications for peace and security.

### **Disillusioned youth and gang criminality, including in displacement sites**

Interviewees repeatedly highlighted the criminal activities perpetrated by gangs of alienated young people in urban spaces. This is happening at a time of worsening food insecurity in the country, compounded by reductions in assistance even for vulnerable people due to limited funding. For example, WFP has had to reduce food rations for the 12,000 refugees in Wedwiel Refugee Settlement in Aweil West County to 50%, down from 70 % rations.<sup>61</sup> According to the WFP office in Aweil, available funds 'would last for only seven months, and if nothing is done by donors, worse is yet to come.'<sup>62</sup> Gorom Refugee Settlement, located about 26 kilometres from Juba City along the Juba-Yei road, is also experiencing acute food shortages because of a significant reduction in assistance.

There is the risk of young people returning from Sudan and other countries getting sucked into these criminal networks in the urban spaces, and hence compounding the security challenge, which the government has been grappling with. The police have been cracking down on youth criminal activities in neighbourhoods in Juba, but the problem appears to be persistent in the former PoCs and other places like Malakal where the security organs face capacity challenges. While gangs are certainly not new to South Sudan but are a common phenomenon in urban centres<sup>63</sup> key informants highlighted how the recent influx of often traumatised and disillusioned youth from Sudan had met with already present structures of disillusioned youth in overcrowded and insecure urban places, including the ex-PoC camps. This has reportedly created an explosive situation, such as in the PoCs 3 in Juba where robberies, violent attacks and killings are a common occurrence, according to respondents often perpetuated by gang boys, including returnees. The situation is compounded by a lack of assistance for newcomers, who share the limited food of the longer-term residents in the camp. Most people are afraid to move at night and only feel safe to move during the day. There is reportedly no police force within the site - the nearest police is at a checkpoint located about 3 kilometres away, and will only come sometimes when they are called by the community to intervene. Instead, most interviewees reported going to the different community watch groups to report cases of criminality.

Overall, this reveals a broader trend of urbanisation that is common to post-conflict countries but often aggravated by successive waves of displacement and return. Yet, as was the case in previous experiences of returns after the CPA, there are very few discussions around urbanisation and urban solutions ongoing, both within humanitarian as well as durable solutions circles. Much of the focus of the returns operation remains on rural areas, with limited thinking around longer-term urban

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<sup>61</sup> Achiek, A. (2024) 'WFP cuts food rations to Sudanese refugees amid funding gap.' *The Dawn*, 9(014), 1 March 2024.

<sup>62</sup> Madouk, W. (2024) 'At least 500 Abyei IDPs receive food assistance.' *No. 1 Citizen*, 4(1117), 1 March 2024.

<sup>63</sup> See Martin, E. and Mosel, I. (2011).

solutions, including a focus on increasingly sprawling informal settlements and slums. Similarly, there is limited attention paid to supporting urban–rural linkages and how to support existing networks of mobility that people employ after decades of displacement.

### 3.5 Elections and Movements

Some research respondents expressed concerns about politicians manipulating movements of returnees in order to create ready constituents in the December 2024 elections,<sup>64</sup> which the President and his allies insist will happen despite serious doubts expressed by some opposition leaders and other people. For example, the First Vice President, Dr Riek Machar, stated his party, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO), is ready but reiterated that necessary prerequisites for holding elections, including completing security arrangements and repatriating of refugees and IDPs to their places of origin, had not met.<sup>65</sup>

Notwithstanding these reservations, the R-TGoNU is required by the R-ARCSS to facilitate the return of refugees voluntarily and with dignity. This is not happening yet, but some people believe that the government will resettle people. For instance, an elderly Nuer leader in the PoCs in Malakal stated that, ‘the government needs the people to participate in the coming elections which means that it will do its best to settle these people before elections.’

The problem is that some of the places chosen for the relocation of returnees face some significant challenges. For example, the government of Unity State has been promoting the settlement of returnees in northern parts of the state, especially Rotriak, which are drier compared to locations in the flood-affected south. However, this location has significant conflict potentials linked to oil exploitation, the movement of Misseriya cattle keepers from Sudan, the proximity to the border with Sudan where various armed groups cross freely, as well as the proximity to military barracks from both government and opposition forces.<sup>66</sup> Reflecting the insecurity in the Rubkona County, of which Rotriak is a part, a convey in which Governor Joseph Manyuil was travelling came under attack on Monday, 29 January 2024 reportedly by SPLM-IO forces, who claimed that their base in the area was attacked first by the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF).<sup>67</sup>

### 3.6 Durable Solutions on Paper

The durable solutions architecture in South Sudan is still being developed. The Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management (MHADM) and the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) developed the Framework for Return, Reintegration and Relocation of Displaced Persons in February 2017, and the Action Plan on Return, Reintegration and Recovery 2020-2022. With the support of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and UNHCR, the MHADM and Commission for Refugee Affairs (CRA) produced the South Sudan Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action under the Solutions Initiative for Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Host Communities in 2021, which was passed by the Council of Ministers in late-2023. Presently, the RRC, UNHCR, IOM, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Danish Refugee Council and a few other partners are working on a plan to operationalise the Strategy and Action plan and harmonise it with the Framework for Returns and Reintegration. All these documents recognise the right of movement, especially for returnees to settle in their places of choice.

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<sup>64</sup> Similar developments happened ahead of the census. See, for example, Santschi, M. (2008) ‘Briefing: Counting ‘New Sudan.’ *African Affairs*, 107(429): 631-640.

<sup>65</sup> Takpiny, B. (2024) ‘FVP Machar reiterates his readiness for elections.’ *The Dawn*, 8(290), 25 January 2024.

<sup>66</sup> See Non-Violent-Peaceforce (2023) ‘Crisis upon Crisis: Conflict & Climate Induced Challenges in Rotriak, South Sudan.’

<sup>67</sup> Madouk, W. (2024) ‘Casualties: Three killed, five wounded in Monday clash.’ *No 1 Citizen*, 4(1091), 31 January 2024.

Aid workers have succinctly pointed out that the ongoing policy work is completely disconnected from the emergency response, especially selecting the arrival of refugees and returnees from the Sudan crisis. The emergency operations happening at the state and local levels are not guided by policy actions being undertaken at the national level. For example, while in Wau, people are moved from current IDPs sites to permanent locations (only involving previous caseload), the former PoCs and also some other IDP sites are filling up again with returnees coming from Sudan, for whom solutions are not yet considered. South Sudan is one of the four countries globally piloting the Emergency Relief Coordinator's (ERC) Flagship Initiative. The Flagship Initiative is being piloted in Upper Nile, Unity, and Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal States since the beginning of 2023 and has established Area-Based Leadership (ABL) coordinators in some states (namely Upper Nile, Unity State and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal) to enhance area-based coordination and planning as well as to decentralise community engagement. ABL coordinators chair the humanitarian, development and peace (HDP) nexus working group in the state and, while formally reporting to the Resident Coordinator, they have some independence to act.

ABL coordinators have taken different approaches to durable solutions planning in different states, depending on local circumstances: for example, in Upper Nile the ABL recently finalised a durable solution roadmap for the state that links to the state development plan in consultation with the state government and other aid and development actors; the roadmap focuses on five key areas for durable solutions over a three-year period, and is costed at USD 94 million. In Unity State, the launch of the state development plan was delayed, therefore here the ABL is working on a humanitarian, development and peace collective strategy, which sets out key priorities for durable solutions in the state. However, connections are unclear both in terms of implementation and content to strategies and plans being drawn up by MHADM and RRC in Juba, which do not work in a collaborative manner all the time, with support of aid organisations that have their own coordination weaknesses. For example, ABLs are not yet concretely linked to state-level task forces as set out in the national policy, which should in theory be the spaces where line ministries and aid agencies come together to discuss and agree on durable solutions initiatives for the state.

Other agencies have also initiated their own durable solutions initiatives: for example, UNHCR has initiated the Pockets of Hope (PoH) initiative, which is a solutions-oriented, area-based strategy selecting high return areas and refugee areas through investments in medium to long-term interventions to build resilience and government ownership.<sup>68</sup> Some interventions around durable solutions and resilience are done by individual or a group of NGOs with bilateral donor funding, though these do not necessarily always feed into solutions strategies that have been articulated for particular areas.

Overall, a majority of key informants pointed out that there was no real structured space on durable solutions and reintegration at the national level, where actors could come together and discuss key options and ways forward. The national taskforce for durable solutions has not met for over a year now and the state-level task forces are not all active or have been taken over by planning for the emergency response on returns or focused on ad-hoc returns of IDPs within South Sudan. It is also not clear how operational NGOs would link to the state-level task forces for area-based planning. The UN's Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience (PfPRR) was widely praised by key informants as having enabled different organisations to come together and discuss solutions – even though it was not intended to be a coordination space for durable solutions.

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<sup>68</sup> UNHCR (2022) 'Explainer: The Pockets of Hope Initiative: Realizing Solutions in South Sudan.'  
<https://www.unhcr.org/media/explainer-pockets-hope-initiative-realizing-solutions-south-sudan>

### 3.7 Examples of Current Practices

This section presents some examples of integrated programming that includes humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors and discusses some key considerations around potential for success.

#### **Durable solutions initiative for IDPs in Hai Masna and Naivasha camps (ongoing)**

In Wau, the state government, IOM and a number of development and humanitarian partners have launched the Western-Bahr-el-Ghazal Roadmap to Displacement Solutions Project that aims to increase access to durable solutions for IDPs in the state, with USD 5 million support from the Norwegian government. The initiative aims at finding durable solutions for those IDPs remaining in Hai Masna and Naivasha camps (around 9000 people). Given there were very few services left in the camp, those who remain likely have no alternatives to relocate or are highly vulnerable. In this case, the State Governor took the initiative and approached IOM to find solutions. Government land is being allocated and no objection letters were sought from other communities. Individuals will be allocated a land title and the land is surveyed and registered. The initiative also includes the provision of services such as water to ‘hosts’ in the vicinity of the settlement. OCHA’s Flagship initiative helped to understand the priorities of these IDPs in terms of possible support required to reintegrate and partners came together to build shelters and offer support in different areas. There was a lot of time invested in engagement with the RRC and the Ministry of Land, Housing and Infrastructure at the state level as well as with various other partners. This is an interesting example where there was government initiative and willingness, and partners from different background came together around a longer-term process of community engagement to find durable solutions for vulnerable IDPs. Key informants highlighted that the process was slow and it takes a lot of time to do ‘proper’ community engagement and conflict sensitivity assessments, which is an important lesson learned. In this case, there was also a willing State Governor who actively supported solutions-oriented planning, and functioning State Ministries to work with, which made the process easier. Key questions remain whether there are any caveats to conflict sensitivity in this case and whether this is a process that is replicable/scalable also to other locations and other types of displaced people. For example, in this case the IDPs were all from within their ‘original’ state – even if they are not re-integrating within their original location they are not ‘foreigners’, so this affects whether a similar process would be possible with people who are not from the same area. Similarly, the political environment was supportive and, for example, land records in the state were available and functional. This may not be the case in other more complicated settings, such as Malakal where land titles are reportedly with the government of Sudan.

#### **Flexible Dutch fund for strengthening the HDP nexus work in Unity State**

The Netherlands government has made available a fund of around USD 1.2 million, which seeks to strengthen nexus work around humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors in Unity State. This was seen by key informants as a creative way to encourage more collaboration and engagement in the solutions space and has the potential to allow actors to do and try out different things that might otherwise not be tried. Key informants highlighted this as a good practice example of a flexible fund that can be allocated creatively and can encourage more collaboration with some money behind it. IOM is the fund manager and the ABL convenes the nexus working group which can decide on activities that all agencies can benefit from and that are in support of the collective strategy, such as things that cannot be funded through regular programming, such as conflict sensitivity analysis or other ‘soft’ programming components that often do not attract funds. The fund could also feed into activities that all actors are doing or, for example, support coordination structures and encourage greater ways of collaboration around the triple nexus, including around community engagement.

### **South Sudan RSRTF (ongoing)**

The South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization and Resilience Trust Fund (South Sudan RSRTF)<sup>69</sup> supports a whole-of-system approach to implement reconciliation, stabilization, and resilience components which, when connected, aim to build peace and stability. The idea is to promote a reduction in violence through integrated programming across the HDP nexus. The fund aims to reduce violence and conflict in hotspots and marginalised areas of the country through area-based programming and aims to ensure that community reconciliation initiatives are paired with tangible actions to implement communities' priorities. Key informants suggested that this was a successful example where peacebuilding actors joined together with operational agencies, including UN agencies and NGOs to address key areas for conflict or potential for conflict, including those arising directly from humanitarian or development interventions, such as conflicts around water points. As part of a consortium under this, fund agencies were able to look at issues from multi-sectoral perspectives. One of the key successes according to interviewees was the ability of this fund to get all actors together to work collaboratively on issues, even if that meant that implementation at times took a bit longer.

### **Example around semi-permanent shelters and allocation of land to IDPs who came out of the PoCs in Malakal**

In Malakal, the fighting between Nuer and Shilluk residents in the PoC camp in June 2023 resulted in approximately 500 Nuer households leaving the PoC camp and settling in informal settlements within the town. The government suggested the allocation of a piece of purportedly state-owned land to this group of IDPs formerly from the PoCs, for settlement. UNHCR, IOM and other WASH partners were asked to support with durable shelters – one room and a latrine built from teak wood, that are of the same if not higher standard than the majority of the host community. Site mapping was done by the Upper Nile State Ministry of Land, and conflict assessments were done by the protection cluster. No specific services are being put in place for the community as it is not meant to be a camp; instead, people are accessing host community services in the area. The government reportedly intends to use this as a test case to see if this type of process for land allocation and shelter could be replicated for other groups coming out of the PoCs or other IDPs/returnees, both within Malakal town as well as on the outskirts of the town. Key informants suggested that for humanitarians to support this, a number of conditions had to be fulfilled, notably that it was the government that allocated and chose the land, and that conflict assessments were done and accepted by the wider NGO community. The question, given the semi-permanent character of these shelters, in a context like Malakal where land is highly contested between different ethnic groups with one of these groups, the Shilluk – remaining in the PoCs – is whether initiatives like this will create conflict in the future and only aggravate rivalries over land. Similarly, it remains to be seen whether similar approaches can be taken with other IDPs/returnees wanting to settle within Malakal and whether approaches such as this would also work when applied on the outskirts of Malakal, where the government needs to negotiate with different communities. In interviews, respondents were split between those who thought initiatives such as this one would raise the potential for conflict, given the precarious situation in Malakal, and others who thought it was better to take an initiative to settle people in this environment, than to have huge numbers of landless IDPs squatting in different sites in town.

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<sup>69</sup> For more information on the RSTRF see United Nations Multi-Partner Trust Fund (2018) 'South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (South Sudan RSRTF).' <https://mptf.undp.org/fund/ssr00>

## 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

### 4.1 Conclusion

Officially, organised returns from outside South Sudan are not yet being supported as conditions in areas of return are not yet deemed to be conducive. At the same time, aid organisations and the government are responding to an emergency influx of people as if it was partly a ‘return’ movement. Yet, many of the building blocks that would constitute a successful return and (re)integration approach are not yet in place – most notably early reintegration support and connections to durable solutions initiatives. As a result, people are partially supported, based on certain assumptions about ongoing connections to kinship networks and HLP in their ‘home’ areas. However, this focus on ‘returns’ – as happened during previous movements after the CPA - without the corresponding reintegration and early solutions support risks not only increasing individual vulnerabilities but also drawing entire hosting communities into crisis conditions.

Key lessons from previous returns around how (re)integration – including urban (re)integration – programming could and needs to be concurrently initiated and supported in a conflict-sensitive way have not yet been applied. Current durable solutions initiatives are plentiful, though these seem to not yet have been sufficiently connected to the current emergency response but are operating in parallel, often under different coordination structures. Due to lack of funding, ongoing initiatives are still largely concerned with previous groups of IDPs displaced by the 2013 and 2016 violence, as well as large numbers of vulnerable host communities, and have been unable to expand to include the significant numbers of new arrivals from Sudan and elsewhere into ongoing programming.

There are real risks with the current assistance model – that focuses on cash or food assistance at the point of departure and transportation support only – that people will disappear into communities and will only be picked up by the humanitarian ‘system’ if there are large numbers of people returning to one place or if their area deteriorates to significant food insecurity. This is partly due to serious coordination challenges, massive funding cuts and a difficult operating environment that makes tracking people’s movements and widespread aid actor presence extremely challenging.

In the meantime, much of the reintegration burden falls on so called ‘host’ communities who themselves are extremely vulnerable, and often have a similar, and very recent history of displacement. They are forced to share the very limited food and existing services with the new arrivals, putting a huge burden on what are already very strained resources. At the same time, selection approaches, despite being needs-based, continue to single out particular groups of people for assistance rather than employing creative methods that can support whole communities to increase their absorptive capacity, while at the same time preserving important kinship and social assistance networks. This is already creating potential for conflict in many areas, but as resources shrink and areas become more and more food insecure, conflicts will likely be exacerbated even more. This is a missed opportunity to initiate integration/early solutions processes in a conflict-sensitive way, supporting community-based, area-based approaches that match some of the strategies people are already employing for their survival, rather than undermining them.

We are also seeing important movements to towns – of people going either directly to towns due to a perception of better services and livelihood opportunities – or as part of secondary movements after they visited their original areas – similar to what was observed during previous return movements. This increasing urbanisation trend – which will inevitably bring with it an expansion of informal, or slum settlements is not currently sufficiently acknowledged or a focus of the response nor of ongoing solutions initiatives. Within towns, many people are joining relatives in the former PoC camps or other displacement sites, as they have nowhere else to go or land is unavailable in the town. However, in

many of these sites humanitarian assistance has drastically reduced, meaning returnees are joining already overcrowded and volatile environments with significant food insecurity, and criminality.

Youth gangs – though by no means new to South Sudan – are becoming an increasing problem not only in the former PoCs but across many South Sudanese towns. There are indications that disillusioned youth in many cities in South Sudan are being joined by newcomers from Sudan, Uganda and elsewhere who are equally desperate. In current thinking around (re)integration and durable solutions, it will be crucial to consider current dynamics around urbanisation, informal settlements and the continued trends to join former PoC camps, as well as how to support young people with sustainable opportunities, in particular, in urban settings. At the same time, urban rural linkages and how to support existing networks of mobility that people employ after decades of displacement are also crucial to consider.

Land unsurprisingly emerged as the key conflict issue and issue that is affecting returnees, IDPs and hosts alike. Conflict over land is not only happening at the individual level over multiple allocation of land titles and land grabbing and also among and between communities at the *payam*, county and state levels as well as between South Sudan and its neighbours in numerous locations. Malakal town, in particular, is a complicated and potentially explosive set-up where multiple groups are claiming ownership rights, yet one of these groups – the Shilluk – have not yet returned. In such complex settings it will be key to act in a consultative and conflict-sensitive way when supporting durable solutions initiatives, in particular, around land and settlement of displaced populations.

In this context, initiatives that look at longer-term solutions and support integration of arrivals and communities' absorptive capacity and resilience are crucial. However, the durable solutions architecture is fractured, lacking a joint coordination space for exchange and critical thinking, that can connect initiatives from the national level down to the state level and vice versa. While the national durable solutions architecture is not yet in place, at the state level, area-based leadership coordinators are working on state-level roadmaps for solutions, though it is unclear how these will be connected to the national level, and more crucially donors or government planning and financing. There are also questions around what durable solutions would actually look like in the context of South Sudan. As we have seen, displacement and return contexts and dynamics are very different from location to location, and in many places, there are significant inhibitors to return and integration, such as pervasive insecurity and climate effects, such as continuous flooding, that is unlikely to resolve in the near future. As such, it will be crucial not only to connect durable solutions initiatives early on to the emergency response and think of solutions in a holistic way that can support different categories of displaced people and vulnerable 'hosts' alike. It will also be important to look at initiatives that can positively support people's own strategies, networks and solutions, in a community-based, conflict-sensitive and area-based approach.

## 4.2 Recommendations

### Funding:

- It is crucial that donors step up funding not only on returns in areas that are conducive to conflict-sensitive resettlements, but also for concurrent (re)integration/early solutions support to affected populations in these areas.

### Return and Reintegration:

- Real opportunities are being missed to provide early, conflict-sensitive, social cohesion-building reintegration/early solutions support, including activities like start-up capital, skills matching between returnees/hosts, linking people to service providers, markets and jobs, that can prevent people from slipping into food insecurity and violence.

- There is a significant chance to learn from previous lessons, including how to support programmes that focus on increasing the absorptive capacity of communities and support multi-dimensional (re)integration approaches rather than those focused on individuals.
- At the same time, emergency support for transportation and, in particular, food assistance or cash support needs to be continued and stepped-up to avoid severe food insecurity among returnees and hosts in transit centres, displacement sites and within host communities.

#### Selection:

- Important opportunity to use more innovative selection methods that focus on community-wide and area-based approaches, as well as network-based approaches to assistance where people can distribute assistance through their own networks. It is crucial that assistance supports people's own choices and networks rather than undermine them or set them up in competition.

#### Urbanisation, former PoCs and wider dynamics of movement:

- It is critical to look at the wider dynamics of ongoing movements in terms of increasing urbanisation and movements to informal settlements and former displacement sites: specialist support will be needed to support government at various levels in the conflict-sensitive integration of former displacement sites and informal settlements into the urban landscape. Urban innovation and focusing on the interdependence between rural and urban areas and mobility between them are other critical areas to support.
- Importance of engaging donors and aid actors on ongoing integrated support for former PoC and other displacement sites within towns. Increasing numbers of people are again joining these already overcrowded and under-serviced sites, and the price for inaction is likely increasing food insecurity, conflict and criminality that may have wider and longer-term repercussions on surrounding areas and may complicate future solutions.

#### Land:

- There are significant opportunities to engage government at different levels and other actors in discussions around how to increase access to land for everyone, regardless of their place of origin, in a conflict-sensitive way. There is a need to work in a more concerted way on solving land-related conflicts and supporting solutions to disputes, in particular, in urban areas and considering opportunities for returning refugees and IDPs, as well as women, to access land. It will be important to consider existing conflict dynamics carefully in order to not exacerbate tensions, for example, in already extremely tense and complicated settings such as Malakal town.
- There are interesting initiatives ongoing that are piloting different approaches to durable solutions around land, such as the ongoing resettlement of IDPs from displacement sites in Wau town. It will be crucial to learn from these and other initiatives around whether these approaches are desirable, scalable and transferable to other settings and populations with different backgrounds. Also, more realism is needed around how these kinds of approaches need to be resourced in terms of time, expertise, money.

#### Youth:

- There are important opportunities to design interventions focussing on young people – both resident youth as well as those arriving – to open-up viable perspectives and opportunities for future livelihoods and avoid young people seeing gangs as the only option for survival. These should include interventions aimed at increasing livelihoods/life skills, social cohesion and integrate peacebuilding approaches to harness the different skills that different population groups bring and encourage learning from one another.



#### Humanitarian/Development/Peace Nexus:

- Think of ways to support integrated programming that can address not only immediate needs but also support social cohesion and resolution of conflicts at the same time as building and supporting asset creation and livelihoods for different populations. Lessons can be learned from some of the good practice examples of previous returns and reintegration programmes, such as the multi-dimensional and holistic reintegration programmes that were supported after the CPA was signed.

#### Durable Solutions:

- There is a key opportunity to come together and rebuild a space for coordination, critical thinking and action around durable solutions.<sup>70</sup> It will be important to work on an inclusive architecture for durable solutions that can connect initiatives from the national level down to the state level and vice versa and, crucially, link to government mandates, planning and financing.
- Recognise the importance of linking durable solutions initiatives with the ongoing emergency response and make funding available to initiate concurrent early solutions activities that can build and support people's resilience and networks, rather than undermine them.
- Design durable solutions strategies that reflect and support people's own strategies and resilience, in particular, the use of mobility between urban and rural as well as transnational networks and kinship networks.

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<sup>70</sup> According to many respondents, such a space was previously provided by PfPRR, though this is not necessarily its official purpose and the space was also not inclusive of everyone.