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South Sudan's decades of displacement: Understanding return and questioning reintegration

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Contents

List of abbreviations and acronyms

ARCSS	Agreement for Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
ARRA	Administration for Refugee and Returnees Affairs (Ethiopia)
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease (SARS-CoV-2)
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRRF	Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework
CS	Case Study
EAC	East African Community
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EU	European Union
EUTF	European Union Trust Fund
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GCR	Global Compact on Refugees
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRC	International Rescue Committee
HLP	Housing Land and Property
KII	Key Informant Interview
OCHA	(United Nations) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
PoC	Protection of Civilians
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
SGBV	Sexual and Gender-based Violence
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLA-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition
SSI	Semi-structured Interview
TSA	Transitional Security Arrangements
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan

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Executive summary

This study explores the experiences of displacement, return and reintegration among South Sudanese refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). The overall objective of the research is to understand the factors influencing displacement within and from South Sudan, and return to South Sudan from refugee hosting areas. Over 1,000 respondents were interviewed for this study between December 2021 and February 2022. Research locations included Juba, Kajo Keji, Wau and Malakal in South Sudan; refugee hosting areas in Gambella and Benishangul Gumuz in Ethiopia; Kakuma and Kalobeyei in Kenya; and Bidi refugee settlement and Kampala in Uganda. The sample focused on urban areas and informal settlements in the outskirts of towns in South Sudan. Whether they are abroad in exile or at 'home' in urban areas, IDP and refugee camps or Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites have become the *de facto* homes for millions of South Sudanese.

In addition to directly informing policy discussions around return and peace-building processes in South Sudan, the study considers the ways that the country was affected by the 2020 'triple shock' of intensified conflict and violence in several parts of the country, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate-related disasters for a second year in a row (OCHA, 2021, p.4), which led to one of the world's worst food security emergencies (FEWS NET, 2020). The ongoing economic downturn puts further pressure on livelihoods, particularly for those in urban areas, where much service infrastructure has been destroyed, damaged or closed (according to an assessment by OCHA, 2021, p.4). Violence against women and girls is also an extreme risk.

Against this backdrop, and decades-long patterns of conflict, climate change and environmental degradation driving displacement, regional institutions and the international community have sought to prioritise the design of policies and programmes to find durable solutions to the protracted displacement and potential return of South Sudanese IDPs and refugees. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has played a pivotal role in setting up a regional response to South Sudanese displacement and in supporting the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). The Government of South Sudan has drafted a new Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action to implement the commitments on return and reintegration included in the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Despite the existence of this Agreement, there continues to be intense and violent conflict in many areas, which prevents the achievement of durable solutions. Although conflict between major parties has formally ended, violence and violent clashes have at times intensified in some locations, with devastating effects on local livelihoods and protection. These policy processes aimed at promoting durable solutions need to therefore be further developed and solidified, with attention paid to solutions that mirror the needs, priorities and expectations of South Sudanese people in displacement and upon return.

Return and integration, the key themes of this study, involve high political stakes for the many actors involved, as they are crucial factors in successful peace building by various South Sudanese leaders (Logo, 2021, Moro et al, 2017)**.** Any return should be voluntary, safe, dignified, informed and sustainable. However, the study concludes that

- The conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified, informed return and sustainable reintegration are currently not present in many parts of South Sudan, as despite the revitalised peace agreement there continues to be quite intense and violent conflict in many local areas between and within different communities, and these prevent sustainable returns.
- Any discussion and plans for organising returns must proceed at a pace that displaced people and areas of potential return can support.
- The constant process of displacement, mobility and return blurs the lines between the categories normally adopted in programming and policy frameworks. By bringing to the fore the numerous and varied voices of people inside and outside South Sudan, the study shows the need to take greater account of people and communities in programming and advocacy efforts, and to fund area-based approaches.

Key findings

People's experiences and practices of return and reintegration

- South Sudan is experiencing movements that are labelled as 'return' but that are, in fact, pendular (back and forth), partial (household splitting across borders) and transitory, which people rely on to minimise risks, as well as to access rights and opportunities for protection. These movements are often the latest in a lifetime of similar movements, with multiple experiences of displacement, return and renewed displacement. Because of a lack of viable choices, financial and administrative barriers to mobility, misinformation concerning asylum policies and return programmes, it is often difficult to discern the degree of voluntariness underpinning 'returns', and the living conditions of South Sudanese migrants remain precarious throughout their migration journey.
- Many of these movements are towards urban centres, presenting challenges in terms of pressure on infrastructure, availability of services, access to livelihood resources, and housing, land and property ownership.
- Households are variously affected by displacement, yet decision-making powers overall rest with men. Female-headed households are more adversely affected when families are compelled to split further in search of safety and resources, leading to a worsened financial situation. In many cases, decisions about the when and where of a move are made by men, or by the extended family and community networks.
- Displacement alters gender norms and produces empowering and disempowering effects on South Sudanese women and men. Women are frequently left behind, and their mobility space is significantly more constrained. This can have repercussions for their safety and ability to access income or essential household items. At the same time, living without adult male relatives can increase their decision-making power in day-to-day matters, especially in camp settings, where women can access gender-focused programmes and establish solidarity and support networks cutting across ethnic lines. For young men, the displacement experience is largely disempowering. Displacement hinders their traditional path to adulthood. Men nevertheless have

more freedom to move within the country or abroad and to eventually return in search of purpose, belonging, and safety.

- Return is not an aspiration for many young IDPs and refugees**.** South Sudan has one of the world's youngest populations, mostly born in displacement, with no direct experience of living in their families' areas of origin. Many do not aspire to return as they have never been to South Sudan. Upon return, many decide to move to urban areas that might be unfamiliar to them and find themselves in renewed patterns of displacement. The data reveals that 30 per cent of IDPs interviewed had returned from abroad.

- Inadequate services in education and health, and limited opportunities in areas of return, are obstacles to reintegration. The education shortages reproduce inequalities between groups. The existing health and education infrastructure in South Sudan is significantly wanting and barriers to access these services have further increased as an impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The reported level of obstacles to education varies depending on the location of respondents. In addition, the South Sudanese education system apparently does not recognise certificates obtained outside the country (e.g. in refugee settlements across the border), necessitating further delays in students' progress and thus influencing decisions around return. At the household level, education is often available to a very limited number of children due to financial barriers.

- Food insecurity is an issue of widespread concern in South Sudan and is a primary barrier in return and reintegration. Most households are unable to meet their basic food needs on a regular basis. Food insecurity is at crisis level in many communities surveyed, as a result of the overall lack of income and constraints on livelihoods. In our sample, only 45 per cent of households reported having a source of income from employment or self-employment. Many of these work sources are informal and poorly paid, with most being vulnerable to an unstable income or a downturn in the market.

Legal and policy hurdles to (re)integration

- Sustainable reintegration efforts from the Government of South Sudan are currently lacking, despite the lessons learned from past reintegration efforts, and despite the fact that the search for durable solutions is first and foremost a matter of national responsibility. The weak rule of law and a lack of investment in essential services and infrastructure have plagued reintegration programmes pre- and post-independence and have not been addressed in current policies and programmes. Informants spoke openly about the many instances of failed reintegration of South Sudanese refugees because of the narrow focus on individual reintegration instead of community-based reintegration, the lack of community rehabilitation, land and housing, or simply as a result of corruption that diverted aid away from communities of return and return households.

- Multiple crises – COVID-19, flooding and other climate-related disasters, and insecurity – and an overall lack of trust in the wider peace process are significant impediments to return and sometimes result in renewed displacement. Limited or no access to basic services, distrust of security providers and the lack of opportunities or viable conditions to ensure food security significantly hinder returns. Moreover, many returnees have

found themselves unable to reach their areas of origin, whether physically as a result of flooding, or socially because of prevailing norms that prevent, for instance, women from returning to their parents after having been married away.

- The formal legal framework on housing, land and property (HLP) is not functional and is largely absent. Traditional mechanisms to resolve disputes are comparatively more trusted by communities. As land disputes have been a major driver of conflict in South Sudan, solutions are highly dependent on the security of tenure. Large-scale returns can be detrimental to both. As a result of the lack of procedures and rule of law, it is almost impossible for returnees to reclaim their lands. The Land Act of 2009 provides the regulations for land tenure and rights, as well as an environment for economic development. However, the Interim Constitution of 2011 changed the tenure system, making land an unreliable basis of food production. Issues around land grabbing, insecure land tenure in informal settlements, and either lack or disputes over land titles, particularly in urban areas to which many displaced persons and returnees are moving, remain barriers to durable solutions.

- The lack of and competition over land and shelter materials, a generally weak HLP administration, and lack of access to justice are major obstacles to (re)integration. Many returnees interviewed said they were unable to claim back their land and property. Others have returned to find their houses burned down or destroyed: 44 per cent of IDP returnees interviewed for this study are living in emergency shelters, an additional 15 per cent are hosted by family or friends. Other refugees say they will not return because of the uncertainty and fear that they might find their houses taken by others. Inadequate access to justice and remedial procedures poses serious challenges to the prospects for durable solutions in South Sudan. Even when returnees resort to the court system, the process is often hijacked by powerful elites and those belonging to the armed forces. Women face additional vulnerabilities in accessing justice and reclaiming housing, land and property.

- Low levels of trust in institutions, insufficient engagement of displaced communities and confusion on the operationalization of durable solutions, have resulted in discrepancies between the official position of humanitarian agencies and their role as perceived by South Sudanese people. The latest UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) position on returns to South Sudan maintained a non-return advisory, while opening the possibility of supporting individual returnees in specific cases. This position represents a careful balancing act that aims to protect refugees and returnees alike. It will require clear communication with affected communities and other stakeholders.

- In hosting countries, reception conditions for South Sudanese refugees have deteriorated as a consequence of decreasing funds, the primary and secondary effects of COVID-19 and shifting donor priorities. This has created push factors in hosting countries and underscored the importance of transnational cross-border mobility for refugees to build their own solutions. These back-and-forth cross-border movements occur in a legal vacuum far from the attention of policy makers.

Key recommendations

Returnees, IDPs and host communities in South Sudan face similar challenges in terms of securing access to basic services and physical, material and legal safety. This study identifies severe gaps in service delivery, lack of access to justice and an overall mistrust in peace and reconciliation processes. Continuing political conflict and climate-related crises only exacerbate the fundamentally weak systems in South Sudan. Access to education, healthcare, livelihoods and HLP continue to dominate discussions on return and reintegration among the communities we interviewed.

Efforts to address these needs and barriers in the politically, ecologically and economically fragile context of South Sudan are a long-term process. There is a need to overcome the narrow understanding of return as 'a durable solution' and acknowledge that returns are part of a range of mobility strategies South Sudanese communities innovatively use to survive and thrive under extremely challenging conditions. Although moving within South Sudan and across international borders is employed as a coping strategy, any effort to support movements should be carefully and contextually considered by aid actors, given the lack of services, the risk of secondary displacement, the uncertainty in peace and political processes and local patterns of conflict. Central to the recommendations that follow is the place that must be given to both the displaced and to the communities where they live, adopting a needs-based, medium and long-term assistance approach to supporting sustainable reintegration.

The study proposes the following key recommendations:

- Continue to develop plans for the implementation of R-ARCSS and commit to a nexus approach linking humanitarian, development and peace-building needs
- Continue peace-building efforts, maintain the civilian character of former PoC sites while planning for a longer transition period that may (but need not necessarily) involve large-scale assisted voluntary returns.
- Work towards the full implementation of R-ARCSS to create more stable and conducive conditions for return. This should include the full implementation of Chapter II of R-ARCSS (Permanent Ceasefire and Temporary Security Arrangements).
- Uphold the principle of voluntary, safe, informed and dignified returns set out in international instruments and in the South Sudan Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan
- Return initiatives should be decoupled from the political process and not be linked to the viability of upcoming elections.
- Those supporting displaced and return communities should improve their awareness of the return context and of local dynamics, to ensure that activities supporting these communities are based on the systematic engagement of affected communities.
- Reintegration outcomes and post-return experiences should be closely monitored by governmental and non-governmental actors (including UN agencies, NGOs, CSOs and other local actors) managing returns and providing reintegration assistance to the returnees.

- Donors should maintain an adequate level of funding in displacement hosting areas, both within South Sudan (notably in PoC and IDP areas) and in neighbouring countries (in camp settings and out of camps), so that people's decisions to return are not dictated by a sudden decrease of assistance or emerging tensions with hosting communities.
- South Sudanese IDPs and refugees should not be unduly pressured to return, since current conditions are not yet conducive to large-scale returns. The possibility for solutions based on local integration in host countries and in host communities in South Sudan should be explored.
- The government of South Sudan, with the support of donors, agencies, and humanitarian and development actors should address the deteriorating security and safety conditions that act as a barrier to reintegration.
- The government of South Sudan will need to address the specific challenges in the former PoC sites, which have been transitioned from UN Protection sites to conventional displacement camps without a sustainable transition plan.
- The government of South Sudan will need to enact and domesticate the Kampala Convention, as a legal framework to support the implementation of the Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action.
- Integrate provisions for cross-border mobility in regional plans for durable solutions to allow for safe circular mobility
- IGAD should, with support from member states and donors, support the adoption and implementation of frameworks for the free movement of community citizens. In the long run, such frameworks should also establish concrete avenues to fulfil the right to work.
- The EU's multi-annual identification process should be used to plan for financing that can support multi-annual, multi-sectoral and regional interventions to support the protection and resilience of the South Sudanese and invest in regional exchanges on solutions.
- In the short term, refugees should be able to move back and forth between host countries and South Sudan for a period of not less than two years, so that they may gradually explore the possibilities for sustainable return without having to sacrifice the security of their refugee status within hosting countries.
- Donors should fund programmes with an integrated cross-border coordination and programming approach that reinforces cross-border livelihoods and cross-border trade links, as well as enabling people to gather and share information on areas of potential return.
- The Government of South Sudan should invest in mobile healthcare service provision. Where access to health services in the country is not possible, cross-border mobility to access healthcare systems should be facilitated.

- Targeted humanitarian aid support for voluntary small-scale movements should be provided on the basis of needs rather than status, alongside medium and long-term assistance for areas of return.
- Invest in area-based, community-based and locally driven peace and development initiatives
- The Government of South Sudan should adopt area-based and community-led approaches to durable solutions that target the whole population, regardless of their categorisation based on migratory status, ensuring that the entire community engages in dialogue, including local service providers, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders.
- The Government of South Sudan, with support from donors and humanitarian and development actors, should map, identify and support the capacity of local and civil society actors, including local faith actors, to build on local resilience and initiatives and promote solutions locally, strengthening social cohesion in rural and urban areas.
- They should also build on community networks to safeguard and improve access to protection mechanisms.
- In areas where people are returning voluntarily (and often initially without support), the government, with support from donors and humanitarian and development actors, should ensure that adequate levels of assistance are provided to support the absorptive capacity of the local community and facilitate social cohesion between returnees and host communities.
- Support for local communities should include investment in roads and infrastructure that connect rural and urban communities, as well as providing support for disaster-resilient agricultural practices.
- Promote HLP policies and programmes

  In South Sudan
- The Government of South Sudan, together with donor support, should pursue the development and operationalisation of the formal legal framework on HLP.
- Returnees and IDPs should have full access to the court system and other dispute-resolution mechanisms, such as providing information on processes to claim rights, and providing legal services for the displaced; supporting community-based conflict transformation and social cohesion mechanisms and institutions; and addressing women's access to HLP through targeted support by tackling legal and practical obstacles.
- More research is needed on HLP to learn from existing practice and assess constraints, issues and outline the type of interventions that can work and be scaled.

In refugee hosting countries

- Where possible, encourage better access to land that is adequate for the self-reliance of refugee populations, and invest further in schemes promoting agriculture and farming for self-reliance (including for female-headed households).
- Provide safe shelter for refugees and address the tensions over accessing land and materials within communities.
- Increase investment in durable solutions discussions in host countries – to link the access to land, to the right to work, to movement, to access healthcare etc. – and build on existing legal frameworks in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya, to expand the discussion on durable solutions for South Sudanese refugees alongside other refugee groups.
- Develop gender- and youth-sensitive programming and policy responses
- Implement gender- and youth-specific responses based on in-depth analyses in refugee hosting, displacement and return settings.
- Develop more inclusive gender-programming sensitive to the migration experiences of both men and women.
- Engage the community in activities aimed at deconstructing traditional gender norms that limit women's agency and place 'masculine' expectations on men.
- Develop programming that addresses sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and shifting discriminatory gender norms by including perpetrators as well as survivors in programmes.
- Support female-headed households through a package of HLP, education and cash-based support.
- Support young people born in displacement with information, counselling and assistance to plan ahead of their return and join youth-led groups and civil society organisations to bring youth closer together, reinforcing the role of youth-led leadership structures.
- Align education and training opportunities offered, with the demands of the local labour market to enhance positive social interactions and the local inclusion of youth.
- Strengthen the education system in South Sudan
- Increase the capacity of local actors (e.g. faith-based organisations) to deliver educational, livelihood and food security training in partnership with humanitarian and development actors.
- Strengthen cross border efforts to harmonise educational systems in South Sudan and host countries and support a reform of the education system to recognise academic certificates obtained abroad.
- Provide information to young South Sudanese pre-departure on the educational and vocational opportunities available in the country after their return.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Displacement has affected the lives of generations of South Sudanese**.** In the pre-independence period, displacement figures peaked during the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005), when up to 4.5 million South Sudanese fled their places of residence to seek protection within their own country or abroad (UNHCR, 2009, p.1-2). The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the process leading to the establishment of South Sudan as an independent state in 2011 prompted the return of an estimated two million refugees to the world's newest country (IDMC, 2019, p.9).[1] However, many had to flee again when internal conflict erupted in 2013 between the government forces of President Salva Kiir, the armed opposition group Sudan People's Liberation Army-in Opposition (SPLA-IO), led by Riek Machar, and other armed groups and affiliated militias. The internal conflict triggered a new wave of displacement, followed by raised expectations of the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees when the main parties to the conflict signed peace agreements in 2015 and 2018. This cycle of violence, displacement and returns marked the lives of generations of South Sudanese, before and after independence, despite return and reintegration support provided by local actors and international agencies in the wake of previous peace processes. The search for durable solutions to the plight of South Sudanese refugees and IDPs is a central element of the peace-building framework established in 2018 and it has been reaffirmed in subsequent national and regional initiatives. At the current juncture, it is therefore essential to reflect on peoples' and communities' needs and perspectives in order to drive the emerging policy and programme frameworks on durable solutions, and to capitalise on past experiences.

[1] On 9 July 2011, after two civil wars lasting almost 40 years, South Sudan formally gained its long-fought for independence from Sudan and became the world's newest state. More than 98 per cent of South Sudanese voters chose independence in a referendum held in January 2011. Two years after independence, civil war broke out between opposing factions within the country. The ensuing peace process has been fraught with difficulties. IDMC. (2019). *Tired of Running: Repeated displacement and premature returns in South Sudan*. IDMC

Box 1. Emerging policy commitments in South Sudan

While addressing protracted displacement is an integral component of the broader peace-building process in South Sudan, this research reveals a context that is largely unprepared for (re)integration – at structural, community and individual levels. Emerging policy commitments have not yet resulted in tangible outcomes for most South Sudanese, and people's decisions about whether, when and where to return are highly constrained by limited means, insufficient access to information, weak trust in formal authorities and push factors in hosting sites.

The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in 2018, established a framework linking transitional security arrangements with humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts, including the safe and dignified return of IDPs and refugees. Building on this framework, and on the momentum behind the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 2020 launched the Solutions Initiative for protracted displacement in Sudan and South Sudan. One of the goals of the Solutions Initiative is to support national stakeholders and duty bearers in creating the conditions for sustainable return and reintegration. The recently drafted national Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action reaffirmed these commitments by supporting South Sudanese refugees, returnees, IDPs and host communities to find sustainable solutions to their plight and by encouraging lasting peace in the country and across the region. Despite these positive steps, South Sudan is still grappling with widespread insecurity and major humanitarian concerns.

Main displacement and return patterns

An estimated two million South Sudanese are displaced within their own country and 2.2 million are registered as refugees in hosting countries.[2] These data indicate that roughly one-third of the South Sudanese population is currently displaced, either internally or across borders. The reported total number of displaced South Sudanese persons, internally and across borders, has remained remarkably stable since the eruption of the last major wave of country-wide violence in 2016.[3]

Internal displacement is largely the result of conflict, although more than 835,000 people were affected by flooding in 2021, leading to further displacement and protracted impacts in areas where water has not yet receded (UN News, 2022). As of March 2020, four out of five IDPs were living with host communities, while the remaining 20 per cent lived in camp-like settings. Of these, more than 200,000 sought safety in Protection of Civilian (POC) sites established around UN Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS) bases after the 2013 civil conflict (IOM, 2018). These sites offered protection to conflict-affected populations but created 'hard perimeters', limiting their external interactions and making more apparent the challenge of protecting civilian populations beyond these perimeters. All PoC sites, with the exception of Malakal, were reclassified in 2020 and placed under the control of the South Sudanese government, to the concern and consternation of the humanitarian community.

[2] See the UNHCR Operational Data Portal, https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations

[3] Displacement and return figures are difficult to estimate accurately. This report uses UN and government estimates as a starting point for the analysis, acknowledging that official figures are not always an accurate representation of underlying phenomena.

Other forms of camp settings for IDPs in South Sudan have also included 'collective sites', mostly in more urban areas, where conditions are often overcrowded and unsafe.

More than 2.2 million South Sudanese are registered as refugees in neighbouring countries. Ninety-six per cent of South Sudanese refugees are hosted in Uganda (923,536), Sudan (772,313), Ethiopia (373,646) and Kenya (131,201). Each country has different contexts and challenges that need to be considered to assess the full picture of South Sudanese displacement across the region:

1 In Uganda, a majority of registered South Sudanese refugees reside in the north of the country within the West Nile sub-region. Uganda is often described as adopting progressive refugee policies compared with other hosting countries within the region, allowing refugees to own land, to work and to move freely. However, refugees continue to struggle to find employment, education opportunities and access to critical services (REF, 2019, p.1-18). Moreover, growing tensions between hosting communities and refugees are a major element of concern (Okiror, 2020).

2 In Ethiopia, the majority of South Sudanese refugees are located in Gambella region. A shift in government policy in 2019, in response to conflicts between host and refugee groups in Gambella (often along ethnic lines), resulted in the relocation of incoming refugees to Benishangul Gumuz regional state by the Administration for Refugees and Returnees Affairs (ARRA) (Vermeru et al, 2020, p.81). As of June 2020, there were 65,513 persons of concern in Benishangul Gumuz, 21,808 of whom were South Sudanese (UNHCR, 2020c, p.1).

3 In Kenya, 92 per cent of registered South Sudanese refugees reside in Turkana County in the Kakuma and Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement (UNHCR, 2020a). Current legal frameworks make it difficult for refugees to integrate in the country, because of restrictions on movement, employment and other rights. Moreover, due to concerns about COVID-19 the Kenyan government has suspended all voluntary repatriation and resettlement of refugees (UNHCR Kenya, 2021f, p.1). In April 2021, the Kenyan Government announced the planned closure of the Kakuma and Dadaab camps and the repatriation of refugees by June 2022, which was expected to represent a push factor for South Sudanese refugees in Kenya.[4] Since the announcement, there has been little clarity on the future of refugees in these camps, who have been left in a situation of uncertainty and continue living in extremely precarious conditions. At the same time, the signing of the Refugee Act in November 2021 opens possible prospects for durable solutions.

4 In Sudan, the main refugee-hosting areas are Khartoum and White Nile states – accounting for 61 per cent of the refugee population (UNHCR, 2021a). In Khartoum, refugees reside in 'Open Areas' where they face significant challenges, including a shortage of potable water, a lack of paid work and financial services, limits on movement, a lack of land ownership, and insufficient food (MSF, 2020). Refugee groups are located in various poorly developed and resource-scarce areas. Due to political instability in Sudan during the fieldwork period, it was not possible for our teams to conduct fieldwork in that country. We discuss the implications of this in the Methodology section, below.

[4] UNHCR. (2021, April 29). *Joint statement by the Government of Kenya and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee Camps Roadmap*. UNHCR.

Despite ongoing insecurity and a chronic shortage of essential services, over 1,183,666 IDPs and 505,511 refugees have returned to South Sudan since 2018 (UNHCR, 2021e; IOM, 2022). UNHCR and other organisations facilitated the return of 18,890 IDPs between the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018 and July 2021 but the vast majority returned on their own (UNHCR, 2021d). Returns to and within South Sudan have been qualified as 'spontaneous' but little is known about their underlying motivations and outcomes. These returns are an open-ended coping strategy, involving back and forth movements between areas of return and areas of displacement, and the splitting of household members across locations to mitigate risks and secure access to education and livelihoods (Oxfam International, 2019, p.3). Returns from abroad build on a tradition of cross-border mobility, leveraging transnational networks (Carver & Ruach Guok, 2020). At the same time as UNHCR describes areas of return as "pockets of hope" (UNHCR, 2021c), it firmly maintains that conditions are not conducive to any facilitated, promoted or otherwise organised returns to South Sudan (OCHA, 2020b).

1.2 The peace process and the policy framework

In 2018, key parties to the South Sudanese civil conflict signed the R-ARCSS, establishing power-sharing mechanisms and committing to a permanent ceasefire, humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, and transitional justice. Under Chapter III, R-ARCSS also made provisions on the voluntary return of IDPs and refugees. R-ARCSS is regarded as an important but insufficient step towards lasting peace. So far, it has failed to bring about the stability that the South Sudanese were longing for (UN Security Council, 2022a). Armed violence between different groups, including rival factions of the SPLA-IO, continued to result in internal and external displacement. In many cases, violence is the outcome of deep-seated historical and political processes dating back to the colonial and pre-independence periods, often characterised by deliberate exclusionary policies and by the manipulation of ethnic and religious identities by the people in power. Access to essential services remains inadequate in both rural and urban areas. Meanwhile, disasters, including when related to climate have change, disrupted the livelihoods of many South Sudanese, historically based on agro-pastoralism and subsistence farming. The COVID-19 pandemic has further restricted access to essential services (notably education), income sources and essential goods in South Sudan and in countries hosting South Sudanese refugees.

Against this backdrop, regional institutions and the international community have sought to raise the profile of programmes and policies addressing the protracted displacement of South Sudanese IDPs and refugees. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) played a pivotal role in setting up a regional response to South Sudanese displacement and in supporting the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). In 2020, IGAD launched the Solutions Initiative to advance comprehensive solutions for the forcibly displaced in Sudan and in South Sudan, and to mobilise the international community for recovery. At the national level, the landmark agreement of 2020 between the conflicting parties to form a Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity marked an important milestone in the peace-building process. In 2021, the South Sudanese government drafted a new Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action to implement R-ARCSS's commitment on return and reintegration. But many underlying issues remain unaddressed, especially in the field of

justice mechanisms and access to housing, land and property (HLP).

1.3 Objectives

Our research contributes to an evidence base informing durable solutions policies and programming initiatives**.** It builds on four decades of scholarly work to bring new observations, while ensuring that duty bearers are reminded of the legal and human rights of South Sudanese refugees and IDPs, and of the possibilities to support more flexible and adapted forms of durable solutions to their plight.

The study is a partnership between the Research and Evidence Facility (REF) – funded by the European Union Trust Fund (EUTF) – and Samuel Hall, a Nairobi-based research organisation commissioned to conduct this research in South Sudan and its region, with the support of Windle Trust International. The REF research team conducted the literature review used in the study and Samuel Hall's research team led field research in the focus countries of the study, with local researchers, and conducted the analysis and drafting of this report. Given the overall instability in the region – Sudan and Ethiopia, primarily – at the time of the data collection, Samuel Hall's research team worked closely with expert reviewers, key informants and local researchers to ensure the validity of its conclusions. The overall objective of the project is, through a contextualised and evidence-based approach, to understand the different types of factors supporting and affecting displacement within, and return to, South Sudan. Within this overall objective, there are four sub-objectives:

- **identify** challenges and opportunities related to displacement and return in South Sudan
- **elevate** the voices of affected communities
- **drive** the engagement with national and international stakeholders
- **generate** policy recommendations with the potential for positive impact

The project is designed to help identify areas for donor interventions in policy and programmes to support displacement-affected areas.

The study's main research question is:

'How are South Sudanese people and communities experiencing displacement, return and reintegration, and what does this mean for practitioners and policy makers'?"

Through this question, the research aims to unpack the role of *people, communities and policies* in addressing the needs of those displaced in South Sudan and across the region, and those returning. These three themes have been chosen in recognition of the role that states, local actors, families and individuals can play in resolving obstacles to (re)integration. In addressing these key themes, the study seeks to question the concepts of 'return' and 'reintegration,' and situate them within the broader context of South Sudanese displacement and mobility patterns. Among the main threads of the report is the attention given to the gender dimension, with a discussion of both men's and women's roles in displacement, return and reintegration, and the situation of youth.

- Theme 1: People. To understand the experience and perceptions of (re)integration.

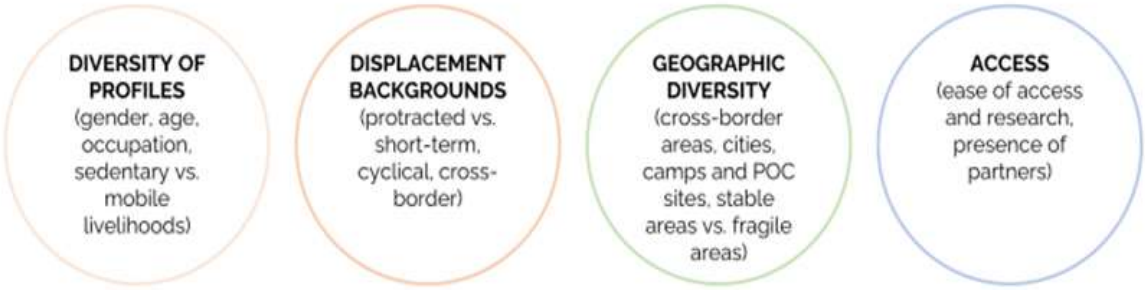
- Theme 2: Communities. To examine the role of communities, networks and services in the country or area of origin in return decisions and (re)integration outcomes.
- Theme 3: Policies. To review whether legal and policy frameworks shape the search for durable solutions.

1.4 Methodology

Locations

Research locations were selected to represent a varied sample of displacement profiles and backgrounds across different contexts – including urban areas, camps, cities and cross-border regions. The selection was also informed by access considerations and by the presence of partners and informants on the ground. Selection criteria are represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Criteria for the selection of locations for data collection



Field research was carried out in South Sudan, and in countries hosting significant numbers of South Sudanese refugee populations, namely Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. As of 28 February 2022, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda hosted 63.5 per cent of South Sudanese refugees globally. Within each country, research locations were selected based on four criteria (Figure 1). The determination of specific sites within each country was informed by the desk review and by key informant interviews (KIIs) with experts and local organisations.

In South Sudan, the research was carried out in Juba[5], Kajo Keji, Wau and Malakal. With the exception of Kajo Keji, the selection focused mostly on urban areas, as these offered a large variety of population profiles, appeared more strategic from a return perspective and were in general more accessible than rural areas. Through this choice of target locations, the study could draw insights on the concerns raised by the redenomination of PoC sites in Juba and Wau, and by long-standing unaddressed tensions over land and resources in Malakal. Kajo Keji is a relatively stable location in Central Equatoria. Because of its proximity to the Ugandan border, it experiences regular back-and-forth movements from refugee camps in Uganda. This location was chosen to analyse cross-border dynamics in greater depth.

In Ethiopia the study locations included Abol, in Gambella, and Assosa, in Benishangul-Gumuz. Abol hosts the majority of South Sudanese refugees within the country. In addition,

[5] Besides the POCs, the following locations were targeted in Juba: Don Bosco IDP camp, DDR Mahad camp, Konyokonyo, Juba Nabari, Mangateen, Hai Referendum, Sherkat, Gumbo, Mapau

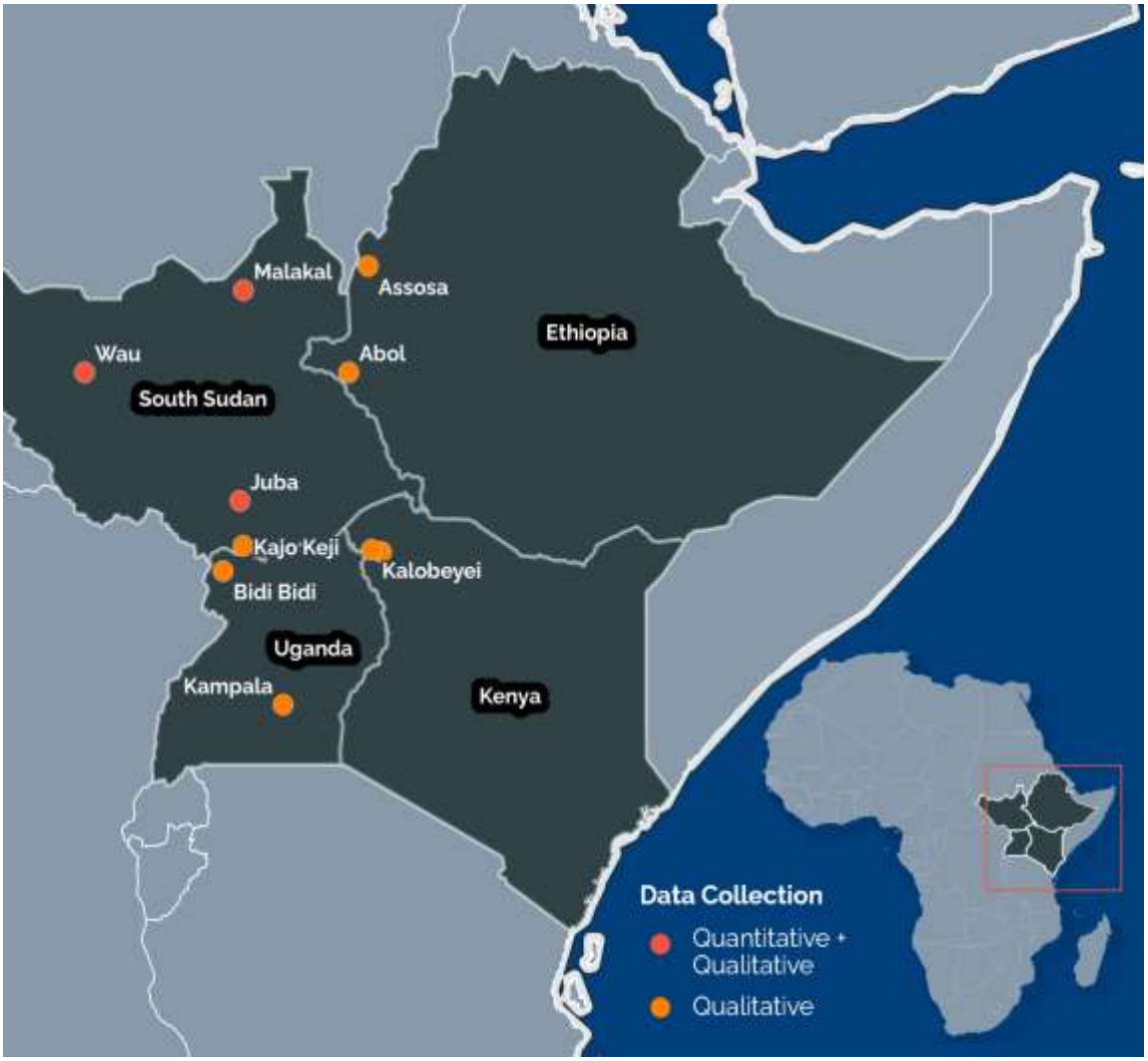
it is a location that experiences regular cross-border mobility of South Sudanese people with cross-border kinship ties. Assosa has a large population of South Sudanese refugees and keeps receiving new arrivals, with some relocated from the Gambella region following an Ethiopian government directive in early 2020.

In Uganda, the research focused on Bidi Bidi refugee camp and Kampala. Bidi Bidi hosts the largest South Sudanese refugee population in Uganda. Its proximity to the South Sudanese border makes it a key location to study cross-border mobility and complement findings from Kajo Keji in South Sudan. Kampala is the main refugee-hosting urban area in the sample. Since the government in Uganda has traditionally focused on rural refugees in designated settlements, it has not granted the same level of attention, protection or assistance to urban refugees. Many young South Sudanese refugees have nevertheless moved to Kampala in search of better opportunities.

Kenya was chosen over Sudan as a research country in view of the access difficulties in Sudan in the wake of the 2021 coup, and to facilitate transnational interviews with refugee families. The selection of Kenya also allowed researchers to gain insights into the impact of the announced closure of refugee camps. Kakuma and Kalobeyei were selected as research locations in Kenya. Both locations are in a sparsely populated area with limited access to infrastructure and services. Kakuma is the largest camp hosting South Sudanese refugees in Kenya. In nearby Kalobeyei, Kenyan authorities and the international community intend to pilot a settlement approach designed as a settlement aimed at integrating the refugee and local Turkana populations.

Figure 2 shows the location of the research sites in the four countries.

Figure 2: Research locations



Methods

The study applied a mixed-methods research approach that utilised both quantitative and qualitative tools. South Sudan was the core research country and the only country where both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted. The quantitative approach was used to inform the qualitative approach, assessing the individual, community and structural factors that influence sustainable return, reintegration and displacement within and to South Sudan. The survey was the starting point for other data collection, providing preliminary insights on how individual characteristics such as gender, age and ethnicity, are correlated with household-level mobility strategies, including split households, and those 'left behind' at displacement sites. The data collection was conducted in three phases.

a. Quantitative survey. Through a combination of systematic and purposive sampling,[6] a survey with a sample of 794 households was conducted in South Sudan in December

[6] Sampling was done by a mix of systematic and then purposive sampling. For the first four days of fieldwork, enumerators were given areas of each location and told to interview every third household. Since systematic sampling could not result in a significant number of returnees (a key cohort of interest for this study), after the

2021.[7] In total, 256 households were sampled in Juba, 265 in Malakal and 273 in Wau. Four categories were identified within the sample, as detailed in Box 2: returnees (from outside South Sudan), IDPs, IDP returnees and host community members. Details on the survey sample are provided in Table 1.

b. Qualitative fieldwork. The study included four qualitative research tools:

    a. Semi-structured life history interviews with individuals of different genders, ages and ethnicities, as well as displacement profiles (refugees, returnees, IDPs and host community), which provided in-depth understanding of the displacement trajectories.

    b. Key informant interviews (KIIs) with humanitarian actors, local authorities, academics, and refugee and IDP community representatives, who provided high-level information on the displacement context, peace process, security issues, legal and policy context, existing and planned humanitarian and development programmes, and state of service delivery.

    c. Focus group discussions (FGDs) with displaced-affected households (IDPs, refugees, returnees and members of hosting communities), centring on mobility choices and strategies, attitudes and perceptions towards return-based solutions, reintegration challenges, inter-communal relations and protection issues.

    d. Case studies on separated households, cross-border mobility and repatriation programmes. Case studies aimed to foreground less visible displacement profiles, such as households split across borders, and to provide in-depth information on individual stories.

    e. A validation workshop was held in Juba in September 2022, to present the key findings and recommendations of the report, and benefit of stakeholders' input during a panel and open discussion, joined by research participants, international and national non-governmental organisations, and United Nations agencies, as well as the European Union delegation.

first four days sampling became purposive. Enumerators were requested to target returnee households specifically to reach the sample target of 125 returnee households per location. As such, the sample should not be considered a perfect representation of the underlying population.

[7] In line with the South Sudan National Baseline Household Survey 2009, a household is defined here as "a person or a group of persons, related or unrelated, who live together in the same dwelling unit or separate dwelling units but make common provisions for food and regularly take their food from the same pot or share the same grain store, or who pool their income for the purpose of purchasing food." It must be noted, however, in the context of this study, that polygamy is common and not all wives/children may have been considered in all cases. Furthermore, the classic definition of eating from the same table or pot may not be the ideal definition where different age groups do not customarily eat together. Finally, extended families can be split, move back in together and split again. This means that, while the customary definition was adopted for the sake of comparability with other sources, it should be considered a rough approximation of a more complex reality.

Box 2. Profiles identified through the household surveys

For the purpose of the survey, respondents were classified as follows:[1]

- Refugee returnees were defined as a) anyone who is a South Sudanese citizen *and* has authorised recognition as a returnee or refugee (they would have had to leave the country to become a refugee); b) anyone who was forcibly displaced externally as a result of insecurity or conflict, persecution, natural disaster or lack of food; c) someone who was born abroad but is now living in South Sudan *and* is a South Sudanese citizen.
- IDPs were defined as persons who were not born in the location of data collection *and* were forcibly displaced internally as a result of insecurity or conflict, persecution, natural disaster or lack of food. This category also comprises persons who experienced displacement after having returned.
- IDP returnees were defined as IDPs who had returned to reside in the location of data collection.
- Host communities were defined as persons who were born in the location of data collection and had lived there all their lives.

Table 1: Household-level surveys by displacement profiles in South Sudan[8]

Location	Returnee	IDP	IDP returnee	Host community
Juba	111	147	32	16
Malakal	133	81	19	71
Wau	108	121	68	63

Table 2: **Summary of quantitative and qualitative data collection**

Research tool	Ethiopia	Kenya	South Sudan	Uganda	Remote collection	TOTAL
Quantitative tool						
Household surveys	0	0	794	0	0	794
Qualitative tools						
Key informant interviews	8	10	21	6	38	83
Semi-structured interviews	14	10	50	10	0	84
Focus group discussions	10	6	12	11	0	39
Case studies	0	0	14	0	0	14
						220
Total						1,014

The quantitative data from the household survey shed light on the profiles of returnees, displaced persons and hosting community members in the context of South Sudan. For qualitative data, all interviews were recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim. A combination of deductive and inductive analysis techniques was applied. A

[8] A sub-module of the tool explored individual migration trajectories. Participation in this sub-module was voluntary, and not all participants chose to provide detailed information. The sample used to discuss experiences pre-arrival is thus smaller than that of the entire dataset. As such, the sub-module has information on the return move for 119 returnee respondents, compared to the 352 returnee households captured within the whole sample. Throughout the analysis, we flag which underlying sample was used to derive the figures presented. The number in this table does not add up to the total household surveys of 794 as some of these displacement profiles are not mutually exclusive. For example, a participant can be both a 'returnee' and an 'IDP'.

codebook was developed based on the research questions, as well as on the preliminary findings from the desk review and quantitative analysis. The codebook was adjusted in the process of coding, either by adding new (sub) codes or removing existing (sub) codes, to ensure that the data were fully captured by the coding structure. Themes were identified from the codes generated. The findings from quantitative and qualitative approaches were consolidated through triangulation across different data sources.

Theoretical approach

The study's theoretical approach was guided by the existing academic literature on South Sudanese displacement and by interviews conducted during the inception phase. The approach was based on the following considerations:

- Individual trajectories and decision-making processes. Few studies have considered the individual decisions of refugees or IDPs to return and how different factors shape return, reintegration and displacement outcomes in South Sudan. This study contributes to addressing this gap by focusing on the experiences, perceptions and needs of displacement-affected persons within South Sudan. The narratives produced through the study contribute to "centring perspectives that are often rendered inaudible in dominant framings and issues that have been historically invisible" (Kihato 2007; Zaatari 2014 cited in Saltsman & Majidi, 2021, p.3), such as, in the case of South Sudan, the perspectives of displaced women or persons engaging in circular and cross-border movements. This approach comes with the risk of producing "standardized displaced 'life stories' as a discrete narrative genre" (Kindersley, 2015, p.203). Our study mitigates this risk by accounting for the diversity and complexity of the experiences of research participants, and by questioning the descriptive labelling generally adopted by aid practitioners, such as 'returnee' and 'host community'. The rich narratives collected by researchers through semi-structured life history interviews, focusing on the course of individual displacement and individual case studies, have been used to render the heterogeneity of displacement and return experiences in South Sudan. These narratives highlight how individual trajectories of displacement and return fit within broader mobility patterns and household mobility decisions, and how they relate to the underlying policy framework and political context.

- The gendered dimension of displacement and return. One of the threads of this report considers the experiences of women whose lives have been fragmented by war, conflict and structural violence, who experienced different challenges than men during their migration, displacement and return, but at the same time displayed exceptional resilience. South Sudan's independence on 9 July 2011 has given "more power and opportunities to women",[9] such as representation in parliament, with close to one-third of the seats held by women (28.5 per cent in February 2021). However, the official end of the civil war in 2018 has not disrupted pre-existing patterns of gender inequality across all dimensions of protection: whether in terms of women's participation in public affairs and access to education, health, decent housing and land, or employment. World Bank data on primary and secondary school attendance identify a gap in literacy rates between girls (40 per cent) and boys (60 per cent). This inequality is also seen in the teacher workforce, with around 12 per cent of teachers in the country being women. Our study builds on existing scholarly

[9] Zoe Nichols, 'Women's Rights in South Sudan', The Borgen Project, undated (accessed 2 August 2022), https://borgenproject.org/tag/global-partnership-for-education-program/

work on the gender experience of displacement and return (see, among others, Grabska, 2013, 2014; Grabska & Fanjoy, 2015) to pave the way for a more nuanced understanding of the policy implications of returns, for men and women, in South Sudan.

1.5 Limitations and constraints

The study largely prioritised urban areas within South Sudan, namely Juba, Wau, Malakal and Kajo Keji. The sample is therefore not representative of the entirety of displacement profiles within the country.

The household survey included a module to explore individual mobility trajectories in further detail. Participation in this sub-module was voluntary, and only a few participants chose to provide detailed information. Samuel Hall follows a strict do-no-harm policy and its enumerators do not push to obtain answers where questions may cause discomfort and they systematically obtain informed consent to record. Therefore, the quantitative analysis did not provide detailed insights on individual displacement journeys, although this gap was addressed through the abovementioned qualitative semi-structured interviews and case studies. In hosting communities, with the notable exception of Kampala in Uganda, the sample consisted mainly of registered South Sudanese refugees living in camps. The validity of the findings is largely limited to those settings.

As a result of instability in Sudan in 2021–22, and associated access constraints, Sudan was not included as a research location. Data on Sudan is limited to KIIs conducted remotely and to secondary sources. KII participation depended on the willingness of potential interviewees to participate and respond. Researchers reached out to a broad range of stakeholders to ensure that a variety of perspectives were included.

Given the inability to conduct fieldwork in Sudan, and the fact that South Sudanese refugees hosted in Sudan may have different experiences and aspirations than those in the other countries studied, it is important not to extrapolate or apply these findings to refugees in Sudan.

1.6 Structure of the report

The findings section presents the three main themes of enquiry:

- *The individual and household level:* people's experiences of displacement, return and (re)integration
- *The community level:* the networks and services influencing (re)integration after return
- *The structural level:* the laws, policies and interventions in the region and in South Sudan

The conclusion closes with final reflections on the key terms behind this study, and on the narratives of solutions around repatriation, return and durable solutions in the South Sudanese context. It offers:

- *Recommendations* geared towards supporting mobility and protection for South Sudanese migrants
- *Two life histories of respondents*, one man and one woman, to close the analysis with the stories that the research team heard and shared in this study

A glossary of terms and the references can be found at the end of the report.

2 Findings: People

2.1 People's experiences of displacement, return and (re)integration: the gains and losses of mobility

The experiences narrated by research participants indicate that conflict and insecurity are still the predominant displacement triggers and that, similarly, the return of peace is a trigger for refugees to return from abroad. However, several research participants emphasised that civilians have been continually targeted by armed actors since 2013, leading to new displacement, and to the continued fear that "violence could happen again". In South Sudan's volatile context, mobility remains a coping strategy for many South Sudanese, often resulting in split families across locations in the country, and transnationally. This section discusses household mobility decisions with a focus on the impact that mobility has on men and women.

The shocks of the past years – violence, disasters and COVID-19 – have restricted the range of mobility options available to most South Sudanese. In the decision-making space that remains, men's decisions, as well as extended family and community decisions still largely determine the 'when and where' of a move. Men and women do not have the same level of access to extended family and community networks, and with distance and separation, these ties might break. This is another element that puts women at a disadvantage with respect to men, in a context where they are often less mobile. This section also discusses the situation of South Sudanese youth we interviewed, who find themselves unable to transition, as they would like into adulthood.

2.2 Factors shaping household mobility decisions

2.21 Why do people move?

Within the policy and programming worlds, conversations surrounding returns tend to hinge on 'push and pull factors' that do not reflect the complex web of motivations behind the decision to move (Oxfam International, 2019). When it comes to returns to South Sudan, the literature factors in insecurity, lack of food and water, obstacles to HLP, the difficulty of generating an income, insufficient schooling and marginalisation (Bohnet, 2016, p.15). Intention surveys carried out in May 2019 by UNHCR in all countries of asylum highlight the top reasons for planning to return to South Sudan, adding 'family reunification' to the factors mentioned. In some cases, however, refugees have little or no say in their decision making, and are forced to return, whether by security forces in host countries, because of political unrest, threats of arrest and deportation (IDMC, 2019), or because of the lack of access to services during COVID-19. All these factors were confirmed in our data.

In our survey, the reasons given by research respondents for leaving their last location to move to the location of interview was most frequently linked to the following:

- Conflict was the main reason given, at 44 per cent for the overall sample but at well over half of those who returned from Uganda (64 per cent), those displaced within/from Central (58 per cent) and Eastern Equatoria (62 per cent), and those who had arrived from Sudan (52 per cent).

- Hunger was given as a reason by 7 per cent of interviewed non-hosts overall, but 17 per cent of those who arrived from abroad and over 10 per cent of those who arrived from the Upper Nile and Warrap areas said they were motivated to move to escape hunger.

- Crime was reportedly a factor in deciding to leave their last location of residence for 11 per cent of respondents, but was close to twice as significant for those who arrived from Sudan (17 per cent) and the Upper Nile region (19 per cent).

- Family reunification was mentioned by 11 per cent of non-hosts overall, but by only 8 per cent of those who had arrived directly from Sudan.

The majority of those who were displaced externally spent at least eight years as refugees before returning to South Sudan, with peaks of more than 12 years and even decades. Time is both a factor in decision making and a determinant of reintegration. Previous research among South Sudanese refugees in Egypt and Uganda reveals significant generational differences regarding the desirability of return, particularly with regard to access to formal education and employment opportunities, language barriers and changing perceptions of a 'modern' way of life (Ensor, 2013). Duration in exile also influences in differing ways the kinds of factor that shape decision making, with those born in exile facing a different set of considerations to the more recently displaced. The longer the duration of displacement, the more likely it is that conditions and structures will have shifted in countries of origin, to the extent that some refugees may be seen as foreigners by their home communities (Lukunka & de Clercq, 2019).

2.22 Security factors and perceptions of the peace process

Our data indicate that population movements within South Sudan oscillate constantly between a highly compressed decision-making space leading to forced displacement or involuntary immobility and people's struggle to reclaim their own agency in determining when and where to move. The experiences narrated by research participants confirm that conflict and insecurity are still the predominant displacement triggers. Sixty-six per cent of survey respondents attributed their decision to leave their last location to conflict, the activities of armed groups or crime. Security comprises different interconnected elements, ranging from armed conflict to inter-communal tensions, criminality and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Several research participants noted that civilians had been more frequently targeted by parties to the conflict during the civil war that erupted in 2013, leading to new displacement. According to an IDP interviewed in Juba:

> *The war between Sudan and South Sudan was a war when soldiers would not attack civilians, we could stay in our original homelands because they wouldn't target us. But since 2013, the army doesn't differentiate between soldiers and civilians, this is why people live in the PoC site. We all mostly entered the PoC in 2013. (FGD 32)*

While conflict between the SPLA and the SPLA-IO become less intense after R-ARCSS, tensions have escalated between different factions of the SPLA-IO (UNMISS, 2020), leading an informant from a humanitarian agency in South Sudan to observe that "[internal fighting within] the SPLA-IO is still a major driver of conflict … South Sudan can still be considered an emergency context" (KII 25). The resulting insecurity, especially in the Equatoria states and along key roads, notably between Juba and Yei, is still causing the

displacement of South Sudanese civilians, both within their own country and across the borders into Uganda and Kenya. Moreover, localised conflict over resources, cattle raids and intragroup violence have not subsided after the signature of R-ARCSS, triggering what an academic informant referred to as "unnoticed displacement" (KII 27), often through *panya* (unmarked) routes in hard to access rural locations ('the bush'). Since 2020 devastating floods have further increased the numbers of people displaced by causing widespread destruction of livelihood assets, property and crops, and an increase in infectious diseases.

> *"We are afraid that violence will happen again"*

Mobility patterns are entwined with the wider peace process. Research participants were acutely aware of the complexity of the South Sudan political context and this affected their plans and expectations concerning mobility and returns. Respondents were highly ambivalent about their expectations of the peace process, and in general expressed a feeling of distrust and distance towards government authorities. Often, their perspectives were the result of individual trajectories. For example, those who in the past had been directly affected by conflict, violent disputes or cycles of revenge said that they had limited reasons to believe that the national peace process would have a tangible impact on their personal safety. Limited trust in government institutions, the failure of previous peace-building initiatives and a general dissatisfaction with the implementation of R-ARCSS make people particularly cautious and sometimes cynical about future developments. The words of two refugees interviewed in Ethiopia and of one IDP in Malakal summarise this general attitude:

> *We can't fully trust information when it comes to safety in South Sudan or even if [the government] say that there is peace now, because of the trauma we already faced there. Today they sign the peace agreement and a week later the war resumes. (FGD 6)*
>
> *[Community elders] always tell us that we should not go back until a peace agreement is fully implemented. Now it seems there is relative peace, but this is not enough. (FGD 35)*
>
> *We are thinking of going back to our homeland in Atar [Upper Nile] but we are waiting for peace to be implemented. We have rebels in our land. They have signed the peace agreement with the government, but in case of failure in the peace [process] they will attack the civilians. (FGD 27)*

So far, peace processes have failed to bring long-term peace to civilian populations. South Sudan has gone through several peace processes, both as an independent country and as part of united Sudan. The main landmarks are the 1972 Addis Ababa agreement, providing an interlude of stability between the two Sudanese civil wars (Collins, 2008), the 2005 CPA paving the way to independence, ARCSS in 2015 and R-ARCSS in 2018. Post-independence agreements have been described as "Juba-dominated elite-level power-sharing agreements", representing the interests of those powerful enough to control armed groups (Craze, 2020) and producing "a series of zero-sum struggles for power" (Craze, 2022b). According to an academic informant, "everyone is waiting for the next blow-up. The peace agreement is long dead and has been rewritten many times since 2018" (KII 24).

The failure of previous peace processes is a vivid part of the South Sudanese collective memory. The lives of our research respondents are full of anecdotes of misplaced expectations over previous peace agreements, and of mobility choices that they came to regret. For example, an IDP in Juba remembered that:

> *I was informed that the peace is coming. People in all areas abroad were being informed that a peace agreement had been signed. I heard it from the media. I decided to return with my family, all of us were happy to come back, but the situation we met in South Sudan forced us to leave again to other countries. In 2005, the situation was good, but then the war came again, and then we had to leave*. (SSI 27)

South Sudanese in displacement express a circumspect attitude towards forthcoming elections. Instead of considering 'returning home' as a viable option in anticipation of elections, as suggested by their political leaders, most respondents would rather wait and see whether the elections take place as planned and what the outcome is before making any definitive return decision. Worries about violence during the forthcoming elections and reluctance to return are linked to the experience of the past elections in 2010 that fuelled outbursts of violence in the country. As an IDP in Wau succinctly put it, "we are afraid that violence will happen again".

2.23 Socioeconomic factors and access to essential services

When the acute phase of a crisis is past, people tend to base their mobility decisions on access to services and on risk-spreading strategies. Inadequate services and a diminishing level of assistance in areas of displacement often determine mobility patterns. As a refugee community leader interviewed in Gambella explained:

> *The economic situations here in the camp make refugees move from one camp to another and from Ethiopia to South Sudan and again, back to Ethiopia. We are not getting good services here at the camp. No good health and education services offered to refugees by the Ethiopian Government and its partners like the UNHCR, which is in charge of offering services to refugees. Absence of these basic services makes people move from one place to another, hosting country and back to home country*. (KII 19)

The declining levels of humanitarian assistance in hosting countries constitute a push factor for many refugees to return, as described below in the case of access to education and as discussed in the literature. Within South Sudan, decreasing assistance in former PoC camps is pushing people to leave when they have the means and resources to do so. As illustrated by an informant, "When [organisations providing healthcare and water] left the Mangaten PoC in Juba, they left without any transition or other support. The lack of assistance pushed people to leave. As long as healthcare and water were provided, people did not decide to return. In the absence of these two services, many decided to go back" (KII 16). Similarly, the lack of viable livelihoods for those restricted to camps or settlements was encouraging displaced persons to move elsewhere, often splitting from the rest of their household. This is often the case of young men seeking better prospects in urban areas within hosting countries or in South Sudan, while giving up the limited assistance and relative safety of the camps.

> The *factors I would take into consideration before deciding to move elsewhere within South Sudan or abroad are the availability of healthcare, school for children, food, and security. But when I came back [from Uganda], none of these factors were available because there is no schooling during the COVID lockdown, access to healthcare was difficult because one has to pay for it and food was also difficult to afford for my family.*[10]
>
> *People thought that the assistance package would sustain their needs or change their living standards [in South Sudan]. In a couple of years when the money [of the repatriation package] finished, they decided to come back as they couldn't afford the living by themselves. Those problems are like hunger, civil wars, drought and lack of education. These are critical ones and there is no way they will withstand it.*[11]

Our data point to education as the most important service guiding mobility decisions. The availability of free basic education, recognised as a right under the 1951 Refugee Convention, was often quoted by research participants as one of the reasons to move to refugee camps in neighbouring countries, and the abrupt interruption of those services during the COVID-19 pandemic has partly contributed to the recent waves of spontaneous return. Education is seen as an essential vehicle to status and opportunities, even though the quality of schools in IDP camps and to a lesser extent in refugee settings is widely recognised to be low and opportunities beyond secondary education are limited. Moreover, education is what allows South Sudanese youth to hold on to any hope for the future, despite an often traumatic past and an extraordinarily difficult present. According to a 22-year-old refugee interviewed in Gambella, "the pursuit of education opportunities has forced me to look for a place where I could study and learn. In my homeland [in Upper Nile], no one will be able to support my education or be responsible to help me get access to education. Because of that, I came to a refugee camp in Gambella, Ethiopia as an alternative to me" (SSI 13). However, youth aspirations and dreams too often remain unrealised. "In 2008 I made the decision to relocate to Uganda to be able to continue with the dream of pursuing my education", said a refugee in Uganda (SSI 12). Fourteen years later the research team met him in Kampala, unable to make ends meet and relying on the support of fellow urban refugees for food and shelter.

2.24 Household mobility decisions on return

Decisions about return are also shaped by broader mobility patterns. Much of the literature describes South Sudanese refugees and IDPs engaging in 'circular' and 'back-and-forth' returns. These mobile strategies often reflect a 'grey' period during which displaced people move regularly between different contexts, before sometimes settling more permanently, thereby creating their own durable solutions (Huser et al, 2019). This underlines how the decision to return, and indeed the returns process as a whole, is a gradual one that takes place over time, rather than a one-off event (Hovil, 2010). In other cases, they reflect the continuation of ongoing livelihood strategies that have for decades relied on transnational movements and connections that pre-date the conflicts that caused displacement in the first

[10] SSI19
[11] FGD4

place (Harild et al, 2015).

Household members move back and forth between locations of displacement and return (Oxfam International, 2019), especially during lulls in the conflict or periods of relative security (Kaiser, 2010). In other cases, households split themselves across these different locations. This multi-locational living expands access to simultaneous livelihoods opportunities in different locations, while also enabling some members of the household to continue with their studies and access improved health care as required.

That said, our research reveals that mobility patterns occur within limited boundaries because of the layers of shocks – conflict, violence, scarcity of essential services and frequent natural disasters, and COVID-19; they also occur without preparation. Mobility options are restricted in the presence of immediate triggers. For example, armed violence and floods cause civilians to flee without any possibility of anticipating their move and planning ahead. According to a female IDP in Wau:

> *When you see fire is burning and coming toward you, will you stay and wait or escape? First of all, I ran to the Wau cathedral. But I still didn't feel safe, because I remembered hearing that people were killed in the mosque and hospitals in Malakal and Bentiu. I immediately decided to move from the church to the POC because war is war. (FGD 11)*

Outside acute crises, our data indicate that South Sudanese households make more deliberate and carefully planned mobility decisions. However, recent years have been marked by crises that have made such planning unfeasible, further hampering any form of sustainable reintegration. These decisions are usually the result of a consultation process at the household or community level. A research participant from the Juba host community outlined his decision-making process:

> *I knew of the situation in Kakuma and had planned this for years. I decided to send [my wife and children] to Kenya although Uganda is closer because I had heard in 2017 that the camps were better in Kenya and provided more to people. I hesitated between the two but the information I received from other people with relatives in Kakuma there convinced me that Kenya would be the better option. We made the decision together. It was a family decision. We had a meeting, we all sat down, with the children. They were all very happy with the decision. They had actually been waiting for it so it was a relief for them as much as for me. We all knew this is something we were planning, even if we never talked about it in detail.* (CS 1)

Such an example suggests a fairly inclusive decision-making process within the household. But this is not always the case.

Decision-making power is often allocated unevenly among household members. It tends to be concentrated in the hands of men. When a father or a husband is present, he is usually the one expected to make mobility decisions for the other household members. There are countless references to 'fathers' decisions' and (to a lesser degree) 'husbands' decisions' in the narrated experience of research participants. The way in which mobility and displacement journeys are narrated suggests that these decisions are often accepted

passively by other household members. Refusing to do so could come at the price of being cast off by the family and losing access to fundamental networks of support. Women are in a subordinate position: they may acquire ultimate decision-making powers only when they become household heads as a result of their husband's absence. As a woman refugee interviewed in Uganda put it:

> *At first it was my father [who made decisions], then when I got married it was my husband but since we separated with my husband in Juba, I have made all the decisions concerning me and my children. (SSI 13)*

In many cases, not only are movement patterns the man's decision, they are also that of the extended family and community networks who determine the 'when and where' of a move. Such networks comprise male members of the extended family, religious leaders, elders and other community actors. These networks are complex and extend across considerable distances, connecting people living in South Sudan with members of their communities and extended families who are displaced throughout the country or who have sought refuge in neighbouring countries (Gidron & Carver, 2022). Family obligations are felt regardless of distance, and Western notions of 'close' vs 'distant' relatives do not apply. A research respondent in Malakal told of the fundamental material support and advice that he received from a relative living in Khartoum, with whom he had had no prior contact.

Men and women do not have the same level of access to these extended networks: men's networks are wider and spatially more spread out; women's networks are more limited and local. This seems consistent with men's traditional role, which is more outward-looking and more visible in the public sphere, while women's positions have historically been more confined to the domestic space (Hutchinson, 1980). Moreover, these extended family ties may break. This is another element that puts women at a disadvantage with respect to men. Women who do not abide by social norms, especially concerning marriage, risk being marginalised and cut off from family support. A woman interviewed in Juba, the daughter of a single mother and a victim of domestic violence, had no recourse to any form of support from her relatives. She intended to move to Uganda to afford her children a better education but had no resources to move and received no assistance from family members who were already living there as refugees. She separated from her husband and now lives with her elderly mother, five out-of-school children and no support from her extended family:

> *My relatives are irresponsible, they move all the time […] We had many relatives [In Juba] but no one wanted to have us with them […] I [now] live alone with my children. I don't support my mother, it's the other way around; she supports me. (SSI 32)*

These community decision-making processes are made in the interests of the group and entail careful deliberation and a weighing of the pros and cons of different options. Women are not the only ones affected; young people are too. Informants pointed to the role of informal leadership structures in influencing mobility decisions at the community level. In these cases, mobility decisions are made for the entire group. For example, a refugee in Ethiopia observed that:

> *Community and religious leaders have a significant role when deciding on the return. This is because they command a lot of respect through their knowledge and wisdom. People listen to what they say. In our*

> *community as refugees, we have a council of elders who advise young people and the community at large on some issues pertaining to return.* (FGD 35)

Community networks are a means to minimise risks by keeping the group informed and cohesive. However, in some cases, people feel that their individual agency is compressed by the decisions of community networks, as well as by the policies of government or humanitarian institutions. Some research participants recalled past experiences that suggest a passive acceptance of decisions made for them by other actors: "The UNHCR decided to relocate us to Kakuma in1993" (FGD 1); "a soldier was directing us and we spent three days to proceed to Setenya and Ikotos, later moving to Chukudum" (SSI 54).

2.3 Split households and gendered experiences: "The war divided us"

2.31 Split households within and across borders

South Sudanese mobility patterns lead to dispersal of household members across vast geographical spaces. Overall, 44 per cent of survey respondents had left some family members behind as they embarked on their latest migration. These family splits can be involuntary, the result of acute crises – such as fighting, floods or COVID-19 – or have some degree of voluntariness. In general, voluntary family splits are motivated by the need to access essential services in camps and other displacement sites, while other household members maintain family and community ties by remaining closer to places of origin or seek livelihood options in urban areas. This can be conceptualised as a strategy to distribute risks. The survey showed that returnees in Wau and Malakal were more likely to have moved alone or with only part of their household compared with returnees interviewed in Juba. This suggests that locations with a comparatively lower level of safety and services availability are less likely to attract entire households. (Although, as we show later on, many refugees have moved to Juba despite the fact that they consider the area to be unsafe, as the availability of services has attracted them despite the risks. This shows the complexity of decision-making processes and the varying importance of risk versus economic or livelihood security.) When not dictated by external circumstances such as conflicts and disasters, the choice of locations is determined by safety considerations, access to services and opportunities, property and assets, and access to networks of support at the community level. When they succeed, these strategies contribute to the material safety of the whole split household. As noted by a refugee who returned to Kajo Keji and left his family in Uganda:

> *[We] benefited from the separation of the family. I am currently supporting them in Uganda every month. I am able to send them 50,000 UGX [roughly USD 15] every month, which can cater for their diet at home and buy other things which can support them in the house. The money can also help for the education of other cousins we have at home and medication because food here in Kajokeji we can get from the gardens.* (CS 13)

The way in which families split is highly gendered and embedded in decades of movement (RLP 2002). Women tend to remain in camps with children, while adult males are much

more mobile. Families split both within South Sudan and across borders. By scattering across different locations, household members seek to minimise risks and maximise access to opportunities and services, but this also weakens intra-household ties, especially when family separation is long-term. The decisions to move away from other household members may entail a great deal of pain and cause ruptures within the household. A male IDP in Wau recollected the moment when he separated from the rest of his family:

> *I saw that the situation in the church [where me and family sought shelter] was still not safe, so I decided to move to the UNMISS PoC but my family disagreed. Instead, they suggested that we should go to Uganda because some relatives are there. I Insisted that we should remain in the country by staying in the PoC, but my wife rejected the idea and a few days later she moved with my two children to Uganda while I remained in the PoC for almost two years […] [My wife and children] are not willing to come back because of the uncertainty of the situation.* (SSI 45)

This recollection illustrates disagreement within the family, a woman's agency and independence, and a man's attachment to a place despite the lack of safety and services for his children. At the time of the interview, this man had not seen his wife and children again and kept contact with them by sporadic phone calls. Decisions to 'stay' are often less tied to rational cost–benefit calculations than to a quest for belonging and identity. This is more frequently the case with men. An IDP and former government official interviewed in Wau narrated a similar experience: "I sent [my family] to the PoC while I remained [in the village]. I was frustrated and almost gave up because all my properties were looted, but I decided to go back home even if there's nothing there, while my family are in the IDP camp" (SSI 36). Young men who are not in education tend to express a similar desire for purpose and independence: "I decided to come back here to look for some work and keep me busy", said a young IDP returnee in Malakal who had no prospects in Ugandan camps (FGD 27).

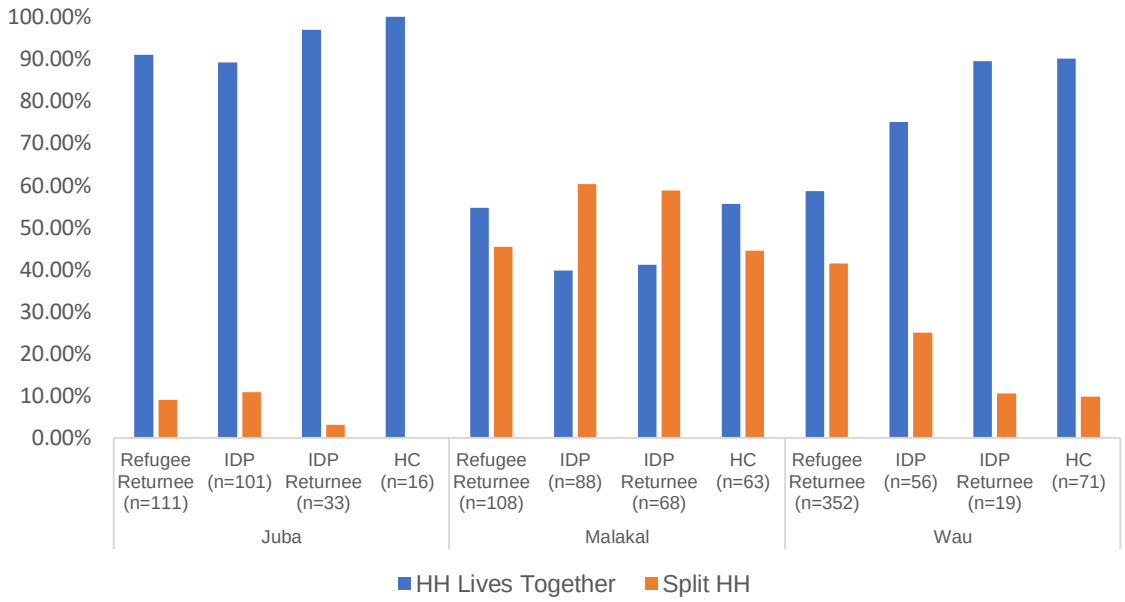
The loss of meaningful family contacts as a consequence of 'split' strategies is recurrent throughout our sample. In some cases, respondents had spent years without seeing or talking to close family members after they parted ways. One refugee in Kampala spent 20 years without knowing the whereabouts of his family members and whether they were still alive, after they lost track of each other while running for their lives during an attack on their village (SSI 11). This dispersion of household members is seen as a normal part of South Sudanese life and a natural consequence of war. As plainly observed by an IDP in Malakal:

> *In 2013, after the conflict, I moved from Atar [Upper Nile] to Juba with my mother and my brother. The rest of my siblings remained behind with our father. The war divided us.* (CS 8)

Our data indicate that 28 per cent of households surveyed in South Sudan are split – but our qualitative interviews suggest that this figure may be higher. As shown in Figure 3, the proportion of 'split households' is significantly higher in Malakal, where insecurity and a lack of opportunities have motivated households to adopt split strategies. The figure is also significantly higher in the sub-population of IDP returnees, suggesting that this demographic is less likely to take definitive return decisions as a result of persistent instability within most of South Sudan. Moreover, a higher percentage of female-headed

households reported that their family was split (31 per cent of such households compared to 24 per cent of male-headed households). Furthermore, our data suggest that female-headed households are more vulnerable to shocks from having split family units compared to male-headed households. Indeed, female-headed households are consistently more likely to report that their economic situation is difficult than male-headed ones, especially among IDP and IDP returnee households. Perhaps linked to the above, male-headed households have a higher average number of working members. Female-headed households display lower asset ownership – a proxy for wealth - in all locations.

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents reporting that household (HH) is either together or split, by location and displacement category



2.32 Gendered experiences of displacement and return: "I am the mother of my children and I am also their father"

Previous research has shown that displacement experiences, as well as programmes and interventions in displacement contexts, affect gender identities and relations (Oxfam International, 2019). In South Sudan, gender roles are strictly defined. However, life in displacement and exile can alter traditions, creating a rupture between how gender roles are perceived across space ('at home' and 'in exile') and time (across different generations). As refugees, South Sudanese people experience different cultural contexts, and gain some access to education and exposure to gender programmes carried out by agencies. Living in displacement therefore changes the way in which they perceive their gender roles, creating tensions with more established patriarchal norms.

In camp settings, young South Sudanese men are often deprived of the possibility to become 'proper' adults according to traditional cultural norms because of gender empowerment and disempowerment processes, changing customs, lack of opportunities and inability to marry (Grabska & Fanjoy, 2015). Men are left in a limbo characterised by uncertainties over their role and identity. This has important implications for return decisions. For young refugee men, return is often seen as a way to assert their identity and take ownership of their lives. However, as some of these young men return to South Sudan to "complete their path to full manhood", they often end up feeling "displaced within their

own communities" (Grabska & Fanjoy, 2015). After years and entire lives in displacement, they have to learn or re-learn their 'home community' culture and adjust to traditional expectations around the role of men as a "life-protecting force" (Hutchinson, 1980). Eventually, men who are unable to fulfil the requirements of hegemonic masculinities, usually through militarisation or education, are marginalised (Grabska, 2014). This peculiar masculine quest for meaning and identity has surfaced in our data. A 41-year-old clergyman (SSI 27), who had spent his whole life in displacement, moved to Juba in 2020 with the goal of pursuing his studies, despite having seven children to support and no livelihood prospects: "My plan is to finish my studies. I completed my previous studies but I realise it's not enough for me. I need to go for further study, if I get a scholarship. I want to upgrade my diploma of theology for it to be a formal degree." In this specific case, education was a last-resort vehicle to social status and a sense of purpose in a life shattered by displacement and multiple failed returns. Similarly, another male respondent moved away from his close family and returned to Wau to retake control of his life and distance himself from family responsibilities that he could not fulfil. Having failed to access livelihood opportunities and his family's previously owned property, he preferred to remain aimlessly in Wau and avoid confronting his family's disappointment and his aborted path to adulthood (SSI 163). These examples show the difficulty of living up to social expectations about 'proper' masculinity, and how 'return' and mobility are at the same time a potential avenue to fulfil these expectations and a means to escape them. This type of behaviour seems consistent with mobility practices for certain ethnic groups as observed in the pre-independence period.[12]

Women's mobility space is significantly more constrained. Often, women and children are the ones who are left behind, usually in camps and informal settlements, by more mobile male relatives. In the words of a 42-years-old refugee woman interviewed in Uganda, "It's usually men who are daring and decide to go back [to South Sudan]". Displacement has both a disempowering and an empowering effect on South Sudanese women. Displacement exposes women to heightened risks of SGBV and breaks down the social and family networks that they rely on, but at the same time it may open new opportunities and decision-making spaces. The way in which gender norms are renegotiated during displacement, and the impact of women's participation in education and empowerment programmes offered by UN agencies and NGOs in camp settings, have contributed to extending to certain women some of the rights and prerogatives traditionally restricted to the male sphere (Grabska, 2013). By accessing such programmes, women, especially those coming from rural areas, are exposed to concepts that might be new to them, such as human rights, entrepreneurship, financial planning and financial independence. Some of these opportunities result from men's still dominant but increasingly fragile role in South Sudanese society. Moreover, the split of household members across vast geographies has turned many displaced women into household heads (Bubenzer & Stern, 2012). Up to 80 per cent of displaced households in South Sudan are reportedly female-headed (Oxfam International, 2019). Many of the women interviewed for this study had not seen their husbands in months or years and could therefore assume higher levels of responsibility.

[12] "The Nuer [men] have always felt themselves free to wander as they pleased, and if a man is unhappy, his family sick, his herds declining, his garden exhausted, his relations with some of his neighbours uncongenial, or merely if he is restless, he moves to a different part of the country and resides with some kinsmen." See Evans-Pritchard (1940).

This is how a 45-years-old woman who returned from Uganda described her situation:

> *I am free to decide where I can go; I don't consult anybody because my husband is not alive. I am the mother of my children and I am also their father. So, I make my decisions independently* (SSI 21).

A female IDP interviewed in Malakal reacted differently to the loss of her husband: "My husband died and in Ethiopia if you have no husband you can't survive in the Anyuak tribe because you can't collect firewood. Only men can do it. [Men] have no respect for women*"* (FGD 39). Women who do not possess sufficient social and financial capital, and uneducated women, are left at the margins. SGBV, marital rape, forced and early marriages were widely reported by research participants, both in camps and in return settings. Despite mobility constraints, women need to preserve a basic mobility space to ensure their own survival – for example, in the context of firewood collection or access to essential services. But this space, however limited, is often too dangerous. According to a 33-year-old refugee woman interviewed in Gambella:

> *If mothers cannot go to the forest and collect firewood to cook food for their children, then who else is safe in this community? I have not many words to say because the problem is obvious. For example, last year a woman I know personally was killed while she went to a nearby forest to collect firewood for cooking*. (FGD 35)

Women's support and solidarity networks are key to coping with these risks. A woman living in the former Wau PoC told our researchers:

> *[The] Women's group [in Naivasha camp] support me materially in terms of soaps, sugar and tea leaves from our women's Sanduk [collective fund box]. This Sanduk supports everyone in the group.* (SSI 66)

Nevertheless, many women's networks and communities may have been deliberately disrupted, or disrupted as an indirect consequence of conflict, and women have had to leave them behind, as part of a life they had to flee from. But even in displacement, our data suggest that women are more capable than men of establishing location-based support systems transcending clan and nationality divisions. The structure of South Sudanese families has traditionally allowed women to build horizontal relations and networks outside of the stricter clan and age hierarchies that characterise male society (Hutchinson, 1980, p.371-387). For example, although South Sudanese societies are patrilineal, in some ethnic groups, women can still maintain strong ties with their families of birth (Baak, 2016). Since the family unit is generally polygamous, these ties are extensive and they are not restricted to specific age groups. This partly explains why, in displacement contexts, South Sudanese women tend to create flexible social arrangements cutting across age and ethnic lines. Such arrangements are essential in negotiating their survival and create a common sense of belonging, rooted in a shared location and a shared displacement experience. According to a refugee woman interviewed in Kampala:

> *Where I am staying, there is no difference, we are all united. The [refugee] women have some [business] projects and they apply to UNHCR as a group. For instance, we applied for skills training on*

sewing machines so that we can earn a living as a group. A united group of refugees from South Sudan, Congo, Eritreans and Somalis. We are all united because we are all refugees. There are no differences of separation or tribalism. It's not there. (FGD 7)

Box 3. SGBV and mobility

Sexual and gender-based violence has affected women and girls nationwide, as more than half of women aged 15 to 24 have endured such violence (UNDP, 2017). This is a direct repercussion of the cycles of violence and displacement marking the South Sudanese population.

Between 2013 and 2018, all sides in the conflict used sexual violence and torture as a military strategy to control the population and disband communities. The cycle of protection issues that ensues follows girls and women across time and space. This has led the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan to describe the "hellish existence for women and girls with widespread rape being perpetrated by all armed groups across the country" (UN News, 2012).

SGBV is a consequence of conflict, but it is also highly prevalent in the domestic sphere. Some research respondents had observed an increase in SGBV cases since 2020. This was attributed to the strain on family resources and lack of food in a context of decreasing humanitarian aid and COVID-19, as well as alcohol consumption and drug abuse. Domestic violence, marital rape and sexual assaults in the public space, as well as forced and early marriages, were consistently reported by research participants. Some have reported higher risks of SGBV in South Sudan compared with countries of asylum, thanks to the comparatively better security context in official camps and to the comparatively higher resources invested in SGBV programmes in refugee settings. Some respondents in Bidi Bidi and Kakuma nevertheless indicated that acts of SGBV were also perpetrated by host community members, especially during firewood collection.

SGBV strongly limits the mobility space of women and girls and influences their attitudes and perceptions towards returns. Observing that SGBV and forced marriages are more prevalent in South Sudan than in Uganda, a refugee in Kampala claimed that "if gender violations are solved [in South Sudan] and people sensitised not to commit those violations, then refugees can consider returning home" (FGD 7).

Conversely, abusive situations and domestic violence can trigger a decision to escape. A refugee in Bidi Bidi remarked that "one thing that makes women move from Bidi Bidi is domestic and gender-based violence. Women decide to run to their relatives so that they are not beaten by their husbands" (FGD 8). These decisions can only be enacted when victims and survivors can access family support networks or specialised service providers, including safe shelters for victims and survivors.

2.4 Unpacking returns to South Sudan: "No place like home"?

2.41 A multiplicity of returns

The literature has shown how displacement "fractures the deep bond between people and home", indicating that the condition of identity and belonging experienced by displacement-affected persons may not correspond to the 'home' that was imagined in exile (Zetter, 2021). To meaningfully restore a sense of identity and belonging, returnees need to deploy adaptation, creativity and improvisation, challenging simplistic notions of return as 'homecoming' to an idealised status quo (Hammond, 1999). This is especially the case when restricted options limit the decision-making space, for both men and women. The 'place' where returnees move to is not only a material location, but also the product of available options at a given time, and of the active construction of new ties and identities through social activity and individual agency (Grabska & Fanjoy, 2015).

South Sudan is experiencing a multiplicity of movements – circular and transitory – that are often labelled as 'return'. They do not lead to a definitive emplacement in people's 'areas of origin' and are often not intended to. They should be seen as one more step in people's complex and open-ended mobility trajectories. The notion of 'place' is key to understanding the nature of these movements. In South Sudan, return is not a process whereby displaced persons quit one place for another. On the contrary, it is a way to nurture social ties and seek opportunities in two (or more) places at the same time. This is very clear in the case of pendular movements between camps and areas of temporary return. Camps are places of relative safety and "a channel to the outside world" where refugees can acquire knowledge and capital (Carver & Ruach Guok, 2020, p.5). Areas of temporary return are where translocal social bonds are created and new opportunities explored – usually by returnee men. Our survey data are consistent with this observation as they show that 40 per cent of returns are motivated primarily by the need to maintain or increase social and family connections, while a similar percentage is primarily motivated by safety considerations. Back and forth movement is also an effective vehicle for encamped communities to acquire information on the situation in South Sudan, especially when trust in official sources is low and rumours circulate widely. This pendular approach entails deliberate and strategic choices aimed at maximising the benefits of being in two places at the same time. As stated by a returning refugee interviewed in Juba who still held his registration card, "we keep one leg in Uganda and another in South Sudan, because of safety reasons" (SSI 75). As in this example, refugees who move frequently across borders take great care to ensure that their pendular mobility does not entail a loss of status or a loss of access to aid in the country of asylum. They do so by being present in the camps during verification exercises and avoiding informing camp authorities and authorities in South Sudan of their intention to move. When this strategy fails, the ability to move back and forth across borders is compromised and the consequences can be extremely harmful. A former refugee who returned to Juba explained: "My child was born in 2018 [in Uganda] and I've never seen him. I've only seen photos because now my ration card is dormant. The UN carried out headcounts several times and I was not present." (CS 3)

The notion of returning 'home' is inherent in durable solutions policies and programmes. But in South Sudan, this notion makes little sense and is incapable of reflecting a generations-long history of displacement, migration, intermarriage, urbanisation and exile.

According to one informant, “the idea that there was a period in the past when people were living in certain places, from which they were displaced and to which they want to return – it’s nonsense. It doesn’t capture realities” (KII 40). To quote another academic informant, “there is very little to return to, most property has been destroyed and most valuable land has already been commodified” (KII 24). Those who returned in the past did not usually choose to live on ancestral clan land. They often rented their accommodation on the outskirts of towns. Rural areas suffer from unaddressed safety concerns and a near-total absence of services and economic opportunities. This is even more visible now compared to the pre-independence period. Back then, the South Sudanese economy was growing, but in the past decade it became increasingly fragile (Pape & Finn, 2019). Therefore, people rarely move with the idea of returning to a rural ‘home’. When they do so, their expectations are often shattered. A refugee who returned from Kenya to Sudan in 2015 narrated his experience:

> *As soon as I heard that there was peace in South Sudan, I came back because I love South Sudan. There is no place like home. I returned with dreams of getting married. But at the same time, I found out that there is no place to work or do anything here, and that my [school] certificate couldn’t help me here. The most difficult part of this was the fact that whatever plans I have made have been destroyed.* (SSI 31)

The camp is the place to return to when projects to relocate temporarily in South Sudan fail. In the accounts of many study participants, the place to move back to was not an idealised ‘area of origin’, but the camps where IDPs and refugees could claim access to essential services, however limited, and where many of them spent most of their lives. This shows the importance of pursuing translocal and transnational mobility strategies. It is even more relevant when age is factored in. South Sudan has one of the world’s youngest populations. Most of its youth were born in displacement and have no direct experience of their families’ areas of origin. In some cases, they have never been to South Sudan. The camp is the only ‘home’ they have ever known. For them, return may be a strategy to mitigate the uncertainty of living in exile, but it may also create a new form of uncertainty, as they will be returning to an unknown context where their chances of succeeding are low (Grabska & Fanjoy, 2015). Nevertheless, families sometimes expect young men to carry out tasks that are antithetical to their ambitions and to the urban or camp environment in which many of them were raised: “Some returnees sent youth [to rural areas] to take care of the cattle. This has been the case since the start of the conflict.” (KII 36)

2.42 Planning and resources mobilisation

Return journeys are extremely costly. People must fund transport, pay for their own food, pay bribes at border posts and checkpoints, and often rent their accommodation. The increase in commodity prices as a result of COVID-19 has reportedly made return more prohibitive for displaced South Sudanese. Overcoming these challenges requires careful planning, taking into consideration financial, logistical and administrative aspects. A returnee interviewed in Juba, whose family was still in Kakuma, intended to plan for the return of his children to South Sudan. In his view, this needed to happen before his older child’s final high school year, as applicants with Kenyan high school certificates might face barriers being admitted to South Sudanese universities. His thought process illustrates the complexity of putting return plans into effect:

My son this year will go into Form 3 [the penultimate year of high school] and soon he will be coming back [to South Sudan]. But this also depends on whether I can pull the money together as I don't have savings right now, all my money gets spent at the end of the month. I have one year to plan for the return – from Kakuma for one person this would cost around $300. Why is it so expensive? When the exchange rate fluctuates, and there are issues due to the scarcity of fuel, the transport costs go up. There are often people on the way that ask for money so you must also plan for bribes. In the past Kenyans could take a lot from a South Sudanese, but I have heard that because of bilateral political talks, some of these amounts have decreased, the Kenyans disturb us South Sudanese less. (CS 1)

Returning is a highly risky endeavour, and transportation costs are an insurmountable barrier for many:

> *To get transport, you need to plan at least two years in advance. And even so you may not succeed. When moving from [Kakuma] you will be turned down at roadblocks and you will lose money. Some of us stayed here for more than 22 years without going back to South Sudan because of transportation hurdles. (FGD 18)*

Funding return journeys often requires selling assets, food rations or even ration cards, and mobilising resources from the extended family or the wider community. In the words of a refugee interviewed in Kalobeyei: "I will go to my kinsmen in the community and talk to them to help me fundraise for my journey. If they help me with some money, then I will leave immediately" (FGD 3). People with limited access to community support networks, including women, are therefore less able to mobilise resources. Those of them who wish to return are thus facing additional hurdles and are more likely to find themselves in situations of involuntary immobility.

2.43 Varying degrees of voluntariness for return

The degree of voluntariness underpinning return movements is variable. Decreasing humanitarian assistance in countries of asylum, notably in Uganda, and the closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role. Had the level of humanitarian assistance remained stable, many returnees would have preferred to remain in countries of asylum. Therefore, a large portion of recent waves of spontaneous returns was determined less by an improvement in conditions in South Sudan than by growing unmet needs in exile. In the words of returnees interviewed in South Sudan:

> *Food rations were keeping us [In Uganda] in the camp. When this was taken away, then we found no reason to stay in [a] foreign land. We would rather come back and struggle at home. The only difference is that there was security in Uganda, unlike here [in Juba]. (SSI 19)*

> *The UN reduced the ration size per person and refugees [in Uganda] went almost six months without food or assistance. So I decided with my uncle to return to South Sudan. (SSI 62)*

> *Most of the refugees who are repatriating their children are looking for education opportunities. Because of the lockdown in Uganda, schools are not operating. They think it's better to come back with the kids to South Sudan, rather than staying in the settlement and doing nothing*.

(KII 31)

Our study did not identify specific occurrences of forced returns. However, participants recalled past experience of deportations and forced returns**,** notably from Israel, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo**.** They were acutely aware of the possibility that the asylum space might become more restricted, for instance after hearing announcements made by the Kenyan authorities concerning camp closures. In the pre-independence period, facilitated and assisted repatriation programmes from Kakuma were not clearly communicated, and this gave rise to a feeling of coercion and to misunderstandings concerning the role of humanitarian agencies. According to a refugee who returned from Kakuma to Juba in 2008:

> *[The authorities] told us clearly that they were closing the [Kakuma] camp for [South] Sudanese refugees because peace had come to the country. The only people who would remain in Kakuma were the Ethiopians, Eritreans, Congolese and Somalis ... It wasn't me or us deciding but UNHCR decided for us. If I was given the choice, I would not have returned. I would have remained [in Kakuma] to pursue my studies.* (CS 5)

Owning to a combination of a lack of viable choices, financial and administrative barriers to mobility, misinformation concerning asylum policies and return programmes, South Sudanese often move in the vast grey area between forced and voluntary returns. Access to information is crucial in safeguarding the genuine voluntariness of the decision-making process. Our data indicate that displaced South Sudanese do not rely on official information from public authorities, because of a widespread mistrust in government sources. International agencies are more often cited as a source of reliable information. For example, one resident of Kakuma expressed appreciation for FilmAid, a non-profit organisation partnering with UNHCR and seeking to provide objective information to refugees through visual media (FGD 3). Rumours circulate widely in the camps, however, especially through the radio and social media and include news of forced return or relocations. As explained by a refugee leader:

> *Last year Kakuma was supposed to be closed in June, and it was all over social media. This disrupted the minds of fellow refugees. Those who do not have hope back home seem worried because they do not know where they belong, since they were displaced while still young.* (KII 67).

Hence relying on individuals engaging in pendular movements and on community networks is extremely important to triangulate information and verify sources. According to a refugee in Gambella:

> *For us young people, we depend mostly on social media [such as] Facebook. But the problem with social media is that it is not reliable. To make decisions on when and how to leave, we have to verify [information] from different sources, for example by calling a friend to confirm whether the information is correct.* (FGD 35)

Persons with limited access to community networks and sources of information in other

localities are therefore at a disadvantage when it comes to weighing different mobility options.

3 Findings: Community

3.1 Meeting the most basic needs and negotiating (re)integration after return

The literature review – conducted by REF for this research – reiterates that successful (re)integration is a two-way process that relies not just on the actions and attitudes of those who return, but also on the readiness and capacity of communities to welcome returnees (UNHCR, 2005). A review of the literature indicates that few academic publications have looked at the impact on the wider community from a South Sudanese perspective – highlighting a gap which this study can contribute to filling. Another gap in the available literature on the topic is that it mainly focuses on the impacts of hosting refugees, while very little attention is paid to the impacts of hosting IDPs and returnees (Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2017).

The discussion on individual and household (re)integration has to be placed in a broader discussion of displacement-affected areas and communities, and their ability to support and welcome back the displaced. This conversation has to be localised and contextualised. From the literature, we know that many major and medium-size towns are in ruins, with few remaining inhabitants and many basic health, water and education facilities destroyed. The state is "absent in large swathes of territory within South Sudan, which further undermines effective service provision" (OHCHR, 2020). As a result, an estimated 5.2 million people are facing severe living conditions with no access to primary health care (40 per cent of the total population) or to protected clean water sources (60 per cent of the total population). Over two million school-aged children are missing out on their education, and one in three schools has been damaged or destroyed since December 2013 (UNICEF, 2017).

The literature and our data further confirm that food insecurity remains a major challenge for communities, and an obstacle to (re)integration. Humanitarian agencies estimate that some 6.4 million people – around half of the population – are severely food insecure, with some groups in Jonglei expected to suffer from the most extreme levels of hunger (OCHA, 2020a). Ongoing conflict, poor rains, floods and the arrival of large swarms of desert locusts are all contributing to further increase food insecurity. At the same time, government actors have been accused of instrumentalising the food crisis to marginalise dissident communities (OHCHR, 2020). Another key challenge is access to HLP**.** IDMC research found that, out of 80 per cent of IDPs who had property before displacement, 70 per cent reported that it had been destroyed. The challenge is worsened by a weak HLP administration and the lack of dispute resolution mechanisms, and by what IDPs in our data reveal are power dynamics that prevent them from being able to prove land ownership and reclaim occupied housing and land. Finally, the literature and our data suggest that the sustainability of returns is dependent in large part on access to livelihoods opportunities.

The next section will focus on the community dimensions of reintegration, and analyses specifically the physical, material and legal safety dimensions of (re)integration, as outlined by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) framework on durable solutions (IASC, 2010). Our findings will show that locations with comparatively better access to services are not necessarily the ones where research participants feel physically safer. This is notably the case with Juba. The lack of correlation between the three safety dimensions

complicates return decisions and undermines the prospects for durable solutions.

3.2 Displacement-affected communities' inability to support returns

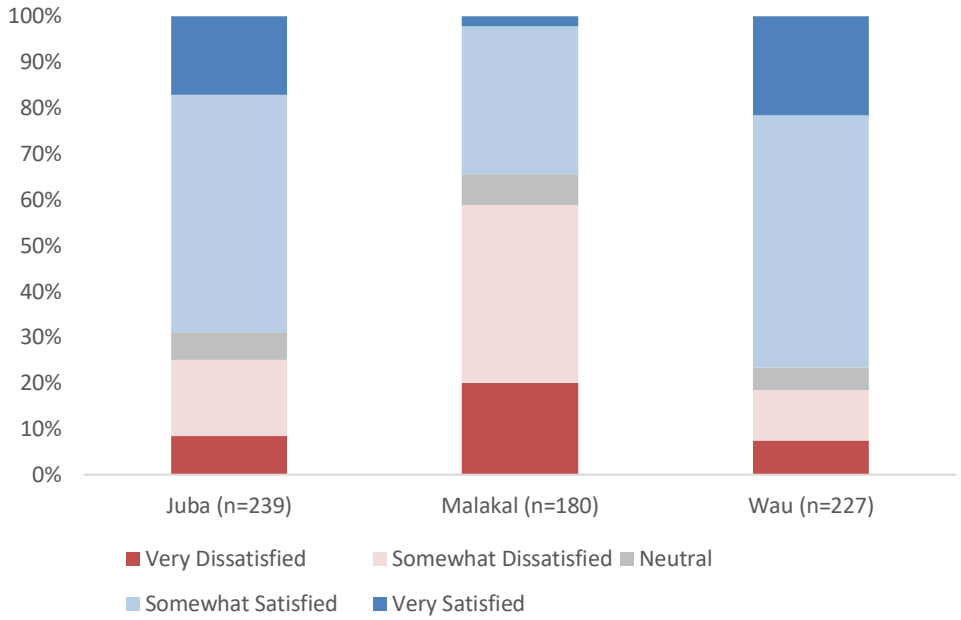
According to our survey data, 30 per cent of IDPs had previously returned from abroad**.** This indicates that returns may lead to secondary displacement when those returning – and their own communities of return – have no resources to cope with external shocks. This was illustrated by an IDP leader in the Juba PoC:

> *Last year, before the floods, those in Unity [state] would tell their families to join them there, that it would be better for them than sitting idle in the camps. "Come here, and be prepared for hard work, be prepared not to be supported" our relatives would say. In July 2021 the floods started. So after six months, the returnees became IDPs again, moving to another camp managed by UNMISS.* (KII 16)

3.21 Communities are largely dependent on aid for essential services

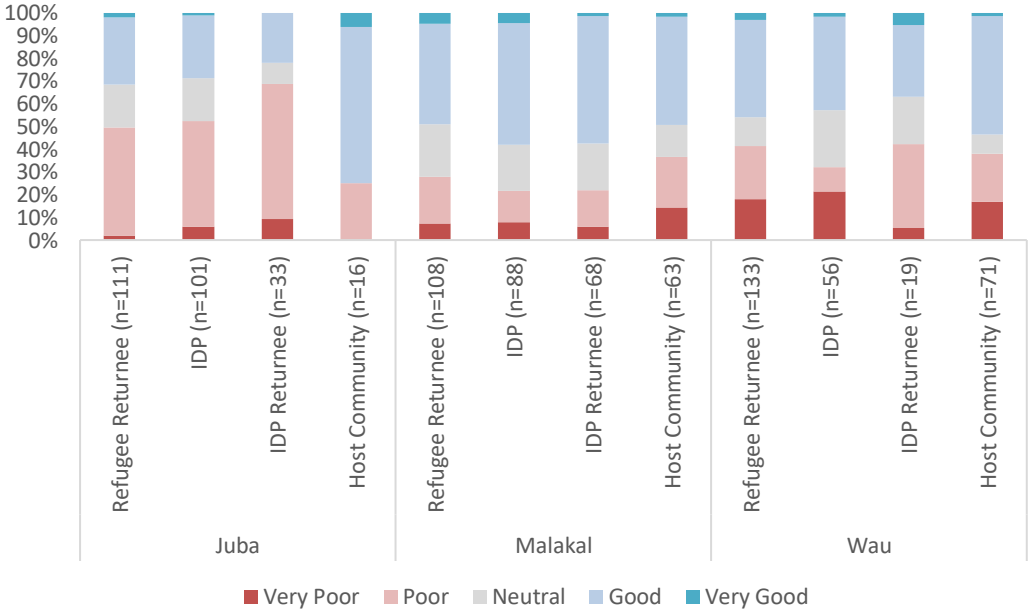
The healthcare system in South Sudan is one of the sectors entirely dependent on the support provided by international agencies. As the quality of healthcare is comparatively better in hosting countries, the result is cross-border movements to access medical care – for example, from Kajo Keji to Uganda. The choice of community of return will affect access to services – such as healthcare. The draw to urban centres is clear when looking at Figure 4. Overall, 69 percent of respondents in Juba said that the healthcare they had received was either satisfactory or very satisfactory. While populations in Juba were more likely to rate their health as poor (53 per cent of all respondents), they probably have access to better healthcare than in other areas, explaining one of the draws to the urban centre.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with healthcare by location



Note: This question was only asked of those who responded that they had accessed medical care in the past year.

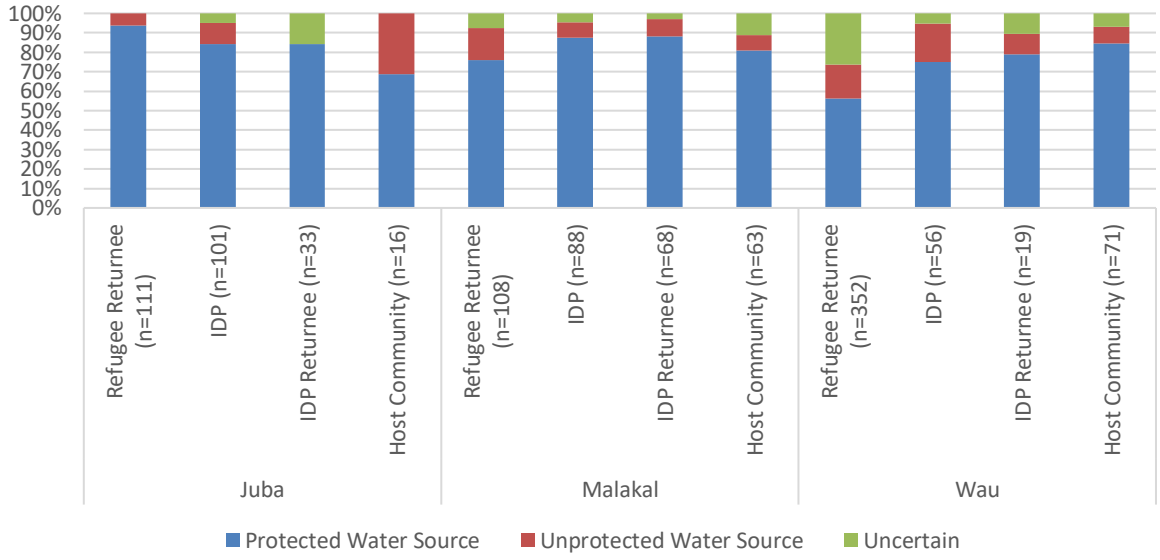
Figure 5: Health and wellbeing by location and displacement profile



Nevertheless, whether in rural or urban areas, access to water and sanitation remains a basic challenge to both health and economic stability. A wide variety of water sources was used across the sample, the most commonly cited being public taps (28 per cent), boreholes (26 per cent) and street vendors (18 per cent). Location was an important factor in determining how water was sourced. In Juba 50 per cent of respondents reported that they bought water from a vendor, in Malakal, 68 per cent sourced water from public taps and in Wau 36 per cent sourced water from a borehole. Wau showed the most variation in

water sources, with respondents in this location most likely to use unprotected water sources such as unprotected wells.

Figure 6: Usage of protected water sources by location and displacement category



Note: 'Protected' sources include boreholes, protected wells, vendors, pipelines and public taps. 'Unprotected' sources include rivers and unprotected wells. 'Uncertain' indicates water sourced from neighbours, donkey carts or other sources.

Overall, the sanitation levels are poor in areas where returnees live, either because of the lack of latrines, or because "toilets are full and difficult to remove" (SSI 17). People find themselves going to the bush, with open defecation spreading diseases, in a context where there is a lack of access to healthcare as well. This overall lack of basic infrastructure is a recurrent theme across the many dimensions of reintegration**.** We will now turn to discuss how this affects physical safety, material safety and legal safety levels.

3.3 Physical safety

3.31 The absence of basic infrastructure and the lack of trust in security providers

The absence of infrastructure and security services in areas of return, and a widespread lack of trust in state security providers is a major concern for displaced South Sudanese. So far, the peace process has done little to shift these perceptions. In 2022, a government commission report described the implementation of R-ARCSS as "slow, particularly in the critical areas of the Transitional Security Arrangements (TSA), the enactment of key pending Bills before the Transitional National Legislative Assembly [including the national Solutions Strategy], and the setting up of the Transitional Justice mechanisms" (RJMEC, 2022. p.iv). The same report observed that, although the Permanent Ceasefire continued to hold among R-ARCSS signatory parties, during the last quarter of 2021 deadly clashes between rival SPLA-IO factions took place in Magenis (Upper Nile), and inter-communal clashes occurred in Tambura, Western Equatoria State, Warrap State, Jonglei and Eastern Equatoria State, causing hundreds of civilian deaths. Where the status of cantonment sites

and training centres are concerned, the government commission reported that "many troops deserted and either went to their homes or elsewhere in search of food, essential life support commodities and shelter" (RJMEC, 2022, p.5). The resulting proximity between members of the armed forces and civilians is viewed with great concern by displaced persons and returnees.

Box 4. The transition of PoC sites: people's voices and implications for safety and returns

The most important factor for choosing a location to live, for South Sudanese interviewed in the survey, was security. This is the most basic condition driving return movements, but there are (dis)advantages with each assessed location. In refugee and IDP camps, a minimal level of security is usually guaranteed by law enforcement agencies, private security companies (such as G4S in Kakuma), UNMISS (in PoC sites) and residents' committees, as well as by physical infrastructure such as fencing and lighting.

The deterioration of the safety context in former PoC sites remains a major concern. IDPs living in the former Juba PoC told the research team that:

> *The camp is not safe, there is no fence. Anyone can come in and out. […] Since UNMISS left, it has gotten spoiled drastically. Safety has only gotten worse in the last three years […] There were two cases of rape recently. One of them involved a 12-year-old girl. [In both cases], the perpetrators were not found. (FGD 31)*

> *Gangs come in [Mangaten PoC] at night and everyone is very scared of them. There is no protection at all. (KII 16)*

According to an IDP who helped manage the Wau PoC, the civilian character of the site can no longer be maintained after the transition:

> *When UNMISS was in charge the camp security was in place and schools were functional. But after the government took over in 2020 things fell apart, there is no control at the gates and people entered the camp with their guns. That is terrible. (KII 12)*

Informants are particularly concerned about the potential transition of the Malakal PoC, the only one that is currently still managed by UNMISS, given the security context in the area. According to a humanitarian worker in Malakal:

> *A lot of us are concerned with redesignation in Malakal, because it's a recipe for disaster to tell you the truth. Because of all the issues between the different ethnic groups, the presence of peacekeepers provides protection. (KII 36)*

Residents in former PoC sites are seeking ways to strengthen their own security and self-protection. Residents in former PoC sites expressed the desire to leave the site, but often had no means to do so. Even when assistance is offered or promised, it does not meet the needs of specific demographics. A significant percentage of former PoC residents may remain, despite increasing safety challenges and diminishing aid.

3.32 The trauma of armed forces abuse and the psychological impact of structural violence

To complement our understanding of the physical dimensions of reintegration in South Sudan, we looked at Bohnet's (2016) consideration of the complementary psychological aspects of reintegration, in particular notions of home and wellbeing. Bohnet's fieldwork in Aweil, Bor and Juba showed a reluctance to return home because of a lack of trust in the peace process and the trauma experienced. Our data confirm that the traumatic memories of armed forces abuses are still fresh in the minds of the South Sudanese. An IDP who worked for two years in security and law enforcement said: "We were sent for missions to arrest people, when we got there, maybe it was someone who was innocent, but they would be forced to confess. I dislike all those things, we are torturing ourselves". (SSI 28)

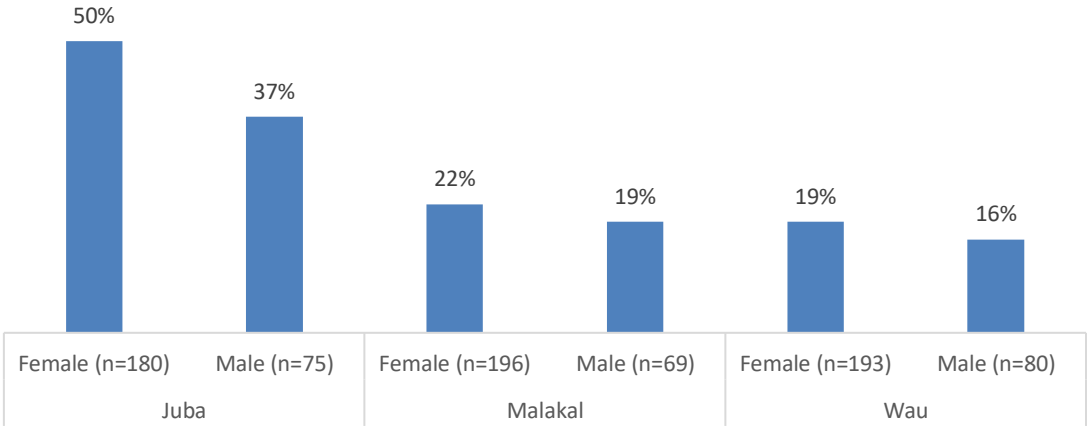
Unsurprisingly, research participants tended to see armed and law enforcement actors in South Sudan as a threat rather than as providers of security. This has an impact on return outcomes, leading to renewed displacement. A female IDP leader in Wau described how poor relations between armed forces and civilians hindered return prospects:

Many IDPs have returned to their habitual residential areas, others are even farming. But the challenge is the deployment of armed forces in the towns, which causes panic among the returning IDPs. Two weeks ago government forces were deployed south of town. This angered us, because some of the friends who returned are located in the place where the soldiers were deployed. As a result some of them started coming back to the IDP site. (KII 10)

3.33 The lack of safety in all locations and across displacement categories

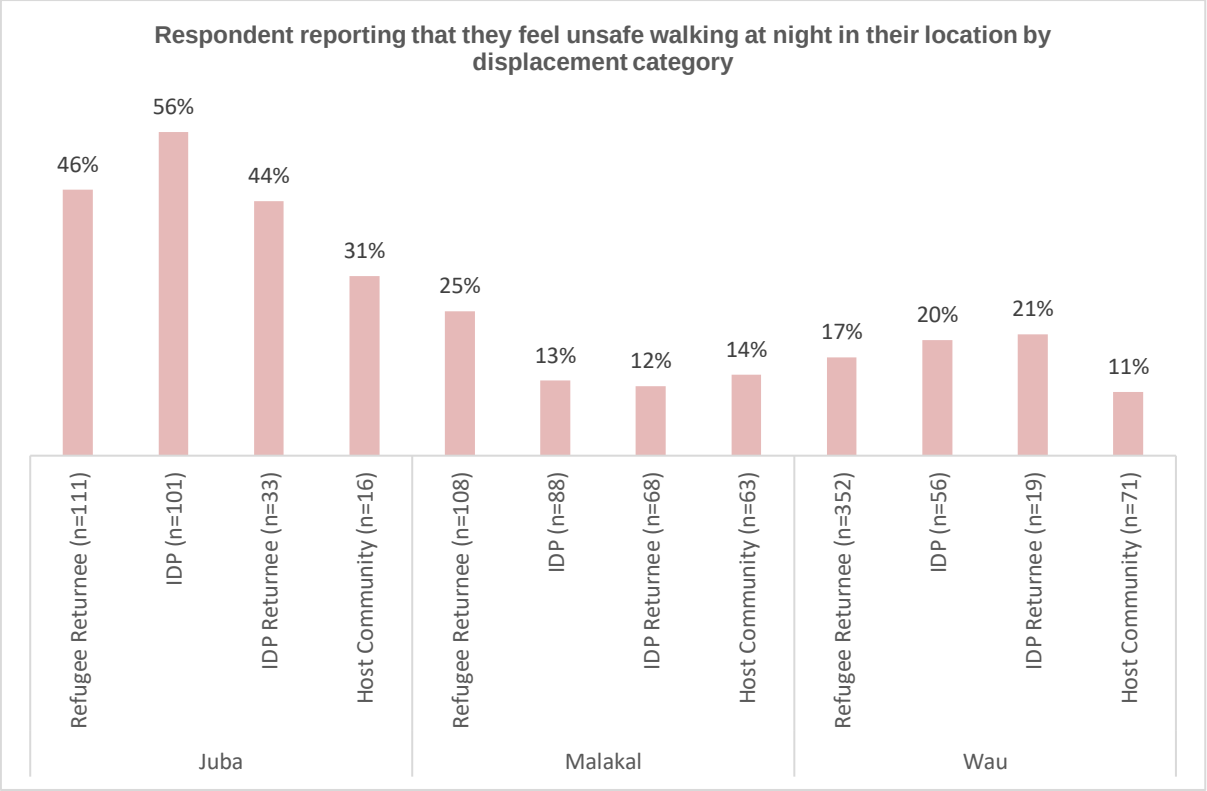
Overall, returnees find relative physical security upon return, but they do not necessarily find safety in their day-to-day lives. Survey data indicate that lack of safety is a higher concern in Juba than in other locations across displacement categories. In return decisions, the relative danger of Juba is offset by a wider access to services and opportunities compared to other areas within South Sudan. Location is a more significant factor than displacement category in determining whether a respondent feels safe, as represented in Figure 7. Across all areas, female respondents were more likely to report that they felt unsafe, for example walking at night, compared to male respondents. In our sample, 50 per cent of women in Juba feel unsafe at night, while this is a reality for one in five women in other locations – Malakal and Wau.

Figure 7: Proportion of respondents stating that they feel unsafe walking at night in their location by gender



If we now turn to displacement categories, returnees are among those who feel the most unsafe at night. In Juba and Wau, multiple displacement leads to greater feelings of insecurity, while in Malakal, returnees feel significantly less safe in their environment.

Figure 8. Proportion of respondents stating that they feel unsafe walking at night in their location by displacement category



Physical safety is in part the result of social cohesion at the community level. Our data indicate that, in refugee settings, community relations tend to be less conflictual where there is cultural and ethnic affinity between refugees and host, and some level of intermarriage

between different groups (notably in Uganda and Ethiopia). But significant tensions exist over a perceived feeling of neglect expressed by hosting communities in countries of asylum. In South Sudan, tensions between hosting communities and IDPs are less visible, largely thanks to the blurred lines between these different categories. However, qualitative data suggest that social cohesion is lower in areas where unaddressed grievances and disputes continue to trigger armed violence, such as Malakal and, to a lesser extent, Wau. In Juba, South Sudan's only large city, fractures along ethnic lines seem in part to be superseded by class-based divisions. Regression analysis confirms that, when controlling for location of interview, being in Wau and Malakal has a significant negative effect on perceived respect from neighbours.[13] This may indicate that community tensions are higher there than in Juba. In the rural setting of Kajo Keji, research respondents expressed higher levels of social cohesion and of safety. Moreover, regression analysis shows a link between safety and social integration: feeling respected by one's neighbours has a significant impact on feelings of safety.[14]

3.4 Material safety

3.41 Food insecurity at a crisis level in many communities surveyed

According to the reduced food coping strategy index (rCSI),[15] 51 per cent of returnees and 49 per cent of non-returnees were classified as at a crisis level or above crisis level of food insecurity according to rankings by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) (see Figure 10).[16] In Juba, respondents reported the highest proportion of crisis or emergency food coping strategies, with 69 per cent of the population reporting at least a crisis level of food insecurity. In Malakal, the rate dropped to one-third, the lowest in our sample according to rCSI, with 31 per cent of respondents reporting at least a crisis level of food insecurity. This may be related to aid received, as Malakal had the highest proportion of respondents reporting they had received aid in the past year (57 per cent of returnees and 60 per cent of non-returnees). Wau also reported a high proportion of respondents receiving aid in the past year but a higher proportion reported a critical and emergency phase rating.

[13] Regression analysis is a statistical method to estimate the relationship between a dependent variable (in this case, 'perceived respect by neighbours'), and a set of independent variables (in this case, the location of the interview and the respondents' characteristics). Since the dependent variable is discrete, a logistic model was adopted. Regression analysis was completed for a number of indicators to assess the relevant and affecting explanatory factors for these given variables. As such, for this section regression analysis was used to assess whether certain factors such as, but not limited to, location, language group and displacement profile were relevant in predicting whether a household feels respected by community or feels safe walking at night. Coefficients from the logistics regression were: Wau = -1.27, Z() = -3.71, $p < .05$; Juba = -1.24, Z() = -3.37, $p < .05$. Coefficients from the logistics regression were: Wau = -1.27, Z() = -3.71, $p < .05$; Juba = -1.24, Z() = -3.37, $p < .05$.

[14] Coefficient = 2.15, Z() = 5.2, $p < .05$

[15] The reduced Coping Strategies Index (rCSI) developed by CARE International is an experience-based indicator collecting information on household use and frequency of five different food-based coping strategies over the past seven days. The rCSI cut-offs are based on the FANTA/FEWS NET Household Food Consumption Indicator Study report and validation conducted by WFP.

[16] The IPC is multi-partner initiative for improving food security and nutrition analysis and decision making.

Figure 9: In the past seven days, have there been times when you or your household did not have enough to eat?

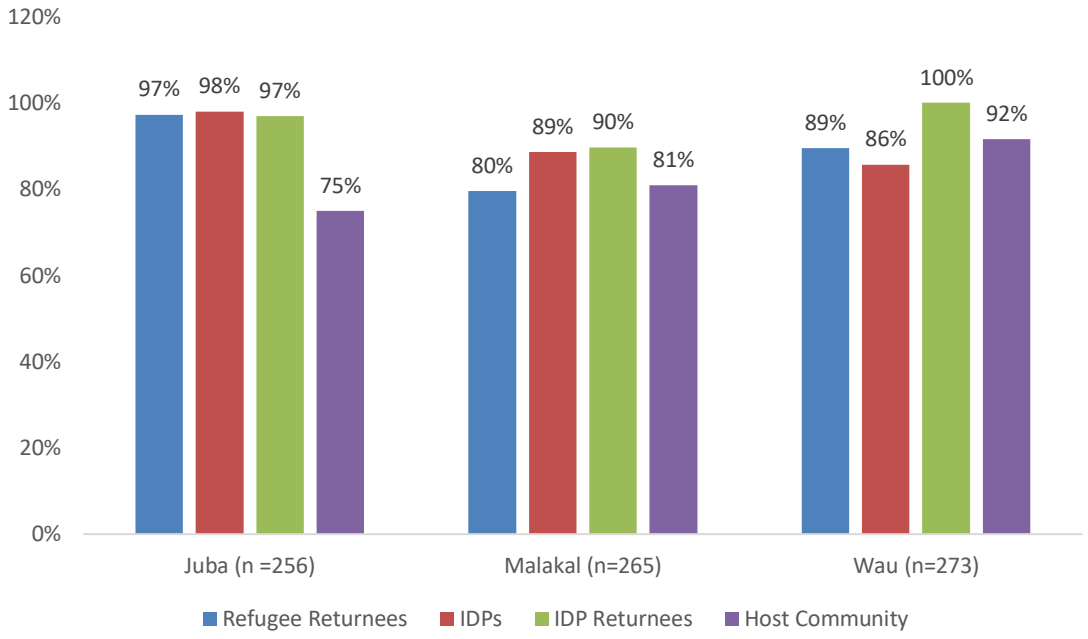
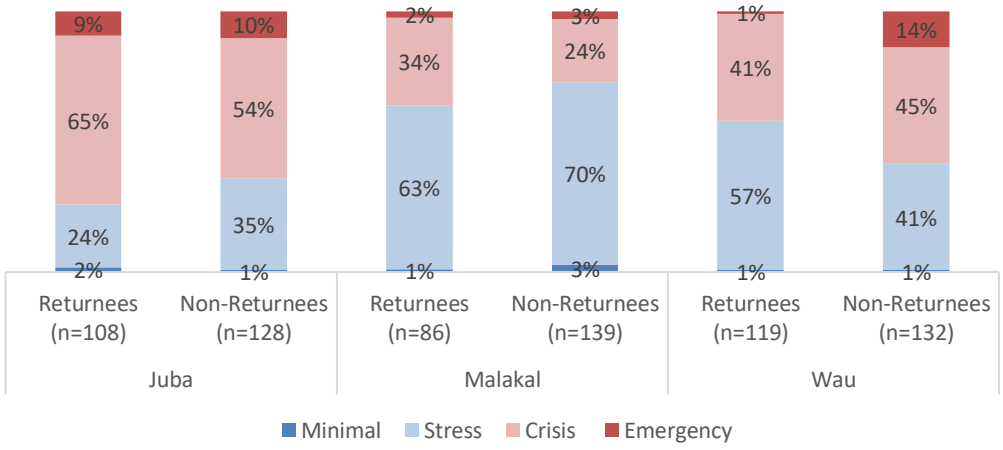


Figure 10: Indicative IPC Phase according to rCSI for returnees and non-returnees by location

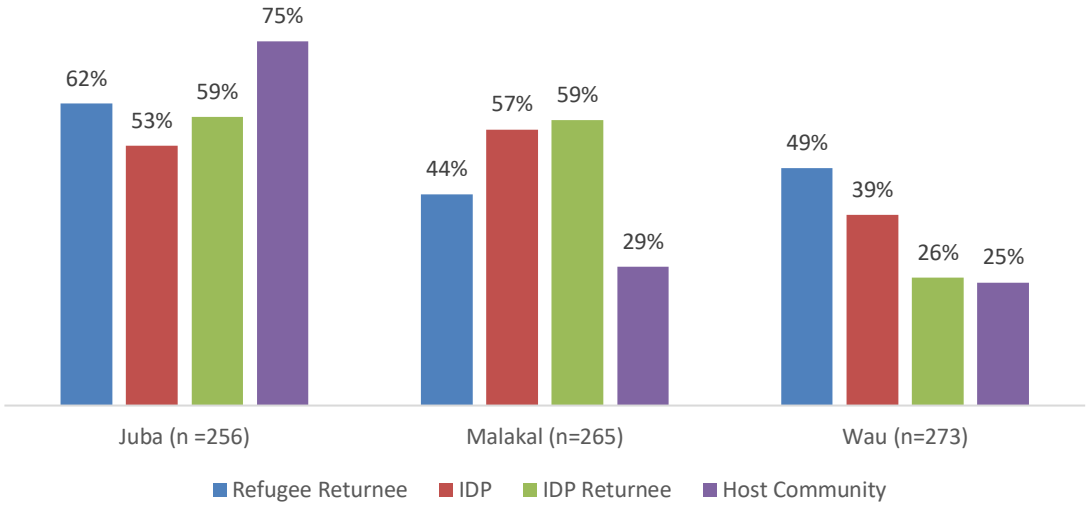


3.42 A result of the overall lack of income and livelihoods

Local economies cannot provide the displaced and returnees with enough jobs: only 45 per cent of households reported having a current source of income from employment or self-employment. The number of households reporting that they had a source of income was fairly consistent across the displacement categories, except for host community households – of whom only 32 per cent reported that they had a source of income. In Wau, only 27 per cent of respondent households reported a source of income from employment or self-employment. Fittingly, households in Wau were more likely to report having debt (26 per cent of households) than in other locations, suggesting that this location may present more livelihood and income challenges. This is complemented by the finding that lack of work

opportunities was the most commonly reported challenge of living in Wau (as reported by 42 per cent of households).

Figure 11: Existing source of income from employment or self-employment by displacement profile and location



The most common types of work were largely derived from trade (15 per cent of households) and agriculture (13 per cent of households). A large proportion of respondents (40 per cent) reported that their work belonged to an 'other' category, with many of these households selecting trading of charcoal or firewood, driving motorcycle taxis (*boda bodas*) and casual work as their primary form of income, as illustrated by the word cloud in Figure 12. Many of these work sources are informal, volatile and limited in productivity, suggesting that most populations are vulnerable to an unstable income or loss of income based on a downturn in the market.

Figure 12: Main source of income cited by survey respondents

The number of working household members was low throughout the sample, and under the average of 1 for all displacement categories, as seen in Table 3. The demographic variables which had the greatest impact on the number of working members per family appeared to be whether a family had a working member in an external location, or whether the head of the household was male. Households with male heads reported better financial conditions, and for every displacement category male heads of households had a higher average of working household members and reported better financial security.

Having a family working abroad or a male head of household is a stronger predictor of livelihoods than the composition of a family or level of education. The indicator which positively affected the average number of working members was whether a member was working externally, either in another part of South Sudan or outside the country. This suggests that this member provided for the whole household, or that the household had more resources and flexibility to enable more members to work, in both cases indicating that access to jobs is related to split mobility strategies. Neither family composition nor level of education of the respondent seemed to affect the number of working members per household.

Table 3: Average number of working family members by displacement category and associated breakdowns

	Average	Split families	Family member works abroad	Higher than average adults to dependents	Primary education or above (respondent)	Female head of household	Male head of household
Returnee	0.95	1.07	1.21	0.97	1.01	0.84	1.07
IDP	0.87	0.9	1.04	1.03	0.96	0.65	1.06
IDP returnee	0.94	1.09	1.25	1.12	1.12	0.80	1.06
Host community	0.75	0.83	0.7	0.74	0.79	0.64	0.86

Male heads of household reported better conditions on a number of financial security indicators. Across all displacement categories, male-headed households were less likely to report that their financial situation was difficult, especially for IDP and IDP returnee households (see Figure 13). They were also slightly more likely proportionally to report that their financial situation was stable,[17] although the vast majority still reported that their financial situation was unstable. These indicators confirm that female-headed households face more economic vulnerability and livelihoods difficulties.

[17] $p > .05$ for both relationships.

Figure 13: Proportion of households reporting that their financial situation was difficult by gender of head of household

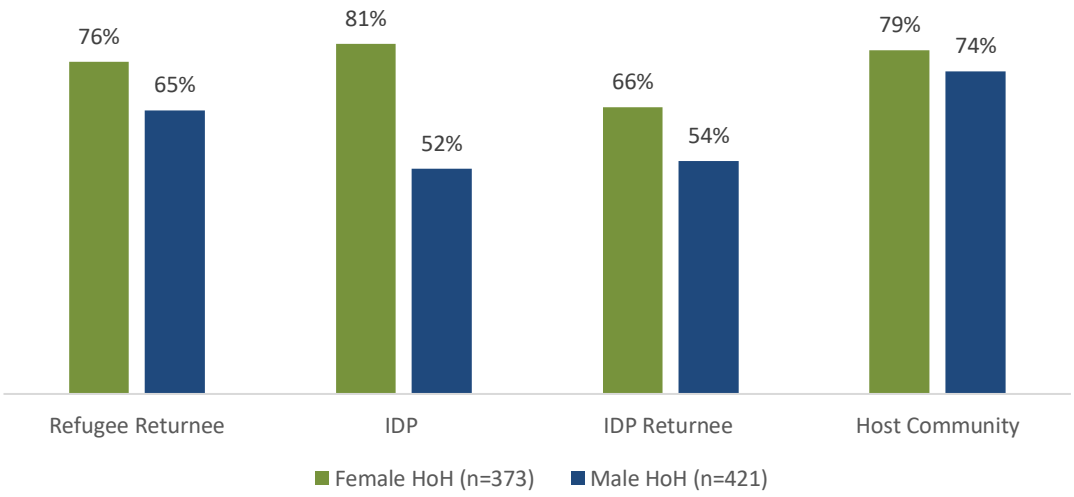
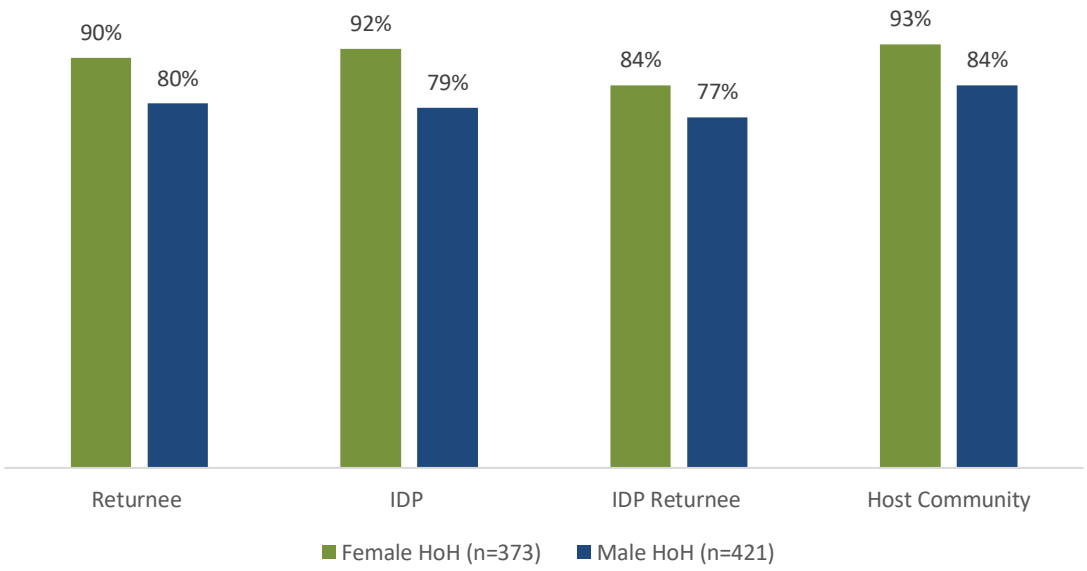


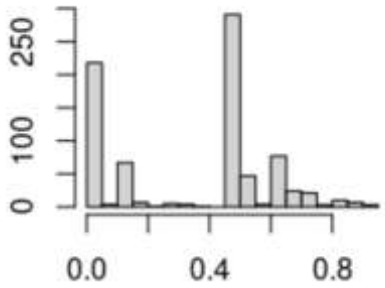
Figure 14: Proportion of households reporting that financial situation is unstable by gender of head of household



Our survey data point to significant inequalities in asset ownership. As asking directly for household income is often challenging for several reasons, ranging from a lack of numeracy to seasonal fluctuations to intentional or unintentional misreporting, an asset index is often a better way of understanding the relative economic status of a household. The following assets were considered in this index: car, motorcycle, bicycle, TV, radio, fan, basic mobile phone, smartphone, fridge, computer, internet access, sewing machine, agricultural equipment, barber's equipment, livestock or a generator. Among these items, the most important differentiators were the basic mobile phone or smartphone, along with a radio and, to a lesser degree, a TV, bicycle and agricultural equipment. All the other items on the above list did not display much variance (either almost everyone had or – more likely – did not have them) and they were automatically weighted less heavily for the calculation of this

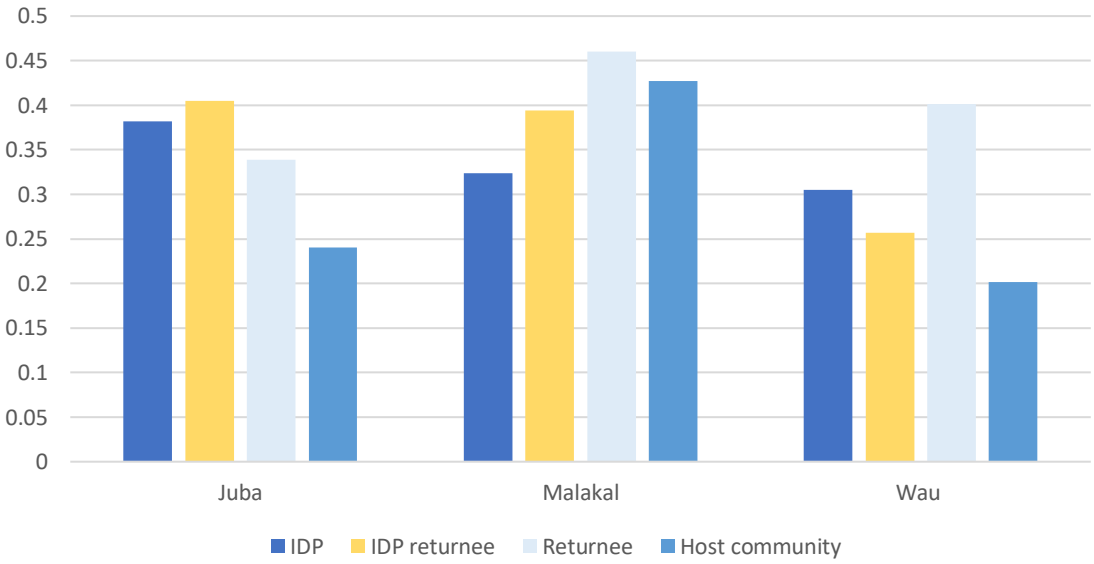
variance-based index, computed using principal component analysis (PCA). The results, seen in Figure 15, show a stark division between those who had practically no assets, and another group scoring towards the middle ground (1 is the perfect score).[18]

Figure 15: Histogram of asset ownership scores



Looking at these asset scores, we find that hosts are markedly worse off in terms of asset ownership than their displaced peers in Juba and Wau but not in Malakal (Figure 16). This illustrates that many displaced persons in South Sudan are arriving in, or returning to, a context of high needs even among the host community.

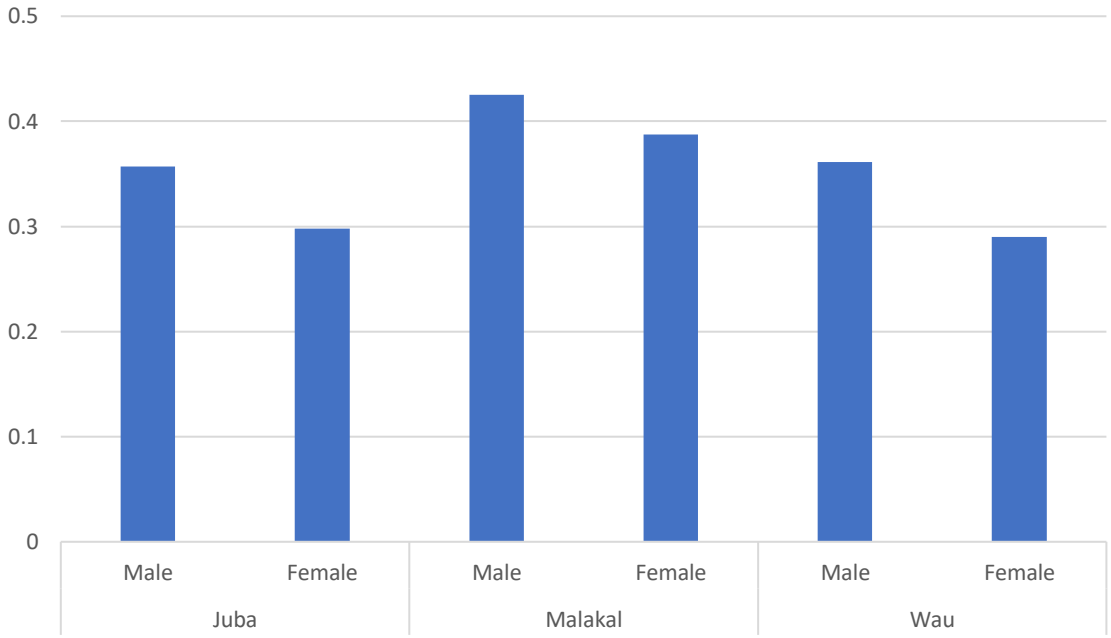
Figure 16: Average asset index score by category and location



Female-headed households display lower asset ownership than male-headed households in all locations (Figure 17).

[18] Asset ownership gives an indication of the longer-term economic status of a household and is less dependent on short-term economic changes compared with other wealth or poverty measures. For this study, an asset index was derived using principal component analysis (PCA). The wealth index as created is a continuous variable which can be used in correlations or regression models. The higher the score of the index, the wealthier the household. Additional information on the wealth index can be obtained in WFP (2017).

Figure 17: Average asset index score by head of household gender in each location



3.43 Education is a structural gap, and not equally available to all

Limited access to basic services and economic opportunities not only affect reintegration outcomes but are likely to reproduce cycles of generational poverty that will prevent future generations from fulfilling their basic rights – including their right to work and education. One reason for the return of young people to South Sudan is frustration with the education system, especially after primary level, and a general lack of opportunities in hosting countries. According to a professor at Juba University:

> *In Uganda they can provide education up to a certain stage, up to Senior 4 (10th grade, 16 years). Beyond that you are on your own, so if you don't have money and you can't go to school, you can't continue with your education and can't do courses. There is no job, no business, you can't set up a business easily, no land and then your life is in a hopeless state. We got some students who came here at Juba University. This is exactly what they told us. That they have nothing to do so they came here to join the University. (KII 76)*

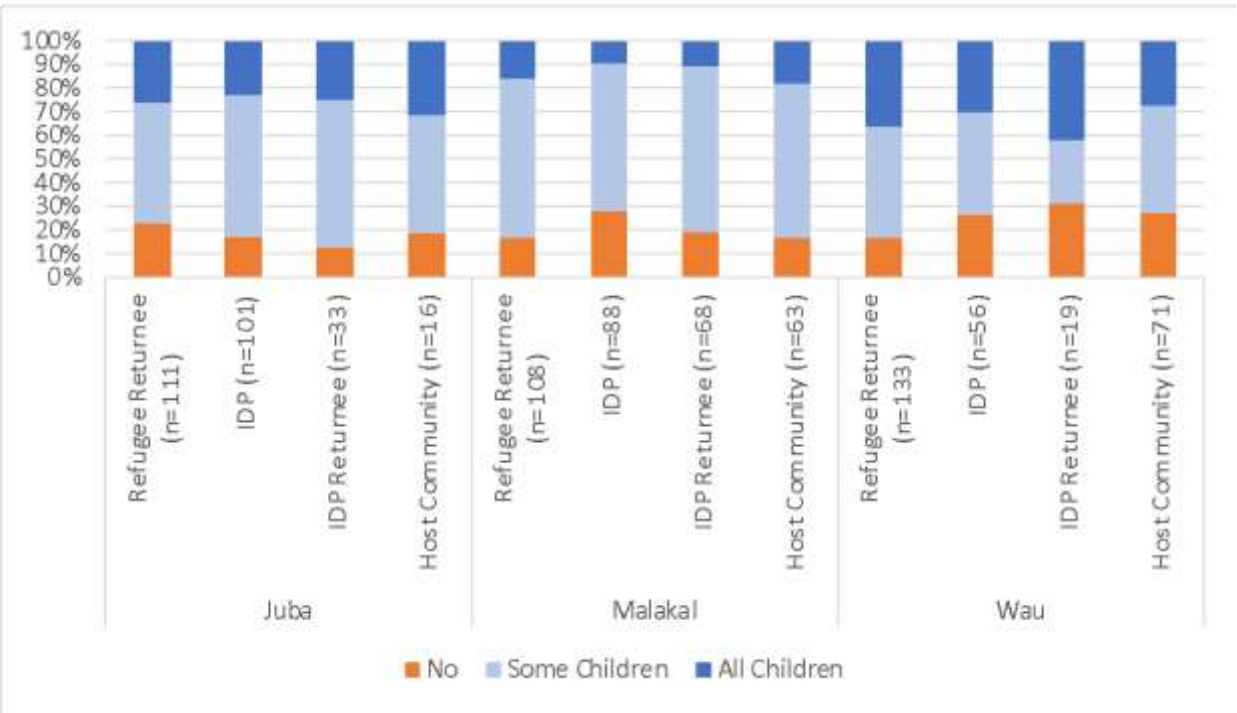
In South Sudan, the education system is extremely weak. According to UNICEF, the number of out-of-school children increased from 2.2 million in 2018 to 2.8 million in 2021, teachers are under-qualified and not regularly paid, school infrastructure is inadequate, and large areas within the country are heavily underserved. The education sector suffers from decades of conflict, disparities between rural and urban areas, and a long history of politicisation around the role of schools in imposing a hegemonic national culture. The types of school described by many research participants within South Sudan can be summarised in the words of an IDP leader in Malakal: "Education is very bad here. There are no schools. We have a local school organised by our community. It's done under trees." Similar challenges were reported in the former PoC sites in Juba and Wau, where education services stopped being provided after the transfer of responsibility from UNMISS to national

authorities. While the primary education sector has so far attracted some degree of international support in the most accessible areas, secondary education has been described as “a neglected priority”, with a gross enrolment rate of only 6.4 per cent for male and 3.5 per cent for female students (Windle Trust International, 2017, p7). The country is slowly trying to rebuild its education system after decades of conflict, but the challenges are daunting. According to a humanitarian worker:

> *Before 2016 we had a large number of schools. After 2016 the number dropped. The number of schools and the number of learners dropped. And in 2019-20 education was interrupted by COVID-19. However, the number of schools is starting to grow again. Some schools are being reopened. And some schools in rural areas have moved to slightly safer areas or to towns.* (KII 66)

Education is not equally available to all. While our household survey did not detect significant access differences correlated to the respondent’s displacement status, respondents in Wau and those from the Nuer group were the most likely to report that no children in their household had access to any education (17 per cent and 28 per cent of households, respectively; see Figure 18). These results suggest that schools are not equally available and accessible across locations, and that certain groups may face barriers (the Nuer are a minority group in all survey locations). Moreover, at the household level, education is rarely afforded to all children. In this respect, our qualitative data did not detect gender discrimination patterns. Age played a more important role, as first-borns appeared more likely to be enrolled in school, while younger siblings were often left out of school when the family lacked means and resources. This resulted in differential access to education among members of the same household.

Figure 18: Proportion of respondents stating that their children currently access education, by location and displacement category



In hosting countries, legal frameworks provide for refugees' access to education at least up to the primary level. However, our data indicate that this right is not fully realised because of the poor quality of education, to language barriers and to the need to present official identity documents to enrol in schools. Moreover, limited access to secondary and higher education and the protracted closure of schools during COVID-19 lockdowns are pushing young refugees to return. As previously noted by a professor at Juba University, these returns have exacerbated the pressure on existing school facilities, further constraining access to quality education within South Sudan.

The refugees who attended schools in the camps face three challenges upon return.

First, the education systems of South Sudan and hosting countries are not well integrated. Education certificates are not consistently recognised, especially between Kenya and South Sudan. As a result, students are often forced to repeat years when they move to a different country. This further delays their progress in the education system and complicates mobility and return decisions. According to a scholar from the University of Juba:

> *The education policies are still struggling, there is no clear education philosophy and this is causing another problem for return and reintegration. We are using multiple curricula; we have Ugandan curriculum and Ethiopian curriculum. Educationally, we are dividing the refugees. In South Sudan, the trend is that people are going to the private sector. (KII 29)*

Second, young people's education is almost entirely dependent on the presence of programmes run by international agencies. Such programmes are sometimes transferred to local implementing partners without sufficient emphasis on the quality of service provision, and are often not available upon return. Overcrowded classes, rundown facilities, under-qualified and underpaid teachers compromise the quality of education. According to a refugee in Gambella:

> *One of the disadvantages in this camp [Jewi] is the poor quality of education, especially pre-school and primary school. It was somehow good when World Vision was responsible for providing education, but it deteriorated significantly when this responsibility was given to the Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (DICAC). (SSI 79)*

Third, national curricula do not adequately consider the needs of refugee children. This is especially the case in countries that require families to cover the cost of school uniforms or to purchase additional teaching material. The introduction of a Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya has been met with scepticism by refugee parents in Kakuma. According to a refugee: "many parents said that CBC wastes their children and they will withdraw their children and run away with them" (FGD 4).

4 Findings: Legal and Policy

4.1 Legal safety

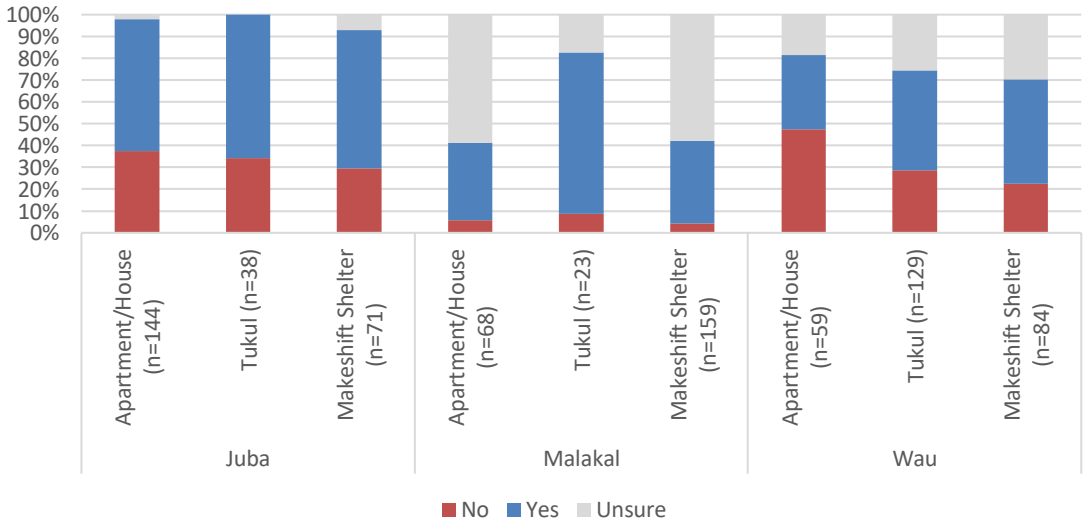
4.11 The inability to claim HLP prevents returns and challenges (re)integration

Many returnees interviewed in urban areas were unable to claim back their land and property. Others returned to find their houses burned down or destroyed. Having lived years in the camps, where shelter was provided for them, the qualitative data suggest that many expected to receive similar support in setting up their shelters upon return, or rehabilitating their damaged houses. Other refugees said they would not return because of the uncertainty and fear that they might find their houses taken by others. Not wanting to also risk losing their camp shelter, they remain in exile. The lack of information on their property, the doubts over whether they "will find someone has been given your house to stay in, and being told that your house is no longer yours because you left" (KII 74), and the risk of homelessness are all barriers to return.

> I thought the government would come to our support. To my dismay, it was not the case. We were just given food for six months by UNHCR and we were left on our own. UNHCR equally did not set up a shelter for us to stay in. We were told to join our relatives. But when we left the country for Kakuma, we were young, and we do not remember any of our relatives. (CS5)

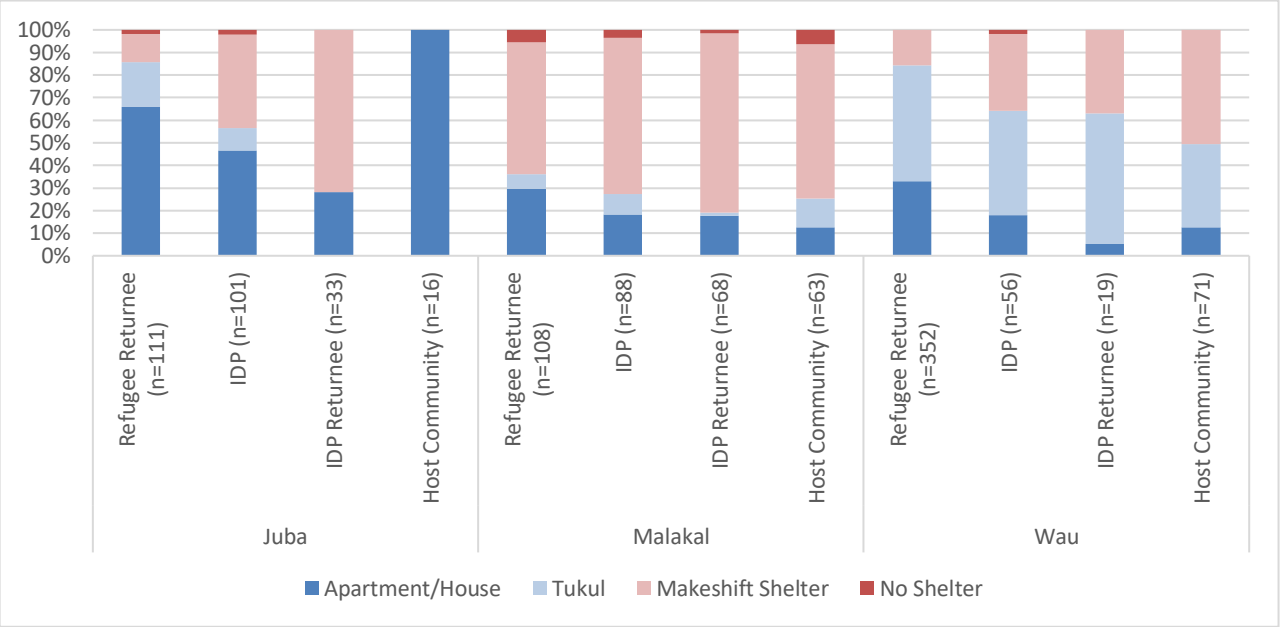
Tenure security is a concern for returnees. Households in Wau and Malakal are much more likely to report that they do not know whether they can remain in their current shelter for as long as they wish. Households in Juba report much higher security in their current tenure. In particular in Malakal, only 35 per cent of households housed in apartments or houses and 38 per cent of households living in makeshift shelters reported that they could remain in their shelter indefinitely (Figure 19). In Malakal, much of the sample was taken in PoC sites, which might reflect the volatility of tenure in this location.

Figure 19: Security of tenure by location and type of shelter



Generally, refugee returnees faced better shelter conditions than IDPs and IDP returnees throughout the sample.[19] As shown in Figure 20, in all assessed locations returnees were more likely to be housed in permanent shelters than were IDPs or IDP returnees. Overall, 70 per cent of returnees were accommodated in a tukul [round hut] or apartment/house.

Figure 20: Type of shelter by displacement category and location



Most respondents reported that their shelter type was inadequate. Respondents housed in apartments or houses were the most likely to report this (34 per cent of respondents), whereas only 19 per cent of respondents housed in Tukuls, and 10 per cent of respondents housed in makeshift shelters reported the same.

Similar concerns were raised in the refugee camps. South Sudanese refugees in Kakuma explained that, in the past, any destruction to households would be resolved through support from NGOs. But in the most recent incidence of flooding that swept away entire blocks of homes, no action had yet been taken, despite requests from block leaders (FGD 18). Other refugees in Uganda's Morobi camp explained to the research team that they were given plots and carpets, but had to source poles from the forest. This led to tensions with the host community and the need to sell their food rations to buy construction materials from them.

The downgrading of land and shelter in refugee camps across the years, from Kenya to Uganda, was noted by all. Whereas South Sudanese refugees in Uganda in the 1990s received land for shelter and farming, and to produce food crops to sustain themselves, access to food, water, land, firewood and poles for building shelter have become a widespread problem. The lack of and competition over land and shelter materials is a cause for concern and an obstacle to local integration and reintegration. Even those few still being

[19] Better shelter conditions mean the shelter is a permanent structure (either an apartment/house or a Tukul).

given shelter in the camps consider their dwellings as temporary shelters, not houses they can live in comfortably – “not the ones that are built with stones and where one can have carpets” (KII 74).

4.12 The formal justice system is lacking a strategy and capacity to address HLP challenges

Inadequate access to justice and remedies poses serious challenges to durable solutions prospects in South Sudan. This is particularly visible in the HLP sector. HLP challenges stem from the intersection of three main factors: the weak rule of law, the disruption of traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms as a result of decades of conflict, and the uncontrolled appropriation and commodification of land. Tensions over land are not separable from broader conflict dynamics and rivalries between groups. Tensions between communities can be a source of grabbing, and the displacement context has resulted in widespread secondary occupation of property and land. According to a government informant, “the courts are full of disputes” related to secondary occupations and land grabbing. While, on the one hand, this shows a certain level of trust in the judicial system, on the other, these disputes are rarely solved and formal HLP frameworks are almost non-existent out of urban areas. In the absence of effective dispute resolution frameworks, access to land and property is often determined by power relations. An IDP returnee in Wau lamented:

> *In some areas some people lost their land and they are not able to recover or claim it. This is because those who took their lands are from the ruling party in the nation and won’t allow previous owners to recover their land. (FGD 10)*

> *If the government wants to take the land, they will come with soldiers and tractors to force you out of the area.* (FGD 11)

Even when returnees resort to the court system, the process is often hijacked by powerful elites and armed forces actors. This is especially the case with disputes over valuable urban land, whose value has increased significantly since independence. For example, according to this returnee in Juba:

> *I have been over five times to court. It has now been adjourned again for the sixth time. The justice system is favouring those who stole my home. I have deeds and papers. The other side made new papers and claimed the house for themselves*. (FGD 32)

According to research participants, community-based dispute resolutions mechanisms in rural areas, based on the mediation of trusted traditional authorities, are generally more effective in restoring rights and treating people fairly, at least when disputes involve members of the same group and there is a trust-based relationship between community members and their leaders**.** However, community-based mechanisms to address disputes are less effective in South Sudan than in refugee settings. According to the account of research participants, disputes in refugee camps are less likely to lead to violence. This is generally attributed to the rapid intervention of refugee leaders capacitated by the interventions of humanitarian agencies. When these mechanisms are dysfunctional or break down, the consequences can be catastrophic, as shown by recent security incidents

in refugee camps in Northern Uganda, which led to the destruction of shelters and cycles of revenge (UNHCR, 2020e).

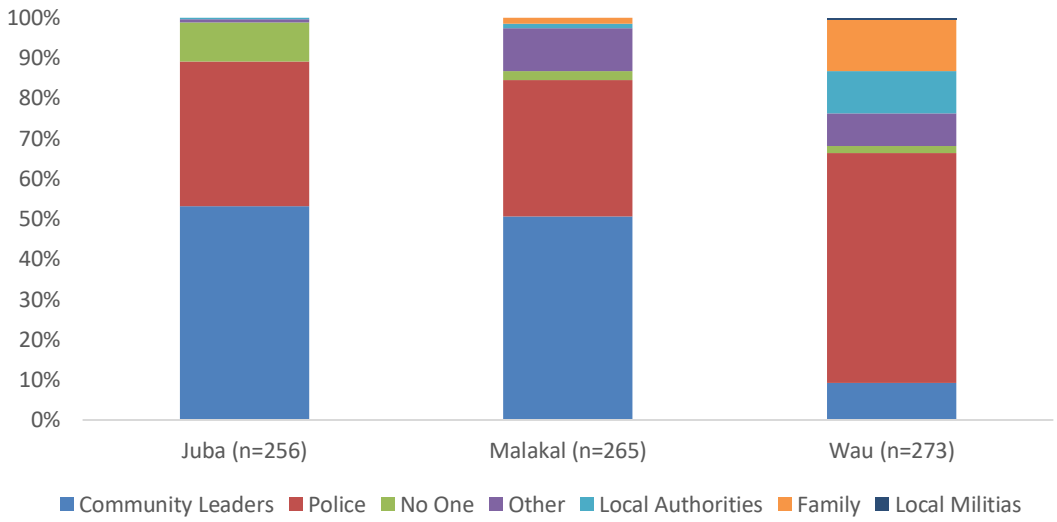
Women face additional vulnerabilities in accessing justice and reclaiming HLP**.** Women's inheritance rights are often infringed by customary practices preventing them from inheriting land from their birth families, while customary norms traditionally protecting widows' inheritance from their deceased husband are breaking down in urban contexts where land is in short supply (Deng, 2021). Moreover, women with no recourse to family networks and the protection of male relatives can see their land taken away without due process. According to a humanitarian worker:

> *You have a lot of cases in Unity State of widows that had their land taken because it's a familial household. Local government authorities just take the land, it's brutal.* (KII 36)

HLP rights are a key determinant of displacement patterns and contribute to inform people's choice (or lack thereof) around returns. Residents of former PoC sites often cannot return to their places of origin because their land is occupied by people with political or military power and connections. The implementation of the formal justice system is heavily skewed towards elite interests and it is vulnerable to corruption and bribes. Conversely, in rural areas where land is less valuable and informal mechanisms are still functional, it is easier to claim HLP rights. The paradox is that the same rural areas are much less attractive to prospective returnees, because of the lack of services and opportunities and the absence of the state.

When encountering a threatening situation, populations across all locations are most likely to turn to either community leaders or the police, suggesting that there is trust in community conflict-resolution methods and government sources (Figure 21). In Wau, households are much less likely to turn to the community leaders than to police, suggesting that there may be less trust of local leaders in this location. Across the study locations, 9 per cent of respondents in Juba reported that there were no figures to turn to, while this was only reported by 2 per cent of respondents in Wau and Malakal. In Juba, 14 per cent of returnee respondents reported that that there were no authorities to turn to in case of threats, markedly higher proportion than in Malakal and Wau.

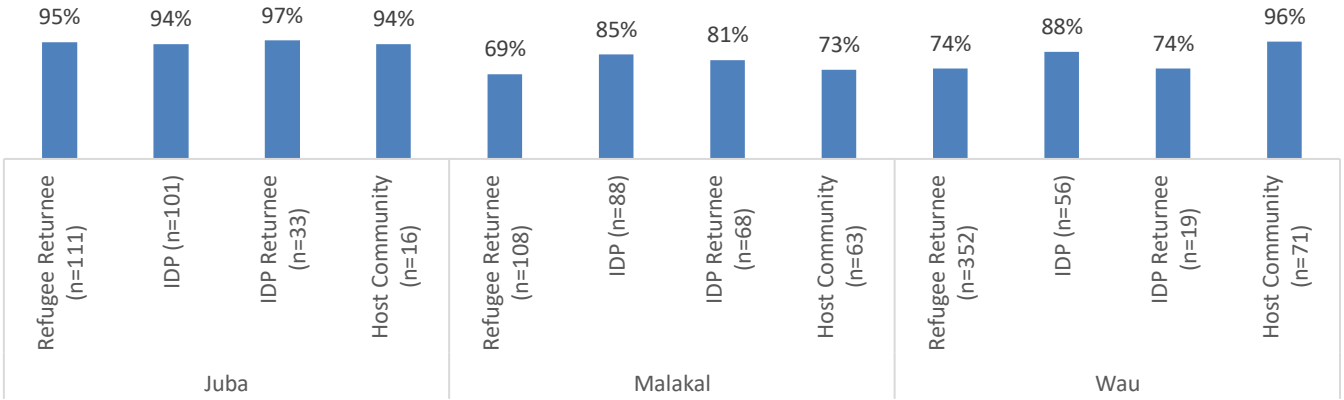
Figure 21: Authority that populations turn to in case of threat by location



When issues are raised with the relevant authorities, regardless of location and displacement profile, households report that they feel their concerns are respected by authority figures either well or very well. However, 16 per cent of the total population in Juba reported that their concerns were not addressed at all, which raises concerns for these households, since the population in Juba was most likely across the locations to report that safety was a challenge. Returnee populations were once again the most likely to report that their issues were not raised at all well, complementing the finding that returnees in Juba are also the least likely to have an authority figure with whom to raise a concern.

Community elders are the primary form of representation for returnees (82 per cent), IDPs (90 per cent), IDP returnees (87 per cent) and host communities (89 per cent). Further, across all locations (and displacement categories) respondents reported that they largely felt well respected by their community, suggesting that, even though significant humanitarian needs were reported in each location, this did not necessarily negatively affect community ties and might in fact strengthen them (Figure 22).

Figure 22: Percentage of populations reporting feeling well respected by their neighbours, by location and displacement profile



4.2 Laws, policies and interventions

4.21 Displaced persons between politics and policies

While national and regional policy is moving towards facilitating return, the experiences of displacement, return and reintegration highlighted above call for caution and attention to people's needs. Key informants for this study reiterated the need to review lessons learned from the past, while framing our understanding of current initiatives towards durable solutions. Revisiting past repatriation programmes and interventions by states, the international community, donors and civil society, this section reviews factors that are promoting or discouraging reconciliation and return, and are influencing sustainable reintegration outcomes. Within this section, we will review how refugee policies in hosting countries have further influenced decision making around return, and the key actors influencing current policies (at the community, national and international levels). This analysis is essential for the formulation of concrete recommendations following the IGAD Solutions Initiatives and the recent Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan.

4.22 The nexus between durable solutions and the peace process

R-ARCSS contains several provisions on durable solutions, with the underlying premise that return and reintegration are key components in the broader peace process. Linking planned population movements to war- and peacetime governance has been a constant in pre-independence history, as evidenced in post-war return and relocation projects marking the end of the first South Sudanese civil war between 1969 and 1974. Such projects failed in their stated goal of supporting post-war state building through return migration and have been described as a "continuation […] of colonial and postcolonial constructions of the southern population as ethnically bounded to primordial tribal territories" (Kindersley, 2017 p. 8). In 2018, the parties to the R-ARCSS committed to the voluntary repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation and reintegration of returnees and IDPs. The terms 'voluntary repatriation', 'resettlement' and 'reintegration' are not defined in the agreement. Chapter III of R-ARCSS sets out principles for humanitarian assistance and reconstruction, including "the right of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to return in safety and dignity and to be afforded physical, legal and psychological protection". Moreover, the Revitalised Government of National Unity is mandated to "immediately" institute "programmes for relief, protection, repatriation, resettlement, reintegration and rehabilitation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnees". These commitments are echoed in the statements of high-level South Sudanese officials. For example, in 2020, the South Sudanese Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020, p.3) declared that:

> *Peace is already being felt by the citizens, and consequently over 326,000 refugees from the neighbouring countries have returned home spontaneously and are settling into their villages to start rebuilding their lives. […] As we continue to promote peace in our country, we are aware that many South Sudanese refugees, especially those in our neighbouring countries, will return voluntarily.*

South Sudanese leaders have actively encouraged returns, especially after R-ARCSS entered into force. In August 2021, President Salva Kiir was quoted as saying:

> *I will repeat, come home and join hands with us to develop our country. We are aware of the challenges that face returnees but I still urge you to come home. Home is better than foreign land […] This is important because your return has a direct link to the full implementation of the peace agreement. We cannot for example hold a credible election when the majority of our people are in displacement camps.*[20]

During our fieldwork, a woman refugee leader recounted being called to give a speech before an audience in Kampala. She spoke about the violence that women endure in South Sudan and expressed critical views of the emphasis on returns at this time.

> *I didn't know that [politics] was a no-go area […] Apparently, I wasn't supposed to talk about the rape I endured in South Sudan. Immediately after the presentations, I got calls from different numbers threatening me. I reported the case to a Ugandan NGO. They told me that I could go to Interpol so I can get protection because I was beaten by some people in Arua Park over that same speech.* (FGD 6)

The statements of South Sudanese leaders and the high stakes around R-ARCSS show how the politics and the policy of durable solutions are deeply entwined. South Sudanese leaders seem to consider returns to be a key success factor in peace building and are, as a result, endorsing the notion that displaced persons should move back to their areas of origin despite the difficulties they will face upon return (KII 79). This approach comes with significant risks, especially in the context of the electoral process. Based on recent South Sudanese history, key informants interviewed for this study expressed the perception that returns and repatriations might be used to engineer electoral constituencies in view of the 2023 elections, potentially leading to violence and further displacement (KIIs 24, 33, 46, 42; see also Lynch, 2017).

4.23 The 2021 Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action

In March 2021, the government launched technical workshops with UNHCR and IGAD to develop a Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action in line with the commitments of Chapter III of R-ARCSS. The Strategy and Plan of Action build on the National Framework for Return, Reintegration and Relocation of Displaced Persons, a government-led initiative launched in 2019. The new strategy addresses the situation of South Sudanese IDPs and refugees, returnees and hosting communities, as well as Sudanese refugees hosted in South Sudan.

The strategy is grounded in the policy and legal frameworks established by the 2009 Kampala Convention, the 2006 Great Lakes Protocol on Protection and Assistance to IDPs, the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 Organisation for African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, as well as on the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and the CRRF. It focuses on the areas of safety, service provision, integration, institutional capacities and partnerships and it seeks to pursue a development-oriented, rights-based approach. During consultations held in 2021,

[20] President Kiir urges refugees to return home, says elections won't be credible without population'. Radio Tamazuj, 19 August 2021.

Western and Eastern Equatoria and Western Bar Ghazal were suggested as areas for IDP and refugee return pilots, thanks to their relative stability (UNHCR, 2021a). The new strategy was established under the umbrella of the Regional Solutions Initiative, launched in October 2020 within the IGAD Support Platform – a mechanism created in the context of the Global Refugee Forum to mobilise further support for the implementation of the 2017 Nairobi Declaration and Plan of Action.

While the Durable Solutions Strategy now exists, key informants raised the fact that the 2009 Kampala Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa has not yet been enacted by the Government of South Sudan. The Kampala Convention needs to be domesticated, to have a legal basis to support the implementation of the Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action.

Box 5. From the Nairobi Declaration to the IGAD Support Platform

The 2017 Nairobi Political Declaration and Plan of Action was a landmark initiative generating high-level support for seeking regional solutions to the Somali refugee crisis and to other refugee situations throughout the region, attempting to move beyond repatriation as the only feasible solution (REF, 2019). The Nairobi Declaration and subsequent thematic declarations, referred to jointly as the 'IGAD process', constitute a mechanism built on four pillars: return and reintegration, education, refugees' economic inclusion, and health. The IGAD process facilitated regional policy dialogue and coordination on issues related to the GCR – a non-binding framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility sharing in refugee situations, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2018, following the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants. The GCR operationalises the CRRF, which puts forward a whole-of-society approach aimed at easing pressure on refugee hosting countries, enhancing refugees' self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions, and supporting conditions in countries of origin for safe and dignified returns.[1] In addition, the GCR introduced the notion of 'Support Platforms', partly based on the IGAD experience, to further galvanise political commitment, mobilise resources, facilitate coordination and support comprehensive policy initiatives. Support platforms can be activated and deactivated by refugee hosting countries or by countries of origin and are assisted by UNHCR. With pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, the IGAD process was strengthened and formalised as the IGAD Support Platform. The IGAD Support Platform plays a key role in supporting the CRRF in the Horn of Africa. In 2020, it launched the Solutions Initiative for protracted displacement in Sudan and South Sudan with EU and UNHCR backing (UNHCR, 2020d). The Solutions Initiative pursues a dual-track approach by supporting both the political process around solutions (Track 1) and government-led solution responses (Track 2).

The institutional architecture underpinning the South Sudan durable solutions strategy rests upon a National Task Force set up in December 2020, chaired by the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) and supported by UN partners, which is also present at the subnational level (KII 77). The Task Force is meant to serve as a coordination forum bringing together stakeholders to identify opportunities and impediments on return, as part of a government-led process. The Task Force is an example of a government-led solutions

architecture, but the operationalisation of these objectives is pending technical and financial capacities (KII 80).

The legal and policy framework on solutions gives prominence to IDP return and refugee repatriation, while local integration, IDP relocation or refugee resettlement are residual options. In South Sudan, this framework has evolved under the impulse of post-independence state-building efforts and global initiatives following the 2016 New York Declaration. These processes culminated in an IDP law reflecting the commitments of the Kampala Convention (Beyani et al, 2020) and the drafting of the Solutions Strategy. While these new instruments are a positive step in the right direction, implementation capacities remain weak. Moreover, fast-tracking the domestication of internal displacement frameworks in an inchoate national legal system may come at the cost of treating IDPs solely as a humanitarian caseload, rather than as subjects enjoying the full range of rights and entitlements that descend from citizenship. Adding to this complexity, South Sudan has been embroiled since independence in long and conflictual undertakings to redesign administrative subdivisions and boundaries.

This endeavour has been hampered by rivalries between different power groups, with cascading effects on land governance and HLP rights. This has rendered the ambitious 2009 Land Act and the 2011 Land Policy "widely irrelevant for day-to-day land management of land relations in the country" and created friction between customary and statutory land administration and dispute resolution systems (Housing, Land and Property Technical Working Group, 2021). Land governance is fragmented across multiple agencies and is hindered by a contractor legal framework, whereby land is formally owned by 'the people' but *de facto* belongs to the government (Webber Wentzel & IOM, 2020). These challenges are especially visible in urban and peri-urban areas, where they are compounded by a lack of regulation and planning of urban spaces, lack of oversight on land demarcation committees and unreliable land rights documentation (Martin and Mosel, 2011; Webber Wentzel & IOM, 2020). These challenges make it difficult to envision sustainable solutions strategies based on returns. In the current context, large-scale returns may have the potential to reignite tensions over land and resources. Since the ethnic composition of certain towns has changed drastically during conflict (IDMC, 2021), returning home has become extremely challenging for marginalised minorities in the absence of a well-functioning system to settle disputes fairly.

4.24 Mistrust in policies and the experience of past return and repatriation programmes

Displaced communities have been consulted as part of the process leading to the drafting of the Solutions Strategy. However, our data show that research participants have limited knowledge of and trust in policies emanating from governments and international actors. Our analysis suggests that this is a consequence of their experience and of the way displacement and solutions discourses are embedded in local power struggles and conflict dynamics.

Returns have been an integral part of recent South Sudanese history, before and after independence. The succession of internal conflict, landmark peace agreements and return and repatriation programmes has repeated itself several times, at least since the end of the first Sudanese civil war in the early 1970s. A constant element of these programmes has

been the circumspect approach with which they were received by displaced South Sudanese. Already in 1972, after the signature of the Addis Ababa Agreement formally ending the first Sudanese civil war, many refugees chose not to repatriate and adopted a 'wait and see attitude' because of their "mistrust in government's intent and sincerity", concerns about their personal security, and limited reintegration support (Rogge & Akol, 1989). This attitude has not changed significantly over time, despite the desire of many displaced South Sudanese to contribute to the (re)construction of their country, driving many to return with limited formal support after peace negotiations had started (Kindersley, 2019). The enthusiasm of the pre-independence phase, and the mobilisation capacity of civil society and political leaders, have largely waned after years of internal conflict and a state-building process that did not live up to expectations.

The experience of past return and repatriation programmes is instructive for gauging what worked and what did not work in the past. However, almost all our interviews with practitioners from international organisations and humanitarian agencies indicated a lack of knowledge of past interventions and of the historical trajectories leading to current challenges. The high level of staff turnover and the often unavoidable need to work in emergency mode have reduced agencies' ability to learn from the past and leverage their institutional memory. The repatriation programmes carried out after the CPA of 2005 were significantly better organised and better planned than previous initiatives (Duffield et al, 2008). These programmes were based on tripartite agreements with five hosting countries and the subsequent activation of four return corridors and way stations in difficult operational contexts.

Post-CPA-facilitated and -assisted returns succeeded in overcoming significant logistical and security challenges and ensuring a dignified return process for most refugees (Duffield et al, 2008, p.1). However, just as in the 1970s, reintegration outcomes were not satisfactory. The return process was "once again dominated by agency efforts and coordination, and ways of supporting reintegration have come a distant second" (Pantuliano et al, 2008, p.43). In other words, history repeated itself. The information available to prospective returnees was largely insufficient and limited to the often biased accounts of 'go-and-see' visits led by male community leaders (KII 36). The accounts of research participants indicated the general failure of post-CPA returns. Many described the logistical process in positive terms but expressed dissatisfaction with the extent of the reintegration support received. A refugee who returned voluntarily in 2007 described his experience bitterly:

> *Our houses were destroyed so we had nowhere to shelter ourselves. They just collected us and left us there like we are animals. They only gave us food and no money.* (SSI 8)

These accounts also signal a significant discrepancy between the official position of humanitarian agencies and their role as perceived by the South Sudanese. The signature of ARCSS in 2015 did not change the first UNHCR non-advisory position on returns issued in 2014. The returns that occurred after 2015 have consistently been described as spontaneous. However, some respondents who returned from Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia referred to the 2017 spontaneous returns as 'repatriation programmes', suggesting misplaced expectations of reintegration support. The way in which agencies and stakeholder governments communicated their role in the return process may have

contributed to a lack of understanding of UN return policies. An Ethiopian government official described the 2017–18 returns as if they were part of a tripartite programme, while also acknowledging their failure: "I remember that repatriation in 2017–18 with the help of UNHCR and the South Sudanese and Ethiopian governments. The number of returnees is more than 5,000 people. We helped [willing refugees] to return with organisations like UNHCR. However, those who returned are also now in this camp due to displacement again. This is because of war and lack of services like health, school and telecommunications" (KII 68). In some cases, research participants who held positions with the Sudanese government before 2011 described their return as forced. According to a former civil servant, "our return to South Sudan was not by choice. The government issued a decree and the information was in all social media, newspapers and other channels of communications. They wanted all civil servants and government officials to return to South Sudan" (CS 10). While understandable from a nation-building perspective, this approach may have breached voluntariness.

In a context where agencies do not always have an adequate level of context awareness, interventions concerning returns and population transfers may be manipulated by powerful interest groups. A recent transfer of IDPs from Melut to Baliet (Upper Nile region) provides a cautionary tale on the risks involved in such programmes. According to an informant, in 2019 the now defunct Padang Dinka-dominated Central Upper Nile State requested the humanitarian community to facilitate the return of thousands of Padang Dinka from Melut to Baliet, an area from which rival Shilluk had previously been expelled (KII 46). By agreeing to provide support, the humanitarian community may have helped "hardwire a demographic majority into a politically contested county ahead of future elections" (Craze, 2022a). This case shows how politically sensitive return interventions can be. According to a government official in Malakal, the official government policy is "to return people to their ancestral land" (KII 47). But in South Sudan, as this study has sought to demonstrate, the notion of 'ancestral land' is elusive, politically charged and easily manipulated. An IDP leader in Malakal made a remarkably mature and legally sound argument:

> *[Returnees] should be allowed to settle wherever they want within South Sudan. I think that the European Union and IGAD should implement this policy. This is the reintegration that I have in mind. It's not about sending people back to their villages as UNHCR has been doing.* (KII 49)

Past returns and repatriation programmes have not led to sustainable reintegration outcomes, as a result of insufficient long-term support and unfavourable conditions in areas of return. The most visible cases of success observed by the research team were often limited to individual returnees who possessed enough social and cultural capital to obtain well-paying jobs from international agencies and NGOs. But in the vast majority of situations, according to a UN informant, return programmes have merely led to "moving people from a displaced environment to another displaced environment, slightly closer to the environment they came from" (KII 65). Most of these programmes targeted rural areas and included the provision of agricultural tools and inputs, despite the strong appeal of fast-growing urban locations (notably Juba) to younger demographics. The rural bias of return programmes has been criticised by an academic informant as entailing a "forced ruralisation of people" that does not correspond to the wishes and aspirations of most returnees,

especially in a context where ongoing violence and frequent natural disasters make subsistence farming “extremely risky if not impossible” (KII 24). In rural areas, the use of cheap return labour in commodified farmland appropriated by ruling elites has been flagged as a risk factor in relation to future return initiatives (Kindersley, 2019).Moreover, it has been argued that the current context creates a whole new set of challenges for return and reintegration, because of the post-independence economic collapse and a lost sense of national pride after years of conflict and harmful manipulation of ethnic identities (Kindersley, 2019).

Box 6. Working towards solutions and area-based approaches

The international community has struggled to find a balance between working towards durable solutions before the end of a crisis and safeguarding the protection space during displacement. To unlock protracted situations, it is appropriate to build avenues towards appropriate solutions when opportunities arise, while ensuring that displacement-affected persons continue to access essential services and remain free to choose if, when and where to move. In the words of a UN informant, this requires thinking about solutions 'as a spectrum' rather than as an outcome to be achieved in one go (KII 78). In protracted internal displacement contexts, experts have called for governments and stakeholders to work towards evidence-based collective outcomes "to progressively reduce the vulnerability, impoverishment and marginalization of IDPs even before a conflict ends or the impacts of a disaster subside" (Kälin & Entwisle Chapuisat, 2017). This same logic is underpinning the approach of UNHCR and the international community to the South Sudanese displacement. UNHCR issued its Position on Returns to South Sudan in 2014. The UNHCR position was updated in 2015, 2019 and 2021.

In all cases, UNHCR has maintained a non-return advisory, acknowledging that "persons fleeing South Sudan are likely to meet the criteria for refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention" and calling on states "to refrain from forcibly returning South Sudanese nationals or habitual residents of South Sudan to any part of the country" (UNHCR, 2021d). In its 2021 update, UNHCR took cognisance of the recent "political, security, human rights and rule of law changes" and for the first time added a paragraph on "spontaneous returns". This new addition opens the possibility for UNHCR to support individuals who, "being fully informed of the situation in their places of origin or an alternative area of their choice, choose voluntarily to return" (UNHCR, 2021d). This is a position typically adopted in similar 'stabilisation contexts' (such as Afghanistan or Somalia) and it is grounded in the UNHCR Statute of 1950 (Morello, 2016). In South Sudan, this policy has been framed as an 'area-based approach' to build essential services in relatively stable areas where South Sudanese refugees and IDPs are choosing spontaneously to return. According to UNHCR the approach was taken in response to consultation with returnees and their communities. These areas have been described as 'pockets of hope'. They should work as catalysts for coordinated interventions bridging the humanitarian–development divide and supporting both returnees and hosting communities. The area-based approach is in line with the new South Sudan Durable Solutions Strategy. This approach needs to be closely monitored. A Juba-based academic informant cited the apparent contradiction of advising against return while also supporting those who decide to return spontaneously (KII 76). A critical UN informant argued that pockets of hope risk creating "an artificial environment pulling people towards unsafe locations" (KII 65).

From a practical standpoint, area-based approaches need to be communicated effectively to all stakeholders, with commitments to long-term funding and to the monitoring of outcomes and of reintegration in order to now of the fate of those who have returned.

4.25 The repeated failures of reintegration of South Sudanese refugees

> *In 2007, there was repatriation depending on the choice of people. This programme was not successful because those people are here with us today. They were not safe during their stay there. The security issue is problematic there.* (FGD 37)

Repatriation programmes have taken place – and failed – as often as displacement has occurred from South Sudan. In 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012 and 2017, repatriation programmes were organised with the support of UNHCR and involved governments – hosting and origin – but their failure was measured by the number of people displaced again after return. Return to the camps became a common occurrence – from Kenya to Uganda and Ethiopia. Of those who returned to South Sudan, many then went back to the camps for the stability, access to basic services and fulfilment of basic needs that these provided. A preference for returning to refugee camps illustrates the dire situation that has awaited returnees in the past in South Sudan.

Key informants and community members spoke openly about the many instances of failed reintegration of South Sudanese refugees – either because of the lack of community rehabilitation, the lack of land and housing, or simply because of the corruption that diverted aid away from communities of return, and return households, towards "individuals' pockets and their patronage networks" (KII 19). Overall, allegations of corruption and malpractices by government officials and agencies resulted in a widespread lack of trust in political processes – such as the CPA.

Key informants spoke of the cyclical nature of aid and relief, followed by further displacement and uprooting. Community members and those living in PoC sites spoke of UNMISS, which remained one of the few sources of protection for civilians, able to intervene in conflict-affected regions to promote peace. When this force left, and when the camps to which people had been displaced transitioned to a national duty of care, many grew worried again. This opinion was shared between key informants and communities.

When COVID-19 hit the world, and South Sudan, and when food rations began to be reduced and were ultimately stopped, many more grew worried that history was repeating itself. While returnees and IDPs recognised that the World Food Programme's (WFP) support would one day end, when stability was within reach, their lives have often not evolved beyond an emergency context. What explains this perpetual state of emergency in South Sudan? What are the conversations to be had, and that no one seems to want to have, around durable solutions in such a continued context of emergency?

4.26 Adapting to instability when protracted crisis is the norm

> *The 2005 return was considered a failure, following the CPA. It was not sustainable. Return has to be linked to development and linked to the peace process.* (KII 37)

The preconditions for sustainable returns have not been put in place in repatriation efforts to date. IDPs' main concerns remain over housing – asking "how do we return when our houses have been looted?" – while returning refugees are finding that assistance remains inadequate over the long run. The stability needed for returns can only be provided through a nexus approach – targeting humanitarian and emergency needs, while planning for

infrastructural and area-based rehabilitation, in a context of continued peace-building efforts. With the end of the UNMISS mandate in 2020, questions remain over what type of nexus approach could bring stability to South Sudan. As Wahba (2022) explains, "the consequences of a lack of alignment within the triple nexus then are confusion in the field, competition for resources and uneven relations with central and local authorities".

> *What was happening was that UNMISS was promoting returns, putting a chief in a helicopter and then he decided on behalf of the community. These 'go and see' visits are problematic, as it is problematic to just send the male chief to decide. Not enough information was given in terms of security and resources, but monetary incentives were given. We had cases where people were taken to their areas, but then they returned to the PoC shortly after. Sometimes there was not enough information provided to those families. In 2019, the government wanted to resettle IDPs in a particular location because they had international investors coming to town.* (KII 36)

It is necessary to question the logic of return and that of reintegration in South Sudan, and to question the assumption that there was stability before, which was disrupted and corrected, leading to refugees coming back. As key informants highlighted, stability did not exist. Instead, displacement, movement, war and living in uncertain conditions have permeated the context. When uncertainty and displacement are the norm, programming will have to be thought about differently. The continuum of displacement, war and conflict requires interventions that focus on bringing stability, as this is what people dream about and aspire to, on the realities on the ground, and on adapting to instability. The missing conversations are about how to invest in South Sudan, in its civil society and local faith actors, as much as in local governance and communities.

4.3 Refugee policies in hosting countries

As the literature review underlines, "repatriation is presented as the optimum outcome for refugee situations as if by definition, and the 'obvious' thing for refugees to do" (Bakewell, 2000, p.100). And yet, while some refugees and IDPs intend to return in the future, many others have no intention of doing so, at least under current conditions. As we have seen in this research, displaced people are likely to engage in a range of activities, often encompassing different household members extended across borders. This ongoing mobility of South Sudanese refugees and returnees disrupts simplistic discourses of displacement, return and repatriation (O'Byrne & Ogeno, 2020, p.748). Flexibility also encompasses temporal and geographical dimensions. For example, a World Bank study recommends support for staggered returns that take place over a considerable period of time, and encompass multiple locations across countries of exile and return (Harild et al, 2015). In a similar vein, Hovil (2010, p.17) recommends a longer period of transition between refugee and non-refugee status. These more staggered, flexible approaches take into account that returns are an ongoing process rather than a one-off event (Kaiser, 2010). Such prospects need to be carefully studied, given the deteriorating conditions in refugee hosting countries, the instability in Sudan and Ethiopia, and the limited prospects for protection in asylum, notably as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.31 Deteriorating conditions in refugee hosting countries

Reception conditions for South Sudanese refugees have deteriorated as a consequence of decreasing funds, the primary and secondary effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shifting of donors' priorities both regionally (Tigray conflict, Sudan political transition) and globally (Ukraine crisis). This reduction in humanitarian assistance is made more concerning by initial signals of the restricting of asylum space. According to an informant, "in Ethiopia there has been a move by the government to try and close the border, to try and stop accepting new refugees and get rid of *prima facie* recognition of South Sudanese refugees" (KII 40). Refugees, especially younger demographics born in exile, tend to express a stronger feeling of attachment to the hosting country than to their parents' homeland. However, *de jure* pathways to local integration are precluded. Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia do not offer naturalisation options to refugees. This lack of official pathways shows how local integration is "not so much the 'forgotten' solution but the official 'forbidden' solution" (Hovil, 2014). *De facto* local integration options are made difficult by emerging tensions with host communities over opportunities and resources (notably in Uganda) and significant limitations on internal movement (especially in Kenya). Some young refugees are nevertheless voting with their feet, by giving up humanitarian aid to move to urban areas such as Kampala, and by engaging in transnational mobility strategies across borders. In doing so, they are building their own solution without any external support. In the Uganda–South Sudan borderland, it has been observed that transnational strategies based on pendular cross-border movements, which "enable the refugees to hold on to certain aspects of 'normal life', such as being employed, enacting customs and visiting loved ones, blurring the distinction between voluntary and forced migration" (Vancluysen, 2022). These types of movement are essential to nurture a sense of belonging and to support the lives of refugee households. However, they occur in a legal vacuum far from the attention of policy makers. The slowly emerging freedom of movement framework in the IGAD and the East African Community (EAC) spaces can play an important role in empowering displaced South Sudanese to build their own self-reliance and their own solutions through mobility. Strong regional coordination is crucial to making further progress. As an IGAD informant put it:

> *We need collective solutions to displacement. IGAD member states through the IGAD forum maintain that displacement is a regional collective responsibility. So we promote regional and holistic approaches to solutions and peace in the region*. (KII 37)

Defending and expanding the freedom of movement of IDPs and refugees while safeguarding the protection space is not a 'solution' *per se* but can increase the capacity of the South Sudanese to pursue the translocal and transnational strategies that are such an important part of their lives and livelihoods (Long, 2014, p.370-373)**.** After all, the purpose of the refugee protection regime, and of the internal displacement regime by analogy, is not to 'fix the refugee problem' through standardised humanitarian programmes. Its purpose is to "guarantee refugees live in dignity until and unless either the cause of their flight is firmly eradicated or the refugee himself or herself chooses to pursue some alternative solution to their disfranchisement" (Hathaway, 2007. p.3).

4.32 Prospects in countries of asylum

People's plans and aspirations reflect a longing for peace, stability and self-reliance. These outcomes are not necessarily conditioned to the idea of homecoming. Some research participants made explicit reference to local integration and resettlement as their preferred solutions. Younger generations with no memories of 'home' and a history of protracted displacement are more likely to see themselves as part of the hosting community. As explained by two refugee women in Ethiopia:

> *Home is subjective, for example my children were all born here in Sherkole camp, so this is their home. But for me I consider this as my home only because I have spent so many years here. However, where you have the full right of citizenship is your home. (FGD 28)*

> *I do have four children and all of them were born here. If I tell them about South Sudan, they consider it as a foreign country and they reply to me that this is our land and home.* (FGD 29)

The preference towards local integration is often a function of the cultural proximity between refugees and hosting communities. It is stronger where there is a consolidated historical pattern of cross-border mobility and family ties stretching across international borders. This is more frequently the case in Ethiopia and in Uganda as compared to Kenya. The rights afforded to refugees further contribute to creating ties to the hosting countries:

> *Here in Ethiopia, many refugees want to join the local community and live with the hosting community as a resident of the country. This is because of things have improved here. For example, a year ago, refugees were not allowed to have a car licence, trade licence and even a bank account. But now they can have all of this and that is why they want to live with the local community.* (KII 54)

Moreover, far from seeing South Sudan as a country to long for, some refugees are still too traumatised to consider returning. As a refugee in Uganda put it: "even if the announcement goes around that all South Sudanese need to go back, I will cry to the president of Uganda to let me stay with my children because the trauma I faced in South Sudan was too much". For many who do not see a future for themselves in South Sudan or in hosting countries, resettlement is the bigger aspiration. A refugee in Kenya illustrates how pursuing resettlement may sometimes call for strategic mobility decisions: "in 2016, I went back to Kakuma to reactivate my status again as a refugee in order to ease my resettlement process to Australia" (CS 5). However, local integration opportunities are absent, while resettlement and complementary pathways are a residual solution for a very small caseload. Mobility-based solutions based on emerging regional migration frameworks may therefore be more viable in the medium term.

4.4 Key actors and initiatives affecting policies on return and reintegration

4.41 The role of large-scale investments, infrastructure and the rule of law in South Sudan

Investments are needed to address the destruction of agricultural infrastructure and assets, as well as production capacity across rural areas, as a result of floods and other hazards, as well as of man-made disasters, across decades. A 2011 report (Norwegian People's Aid, 2011, p.7) presented data on 28 foreign and domestic investments planned or underway across South Sudan. "In just four years, between the start of 2007 and the end of 2011, foreign interests sought or acquired … a larger land area than the entire country of Rwanda". These were lands in the agriculture, forestry and biofuel sectors alone. The report showed that while, *in theory*, the investment would be geared towards the development of rural communities, *in reality*, it would undermine livelihoods. One of the key government informants interviewed lamented that some institutions, such as the Ministry of Information and Ministry of Physical Infrastructure, are present but do not have grants at the national level to employ and deliver services to the population. The World Bank (2020, p.4) *Doing Business* report ranked South Sudan 185 out of 190 economies. The lack of a rule of law, corruption, bureaucratic impediments and taxation systems have all remained obstacles to investments in South Sudan.

Investments are closely linked to displacement in South Sudan. One academic expert in South Sudan commented on the ways in which population displacement was used by the government and its associated militias to clear populations from resource bases and oil fields, and to produce a surplus labour force to be used in the intensive farms in South Kordofan. In other words, as this example shows, displacement has been used as a tool to prevent sustainable solutions.

Investments are linked to the rights to HLP. According to one key informant, "about 60 per cent of people have returned to their places of origin to find someone else occupying their land, and there is no housing, land, property governmental recourse system in place or compensation" (KII 65). When people return, they have no other choice but to move again, becoming displaced a second or third time, or more. With or without land documents, as a result of the lack of procedures and rule of law, it is close to impossible for returnees to reclaim their lands. The Land Act of 2009 provides the regulations for land tenure and rights, as well as an environment for economic development. However, the Interim Constitution of 2011 changed the tenure system, making land an unreliable source of production for development projects.

Investments in roads and disaster-resilient agriculture would be the foundations for reintegration for many. A key informant on Ethiopia and Uganda explained the increase in transportation prices in the region during COVID-19, which blocked access to the cross-border mobility people needed to survive. This made returns riskier – by foot, risking arrest – for South Sudanese, and ended up costing more, with people forced to remain immobile as a result.

4.42 The role of civil society and local faith actors in South Sudan

The Centre for Humanitarian Action in 2020 published a report on the triple nexus in South Sudan (Quack & Südhof, 2020). Its conclusions highlighted the three levels of conflict in South Sudan: elite political–military competition over the state, which has been influenced by foreign engagement; citizen–state conflict; and community conflicts over resources. These local-level conflicts over land and water are predominant and fuelled by gender norms and norms around warfare and cattle raids. Given the scale of violence, community leaders have not been able to provide forms of redress and justice locally. The same report identifies local actors as the basis for peace in these levels of conflict.

The central role and influence of churches on communities and returnees was highlighted by all informants. The church is considered to have an essential role in the peace negotiations in South Sudan thanks to its exchanges with the government and different rebel leaders. Looking back at the last major repatriation programme around ten years ago, church leaders were the ones telling refugees to come back, that it was safe again to settle in South Sudan. Churches have created branches in the settlements, including abroad in Uganda, and religious leaders have undertaken cross-border movements as well, providing a link to refugees and returnees across locations. This led a Ugandan civil society representative to claim that “repatriation without the support of the churches is very unlikely” (KII 32). The cross-border link with the Anglican Church of Uganda was reported by other key informants as one of the keys to community dialogue, peace and reconciliation programmes, which can be planned before return.

Box 7. The Don Bosco IDP settlement in Juba

The *Don Bosco IDP Settlement* was established on the outskirts of Juba in 2013 during the outbreak of conflict. The fences, the tents, the garbage piles all indicate the lack of services available when the research team visited in early 2022. Humanitarian billboards indicate activities by international organisations, which community members explained had, for the most part, shut down, apart from some community-based activities targeting women carried out by the International Rescue Committee. The IDPs who live here arrived between 2013 and 2016 during previous rounds of conflict across the country, but also from Juba city. Depending on their arrival dates, they were given different support packages by the international community. At the time of the site visit, they had been told that their food distribution had stopped.

The Don Bosco priest explained: "The people ran and came to me. I never knew the settlement would continue to grow and expand the way it has today. We gave them plastic sheets to erect temporary shelters, thinking it would be short-lived. But today the population of the camp is around 10,000 people, and nobody is willing to go back." Today, it is home to returnees from Uganda – who mainly returned as a result of school closures during COVID-19 – as well as IDPs. However, the government does not acknowledge the presence of IDPs, nor approve services to be delivered to them. The population will not leave as they still doubt that peace, security and the ability to live independently can be found in their original homes. The main source of education for all the children in the camp remains the church, and the assistance provided by Don Bosco.

While local actors work across humanitarian, development and peace activities, most of their funding is short-term funding from different partners, which is a source of pressure on local actors seeking to have a longer-term impact (Wilkinson et al, 2019).

Local actors – and particularly faith-based actors – are not involved as equal and equitable partners in the work of consortia for the displaced. One of the key unspoken realities of a nexus approach in South Sudan is the need to include local actors in decision-making processes, most notably using local faith actors in peace building and the nexus overall. Yet they are often the most well established, and are already operationalising the nexus approach, without calling it as such. They are involved in peace-building work through education, psychosocial support, livelihoods training and food security programming. The Don Bosco Church is just one of many examples of faith-based organisations that are sustaining entire return or displacement sites, such as the Don Bosco IDP site in Juba that the research team visited. Don Bosco is one of the largest religious societies within the Catholic Church and is present in refugee settlements in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda as well. In locations covered by Don Bosco, such as the site in Juba, education needs no longer feature among the top priorities because of the provision of free primary and secondary education. Instead, the majority of households prioritise basic household items, shelter, food and medical care (UNHCR, 2020b).

When interviewed, local faith-based actors posed questions around political leadership on

return and reintegration, which they believe is flawed as long as the government does not acknowledge the existence of IDPs. They further asked about any plans by UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the Ministry of Land and Housing to revise policies and operational plans on return and reintegration and discuss, at a national level, the factors that are delaying repatriation (KII 5).

4.43 The role of local governments and financing for 'solutions'

South Sudan remains one of the poorest countries in the world, with an estimated four out of five people living in poverty in 2020 (World Bank, 2021). Years of conflict, natural disasters and economic crises have taken their toll on almost all economic activities (Von der Goltz & Harborne, 2021). Most urban jobs are low-productivity, self-employed or household work in agriculture and services (Von der Goltz & Harborne, 2021). Development actors interviewed for this research confirmed there are currently no prospects for return, and that opportunities for development actors should be delinked from any repatriation logic (KII 81).

An alternative approach, from the development perspective, would be to focus on host communities and local government, to transfer capacities from the central to the subnational level. The questions to be asked are: how can local government be made relevant? How can development programmes be used to support local governance?

Investments in local government to address critical shocks like flooding. The research noted the work of NGOs in the field of disaster risk reduction (DRR). Local authorities need support to address the hazards of cyclical disasters and at a community level to prepare entire communities for the risks of flooding, for instance. In this report, returnees who come back with skills adapted to their context cannot use them, as their area has been flooded. The discussion of DRR in South Sudan will need to go beyond discussions in a context of natural hazards and climate change, to also include discussions on conflict and political vulnerability (Feinstein International Center, 2013).

In 2021, the World Bank initiated programmes focusing on flooding to build preparedness. Given the constant threat of displacement caused by disasters, the Bank's community development approach through flood prevention, and creating water reservoirs for public use and drainage, aimed to ensure that communities would be made more resilient. Flood prevention can be one organising pivot to ensure greater protection for returnees. Others, as seen in the World Bank's report, involve ensuring that teachers', doctors' and nurses' salaries continue to be paid to ensure adequate access to services, across locations. A conversation is needed on the types of project that can link community-based projects in return areas with the Bank's community development projects, to connect the small-scale agriculture interventions to longer-term governance. Key to this dilemma will be solving questions of financing and budgeting, which remain country-based, with more cooperation needed to develop regional and development funding mechanisms for solutions to the South Sudanese refugee crisis. While the revitalised Agreement provides a framework for the peace process, integrating transitional justice, a permanent constitution and for security arrangements (KII 37), support is need for a nexus approach that would not be linked to state building or to repatriation, but to supporting the South Sudanese in their mobility, across and within borders.

5 Conclusion

This study has provided up-to-date information on the complex and varied experiences of displacement, return and reintegration of South Sudanese people and communities to devise better and more adapted responses to protracted displacement**.** The findings highlight the needs, perceptions and aspirations of South Sudanese people interviewed, their existing mobility-based coping strategies, and specific gender-related and age-related needs. The study has shown that the displacement experiences of research participants are in part the result of a post-independence context that remains extremely fragile and characterised by deadly rivalries between factions, despite limited procedural progress towards the implementation of the peace agreement and a slowly emerging framework on durable solutions (UN Security Council, 2022b). In this environment, moving between locations has been a key component in South Sudanese lives, allowing people to flee from violence and insecurity, access essential services and maintain translocal networks. These patterns of mobility have fractured links between people and created new ones (Stites & Humphrey, 2020). They have altered people's relationship with their ancestral homes and created new senses of belonging that often transcend international borders. While longing for stability, research participants had to learn how to navigate extreme instability by making strategic individual and household decisions on whether, when and where to move. Most South Sudanese participants interviewed for this study do not expect significant gains towards sustainable peace or better reintegration prospects. Decades of conflict and manipulation of ethnic identities have largely depleted their trust in formal authorities and in top-down approaches. Solutions to protracted displacement should therefore stem from the coordinated effort of formal duty bearers and community actors. In reflecting upon the study's main findings, this concluding section frames returns as a coping strategy within broader mobility patterns, and questions narratives on solutions and displacement based on the abstract application of top-down categories. These reflections have important policy and programme implications in light of the recent Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan and the IGAD Solutions Initiative. These implications will be explored further in the recommendations section.

Returns to South Sudan are in most cases one step in existing mobility patterns, rather than a meaningful step towards solutions

People in South Sudan have been forced to be on the move for decades, often for their lifetimes, given how young the population of South Sudan is. Mobility is the main coping strategy in South Sudan, with transnational networks helping people access information and support that governments may not provide them with. South Sudan's borders are porous, with communities having lived and continuing to live across a number of territories, in South Sudan, Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. Faced with multiple crises and shocks, from conflicts to repeated natural hazards to a global pandemic affecting the quality of asylum abroad, households are spreading the risks.

Returns are often a means to cope with unfavourable conditions in areas of displacement within South Sudan and in countries of asylum (Oxfam International, 2019). When returns have been assisted or facilitated, returnees' expectations concerning their ability to sustain their lives have rarely been met. An IDP returnee and a returning refugee described their difficult experience after returning, underlining the lack of information and preparedness for

return.

The recurring shocks that confront all South Sudanese require them, including returnees, to constantly adjust to changing circumstances and seize whatever opportunity may present itself. Moving and returning are one of the main strategies adopted by research participants to deal with conflict, violence and natural disasters. Humanitarian and development agencies tend to conceptualise returns as a 'durable solution'. This narrow conceptualisation fails to acknowledge that returns are part of a range of mobility strategies through which the South Sudanese cope with one of the world's harshest environments. Moving within South Sudan and crossing international borders is key for South Sudanese households to survive. According to research participants, these mobility-based coping strategies are becoming more difficult to enact. The secondary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has made travelling more expensive and entailed additional administrative hurdles, especially among South Sudanese refugees in Kenya. At the same time the pandemic has made it even more necessary for people to move, for example in order to access services that were no longer available in Uganda during lockdowns. Similarly, the ongoing violence and the increased occurrence of catastrophic floods have made entire areas unsuitable for return.

People's plans and aspirations reflect a longing for peace, stability and self-reliance. These outcomes are not necessarily conditioned to the idea of homecoming. Some research participants made explicit reference to local integration and resettlement as their preferred solutions. Younger generations with no memories of 'home' and a history of protracted displacement are more likely to see themselves as part of the hosting community. The preference towards local integration is often a function of the cultural proximity between refugees and hosting communities. It is stronger where there is a consolidated historical pattern of cross-border mobility and family ties stretching across international borders. Moreover, far from seeing South Sudan as a country to long for, some refugees are still too traumatised to consider returning. As explained previously by a refugee in Uganda, "even if the announcement goes around that all South Sudanese need to go back, I will cry to the president of Uganda to let me stay with my children because the trauma I faced in South Sudan was too much".

This study questions top-down narratives on solutions and returns in the South Sudanese context, favouring instead localised, community-based and civil society-led efforts towards social cohesion and local development

The constant process of displacement, mobility and return blurs the lines between the categories normally adopted in programme and policy frameworks. For example, the distinction between an IDP, a returnee and a member of the host community is not always clear cut. Humanitarian needs tend to be broadly similar across different categories and the level of permeability between some displacement sites and the surrounding community is such that, in the words of an academic informant, "some IDPs move to their house in the community during the day and return to the camp in the evening, so they are both IDPs and hosts in some sense. They don't feel like moving back home permanently due to safety concerns" (KII 22). Moreover, the way in which people perceive their displacement status is often a consequence of their mobility strategies, their attachment to specific communities or locations (real or idealised), their ability or inability to move, and the labels attributed to them by humanitarian agencies and local leaders. For example, it has been argued that in

the Ugandan context “the government and UNHCR had effectively redefined a ‘refugee’ as someone receiving assistance and living in a camp” (Hovil & Gidron, 2018). According to a South Sudanese scholar, the fact of receiving some forms of assistance upon return generated “the emergence of ‘the returnee’ as a category”, which then became internalised as it was linked to specific entitlements (KII 43). Local perceptions around displacement categories are also filtered in context-specific ways through which people construct their own narratives and establish social bonds. For example, according to an academic informant, the Nuer culture describes most returnees as ‘visitors’ “because they could not invite people in their own places” KII 75). In this case, being able to host is a key criterion determining the implicit social hierarchies between hosting communities and returnees/visitors. These observations call for analytical approaches that move beyond common assumptions on migration and displacement categories and embrace the complexity of people’s experiences (Bakewell, 2008).

The all-encompassing notion of ‘spontaneous returns’ does not adequately describe the complexity and diversity of movements from hosting sites to urban and rural areas within South Sudan. As this study has shown, returns are underpinned by different motivations and are often temporary. They are often not directed towards people’s ‘areas of origin’ and are but one part of complex household and community-level decision-making processes and risk-mitigation strategies. Returns seldom lead to sustainable reintegration outcomes. Returnees are often confronted by limited opportunities, the inability to access land and housing, and inadequate access to essential services. These multiple challenges shrink reintegration prospects, compelling returnees to travel elsewhere, to move back to hosting sites or to experience secondary displacement. Contextualising the notion of ‘spontaneous returns’ is therefore critical to ensure that policies and programmes emerging from R-ARCSS, the IGAD Solutions Initiative and the new Durable Solutions Strategy are more cognisant of the diversity and complexity of people’s actual experiences of return and reintegration.

The places to which people choose to return affect reintegration outcomes, and call for localised responses. As explored in our analysis on physical and material safety, research participants do not necessarily feel safe in the locations where they have better access to services and opportunities. For some, moving to Juba carries the promise of accessing higher-quality education, healthcare and livelihoods, at the cost of feeling less safe and less stable in their land and housing tenure. By contrast, some rural locations within South Sudan, such as Kajo Keji, may offer more safety (at least temporarily) but limited or no services. These considerations are factored in by research participants when making difficult individual and household decisions about where to move. They should also more systematically inform the policy discourse, so that prospective returnees do not feel compelled to sacrifice safety for services or vice-versa.

As we move to the recommendations section, we conclude that support in South Sudan should not be framed as support for returns or returnees, but for local, area-based approaches given the needs facing communities, while maintaining adequate protection and assistance levels in hosting sites and safeguarding coping strategies based on mobility. The tension between intervening at scale to address existing structural vulnerability and designing projects and programmes that can address circumstances is clear. In a context where people’s trauma and distrust is embedded with national level discussions and state

authorities, the local support networks and communities, as well as local authorities, require support. The main recommendations stemming from this research are presented below.

6 Recommendations

- Continue to develop plans for the implementation of R-ARCSS and commit to a nexus approach linking humanitarian, development and peace-building needs
- Peace-building efforts should be continued, with an emphasis on maintaining the civilian character of former PoC sites while planning for a longer transition period that may (but need not necessarily) involve large-scale assisted voluntary returns.
- Full implementation of R-ARCSS should be supported to create more stable and conducive conditions for return. This should include the full implementation of Chapter II of R-ARCSS (Permanent Ceasefire and Temporary Security Arrangements).
- Uphold the principle of voluntary, safe and dignified returns set out in international instruments and in the South Sudan Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan
- Return initiatives should be decoupled from the political process and not be linked to the viability of upcoming elections.
- Those supporting displaced and return communities should improve their awareness of the return context and of local dynamics, to ensure that activities supporting these communities are based on the systematic engagement of affected communities.
- Reintegration outcomes and post-return experiences should be closely monitored by governmental and non-governmental actors (including UN agencies, NGOs, CSOs and other local actors) managing returns and providing reintegration assistance to the returnees.
- Donors should maintain an adequate level of funding in displacement hosting areas, both within South Sudan (notably PoC and IDP areas) and in neighbouring countries (in camp settings and out of camps), so that people's decisions to return are not dictated by a sudden decrease in assistance or by emerging tensions with hosting communities.
- South Sudanese IDPs and refugees should not be unduly pressured to return, since current conditions are not yet conducive to large-scale returns. The possibility for solutions based on local integration in host countries and in host communities of South Sudan should also be explored.
- The government of South Sudan, with the support of donors, agencies, and humanitarian and development actors should address the deteriorating security and safety conditions that act as a barrier to reintegration.
- The government of South Sudan will need to address the specific challenges in the former PoC sites, which have been transitioned from UN Protection sites to conventional displacement camps without a sustainable transition plan.
- The government of South Sudan will need to enact and domesticate the Kampala Convention as a legal framework to support the implementation of the Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action.

- Integrate provisions for cross-border mobility in regional plans for durable solutions, to allow for safe circular mobility
- IGAD should, with support from member states and donors, support the adoption and implementation of frameworks for the free movement of community citizens. In the long run, such frameworks should also establish concrete avenues to fulfil the right to work.
- The EU's multi-annual identification process should be used to plan for financing that can support multi-annual, multi-sectoral and regional interventions to support the protection and resilience of the South Sudanese and invest in regional exchanges on solutions.
- In the short term, refugees should be able to move back and forth between host countries and South Sudan for a period of not less than two years, so that they may gradually explore the possibilities for sustainable return without having to sacrifice the security of the refugee hosting countries.
- Donors should fund programmes with an integrated cross-border coordination and programming approach that reinforces cross-border livelihoods and cross-border trade links, as well as enabling people to gather and share information on areas of potential return.
- The Government of South Sudan should invest in mobile healthcare service provision. Where access to health services in the country is not possible, cross-border mobility to access healthcare systems should be facilitated.
- Invest in area-based, community-based and locally driven peace and development initiatives
- The Government of South Sudan should adopt area-based and community-led approaches to durable solutions that target the whole population, regardless of their categorisation based on migratory status, ensuring that the entire community engages in dialogue, including local service providers, local authorities and other relevant stakeholders.
- The Government of South Sudan, with support from donors and humanitarian and development actors, should map, identify and support the capacity of local and civil society actors, including local faith actors, to build on local resilience and initiatives and promote solutions locally, strengthening social cohesion in rural and urban areas.
- They should also build on community networks to safeguard and improve access to protection mechanisms.
- In areas where people are returning voluntarily (and often initially without support), the South Sudanese government, with support from donors and humanitarian and development actors, should ensure that adequate levels of assistance are provided to support the absorptive capacity of the local community and facilitate social cohesion between returnees and host communities.
- Support for local communities should include investment in roads and infrastructure that connect rural and urban communities, as well as providing support for disaster resilient agricultural practices.

- Promote HLP policies and programmes

In South Sudan

- The Government of South Sudan, together with donor support, should pursue the development and operationalisation of the formal legal framework on HLP.
- Returnees and IDPs should have full access to the court system and other dispute-resolution mechanisms, including providing information on processes to claim rights and provide legal services for the displaced; support community-based conflict transformation and social cohesion mechanisms and institutions; and address women's access to HLP through targeted supported by addressing legal and practical obstacles.
- More research is needed on HLP to learn from existing practice and assess constraints, issues and outline the type of interventions that can work and be scaled.

In refugee hosting countries:

- Where possible, refugees should be given better access to land that is adequate for self-reliance, and invest further in schemes promoting agriculture and farming for self-reliance (including for female-headed households).
- Safe shelter for refugees should be provided and address the tensions over accessing materials within communities.
- Increased investment in durable solutions discussions is needed in host countries – to link the access to land, to the right to work, to movement, to access healthcare etc. – and build on existing legal frameworks in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya, to expand the discussion on durable solutions for South Sudanese refugees alongside other refugee groups.
- Develop gender- and youth-sensitive programming and policy responses
- Gender and youth-specific responses should be implemented based on in-depth analyses in refugee hosting, displacement and return settings.
- More inclusive gender-programming is needed that is sensitive to the migration experiences of both men and women.
- Communities should be engaged in activities aimed at deconstructing traditional gender norms that limit women's agency and place 'masculine' expectations on men.
- Programming is needed that addresses sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and shifting discriminatory gender norms by including perpetrators as well as survivors in programmes.
- Female-headed households need to be supported through a package of HLP, education and cash-based support.
- Young people born in displacement should be supported with information, counselling and assistance to plan ahead of their return and join youth-led groups and civil society organisations to bring youth closer together, reinforcing the role of youth-led leadership structures.

- Align education and training opportunities offered, with the demands of the local labour market to enhance positive social interactions and the local inclusion of youth.
- Strengthen the education system in South Sudan
- The capacity of local actors (e.g. faith-based organisations) should be supported to deliver educational, livelihood and food security training in partnership with humanitarian and development actors.
- To enable people with educational and vocational qualifications from other countries to be recognised for their skills, a programme of certification of foreign credentials should be organised.
- Cross border efforts to harmonise educational systems in South Sudan and host countries should be promoted.
- Information should be provided to young South Sudanese pre-departure on the educational and vocational opportunities available in the country after their return.

Glossary of Key Terms

This list of key terms is based on descriptions and definitions commonly used in the displacement literature. However, in the context of South Sudan, some of these descriptions and definitions may not always apply and there could be significant overlaps and continuities between them. Moreover, some commonly adopted categories, such as 'returnee' and 'host community', are highly politicised in South Sudan. This study has sought to problematise and contextualise the terminology commonly used to describe the displacement context in South Sudan.

Durable Solutions	Any means by which the situation of internally displaced persons and/or refugees can be satisfactorily and permanently resolved by ensuring protection of their civil, economic, political and social rights (UNHCR, 2022a).
Host Community	Generally, a community in which displaced persons reside. Continued displacement in South Sudan blurs the distinction between hosts and displaced persons.
Internally Displaced Person	A person who is forced to flee from their home or place of perpetual residence and who has not crossed an internationally recognised border (IOM, 2019, p.109).
Non-refoulement	A principle of human rights law and refugee law, guaranteeing that no person should be returned to a country or territory where they would face torture, punishment or irreparable harm (IOM, 2019).
Refugee	Any person who, out of fear of persecution for reasons of race, nationality, religion, politics or membership of a particular social group, is outside their country of origin and unable to return to it.
Returnee	A former refugee who has returned to their country of origin or former habitual residence with the intention of remaining there permanently and who has yet to be fully integrated. Returnees include those who have returned through voluntary and forced returns. Voluntary return or repatriation refers to the safe, dignified, informed and sustainable return of refugees to their home country. Voluntary return can be spontaneous, with little to no involvement from UNHCR and/or relevant states, or organised with assistance from UNHCR and/or relevant states. Forced return is the return of foreign nationals to their country of origin against their will. Deportation is the forcible removal of a person to their country of origin or a third country. Expulsion is a formal act by the state aimed at removing a non-citizen (UNHCR, 2022a). The term 'returnee' also includes internally displaced persons who have returned to their place of origin or habitual residence.
Sustainable reintegration	A situation where returnees can secure and sustain the political, social, economic and psychosocial conditions needed to maintain a dignified life in their country of return. When sustainable reintegration has been achieved, returnees can make future migration decisions by choice, rather than necessity (IOM, 2019, p.211-12).

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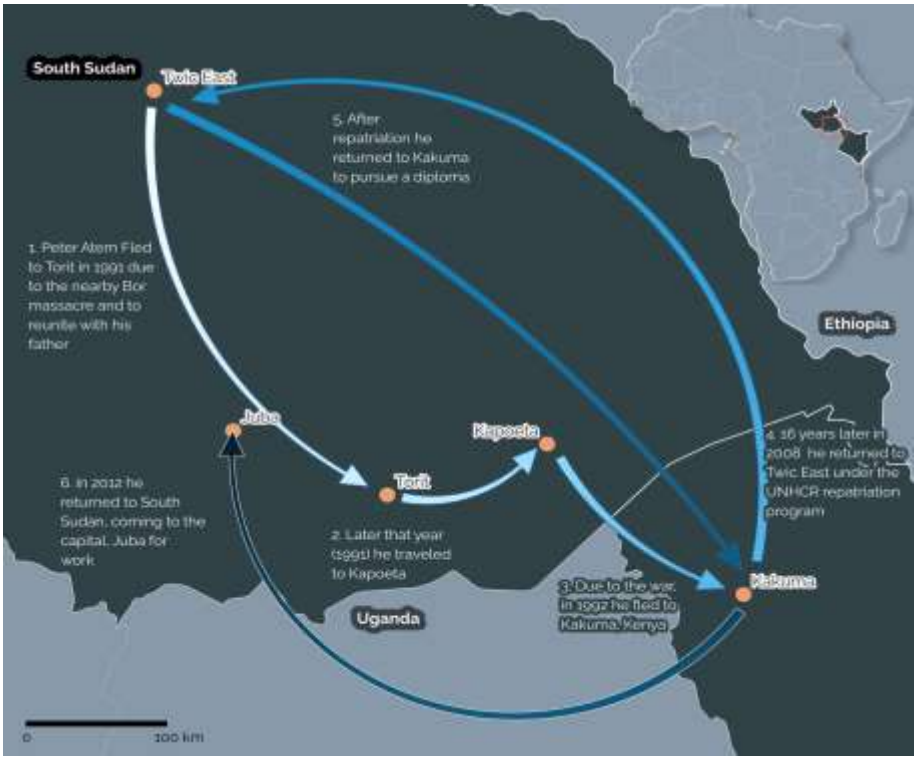
Annex: Case Studies on displaced persons' lives

Lifelines collected in this research provide a visual representation of what Bauman (2006) describes as 'fragmented lives'. The fragmentation refers to the need for individuals to remain flexible and adaptable, "to change tactics at short notice … and to pursue opportunities according to their current availability" (Baumann, 2006). In this study, life trajectories represent patterns of return not as a permanent journey but as a form of adaptation to individual or structural circumstances. Figure 23 exemplifies the complexity of these individual journeys by mapping the experience of a 34-year-old male research participant, born in Jonglei State (South Sudan), who grew up in Kakuma (Kenya), returned to South Sudan and later went back to Kenya for a diploma in IT, before returning a second time to South Sudan.

The two vignettes provided below illustrate the fragmented displacement experiences observed in many other interviews. We present these to conclude the study, to provide illustrations of the main findings, and to humanise its recommendations.

Figure 23: An individual journey of displacement and return



Diing's Story: "I thought that peace was coming but I became an IDP"

Diing [name changed for security reasons] was born in 1980. He was three years old the first time he witnessed war. In 1991, when war resumed, he lost his father as they were fleeing their village. He had previously lost his mother in 1988. At 11 years, he had become an orphan and was taken in by relatives. In 2022, when we interviewed him in Juba, he explained: "my life is the life of an orphan – it cannot be good, wherever I am". His life became a life of displacement as well – from South Sudan his relatives left for Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and some to the US through resettlement programmes in the early 2000s. He joined those who went to Uganda, which was the closest and least costly destination.

At the age of 20, he met his wife, and started to hope for a better life. He followed his uncle's advice: "live a life that can help your family, plan with what you have". He could not see a life for himself and his children in the Ugandan refugee camp and started planning for return. He tried to return 'home' to South Sudan in 2005, in 2016 and again in 2020 – all three attempts to return were unsuccessful. War broke out in December 2013, and again in 2016. Every time the family returned, war broke out, further derailing Diing's plans and sending him, his wife and children back into displacement. The third return in 2020 was forced upon them by the COVID-19 pandemic, as schools in the Ugandan refugee camp closed. He explained that he had to return to enable his children to study. This time, conflict did not erupt, but their village was flooded, forcing them to leave again. They relocated from their village to Mangala camp, as IDPs. Instead of a return 'home' or a costly return to Uganda, his family has been living in this IDP camp for the past two years, an hour or so away from the capital. In 2021, Diing came to Juba to try to find work, and his family remained in the camp. He told us that "there is no more hope for me. Perhaps there can be hope for my children: if they get a good education, they may be able to help me".

Figure 24. Diing's life trajectory (male head of household)

Eternity's story: 'We don't have anyone to protect us. Everyone has made me feel unsafe; there is no feeling of security here either"

Eternity [name changed for security reasons] was born in 1979. She explained that she never left South Sudan because she did not have the support of any family or community. When we interviewed her in January 2022, she was living alone with her nine children in an IDP informal settlement in Konyokonyo. She showed both resignation and resolve. Her life is an account of displacement across decades, driven by repeated rejection, abuse and violence perpetrated by those closest to her. "From the time I was a grown-up child, I was told I had to start a new life. I was sent off to get married – a forced marriage. Home life was harder than I had ever imagined it would be. I was beaten up so often and so hard that I could not eat. I was 15 years old."

Not being able to rely on her parents' protection, she recounted, "I wanted to go back to my mother but she said my dowry had been paid, they had eaten it, and they could not take me back. She forbade anyone from my family to take me back." She also could not seek support from her husband's family, as she feared that her husband would kill her someday. She thus left with her children, moving to Juba where they survived on basic means, collecting and selling bottles on the street to be reused. She never envisaged leaving her children behind, although she knows others who did.

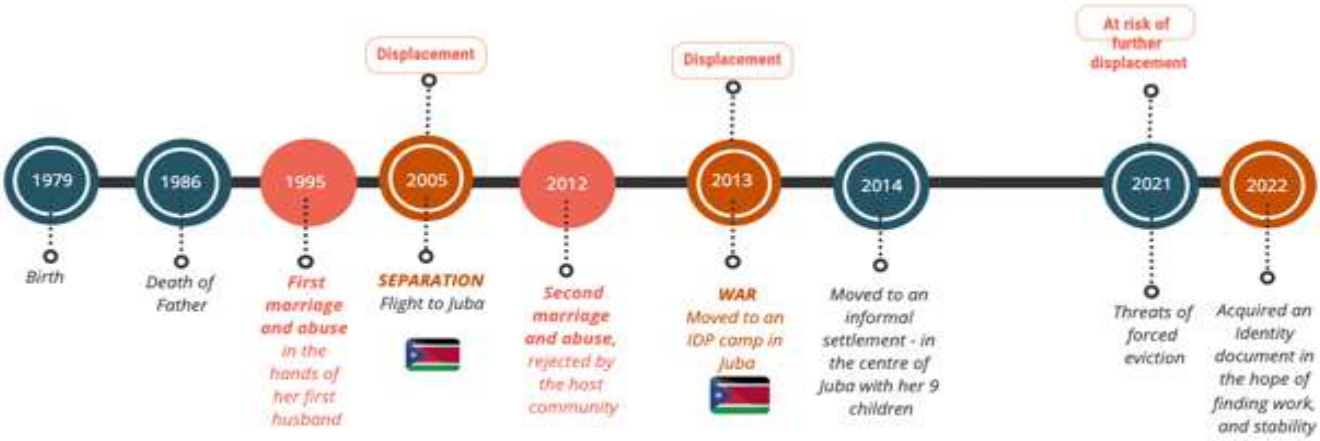
She has nine children, six of whom are from her first marriage and three from her second marriage to a Dinka man she met in Juba. His community never accepted her and their marriage was short-lived, as she learnt that he was married to 16 women, all from the dominant tribe, while she is from a minority tribe. "For the Dinkas," she said, "when you bring another tribe, you insult the tribe, and the other women you have married. I had to leave."

She managed on her own to put two of her children in school but could not afford to educate the other seven. Her out-of-school children work in the street, digging through rubbish to find food to eat or objects to sell in the market. Her oldest son, who has graduated from high school, is jobless, and stays idle under the tent or roaming the streets. They live together in an area of town where there is no toilet or latrine, and no NGOs are supporting them. She questions why refugees living abroad get assistance, while she considers IDPs to be worse off, with less financial means and less support. "Here it is not like Uganda, where refugees get everything. Here you won't find anything. I would have wanted to go to Uganda but to go there you need to have money to cross the border, and I never had that kind of money. I cannot go back to my village as I do not have anything under my name, and as I am scared that my children would be taken from me. The same people who rob cattle can also rob children."

She finishes by telling us how "everyone has made me feel unsafe. There is no feeling of safety here either, when you think you will be forcefully evicted, when your home has leaks everywhere, when you send your children to work and not to school, when you live without access to toilets let alone to medication. We have nothing – we don't have anyone to protect us, we are on our own in the middle of Juba. Our tribe has been discriminated against, and it happens here again. Even in poverty, even in displacement we are the ones who have it the worst." Her hope is that they will not be evicted, that the government will decide to

protect them, and that her children can access education.

Figure 25. Eternity's life trajectory (female head of household)



(female head of household)