

Returns and Peace in South Sudan: Challenges, opportunities and the way forward

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As South Sudan moves towards forming a Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGONU) in February 2020, questions around the return and resettlement of over 4.15 million South Sudanese are rising up the political agenda. There is an urgent need to consider lessons from the previous return migration and resettlement processes, and controls on returnees' movements, particularly from those around the CPA period (2002-2012). This briefing note is part of this process, reflecting on the possibilities for today's returns, resettlement and reconstruction of South Sudan based on lessons learned from previous efforts. This briefing argues that there are three key issues that donors and agencies need consider during their current planning and implementation: the sustained economic crisis, lack of immediate political or social necessity to return, and the deep societal fractures resulting from the intra-Southern civil war of 2013-18, which has brought into question the idea of a South Sudanese national community.

Background

South Sudanese have always moved – evading violence, famine, floods, taxation and other forms of exploitation and risk. Their decision to return home does not match international timelines, which tend to revolve around ceasefires, peace agreements and implementation schedules. Families make (and are constantly updating) plans to reflect immediate contingencies, and long term security. Of course people want to go home; but generations of displacement due to conflict and its related crises has meant that to most *home* is not a single location, but spans urban and rural areas, including in refugee camps.¹

Controlling people's mobility has been a consistent focus of governments in South Sudan since the colonial period. In the 1920s, colonial authorities for example attempted to resettle the Bul Nuer, and made similar efforts in 1933 with the Gawaar and Lou Nuer and Dinka on the east bank of White Nile.² Displacement was also useful for economic exploitation and 'securitisation' of rebellious populations: from the 1930s to 1990s successive governments have used violent depopulation to gain control over useful areas such as oil fields, grazing lands, and mineral-rich areas like Raga. Displaced populations were controlled through

refugee or IDP encampment and exploited as cheap labour.³

All of these tactics were used by the Sudanese government, the SPLM/A, and other armed groups during the 1983-2005 second civil war. Forced displacement gave them access to desperate recruits, supplies and profits: controlling people's flight paths allowed these armed groups to create camps to tax, exploit for aid resources, and control people's work options.⁴ This was also useful for

Cross-border Social Networks

South Sudanese economic and social security depends on diversified social networks that allow households to weather shocks. This diversification includes networks with relatives, trusted friends, old community ties, and employment experience and contacts. These networks cross relatively recent national borders and reflect family histories of regional movements and settlement. As a result, people's networks stretch across regional economies, and provide a buffer to repeated shocks and crises.

¹ Such as Kakuma in Kenya, or Rhino camp in Adjumani in Uganda.

² Pendle N (2017).

³ Duffield M (2002), Moro LM. (2009), James L M (2015), Thomas E (2013).

⁴ Craze J (2018).

denying their opponents material support or fighting forces from these communities.

South Sudanese people's lived experiences are one of migrations and flights from crises; of government-made displacement and exploitation. To them, population movements, relocations and returns are connected to economic needs, to military recruitment, and to violent governance tactics.

Returns and Resettlement, 2002 - 2012

When peace negotiations started in earnest in 2002 to end the second Sudanese civil war, approximately 4 million South Sudanese were internally displaced or refugees.⁵ In preparation for the 2011 secession referendum internally displaced people and refugees were encouraged to return, and began returning in 2010. The majority of returns happened during the 2010-2013 period, with IOM-supported programmes facilitating the return of women, children, disabled people, the elderly and ill.⁶ By 2012, just under 2 million refugees had returned, with around 1 million returning to the Greater Bahr el Ghazal region, 600,000 to Greater Upper Nile, and 400,000 to the Equatorias.⁷

Many families' had returned to their old homes and began reconstruction well before the CPA was signed in 2005, particularly in areas controlled by the SPLA. These reconstruction strategies and activities did not depend on the international community, but rather were supported and coordinated by ethnic associations, community organisations and South Sudanese NGOs operating across the region, from Cairo to Nairobi. This return and reconstruction process took a very long time – at least ten years – and involved continued family resettlement and movement, which was not always back to 'home' areas. For instance, children were sent to urban and peri-urban areas to access education, while adults began the laborious and expensive process of re-claiming and re-opening of family farms neglected during the war.⁸ However, by 2011 hundreds of thousands of people had still

not returned, particularly poor people who had lived most of their lives (or were born) in camps in Sudan. Only when many were faced with the risk of statelessness (and the possibility of losing jobs and property), did they leave Sudan for the south.⁹

What has changed since the 2002-2012 return and resettlement period?

The current conflict has displaced an estimated 4.15 million South Sudanese, 2.28 million into neighboring countries as refugees and 1.87 million displaced internally,¹⁰ many for the second or third time.¹¹ As young men across the country were recruited into the military or mobilised as informal militias after 2013, families were increasingly headed by women, who were already heads of 48.6% of families before the war.¹² Many fighting men's wives and families fled for safer areas or refugee camps, travelling to their former displaced neighbourhoods or refugee camps and drawing on their previous employment connections, friends, or property claims in those places. The reliance on existing social networks, the limited utility of assisted returns to spark widespread return, and the power of aid being made available in target areas (and implications of withdrawing it in areas of current residence) are important to consider in the current context.

Today's potential return migration is significantly different from the 2002-2012 returns. There are three major distinctions:

1. The previous return movement was mobilised by the SPLM/A and aligned civil society organisations and community associations to create a voting constituency for the 2011 referendum on Southern independence. With no vote to currently mobilise for, and given the delays and uncertainties around the the implementation of the revitalized peace agreement, the possibilities of renewed localised or national conflict and the continued economic crisis, the incentive to mobilize returns has waned, particularly amongst social associations and organizations that were so

⁵ Nilsson N (2000), Pantuliano S (2009), Pantuliano et. al., (2008).

⁶ UN OCHA (2011), UNHCR (2011), IOM (2013).

⁷ IOM (2013).

⁸ Newhouse LS (2017), Uffelen van JG (2006), Meier L C (2013), Ersland LS (2014).

⁹ Musa MOS (2015).

¹⁰ UNHCR (2019) -

<https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5cb4607c4.pdf>.

¹¹ ICRC (1972), Kindersley N (2019).

¹² <https://www.unv.org/our-stories/supporting-livelihoods-women-south-sudan-undp>

instrumental in supporting earlier returns in support of the liberatory vote for independence.

2. Five years of economic crisis has significantly weakened employment options, particularly in the cash-paid government and NGO sectors. Government officials are rarely paid, and there are significantly fewer NGO jobs than during the CPA period. With fewer people employed in these sectors, extended family finances are extremely stretched¹³, leaving less money to support community-run reconstruction projects. The costs of fleeing, the death of young men, and currency devaluation have destroyed many families' savings and investment capital, which is crucial for returns and re-opening businesses and farmland. Women are under particular pressure, as many are now responsible for returning families. Women also face discrimination and socio-economic disadvantages around access to land, investment capital, employment, and decision-making. These inequalities will have wider implications for children and communities.
3. The physical, interpersonal, and emotional impacts of the intra-South Sudanese war have left deep and lasting scars on communities and families that are already struggling with generations of trauma and unresolved grievances. Although some have faced violence from fellow South Sudanese before – including from Kiir's old SPLA forces – recent atrocities and brutalities have deeply affected people who were personally invested in the old liberation struggle and the idea of South Sudanese independence. There is now a much weaker (and tarnished) idea of a national South Sudanese identity that was so instrumental in encouraging returns in the 2002-2012 period.

These issues all point towards the slower, fragmented, and possibly impermanent return of recently displaced communities, if they return at all. Flight and out-migration continues, particularly amongst young people, many of whom see their personal futures and opportunities outside of the country. Donors and operational agencies will need

to consider three key issues when designing and implementing their aid programmes supporting returns: the exploitation of returns by a militarized governing and economic elite; the continued economic collapse; and fundamental societal changes following the 2013 conflict.

Key Issue 1: Exploitation of returns by militarised governments and economic elites

Return migration and reconstruction will be useful for the current South Sudanese state's continued efforts to re-establish its authority across the country. CSRF and many other agencies have already raised serious concerns over the risk of return resettlements being manipulated by national and local authorities to gerrymander ethnically-identified constituencies and administrative areas. The utility of this is obvious: creating mono- or majority-ethnic administrative units is a cheap method of divide and rule, breaking apart otherwise potentially politically risky groupings, encouraging local elites to fight over new positions (distracting and dividing them in the process), and giving new opportunities to more closely control and tax residents.

There is also a legitimate concern that mass returns will be a further opportunity for expropriating and monetising land, as was seen in the 2002-2012 return period. In urban spaces, there are renewed opportunities for local military-political powers to organise extra-legal land expropriation, demarcation, and sale.¹⁴ In rural areas, the same powers (and their local family members) could use their wealth and cheap returnee labour to open up large farms and exploit returning poor men and women as underpaid waged farm workers.¹⁵ These are current and continuing dynamics, in various forms, across the country and work to consolidate elite economic power at the expense of the continued impoverishment of the majority.¹⁶

Returns processes risk feeding these processes by assisting people to return only to rural 'home areas'. The South Sudan government is keen to ruralise its population in areas it controls to benefit from cheap farm labour and a recruitment pool of poor young men.¹⁷ People who were transported

¹³ RVI (2019).

¹⁴ Kindersley N (2019), Badiey N (2013), Badiey N (2014).

¹⁵ Kindersley N, Majok JD (2019).

¹⁶ RVI (2019).

¹⁷ Africa Watch (1992), Rogge J (1990), UN OLS (1991), Terrill C (1980). There seem to be two strategies, in areas controlled by the Government, there is a push for rural resettlement,

back to rural ‘home areas’ during the 2008-2012 IOM facilitated returns process, particularly those with no funds or family networks to rely on (like urbanised young refugee women with dependent children), had little option but to depend on daily low-waged farm labour on upper-class residents’ large farms, or poorly-paid military work in the army or paramilitary groups.¹⁸

It is also politically expedient to ruralise returning residents and limit new urbanisation. South Sudan’s government knows that political organisation and new movements are most often generated in intense urban spaces, where people have more access to education, have a chance to mix, and might have more disposable income to put towards collective organising. Since the 1980s, refugee and displaced South Sudanese communities have built inter-ethnic families and relationships, and urban areas, including Juba, have a plethora of inter-ethnic court systems and social organisations. Rural residents are more likely to be dependent on daily wages, physically overworked, and with less access to information and education, and as such are more easily manipulated through misinformation and propaganda.

Returns must be understood as part of this complex political economy that exploits cheap and desperate returnee labour. Donors and aid workers must be aware of these dynamics, and should attempt to mitigate them by supporting: return migration to urban areas, (if that is what returnees want), collectivised agricultural projects, local labour organisation, and rural education projects.

Key Issue 2: Economic Collapse

Economic opportunity and access to services will drive returns processes as much as a sense of confidence in future stability. The willingness of people to return should not be taken as an indicator of peace. Many people returned throughout the 2013-2018 civil war to sustain business or farm investments (often at major personal risk), or to take up jobs in the aid sector that are crucial for funding family medical care, education, and day to day survival outside of South Sudan. These options have been significantly damaged by the war’s impact on development projects and project

funding, and by the major loss of income from government employment. Diaspora residents’ and NGO workers’ salaries are therefore under major stress supporting extended families, and there is significantly less ready cash to invest in the expensive process of return and reconstruction.

The deep economic crisis continues to undermine the foundations of community ‘social safety nets’.¹⁹ Many people are struggling to provide the mutual support and sharing economy that poor family members rely on. This was seen in the previous returns period, with the poorest falling out of these mutual networks, for example poor young women whose marriages were not recognised by their husbands’ families. International humanitarian and development agencies often assume that these complex systems of mutual support will mitigate crises, but these systems require ongoing investment and funding to keep them going, and cannot be preserved through moral obligation alone.

The war has also created an uneven development geography across South Sudan. Some areas have been entirely destroyed, while other areas have continued to benefit from development investments. These internal inequalities will shape both patterns of return and also the future of South Sudan’s economy and society – as some people benefit from continued access to healthcare, education and services, others will continue to battle with waves of humanitarian crisis and the lack of development investment in ‘risky’ areas. Encouraging return ‘home’ without addressing these structural inequalities will only exacerbate existing anger and resentment at the ‘hoarding’ of aid and development in specific urban sites and ‘secure’ regions. This type of anger has already been channelled into violent mobilisation in the previous conflict.²⁰

Finally, despite often wanting to return to loved homes, most people prioritise their access to services, education, and safety. South Sudan’s extensive borderlands mean that most families have experience and connections outside the country, and young people in particular are continuing to leave South Sudan for work and

while in areas controlled by the opposition, the Government seems to be encouraging urban returns.

¹⁸ Dusenbury AS (2013).

¹⁹ Deng LB (2010), Santschi M (2017).

²⁰ Stringham N, Forney J (2017).

education, travelling to places such as Sudan, Egypt, Kenya, Ethiopia. It is likely that this regional diaspora will continue to expand and become politically and economically significant in the mid-term. In the short term, these cross-border economies are fundamental for family survival and contingency planning.

Key Issue 3: Societal Change and Collapsed National Identity

Return movements come with significant social and cultural baggage, including new prejudices and accusations of foreignness and immorality, and new ideas of how good government and social order should work.²¹ South Sudanese returns during the 2002-2012 period were no exception. They catalysed massive changes to South Sudan's society: it rapidly expanded urban populations, sped up the monetisation and marketisation of the economy, challenged gender and generational relations, shifted career aspirations, and sparked cultural and linguistic clashes. Nonetheless, in the lead up to the 2010 referendum and subsequent independence in 2011, amongst South Sudanese there was the widespread sense of pride in, and hope for, the world's newest nation, after decades of struggle and privation. The violent politicisation of ethnicity in the 2013-18 wars has left many South Sudanese feeling that the very idea of a national South Sudanese identity is now at stake.

The return and resettlement of around a third of South Sudan's population will again re-set how people relate to the state, to their local authorities, to cash, to 'good' employment, to their homelands and ethnicities, and to each other. In circumstances where aid agencies are focused on immediate and urgent issues such as nutrition, education, health and welfare, and are wary of the political risks of engaging in civic issues, they may see these questions as secondary to the immediate practicalities of return and reconstruction. But these issues are at the heart of peacebuilding and societal reconstruction, and civic space must be made (and invested in) to promote mutual understanding and collective organisation, and to deal with anger, suspicion and competition over meagre opportunities and resources.

Recommendations

This briefing note makes three recommendations for understanding return and resettlement dynamics over the coming years, and recommends three policy and programme strategies to reflect the difficult and complex issues highlighted above.

Invest in Understanding the Dynamics

Group discussions, including specific women-only discussions, may be helpful to understanding localized strategies and entry points for support: A return 'home' is deeply problematic in a context of multiple displacements and returns over many years. This makes it difficult for agencies to know when to take action on return and resettlement. People will make complicated choices to mitigate potential or known risks, generally through extended family strategies of economic diversification. This shifting, locally-specific contingency planning and collective decision-making will be challenge for agencies to fully understand.

Support space for discussion of key social and economic inequalities, risks, external manipulation, and livelihoods problems that hinder people (and particularly women) in making the best choices possible: Decisions to return are complicated, and based on a constant flow of new information and rumour. South Sudanese people are constantly engaged in extensive cross-verification and information-gathering. International agencies should not assume that people do not have (good, or any) information about their 'destination' area and the political context there. Discussions might include historical conversations about past decisions and experience: many people will have been displaced before and will have extensive expertise. These more significant conversations might highlight opportunities for targeted assistance that would otherwise be missed.

The importance of understanding the complex socioeconomic dynamics of kinship networks should not be underestimated: This note supports the points made in the CSRF Analysis 'Responding to returns and resettlements in South Sudan' (June 2019), particularly the risks of return movements facilitating military recruitment, and the problems

²¹ Grabska KE (2013), Grabska KE (2011), Erickson J, Faria C (2011), Faria C (2013).

of land rights and insecure tenure, particularly for women and the long-term displaced.

Policy and Programme Considerations

Urban resettlement and children's movements between homes for schooling need to be explicitly understood and supported in returns and resettlement programming: Families are managing the additional stresses of destroyed welfare infrastructure (schools, hospitals) and the economic crisis and lack of employment options through diversification. This includes splitting families between urban, rural, and refugee camp spaces, and moving young families and school-going children across residences and borders to access education and care. Women, disabled people, and the elderly in particular will be trying to avoid exploitative or abusive work or living situations, and will prioritise access to education and healthcare, but they will also be under the most social and cultural pressure to return to rural areas.

Agencies should allow for continued cross-border migrations, and should support local conversations about labour rights, fair pay, land tenure rights, and collectivized farming and livelihoods investments: Continued cross-border work and migration allows men to seek alternatives to military work and allows women to escape rural labour exploitation. Even if it seems counter-intuitive to returns planning, in the face of continued wage labour exploitation in South Sudan supporting these strategies and conversations is critical. Supporting communities to openly challenge abuses and exploitation within the returns process is vital to maintain transparency and help people rebuild a safer, fairer civil society.

Agencies should build opportunities for public, open civil conversations about good governance and new societies into their returns and resettlements efforts: It is critically important to support communities to hold their authorities to account during return and resettlement. There is almost no space for public debate or critical conversation in South Sudan at present, despite the relative stability in many areas. This includes open discussion and criticism of the returns process, and criticism of political attempts to manipulate returns. Civic space is vitally important for people to discuss new a social order, rebuild trust, deal with difficult and emotional events, and reconstruct society. It is not a project separate from returns management, but should be seen as fundamental to the returns and resettlement process.

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