



BRIEFING PAPER

Recommendations for addressing internal displacement and returns in South Sudan

INTRODUCTION

Following decades of civil war, a comprehensive peace agreement and the subsequent independence of South Sudan in 2011 prompted as many as two million refugees to return to the world's youngest country.¹ Many, however, were displaced again when internal conflict erupted in December 2013. A temporary reprieve following the signing of a peace agreement in 2015 enabled some to return to their homes, but conflict soon flared up again.

A revitalised peace agreement was signed in 2018, but conflict and violence triggered almost 259,000 new displacements the following year.² A study by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) also found that displaced people in South Sudan continue to face barriers in their pursuit of durable solutions. Despite the peace agreement, many internally displaced people (IDPs) and returning refugees remain in Protection of Civilians sites (POCs) because they do not feel it is safe to return to their areas of origin.³

"We decided to return to South Sudan because of the peace agreement," a returning refugee in Juba POC said. "But its implementation is still in process and we're unable to go back home for fear that the war might break out again ... so it's better to stay here."⁴

The study's findings indicate that POCs provide essential protection for those afraid of being targeted on ethnic grounds. This includes IDPs and returning refugees who find themselves living in internal displacement once back in the country. Despite the opposition of humanitarian organisations, however, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) began to withdraw from the sites in September 2020.

To examine the implications of this withdrawal for the short and long-term response to internal displacement, IDMC organised an online discussion with partners from the Norwegian Refugee Council, France's Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) and REACH.

Drawing on the outcome of the discussion, this paper calls for a comprehensive study of land use to inform discussions about return and durable solutions in South Sudan, and concerted efforts by all those involved in the response to promote peaceful coexistence.

TRANSITIONING AWAY FROM PROTECTION

POCs emerged as an ad-hoc response to the systematic targeted killing of civilians, who sought protection at UN bases throughout South Sudan following the outbreak of civil

war in December 2013. The sites played a key role in saving lives during the conflict, and they continue to offer essential protection to IDPs and returning refugees.

“The security is good as long as you are inside the POC”, said a community leader at the Juba site. “But it’s not good when you go out, especially at night.”⁵ A recent study in Malakal similarly found that many POC residents of leave the site during the day, but all return to its safety for the night.⁶

The residents’ fears are entirely warranted. The security situation deteriorated further in 2020, and the expansion of localised conflicts triggered 232,000 new displacements in the first half of the year.⁷ The peace agreement still officially holds, but implementation of its provisions has been slow.⁸ Local sources say the government’s partisan nature and the lack of unified security forces fuel mistrust and undermine the potential for peaceful coexistence.

The mutual suspicion between POC residents and government is particularly significant, and it is uncertain whether the security of former POCs can be guaranteed in the absence of unified forces.⁹ “If the UN leaves us with no protection... I will go to another country as a refugee,” said an IDP in Juba POC for fear of further violence.¹⁰

Despite widespread ethnic tensions and a resurgence of associated communal violence, the drop in political violence since the signing of the revitalised peace agreement has prompted UNMISS to claim that “external threats that led to the establishment of the POC sites no longer exist”.¹¹ As a result, it started to transfer jurisdiction of the sites to local government authorities in September 2020 in a process referred to as transitioning. The POCs in Bor, Wau and Juba have since been redesignated as conventional displacement camps, and discussions are ongoing about the mission’s withdrawal from the Malakal and Bentiu sites.¹²

UNMISS guaranteed that POC residents would not be pushed out as a result of the transition, and that humanitarian services would continue to be provided.¹³ According to those involved in the response, however, the process has led to the gradual removal of physical protection and a reduction in services, ultimately pushing residents to return to their areas of origin.

HOUSING, LAND AND PROPERTY ISSUES

Civilians from ethnic groups perceived to support the opposition have had their land occupied throughout South Sudan’s conflict, forcing them into displacement. The previously diverse town of Malakal, for example, has become almost entirely Dinka. Many of the former homes of the predominantly Shilluk residents of the POC site have been occupied by Dinka soldiers and their families.¹⁴

In a study conducted in 2015, nearly a third of IDPs in the Malakal POC said they would try to return to their pre-crisis or ancestral homes if the site were to become insecure, and nearly three-quarters if peace came to the country.¹⁵ The occupation of their former homes, however, foreshadows likely disputes. Given their expected prevalence, the transitioning of the POCs not only exposes residents to very real security threats. It also risks fuelling further instability.

Housing, land and property (HLP) issues will have a major impact on the prospects for peaceful coexistence and durable solutions, but they represent a significant knowledge gap. To inform discussions about resolving displacement, a comprehensive study of land use is needed to examine different groups’ ownership claims, future settlement intentions and the resulting risk of disputes.

Given the likely surge in land disputes between POC residents and the occupants of their former homes, the transitioning of the sites adds further urgency to this endeavour. As well as supporting the peaceful resolution of HLP issues in the short and medium-term, opportunities for longer-term land reform to promote lasting peace and stability will also need to be identified.

Such a study should adopt a conflict sensitive approach and uphold the importance of protection. It should draw on a review of existing documentation, but primary data collection among POC residents and the occupants of their former homes will also be needed, based on questions developed by the protection cluster’s HLP technical working group.

CONCLUSION

Opportunities for durable solutions in South Sudan ultimately depend on the successful implementation of the revitalised peace agreement. Concerted efforts by all involved are needed to prevent a new descent into violence. To this end, it is vital to promote peaceful coexistence in the vicinity of the POCs.

This may include fostering dialogue between community representatives, increasing the capacity of local law enforcement agencies and promoting an unarmed civilian approach to conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Providing equitable assistance and services to vulnerable IDPs and host communities, including food, water, education and healthcare, would also help to prevent competition for resources.

Given the risks posed to peace and stability by transitioning the country’s POCs, more data is needed to inform discussions about durable solutions and evidence-based interventions. In addition to a land-use study, this could involve in-depth qualitative research on the living conditions of people who go back to their areas of origin, protection assessments and intention surveys for those who remain in POCs and area-based assessments in locations expected to receive large numbers of returnees.

Some relevant data already exists. The International Organization for Migration's displacement tracking matrix, for example, has conducted intention-perception surveys in Wau and Malakal, and comprehensive protection assessments during mobility tracking. REACH has conducted area-based assessments in return locations in Magwi and Renk, and remote multi-sector needs assessments in much of the country.¹⁶

New and existing data should be compiled into a comprehensive desk review to facilitate uptake. Only when the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors have access to such information will they be able to work together to identify and address obstacles to durable solutions in South Sudan.

NOTES

- 1 BICC, [Back to turmoil: Refugee and IDP return to and within South Sudan](#), 2016.
- 2 IDMC, [Country page: South Sudan](#), 2020.
- 3 IDMC, [Tired of running: Repeated displacement and premature returns in South Sudan](#), 2019.
- 4 IDMC, [Tired of running: Repeated displacement and premature returns in South Sudan](#), 2019.
- 5 IDMC, [Tired of running: Repeated displacement and premature returns in South Sudan](#), 2019.
- 6 CSRF, [Back on their feet: The role of PoCs in South Sudan and the potential for returning 'home'](#), 2020.
- 7 IDMC, [Country page: South Sudan](#), 2020.
- 8 CSRF, [Back on their feet: The role of PoCs in South Sudan and the potential for returning 'home'](#), 2020.
- 9 CSRF, [Back on their feet: The role of PoCs in South Sudan and the potential for returning 'home'](#), 2020.
- 10 IDMC, [Tired of running: Repeated displacement and premature returns in South Sudan](#), 2019.
- 11 United Nations Peacekeeping, [Briefing to the Security Council by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General David Shearer](#), 2020.
- 12 CSRF, [Back on their feet: The role of PoCs in South Sudan and the potential for returning 'home'](#), 2020.
- 13 United Nations Peacekeeping, [Briefing to the Security Council by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General David Shearer](#), 2020.
- 14 NRC, [Protection of civilians sites: Lessons from South Sudan for future operations](#), 2017.
- 15 UNMISS, [Malakal PoC Site - Preliminary Findings Overview Malakal County, Upper Nile State, South Sudan](#), January 2015.
- 16 IOM and UNHCR, [Malakal PoC Intention-Perception Survey](#), May 2019. IOM, [WAU Displacement Sites Intention-Perception Survey](#), March 2019. IOM, [South Sudan — Protection Summary: Site And Village/Neighborhood Assessment — Mobility Tracking R8 \(February – March 2020\)](#), October 2020. REACH, [Area-Based Assessment in areas of return: Magwi Town, Magwi County, Eastern Equatoria State](#), December 2019. REACH, [Area-Based Assessment in areas of return: Renk Town, Renk County, Upper Nile State, South Sudan](#), October 2019.