South Sudanese returns: perceptions and responses

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Gaining insight into the experiences and perceptions of refugees can help ensure programming is better able to support refugees' durable return and reintegration.

Between December 2018 and April 2019, Act-Church of Sweden and the Lutheran World Federation conducted a perceptions-focused study with South Sudanese refugees in northern Uganda (Moyo, Adjumani and Lamwo), in Kenya (Kakuma) and in Ethiopia (Gambella). Despite refugees' widespread scepticism regarding the revitalised peace process in South Sudan, and the position of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) that the conditions for returns were not yet in place, the study indicated a strong desire among these refugees to return to South Sudan.

South Sudanese refugees are carefully watching the situation within South Sudan. They pointed to several indicators they are monitoring to determine when return might be feasible. The peace process is key, with the return of former Vice-President Riek Machar to South Sudan (planned for May 2019 but eventually delayed) having been the most immediate indicator. The national elections, originally scheduled for 2021, were also seen as an event that would trigger returns. However, there were a number of other elements as well.

Refugees were intently monitoring the more immediate security situation, with scepticism about the peace process being partly due to the exclusion of some armed groups, which have continued their campaigns of violence. Thus, the cantonment of armed actors (that is, their relocation into military garrisons) was an important indicator. With many refugees complaining that their properties had been forcibly occupied by armed actors, the demilitarisation of civilian spaces and properties was also highlighted.

They were additionally monitoring the status of the Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites within South Sudan. Under protection by the UN Mission in South Sudan, these PoC sites were hosting some 190,000 internally

displaced people (IDPs) as of early 2019. In assuming that those inside were there because they were unable to leave safely, refugees connected the continued presence of the PoC sites with continuing high levels of risk. Furthermore, few believe that the ethnic fracturing that has occurred within the nation has been addressed. As such, many raised ethnicity-based concerns, especially relating to the freedom to move safely throughout their country. Others emphasised the importance of developmental indicators, including access to good education, health care and livelihoods.

Refugees are meanwhile also weighing the uncertainty about life back in South Sudan against the violence, stresses and economic challenges they face in their current refugee settings. Refugees were generally convinced that if they were in their original home environment, they could better meet at least the essential needs of their families.

In many cases, economic concerns over-rode perceptions of security risk. Refugees – particularly those with formal education and professional skills – emphasised the strong pull of employment opportunities in South Sudan (for example with non-governmental organisations – NGOs – and the Government of South Sudan), especially in urban centres, although these possibilities were again weighed against strong security concerns.

At the same time, the lack of viable livelihoods within the refugee setting is fostering a sense of hopelessness and apathy, especially among adult men and disenfranchised youth. This is reportedly fuelling a growing substance-abuse problem and even criminal behaviour. Some young people are also allegedly returning to South Sudan to join armed groups, which risks propagating further cycles of violence.

Refugee youth see education and employment opportunities as providing

UNHCR/Catianne Tjerina

Gatdet, aged 11, ran from his home in South Sudan and hid in a river as armed men killed his classmates and relatives while others drowned. After fire destroyed his family's tent in Kule refugee camp, in Gambella, Ethiopia, he now owns only this metal plane he made out of disused oil cans. "All my clothes were burned, the food, the cooking oil, the mattress, sheets, blankets, all gone. I am sad about everything we lost. I was going to school but all my books were burnt. I like planes as they move from place to place. I would like to go to many places, like America. I hope to go to South Sudan too because that is my country, but we left because the men with guns came."

direction, without which they are more prone to the above 'distractions'. More broadly, refugees in both Kakuma and Gambella were adamant that their children will not return to South Sudan until good education is available there. While refugees in northern Uganda placed an equal value on education, some complained about school-related costs and low-quality education services in the camps. This led them to consider returning as the more likely means of guaranteeing good education for their children.

Go-and-see visits versus permanent return
Refugees talked about quite significant 'yo-yo' movements back to South Sudan, often for information gathering. For example, some undertook 'go-and-see' visits to monitor the security situation first-hand. Others periodically returned to check on their property, assets and family members. Others were occasionally going back to collect assets (such as a cow) which they could sell to support their family in the camp. This begins to reflect an interim stage or 'grey' period in which refugees move increasingly fluidly between the camp/settlement and their places of return. Such movements were expected to become gradually more permanent, depending on the circumstances within South Sudan.

However, spontaneous 'permanent' returns were indeed happening at the time of the study. The first wave of returnees included those with employable skills returning especially to urban centres. Similarly, many male youth returned to protect family homesteads. The planting season was expected to spark even wider returns to rural areas. As mentioned, children and youth attending school are expected to be the last to return. People with special needs are likely to move according to where they can get the best support.

Such movements were expected to differ according to the circumstances in the place of refuge. For example, in anticipation of a relatively positive peace trajectory, those in northern Uganda saw return as relatively imminent, while those in Kakuma and Gambella more typically estimated a three-

to-five-year period before significant returns would occur (linked to the forthcoming elections in South Sudan). Those returning to areas that saw heavy fighting (such as Upper Nile) expected to return more slowly, probably initially to rural areas, with movement to urban areas increasing only as security and their confidence stabilised.

Programming for durable returns
Insight into the refugees' micro-level experiences, perceptions and analysis can be used to ensure that programming more effectively supports durable returns and integration. There is, for example, a dogged determination among refugees to educate their children. The need to engage youth and foster a sense of hope, whether through formal education, vocational training or employment opportunities, is also a well recognised priority. Indeed, the stark consequences of failing to do so are easy to imagine. Similarly, the need to foster viable livelihoods and economic security for the refugees is also not a new idea. Nevertheless, refugees repeatedly stated that the magnitude and aims of NGO-supported income-generating activities continue to be too small scale. Given that the return process is widely expected to unfold over the next three to five years, there is scope and need for more substantive engagement (for example in vocational training) at the camp/settlement level to better prepare these refugees for return to South Sudan as productive citizens ready to rebuild the nation.

Responses should also incorporate a more substantial cross-border or regional dimension. From the perspective of programming in camps/settlements, responses should be informed by the realities of refugees' places of origin. For example, efforts to tackle sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the camps/settlements should be informed by an understanding of SGBV causes and attitudes in South Sudan, which differ from the Ugandan context.

Moreover, as many of the complex return strategies that refugees are devising involve the splitting of families between country of refuge and return locations, it is important

that international actors ensure that their programmes in the refugee settlements/camps are well harmonised with responses in the places to which the refugees are expected to return in South Sudan; these responses should be strongly developmental in approach. Efforts should be made to ensure maximum cross-border synchronisation. This can be done in the education sector with curricula, standards, teacher training, inclusion policies and so on. Vocational training provided in refugee settings should be informed by market studies conducted in the places of origin. For example, refugees in Gambella are calling for construction, plumbing and electrical training so they can play a role in rebuilding their damaged cities. Such training should also include regionally recognised certification, thus ensuring that graduates are able to market their skills in other locations. While access to credit and savings institutions has long been identified as a challenge, mobile financial institutions are beginning to function. These institutions, that currently provide essential services to camp-based refugees, should be supported to operate across borders to ensure continuity. Such mobility is extremely relevant in this grey period.

However, a stronger commitment within South Sudan to restore the conditions that allow for returns (for example, as stated in the Global Compact on Refugees), including security conditions and essential services at the very least, must be taken on immediately. Indeed, these are the indicators that refugees are monitoring in order to inform their return decisions.

Moreover, especially during this 'grey' period, responses in the return locations should reflect a community-based approach that includes local residents and returning refugees and IDPs, working holistically in order to rebuild a sense of community. Any such approach should also focus on restoring the psychosocial well-being of individuals and their communities, recognising the detrimental impact not only of their displacement but also of their doubts about the feasibility of peaceful co-existence among South Sudan's multi-ethnic

society. This underlines the need for a peace agenda that starts at the individual level. The refugees across the region then need to be drawn into the wider national peace process, because many viewed themselves as being outside the South Sudan peace process.

Indeed, such social change objectives should be more proactively and deliberately pursued. For example, schools can provide an important platform for facilitating attitudinal shifts and promoting a sense of compassionate social responsibility. Community-based structures designed to facilitate support for the most vulnerable in society, and to offer space for reflective discussion, have also proven effective in fostering empathy and compassion, which are essential for rebuilding social cohesion and a sense of social responsibility.

In all this, the restoration of individual agency is critical. Many refugee respondents alluded to a loss of confidence, doubting their own agency and capabilities as a result of both the daily stresses of refugee life and their experience of war. Ensuring meaningful participation in refugee responses, however difficult this might be, can both reduce dependency and help to reconnect people with this sense of agency. Proactive efforts to foster a sense of well-being among individuals and their communities is fundamental to supporting conflict-affected populations in re-learning peaceful behaviour, in collectively envisioning a peaceful future, and in taking the necessary steps towards creating a different kind of future for themselves.

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