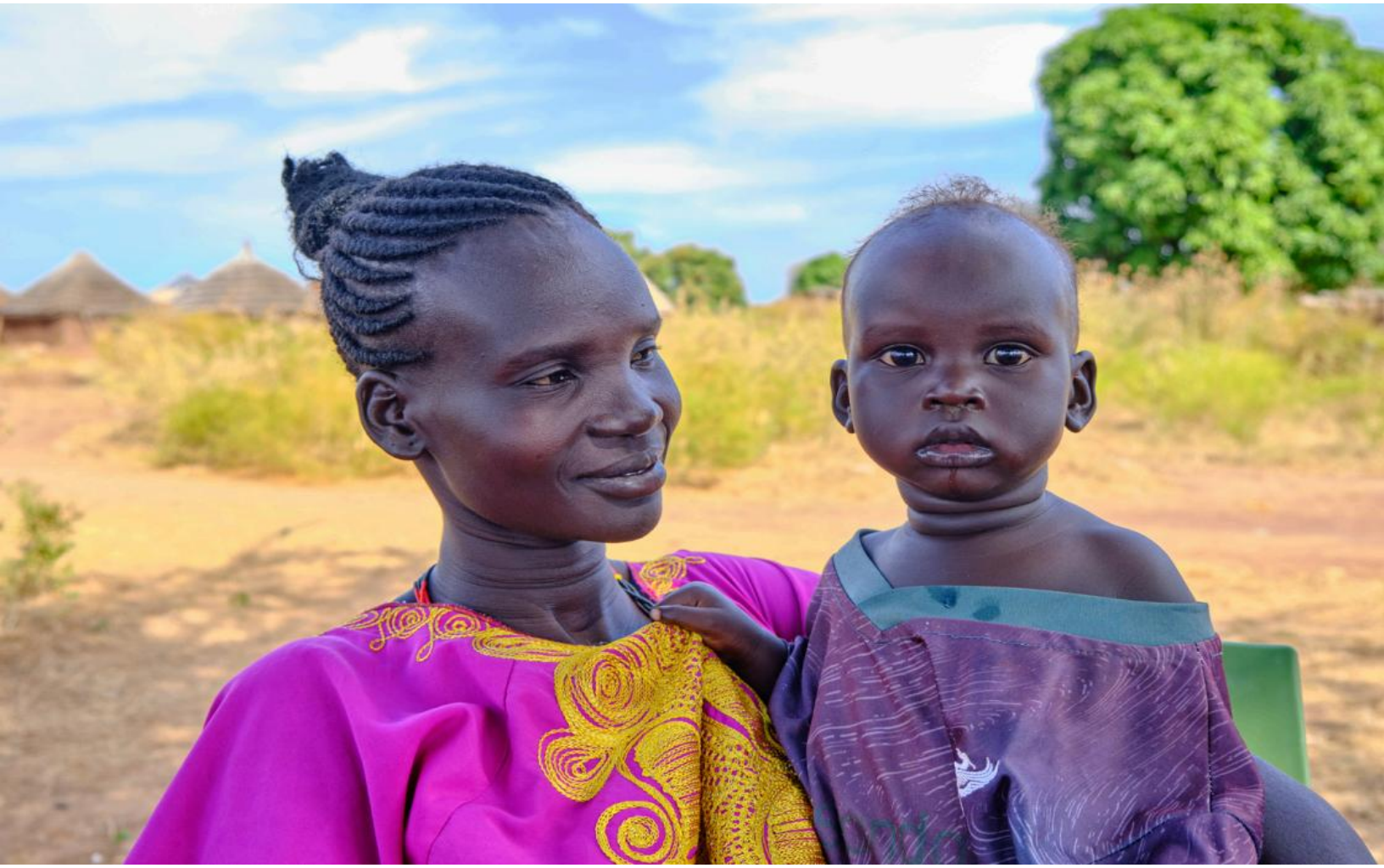
Protection Cluster
South Sudan

South Sudan
Protection Monitoring Spotlight
December 2025



A woman and her baby in Aweil, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan. (2025) Photo by Gabriel Caccamo/NRC.

Displaced Between Homelands:

Protection Risks and Reintegration Challenges of South Sudanese Returnees

South Sudanese people who were displaced into Sudan years or decades ago find themselves being displaced back towards South Sudan by the Sudan Crisis. Defined as 'returnees' because of their historical ties to South Sudan, these people face acute protection risks at each stage of the displacement journey and are vulnerable to falling through the cracks of well-intentioned but over-strained policy and programmatic frameworks that seek to support their reintegration. This Protection Monitoring Spotlight charts the specific protection risks faced by returnees at each stage of the displacement pathway: from the initial trigger and perilous journey out of Sudan, to the initial arrival and longer-term efforts to start a new chapter of life in South Sudan. Furthermore, it explores specific challenges faced by South Sudanese returnees in their efforts to secure safety, and ideally, a durable solution. The analysis is informed by the experiences of people served by Protection Cluster members in Renk (Upper Nile State) and Aweil East (Northern Bahr el-Ghazal State), and the protection actors supporting affected individuals and communities in South Sudan.

Key Insights and Recommendations

<table>
<tr><th>Phase of Displacement</th><th colspan="2">Protection Risks and Recommendations</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">Triggers of Displacement from Sudan</td><td colspan="2">Protection Risks</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Forced displacement, attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, abduction, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary or unlawful arrest, forced deportation, forced recruitment or association with armed groups.

• The Sudan Crisis is the largest displacement crisis in the world.
• Over 1.3 million people have been forcibly displaced from Sudan to South Sudan, of whom approximately 31% are school-age children and 67% are South Sudanese nationals.
• Due to the perception that South Sudanese nationals are aligned with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), ethnic South Sudanese people face increased risk of abduction, arbitrary detention, and torture by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), as well as forced deportation to South Sudan.
• The RSF also perpetrate forced recruitment, torture, and executions targeting South Sudanese nationals.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Recommendations</td></tr>
<tr><td>Humanitarian actors in Sudan:

• Provide protective accompaniment to displacement-affected people travelling overland to South Sudan.
• Leverage protection monitoring data to advocate for compliance of State and Non-State Armed Actors to comply with international humanitarian law obligations to distinguish between civilians and non-combatants and take necessary precautions to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure.</td><td>Humanitarian actors in South Sudan:

• Implement cross-border initiatives to mitigate risks associated with displacement and conflict dynamics.
• Incorporate protection monitoring data from Sudan into delivery of specialised protection services, particularly near border-crossing points.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">A Dangerous Journey</td><td colspan="2">Protection Risks</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Violence, torture, extortion, and sexual exploitation and abuse.

• Extortion is a widespread practice, carried out by armed actors and criminal gangs alike along borders and other travel routes.
• People who are unable to pay for safe passage risk being beaten, shot, sexually exploited, abused, kidnapped, or even killed.
• Some returnees resort to requesting personal loans from people they know and, upon arrival in South Sudan, are coerced into forced labour or sexual situations under the auspices of displacement-related ‘debt repayment’.</td></tr>
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<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">A Dangerous Journey</td><td colspan="3">Recommendations</td></tr>
<tr><td>Government of South Sudan:

• Enforce compliance of authorised checkpoints with South Sudanese law and ensure accountability for abuse of authority and extortion.</td><td colspan="2">Humanitarian and peacebuilding actors in South Sudan:

• Support civilian self-protection strategies to prevent, mitigate, and respond to risks of theft, robbery, and extortion.
• Expand non-violent protective presence approaches in areas with illegal checkpoints.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">“Return” to South Sudan</td><td colspan="3">Protection Risks</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Lack of access to humanitarian services.

• 64% of returnees were unwilling to relocate from Renk to areas of origin, with reasons ranging from fear of renewed conflict, seasonal flooding, lack of family or community ties in their area of origin, or the hope of returning to Sudan when conditions improve.
• Returnees living in informal settlements contend with poor infrastructure and great distances from humanitarian services, which can have life-threatening implications.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Recommendations</td></tr>
<tr><td>Government of the Republic of South Sudan:

• Enhance the implementation of the South Sudan's Action Plan on Return, Reintegration, and Recovery (2024-2028), for safe, dignified, voluntary return and integration of displaced people.
• Ensure recognition for returnee land rights is complemented by investment in local multisectoral services.</td><td>Humanitarian actors in South Sudan:

• Invest in programming models that assess threats and resilience, with people most at risk prioritised irrespective of displacement status.
• Implement joint protection initiatives between organisations with complementary mandates to ensure quality, inclusion, and cost-effectiveness.
• Deliver multisectoral mobile services to returnees in under-served or hard-to-reach areas.
• Implement risk-based targeting that tailors assistance to a person’s intersecting vulnerabilities, capacities, and protection risks.
• Sustain protection monitoring systems that disaggregate populations by displacement status to enhance understanding of the needs returnees have as a discrete population.</td><td>Humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding actors in South Sudan:

• Strengthen local systems in accordance with the principles of the humanitarian-development-peace by harmonising acute response with longer-term development initiatives, with a focus on social cohesion to support a culture of positive peace.</td></tr>
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Struggling to (Re)-Integrate

Protection Risks

Community tension, threats to social cohesion, forced labour, and harmful coping mechanisms

- Overcrowding, resource constraints, and debt traps can lead to sexual exploitation, abuse, forced labour, and violence against returnees by hosts, including family members.
- Humanitarian targeting criteria that determines eligibility for assistance solely on the basis of displacement status can exacerbate inter- and intra-community tensions by reinforcing distinctions between host communities and returnees; these approaches also risk the exclusion of returnees from assistance altogether if prematurely or incorrectly classified as members of host communities.

Recommendations

Government of the Republic of South Sudan:

- Invest in sustainable development initiatives that support returnees' access to social protection and basic services.

Donors:

- Invest in risk- and area-based approaches that include refugees, returnees, IDPs, and host communities, with emphasis on addressing differentiated needs and enhancing social cohesion.
- Support longer-term, flexible funding that combines life-saving acute response with local systems-strengthening and community-led initiatives to reduce reliance on humanitarian assistance.
- Promote integrated humanitarian-development-peace approaches that include clear benchmarks for returnee reintegration.

Humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors:

- Support locally-led protection systems including community-led dialogue platforms, dispute resolution processes, and climate and conflict-related early warning systems.
- Implement conflict-sensitive, participatory, and inclusive area-based programming to strengthen the protective environment and address root causes of conflict.
- Reinforce and ensure accountability, to align with the appropriate standards and criteria of returns.
- Collaborate with local authorities to complement and strengthen local systems and services.

Context Analysis

Since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April 2023, over 1.3 million people have fled across the border from Sudan to South Sudan. Of those, 886,000 (67.3%), of which 31% are school-aged children,[1] are considered South Sudanese nationals. In this varied group are people who fled north from what is now South Sudan to Sudan during the first and second Sudanese civil wars, people who fled the 2013-2018 South Sudan civil war to Sudan, and people who sought new socio-economic opportunities in Sudan. There is a long history of movement of people fleeing violence between the two countries.

Today, people of South Sudanese origin – many of whom hold refugee status in Sudan – are now fleeing violence once again, escaping the widespread conflict-related violence of the Sudan Crisis. Under international law, people of South Sudanese origin or citizenship are typically classified as 'returnees' upon arrival in South Sudan. However, the categorisation as a 'returnee' is premised upon that idea that return is intentional and voluntary. In reality, many of those who make the movement to South Sudan do so involuntarily; compelled by conflict dynamics, ethnic targeting, forced displacement, or a complete collapse of basic services.

Despite being 'welcomed' as returnees in South Sudan, the decision to return is often the result of a difficult choice between a significant risk to life or near-certain death. The routes to South Sudan are hazardous, subject to risks of extortion, arbitrary detention, and abduction for forced labour or sexual exploitation, and efforts to begin a new chapter of life in South Sudan are impeded by limited access to services and protection risks that, for many returnees, are compounded, rather than mitigated, by their displacement status.

South Sudanese returnees meet with humanitarian service providers under the trees – a common meeting place in rural communities – in Aweil East, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. Photo by Scarlett Hawkins/NRC. (2025)

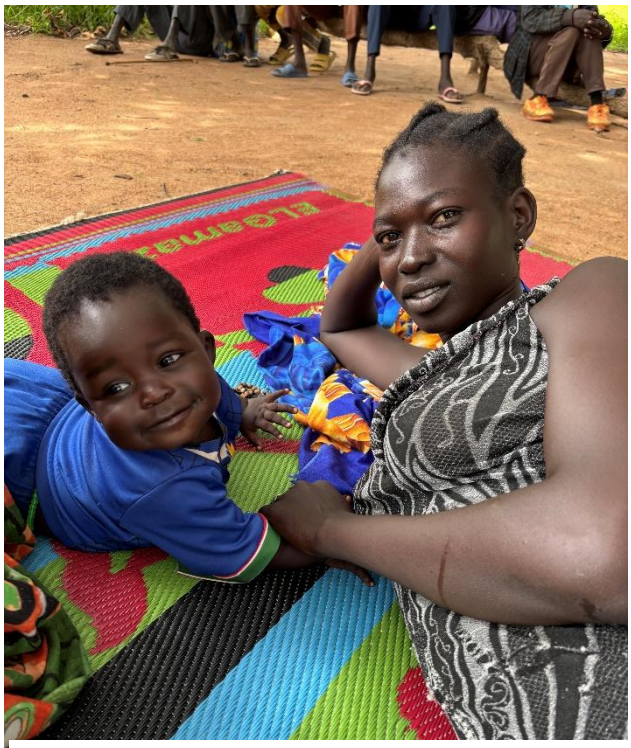
[1] Joint RRC, UNHC and IOM arrival dashboard

Defining South Sudanese Returnees

Displacement status affords specific protections under both South Sudanese and international law, with people no longer retaining refugee status upon voluntary return to their country of origin. However, the vast majority of returnees to South Sudan are not formally repatriated through official processes that would trigger their de-registration as refugees in Sudan. As a result, a returnee in South Sudan lives in a liminal legal space: a returnee one side of the border, and a registered refugees on the other. This presents complex legal and protection challenges, particularly regarding access to services, documentation, and durable solutions.

The Government of South Sudan has made clear policy commitments to support returnees to reintegrate and recover from displacement, and has specifically called upon the humanitarian sector to deliver targeted assistance that can address the needs of returnees.[2] However, the scale and severity of conflict- and climate-related shocks throughout South Sudan mean that people are returning to a context that has pressingly high needs for the entire population, including refugees, internally-displaced person (IDPs), and host communities, with 5.3 million people in need of protection services in 2025 alone.[3]

Displacement-affected people face heightened risks of mental and psychological distress because of cumulative stressors, including precarious living conditions, family separation, maltreatment, and inadequate access to services upon arrival in South Sudan. The ability for humanitarian actors to respond to the risks and needs faced by returnees – already a significant challenge – has been further decimated by global funding cuts to humanitarian assistance in 2025.



A mother and baby, both categorised as South Sudanese returnees, in Aweil East, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. Photo by Scarlett Hawkins/NRC. (2025)

For many people displaced from Sudan to South Sudan in pursuit of safety, this complex convergence of risks and constraints creates multidimensional protection risks. For returnees, these risks are acute at each stage of the journey from Sudan, as well as during their attempts to build a new life in South Sudan.

When the conditions of return are not safe, voluntary, or dignified – as is the case for many South Sudanese returnees who had previously been living in Sudan – complex questions arise about which country they consider home, and whether South Sudan is somewhere to put down roots, or simply to wait out the war in Sudan.

[2] Republic of South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission – Northern Bahr el-Ghazal State; Aweil East County, *Update: Continuation for returnees phase three coming from Sudan to Aweil East in the Month of March to April 2025.* (28 April 2025)

[3] South-Sudan HNRP 2025

Defining Durable Solutions for Returnees

Though all displacement-affected people require assistance that can address immediate needs and support their safety, South Sudanese returnees face specific challenges to achieving a durable solution to their displacement. These differentiated needs are acknowledged in the Government of South Sudan Action Plan on Return, Reintegration and Recovery that aims at achieving Durable Solutions (2024-2028).

Durable solutions can be achieved through three pathways: Local integration, sustainable return and reintegration at their place of origin, or settlement elsewhere.[4] Of these pathways, returns can be particularly sensitive because they can be pursued by communities and authorities seeking a 'return to normal', even when returns are not yet safe or feasible. In circumstances in which authorities perceive their role to be supporting returns where there is no existing return movement, responses to displacement risk being inadequate, under-resourced, or over-accelerated. In such situations, displacement-affected people can face pressure to return to their home countries before the conditions that drove the initial displacement are adequately resolved, which may further jeopardise their safety.

> **"We gave up our property to save our lives."**
>
> *– Female South Sudanese returnee (2025)*

Despite common misconceptions, return is not achieved when a person returns to their country of origin; the conditions must be voluntary, safe, and dignified, with a durable solution considered 'achieved' at the point in which a returnee is able to integrate into the local community, overcome displacement-related needs, no longer require humanitarian assistance, and be able to exercise their rights without experiencing discrimination due to their displacement status. In practice, however, return movements can and do take place without meeting all – or indeed, any – of these criteria.

According to regional intentions surveys conducted by UNHCR, South Sudanese nationals displaced to neighbouring countries typically intend to remain in their country of displacement. Recent analysis found that the majority of South Sudanese people in Kenya (96%), Uganda (86%), Ethiopia (68%), and Sudan (49%) did not plan to return to South Sudan in the next 12 months.[5] Responses from Sudan – the only country in which returns were marginally favoured – can be attributed in no small part to the Sudan Crisis, which pushes returnees to come to South Sudan not because they feel ready, but because they feel it is marginally (but not definitively) safer than Sudan; at least for the time being.

Protection Risks Throughout the Displacement Journey

1. Triggers of Displacement from Sudan: Arbitrary Detention, Deportations, and Forced Recruitment

The Sudan Crisis is the largest involuntary displacement crisis in the world, characterised by widespread human rights abuses and protection violations that have triggered massive involuntary displacement internally and across borders. Even prior to the Sudan Crisis, South Sudanese people in Sudan have been deliberately deprived of access to services and opportunities to exercise their rights due to discrimination against minority groups.[6]

Indiscriminate drone attacks, unlawful killings by armed actors of civilians, and forced relocations – ostensibly at random – have resulted in widespread insecurity and fear and widespread involuntary separation of families. There

[4] Norwegian Refugee Council, *Principles for Engagement on the Return of Displaced Populations*. (July 2023)
[5] UNHCR Regional Bureau for East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes, *Regional Intention Return Survey: South Sudanese*. [Accessed online on 10 July 2025]

[6] UN Human Rights Council. *Report of the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Sudan*. (A/HRC/51/52). (2022)

have been multiple documented instances of South Sudanese people, particularly men, being targeted on the basis of ethnicity and subjected to violence and coercion by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) or the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Due to the perception that South Sudanese nationals are sympathetic to the RSF, ethnic South Sudanese people face increased risk of abduction, arbitrary detention, and torture by SAF, as well as forced deportation to South Sudan. Protection analyses conducted by UNHCR found that persons with specific needs, including children, lactating women and persons with disabilities, are not spared from arbitrary detention, and are required to pay exorbitant fees or stay for as long as six months in prison, despite the absence of a clear legal justification. Border and protection monitoring conducted in Renk during the first half of 2025 recorded 5,024 people of South Sudanese origin were forcibly deported from Sudan to South Sudan without due process or access to legal remedy, with South Sudanese returnees, at their peak, comprising 69% of new arrivals.[7]

Tragically, this perceived affiliation does not make them any safer from the RSF, who target South Sudanese people, including children, for forcible recruitment (generally as armed actors or porters if male, and as cooks or for the purposes of sexual exploitation and abuse if female). Torture is a common tool of coercion and a widespread practice.

Survivors of these experiences have sought specialised protection services in South Sudan to support mental health and psychosocial recovery and address injuries including bullet wounds, mutilation, blunt force trauma, and injuries consistent with sexual assault.

> **"As my family and I fled Khartoum, we were ambushed. They took all our belongings and then shot me in front of my family. It took away all my jaw on one side and the bullet never came out."**
>
> *– Male South Sudanese returnee (2025)*

2. A Dangerous Journey: Violence, Extortion, and Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Most people displaced from Sudan to South Sudan travel along extremely perilous overland routes. Protection monitoring conducted by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Sudan found that protection risks are intensified during movement from area of origin to destination, with 57% of respondents reporting the road to be primary location of protection violations, while the remaining 43% specified checkpoints as particularly high-risk.[8]

> **"For two days, they forced me to serve them without food or water."**
>
> *– Female South Sudanese returnee (2025)*

Extortion is a widespread practice, carried out by armed actors and criminal gangs alike along borders and other travel routes. Extortion is both a protection violation, as well as a trigger for escalating acts of violence. People who are unable to pay for safe passage risk being beaten, shot, sexually exploited, abused, kidnapped, or even killed. Though money alone cannot guarantee safe passage, it can reduce the threat of violence. However, it is costly to pay for passage, especially when people are extorted at multiple points during their journey. Research conducted by UNHCR has found that some deportees were not allowed to travel with some or all of their belongings following rigorous checks by authorities, who frequently confiscated personal items.

To minimise risks associated with the displacement journey, some returnees resort to taking out personal loans from people they know – typically family members in South Sudan or people who have travelled ahead of them and are waiting at their destination. Depending on the size and conditions of the loan, several returnees have found

[7] UNHCR and IOM, *Border & Protection Monitoring Trends Report, Renk, Upper Nile, Sudan*. (June 2025)
[8] Norwegian Refugee Council Sudan Country Office, *Darfur Protection Monitoring Report*. (June 2025)

themselves ensnared in debt traps upon arrival in South Sudan, with worsening economic hardship among returnee households increasing the risk of adolescent girls being subjected to early and forced marriage.[9]

Individual protection assistance has been provided to several returnees in Aweil East who were been coerced into forced labour or sexual situations under the auspices of 'repayment' for displacement-related debts. Given displacement-affected people are largely proactive in their attempts to overcome the challenges and trauma exposure associated with their displacement, new arrivals in Renk use NRC *Family Connect* services, which provides internet credit and phone cards for newly-arrived refugees and returnees, to re-establish contact with separated family members, plan for reunification, and provide advice on how best to stay safe during the journey to South Sudan.

3. "Return" to South Sudan: Severe Needs and Overstrained Services

Upon arrival in South Sudan, returnees are encouraged to travel onwards to reintegrate their 'area of origin' in South Sudan (where they may have not lived for years, or at all). However, intentions surveys conducted by UNHCR Upper Nile State have found that 64% of returnees were unwilling to relocate from Renk, and of those willing to relocate, 82.9% strongly preferred to return to Sudan.[10] Reasons vary for preferring to stay in or near Renk, but most common responses include fear of renewed conflict, seasonal flooding in the area of origin, lack of family or community ties in their area of origin, or the hope of returning to Sudan when conditions improve. Consequently, most returnees prefer to live in spontaneously formed informal settlements near the border with Sudan.[11]

> **"The host community is saying that they are not being supported by the NGOs, and so they will continue to steal and then the refugees can complain to get more support."**
>
> *– Female South Sudanese refugee (2025)*

Of those who do to travel onward to their areas of origin, many stay in the households of extended family. Both options pose challenges for returnees to access services. Regarding civil documentation, the difficulty to establish legal identity and status within the country significantly limits returnees' access to essential services and humanitarian assistance, thereby constraining pathways to durable solutions. Child protection risks include unaccompanied children who have travelled alone from Sudan and, without a primary caregiver, face heightened risks of abuse, emotional distress, and disrupted access to education. Protection actors report significant mental and emotional distress reported by clients due to trauma exposure during displacement and challenging living conditions, family separation, and (re)integration challenges in South Sudan.

Local authorities in Upper Nile have allocated dedicated land for returnees to settle; a positive development to support their integration into local communities. However, a significant number of new arrivals choose to live in informal settlements, where they contend with poor infrastructure and great distances from the humanitarian service hub in Renk. Given the absence of public services, such logistical and economic barriers to access services in Renk can have life-threatening implications for the estimated 25,282 refugees and returnees living in these communities.[12] Furthermore, as global funding shortfalls force humanitarian service providers to reduce costs and reprioritise, the ability for humanitarian actors to travel to these communities and deliver appropriate, inclusive, and impactful services, is impeded. That local authorities have advanced the recognition of land rights for returnees is highly commendable; the next step will be to ensure that multisectoral services are available to address displacement-related needs on the pathway to durable solutions.

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[9] International Rescue Committee: South Sudan Protection Analysis, Child, Early and Forced Marriage in Maban (April 2025)
[10] UNHCR, *Renk Intention Survey*. (July 2025)
[11] *Interagency Update: Sudan Situation: Surge in Arrivals to South Sudan*. (6 - 11 January 2025)
[12] UNHCR and IOM, *Border & Protection Monitoring Trends Report, Renk, Upper Nile, Sudan*. (June 2025)

4. Struggling to (Re)-Integrate: Barriers to Services and Threats to Social Cohesion

When returnees do travel onward to their areas of origin in South Sudan, they often rely on extended family networks for shelter and support. While family and communities ties are highly conductive to reintegration, these gains can be eroded in households grappling with poverty, limited access to basic services, and tensions associated with poor mental health. In Aweil East, which is home to some 18,282 returnees,[13] Shelter and Protection actors host found that households who open their homes to returnees report overcrowding as an additional source of strain on already-limited resources. Resultant tensions contribute to cases in which returnees are subjected to abuse, forced labour, and violence by hosts. Protection case management actors have documented and responded to such cases through provision of temporary emergency shelter and legal assistance, but these examples highlight the profound risks returnees face even in areas of origin.

Despite good intentions, humanitarian programming seeking to make best use of limited funding can inadvertently fuel adverse consequences for returnees. The use of targeting criteria that is limited to displacement status (for example, providing assistance only to people who hold refugee status) risks perpetuating a norm in which a person's legal status is used as a substitute for a more comprehensive assessment of a person's displacement-related needs. Worse still, these categorical approaches – whilst more convenient for humanitarian actors – risk fuelling resentments at the community level by underscoring the differences between host communities and people seeking to integrate or reintegrate. Risks are particularly acute for returnees who, despite experiencing repeated and cyclical displacement that render them more at-risk, rather than less, may be categorised as members of the host community and, by virtue of having 'returned home', deprioritised for assistance.

Displacement-based targeting, even when returnees are included, can increase tension and competition for resources and ultimately undermines longer-term efforts to support social cohesion. Protection analysis in Wedweil Refugee Settlement in early 2025 found that targeted attacks by host community members against the settlement, though triggered by conflict dynamics in Sudan, were primed by growing resentments and the perception that humanitarian assistance was being distributed unfairly to refugees at the expense of other populations. In such circumstances, conflict-sensitive approaches that include host communities in assistance are critical to support the acceptance and inclusion of displacement-affected people. In the context of South Sudan, where efforts to strengthen public services and systems beyond the humanitarian ecosystem are ongoing, this is critical to ensure humanitarian initiatives are aligned with common commitments to the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

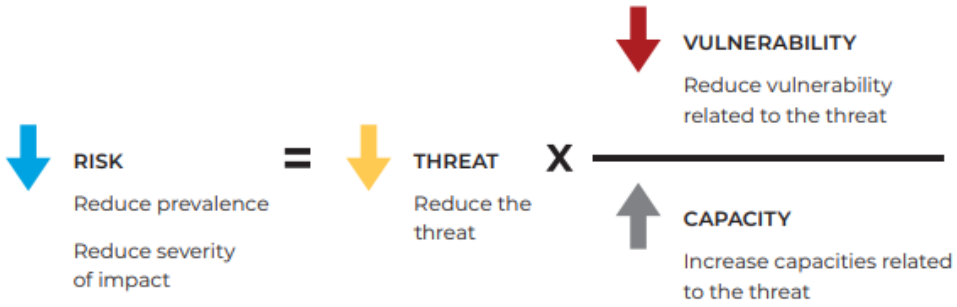
> **"Since they don't have money, they say now it is better to go back to suffer in [Sudan] because the situation is the same. They prefer to die in their own country if they are going to die."**
>
> *– Female South Sudanese returnee (2025)*

That safe and inclusive public services are available for all is critical to ensuring people throughout South Sudan, including returnees, can meet their basic needs. Displacement is a fundamentally traumatic journey in which a person's home becomes untenably dangerous, their community networks are ruptured, and their safety is contingent upon reaching a new destination. If, upon reaching that destination, the environment does not feel safe or there are limited opportunities, the prospect of returning 'home' – despite the danger – might be considered an antidote to despair. In some parts of South Sudan where dependence on diminishing humanitarian services are high and conflict dynamics fuel concerns about basic safety, some South Sudanese returnees have elected to return to Sudan despite the risks. Protection monitoring conducted in 2025 found that those who chose to return did so because of inadequate or exclusionary humanitarian assistance in South Sudan, long distances from needed services, lack of opportunities, and tensions with host communities.

[13] South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, *Cumulative returnee population figures November 2025 – January 2026.*

The Way Forward: Recommendations to Strengthen the Protective Environment

Addressing the protection risks experienced by returnees in a context as dynamic and fluid as South Sudan undoubtedly requires macro-level analysis of hot-spots and population trends to determine where humanitarian response is most needed. However, specialised protection interventions should be enhanced through inclusive and conflict-sensitive approaches that address the most acute needs whilst also operationalising a commitment to social cohesion. Risk-based protection programming offers a way to enhance this approach by assessing people based on the threats they face, their vulnerabilities, and their capacities to cope. Risk-based targeting considers, but is not limited to any one category, of age, gender, disability, displacement status, and other conditions of diversity. As such, they are well-suited to area-based approaches that can support communities to feel unified, irrespective of displacement status.



The protection risk equation is used to assess a person or community's level of risk and to inform the design of targeted interventions that reduce risk through a reduction in threat or vulnerability, or an enhancement of their capacity.

1. Strengthen Legal and Policy Frameworks for Returnees. Returnees face significant legal barriers to access services. Legal protection actors have supported returnees to obtain identity documents and establish legal presence in South Sudan, which are critical prerequisites for accessing education, healthcare, and land. However, these services are limited in scope and scale. The Government of South Sudan should enhance the implementation of the Action Plan on Return, Reintegration and Recovery that aims at achieving Durable Solutions (2024-2028), ensuring that returnees can access basic rights and services and address displacement-related needs.

2. Coordinate Across Humanitarian Mandates. Given that many humanitarian organisations operate under mandates that restrict assistance to certain displacement categories, coordination and collaboration are critical. Joint implementation by agencies with complementary mandates can close the gaps that returnees might otherwise fall through, with refugee-focused organisations partnering with general protection actors to ensure returnees are not overlooked. Where returnees are concentrated in under-served or hard-to-reach areas, multisectoral mobile service delivery is critical to ensure quality, inclusive, and cost-effective assistance.

3. Collaborate Across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus to Support Sustainable Solutions for Returnees. Humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development actors must work holistically to strengthen non-humanitarian local systems in protracted crisis contexts such as South Sudan, where returnees are just one subset of a larger population subject to acute risks. Humanitarian programming focused on addressing immediate needs of returnees should be harmonised with longer-term development initiatives, with a focus on social cohesion to support a culture of positive peace, to support returnees to successfully (re)integrate in South Sudan.

Children play in Renk Transit Centre Two, Upper Nile. Photo by Gabriel Caccamo/NRC. (2024)

4. Implement Risk-Based Targeting Standards. Returnees often exhibit some of the highest protection risks due to multiple cycles of displacement, trauma exposure, and lack of access to services. Protection programming should implement individual risk assessments to better understand a person's intersecting vulnerabilities and deliver a tailored response. Returnee status should be seen as an indicator of risk, not a disqualifier. Humanitarian actors can and should implement models that assess threats and resilience, ensuring those most at risk receive assistance, regardless of their displacement status.

5. Design for Social Cohesion and Conflict Sensitivity. Though life-saving imperatives remain critical, humanitarian programming should be intentionally designed to prevent or mitigate tensions between people of different displacement categories. Programmes should be conflict-sensitive, participatory, and inclusive. Interventions that assist the most vulnerable and at-risk people in a community – even when needs outpace available resources – reinforce both the perception and reality of fairness. Area-based approaches that seek to contribute to durable solutions can help build shared services and reduce friction between community members. These models require robust engagement with local authorities and communities and flexible funding to adapt to contextual changes.

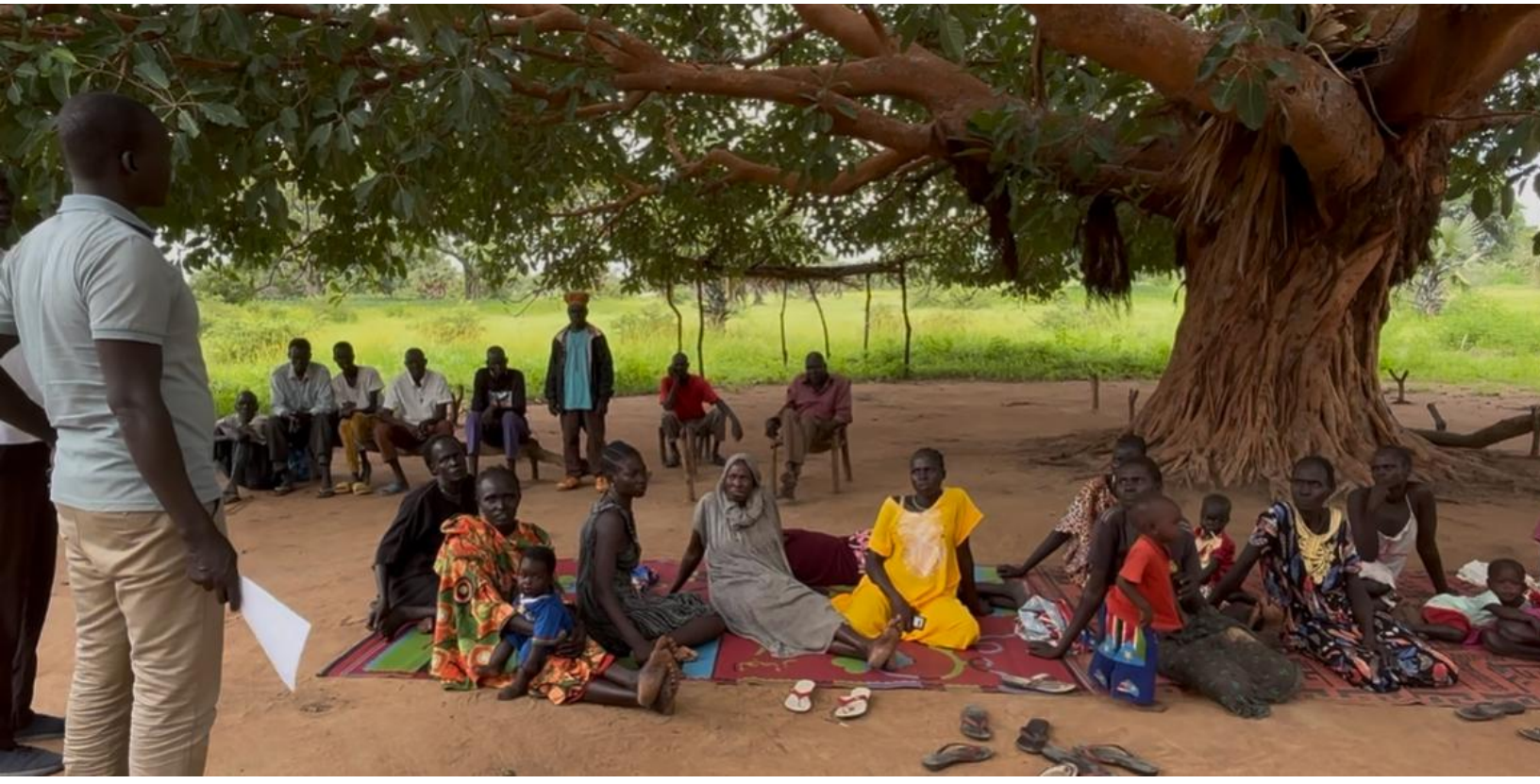
6. Contribute to Protection Risk Monitoring Systems. Humanitarian actors should contribute to national and sub-national protection monitoring systems that disaggregate returnees as a distinct group. This will enable more accurate needs assessments, better response planning, and stronger advocacy on protection issues.

7. Acknowledge the Specific Needs of Returnees in Program Design. Returnees have distinct needs. They may have suffered protection violations, lack shelter, face stigma, or be vulnerable to further displacement. Insights from protection actors in South Sudan demonstrate the ways in which tailored interventions – such as individual protection assistance, mental health support, legal counselling, and safe relocation – are effective in supporting returnees to rebuild their lives and sustainably reintegrate.

Supporting Returnees to Start the Next Stage of Life in South Sudan

At a time when funding is shrinking and needs are rising, the implementation of holistic and inclusive programming is not just a matter of efficiency, but a moral imperative. With the right strategies, planning, funding, and political will, returnees in South Sudan can recover from protection violations, rebuild their lives in safety and dignity, and achieve a durable solution. To achieve this, the specific risks faced by returnees, like people of any other displacement category, must be assessed and integrated into policy and programming; this will ensure protection not only in principle, but in practice.

Rather than assuming that return equates to resolution, humanitarian actors should treat return as a transitional stage requiring targeted support. This means investing in services that support sustainable reintegration, not just initial reception. Durable solutions are not achieved simply by crossing a border – they require sustained attention to physical, legal, and material security, as well as social cohesion. Stakeholders across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, donors, and the Government of South Sudan must work together to close this gap.



Marko Makuot Angok, Protection from Violence Assistant with the Norwegian Refugee Council, meets with community members in Aweil East, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. Photo by Scarlett Hawkins/NRC. (2025)

To register as a member of the Protection Risk Monitoring and Analysis (PROMO) Working Group and contribute to future publications, please contact: **Kennedy Sargo** - sargo@unhcr.org and **Scarlett Hawkins** – scarlett.hawkins@nrc.no. You can visit the PC SSD Contact Collection tool to register as a cluster member focal point or register e-mail on the distribution list. Please visit South Sudan | Global Protection Cluster for updates, reports, and assessments. We would like you to please visit Protection Cluster SSD Dashboard for the latest data on the delivery of protection services in SSD. Please visit SSD PRMS Dashboard for the latest data and trends on the protection environment in SSD. Protection agencies interested in contributing to the Protection Risk Monitoring System (PRMS) please find guidance and training manual HERE. For 5W information sharing purposes, please read guidance note HERE.