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Return To Violent Conflict?

Challenges of Sustainable Return of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons to and within South Sudan

Heidrun Bohnet \ BICC

Recommendations

\ Continuous programmes and locally adapted approaches

As the numbers of returnees in many regions of South Sudan increase, and livelihood opportunities need to be established to foster development and prevent new causes of displacement, aid agencies should address the full cycle of displacement to reintegration at a given location. Programmes therefore have to focus on issues beyond emergency aid and be long-term until returnees have indeed become self-sufficient.

\ Target group: The youth

Young people are very influential in stabilizing the peace process. To promote local economic development, jobs and higher education, for instance, should therefore be offered not only to returnees, but also to hosts to provide alternatives to engaging in violence. Besides vocational training, “spaces” for recreational activities should also be established.

\ Participation of the communities in designing diversified income activities

Trainings are particular successful when communities participate in designing the programmes. A diversification of income activities (e.g. rural and urban) also promotes the sustainability of return. Local dynamics have to be studied beforehand to prevent the failure of programmes and enhance sustainability.

\ Increase information-sharing and extend dialogue platforms

Dialogue platforms help to share information about the peace process and the situation at the return location. Radio broadcasts, in particular, have proven to be a good practice to share information and spread the word of peace. The media thus can be an important tool for fostering communication between groups and, consequently, the reintegration of returnees.

On 26 April, the South Sudanese opposition leader Riek Machar returned to the national capital Juba to be sworn in as vice-president. Three days later, the transitional government was formed; more than six months later than laid out in the peace agreement of August 2015 between Riek Machar and President Salva Kiir. This gives rise to the hope that the implementation of the peace agreement is finally advancing despite the fact that Machar and many other returnees are having to face great challenges, such as overcoming differences and mistrust between hosts and returnees. The large majority of displaced persons have not yet returned as fighting is still going on in many parts of the country. The case of South Sudan shows that peace on paper does not necessarily mean peace on the ground. Around 2.3 million people are still displaced, of whom 1.7 million internally and over 600,000 in the neighbouring countries of Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya and Uganda.¹ Many displaced persons are sceptical² of the peace process and the commitment of their leaders, in particular as nothing has changed since the beginning of the conflict. Kiir and Machar are still in power despite the atrocities they have committed. Moreover, the country is faced with severe economic hardship, fiscal difficulties and widespread food and water insecurity.

Nevertheless, over ten thousand people have already returned, and aid agencies expect many thousands more who return because they feel alienated in South Sudan's neighbouring countries or try to find livelihood opportunities to support their families outside the camps. But their return needs to be sustainable to

prevent new conflict as a first wave of two million returnees³ (after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on 9 January 2005, which had ended the forty-year long civil war between the north and the south of Sudan) between 2007 and 2013 had already failed.⁴ So how can return be made sustainable and new conflict be prevented? Although this question is not new, and aid agencies have preoccupied themselves with it for years, this question is still very much debated. This *Policy Brief* sheds some light on how sustainable return of displaced persons could be enhanced.

Beyond emergencies: Flexible programmes and locally adapted approaches are needed

Since the outbreak of conflict in December 2013 in South Sudan, most humanitarian agencies operate in "emergency mode". Only since the signing of the peace agreement in August 2015 have some aid actors slowly started to think about shifting parts of their emergency programmes to early recovery despite the fact that spontaneous return has already been ongoing for several months. Although reliable numbers are hard to get because of the fluidity of displacement, UNHCR statistics estimate that in 2014, 200,000⁵ internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned to South Sudan (though not necessarily to the ancestral or pre-crisis home). For 2016, humanitarian agencies estimate that some 300,000 IDP returnees alone will be in need of assistance, not counting refugee returnees.⁶ As the implementation of the peace agreement has been delayed and fighting continues in many parts of the country (for example in Unity and Upper Nile states) or has started again (Western Equatoria), emergency mode among aid agencies continues to be the norm. While emergency relief is also very much needed in places such as in Malakal, Upper Nile, other places like Aweil

1 \ OCHA. (2016). *South Sudan. Humanitarian Snapshot*. Retrieved 24 March 2016, from http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_humanitarian_snapshot_20160321.pdf.

2 \ The *Policy Brief* is based on preliminary findings of a two month long field research by the author in Juba, Aweil and Bor in the autumn/winter of 2015 within the framework of the BMZ funded research project "Protected rather than Protracted: Strengthening Refugees and Peace," where around 35 stakeholders from international and non-governmental organizations, government agencies and church representatives, as well as 35 displaced persons, returnees and hosts including traditional and community leaders/chiefs were interviewed in individual or focus group discussions. Thanks go to the respondents and translators that helped to facilitate the interviews as well as the organizations that assisted with transport, accommodation and contacts.

3 \ IOM. (2014). *IOM South Sudan: 2013 Country Programme*. Retrieved January 14, 2016 from https://www.iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/Country/docs/IOM_South_Sudan_2013_Country_Programme.pdf

4 \ UNMIS. 2016. *The Background to Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement*. Retrieved January 6, 2016 from <http://unmis.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=515>.

5 \ UNHCR. (2015). *World at War: Global Trends. Forced Displacement in 2014*. Retrieved February 18, 2015, from <http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html>.

6 \ OCHA. (2016). *2016 South Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview*. Retrieved April 15, 2016, from <http://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/2016-south-sudan-humanitarian-needs-overview>.

that has been quite “untouched” from the current crisis but has one of the highest malnutrition rates in the country, are no longer covered by any programmes. In consequence, many returnees have migrated back to Sudan to find assistance there.

Moreover, “early” returnees—most of whom had returned spontaneously—are overlooked both in the current aid structure and by the media as they are not categorized into “emergency” or “crisis”. Although, of course, priorities have to be made and not all regions within a country can be addressed at the same time, it is important to note that if some volatile regions are neglected or some (vulnerable) groups are left out, new crises emerge and displacement will start all over again; endangering the sustainability of return and reintegration, especially as water and food shortages are on the daily agenda for most South Sudanese. From January to March 2016, around 2.8 million people faced severe food insecurity.⁷

Addressing the full cycle of displacement and reintegration

While much attention is given to the protection of civilian sites (PoCs), as the IDP camps in South Sudan are called, many displaced or returnees outside these sites, such as in Bor and Juba, are often left without any support. The challenges in Bor are the mixture of different groups of people: IDPs, refugee returnees and displaced persons and the fact that many programmes often only address one group at a time, even though the line between these groups is not always clear-cut and their needs are often similar. Therefore, it is advisable that aid agencies make sure that their programmes are more flexible to address persons at the different stages of the displacement and reintegration process. While the call for combining emergency and early recovery with development efforts is not new, it is far from being heard in practice with aid agency programmes remaining rigid and restricted to either relief or development and donors often only funding one kind of activity (emergency or development, but not both).

7 \ OCHA. (2016). *South Sudan. Humanitarian Snapshot*. Retrieved March 24, 2016, from http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/south_sudan_humanitarian_snapshot_20160321.pdf.

Although it might seem unusual to promote recovery or development activities at a location where fighting is still going on or is happening close by, situations such as in Bor show that this is necessary as the numbers of returnees increase and livelihood opportunities need to be established to endorse development and prevent new causes of displacement.

Need for more long-term approaches

Programmes need to be long-term until returnees have become self-sufficient, addressing the full cycle from displacement to the long process of reintegration. Aid agencies and donors have to take this into account when planning and funding the return and reintegration of displaced persons. To achieve sustainable return, wider and inclusive strategies should be adopted that combine different activities rather than restricting the budget or programme to one activity alone. This is imperative as closing down of a programme at a location regularly coincides with losing previously established networks and trust gained.

Target the youth and aim for the diversification of income activities, as well as economic development

Various programmes by aid agencies often target children, women or the elderly as they are considered to belong to the most vulnerable groups. Yet young people, particularly young men between 18 and 35, be they returnees, hosts or displaced, are repeatedly overlooked; not only in relief and development programmes but also in the current peace process in South Sudan because of the prevailing patronage system. Yet, they can be a highly influential force when it comes to stabilizing the peace process or disrupting it—if overlooked. The local government would be well advised to offer them livelihood opportunities, such as jobs to promote local economic development, and international organizations ought to seek to provide them with alternatives to engaging in violence; particularly as the war has created an economic and fiscal crisis and unemployment is very high. These offered activities should be diversified so that returnees have various possibilities of generating an income.

Promotion of urban programming and preparation for rainy seasons

When displaced persons return, they often arrive at a location for which they do not have the necessary work skills or opportunities compared to their host location or pre-crisis home. Moreover, some returnees cannot or do not want to return or do the work they did before the crisis. For example, while they might have farmed before, during their exile, they have lived in an urban setting and are now more accustomed to an urban life style and prefer it over a rural one. In addition, job opportunities are repeatedly greater in the cities than in the rural areas. Therefore, many returnees from Khartoum from 2011 preferred to return to Aweil town or Juba over going back to their rural ancestral or pre-crisis home. In consequence, local governments and international aid organizations should not only promote and offer farming activities to the youth but also other skills. At the same time, the need to develop agriculture should not be overlooked as the majority of South Sudanese still live in rural settings. In this setting it is important to foster a high quality of seeds for producing good crops, to further process primary products and to connect rural with urban areas, thus developing value chains. Yet, such products need a market, and markets need to be accessible to the returnees. Returnees in a village in Aweil Centre county, for example, complained that initially they were not able to sell their products close by as the next market was located very far away (only in Aweil town), and there was no public transport, or they could not afford to travel there from their village. Since a market has been established next to their home, their economic situation has improved. In addition, local and international aid organizations should prepare and train returnees in diverse income activities for the rainy and the dry season to guarantee the sustainability of their return.

Community participation in designing programmes

Ideally, displaced persons are trained in the skills needed at the return location before their return. Yet, this is rather an exception than a rule, therefore, in order not to endanger sustainability, it is all the more

important that vocational trainings offered by international aid organizations to returnees are accompanied by pre-assessments or follow-up programmes to see what kind of training can be useful and how those trained can be integrated into the local economy. Experiences have shown that that trainings are particularly successful when communities can choose themselves who should be able to take the trainings, and when those who have been chosen can decide themselves what kind of training they want so that their motivation while training is high. It is also important to include all groups in the trainings, which means that not only returnees, but hosts, too, as otherwise a feeling of inequality may evolve and cause tension between returnees and hosts which may erupt into violence and threatening the sustainability of reintegration. Village saving loans (VSL) have proven to help to start up businesses within villages. In any case, local dynamics will have to be studied and understood beforehand to prevent programmes from failing.

Enhance higher education

While primary education is on the agenda of most aid agencies, secondary and tertiary education has largely been neglected. Fighting illiteracy in South Sudan (with some of the highest rates in the world) is priority, yet higher education, especially in urban settings, will give the youth perspectives. Some NGOs, as well as international organizations interviewed, for example, stated that because of a lack of higher education, they were not able to hire South Sudanese. Furthermore, as the government has not paid the salaries of teachers for a long while because of budget shortages or because it has been spent elsewhere, the quality of the teaching has been suffering, and lessons have been cancelled.

Create spaces and recreational offers for the youth

Besides vocational training and the promotion of higher education, local government agencies or aid organizations should assist in establishing clubs or “spaces” for recreational activities or discussion rounds because many youths in South Sudan “have

nothing to do'. Not only are they disillusioned or frustrated because employment and education opportunities are rare but also because there is still no peace on the ground. While child friendly spaces are widespread, and their extension is discussed among policymakers, organised youth clubs are still a rarity. In some areas, such as in Bor or Aweil, some youth have taken the initiative and are meeting up to play chess, other board games, or football. If, these activities were extended, they would not only help to divert the youth from turning to violence and to reintegrate more easily in their return location, they would also foster interethnic relations among them, making reconciliation efforts easier and contributing to the sustainability of return. Church grounds in Juba, for instance, that are considered as 'neutral' by different ethnic groups, have already shown to improve relations between different youth returnees and hosts and serve as neutral spaces of exchange. This is why international donors should specially support reconciliation and reintegration efforts by faith-based organizations while respecting their neutrality.

Increase information-sharing and extend dialogue platforms

Dialogue platforms by local non-governmental organizations need to be extended. Radio stations, some of the most accessible sources of information in South Sudan⁸, churches or some other neutral forum, for example, the university, could serve as information exchange. They can not only create a dialogue between people with different views, but also for information sharing about the peace process or about the situation at the return location. Interviewees of different ethnic groups of hosts and returnees stated that they were confused about the current situation in South Sudan. On the one hand, peace has been signed; on the other hand, fighting is still going on. Some do not even know about the ongoing peace process or about the situation at their pre-crisis location. The latest peace agreement was only translated into local

languages several months after the peace agreement had been signed. Those who cannot read can listen to the radio and be informed about what is going on. Radio broadcasts in general have proven a good practice to share information and spread the word of peace. The media thus are an important tool that can foster communication between groups and also the reintegration of returnees. However, the recent increase of threats to the freedom of speech in South Sudan (for example, against voices raised against the unilateral decision by President Salva Kiir to increase the number of states of South Sudan from 10 to 28) has concerned media, church representatives and NGOs alike.

In conclusion, there is still a long way ahead of a South Sudan in peace, even with Vice President Riek Machar having finally returned. Although his return gives hope to some displaced persons that indeed peace will come, mistrust prevails, particularly as old structures, such as kleptocracy, remain. However, even if nothing changes on the central government level, international and national aid organizations will have to strive to act at least on the local level. Aid agencies and local authorities should target the youth and establish long-term development programmes for returnees and hosts alike to prevent development and information gaps from extending and to, consequently, avert new conflict, especially as the numbers of returnees rise.

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