

Navigating the Complexity of Return: Findings from the Forced Displacement Survey

South Sudan 2023

Returnee Sample in Magwi County

Acknowledgements

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Summary of Findings and Recommendations

- ▶ **The Forced Displacement Survey – South Sudan 2023 is the first of its kind, providing detailed information on refugee and host community populations in the North and South of South Sudan.** This brief explores the demographic, social and economic well-being of an accompanying sample of refugee returnee households living in Magwi County, Eastern Equatoria. In doing so, it provides important learning for future surveys of refugee returnees in South Sudan and beyond.
- ▶ **In Magwi County, return and reintegration are non-linear and dynamic.** Nearly half of male-headed households and a quarter of female-headed ones travelled back to South Sudan before their return and many have family members remaining in settlements in Uganda. While the majority intend to stay in South Sudan “permanently”, back-and-forth movements are likely to remain a significant part of livelihood strategies in these communities.
- ▶ **Documentation is a recognized enabler for development and an area of unmet opportunity for refugee returnees.** Only 1 in 10 returnees possess a national identity card/certificate, constraining access to services and economic opportunities. Expanding access to documentation offers new potential economic and social opportunities for these populations.
- ▶ **Access to land is closely associated with employment, income stability and reduced dependence on assistance.** Refugee returnees with land are more than twice as likely to be employed than those without land (37% to 15%). Expanding access to land has the potential to improve welfare, but it must be done carefully to avoid inflaming social tensions.
- ▶ **Area-based approaches, such as the ones advocated for under Pockets of Hope (PoH), seek to raise the availability and quality of services for all populations.** In complex environments like Magwi County, where refugee returnees live alongside IDPs, returned IDPs and non-displaced populations, the findings suggest that delivering services without regard to status is all the more important for sustainability and social cohesion, while also demonstrating the need for new approaches to measuring the quality and availability of services and identifying priority gaps for investment in areas of high return.
- ▶ **South Sudan’s Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action for Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Host Communities (2024) calls for more data and evidence for successful implementation.¹** The FDS South Sudan 2023 refugee returnee sample demonstrates the potential for household data to provide critical insights into the solutions agenda at the policy and programmatic levels, while providing important learning for the Government of South Sudan’s own ambition to include displaced and stateless persons into its national registration activities, surveys and statistics.²
- ▶ **Note on comparability:** The returnee sample (Magwi County, n = 460 households) is not nationally representative and is not directly comparable to the refugee (North & South; pre-Sudan crisis inflows) and host (North only) samples.

¹ South Sudan’s Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action for Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Host Communities (2024). Republic of South Sudan. <https://www.refworld.org/policy/strategy/natlegbod/2024/en/148912>

² At the Global Refugee Forum 2023, the Government of South Sudan pledged to include displaced and stateless persons into its National Statistical Systems for use in national planning and inclusion in service provision by the government and stakeholders as part of multistakeholder pledge on statistical inclusion (GRF-07191).

UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey

The [Forced Displacement Survey \(FDS\)](#) is UNHCR's new flagship household survey programme designed to standardize, streamline, and build on the existing survey landscape to produce high-quality, timely data on people forced to flee. The FDS is comparable across countries over time and aligned with international statistical standards, bridging the gap between humanitarian and development spaces to provide crucial evidence in support of the durable solutions agenda.

The Forced Displacement Survey – South Sudan 2023 is the first of its kind, covering refugee and host community populations in the North and South of South Sudan, as well as an experimental sample of refugee returnee households living in Magwi County, Eastern Equatoria.^{3,4} The FDS Thematic Briefs Series aims to build on the findings of the [main report](#) to offer a deeper understanding of selected topics for improved operational planning and programming.

This brief aims to complement the main report's findings by focusing on the experiences of refugee returnee households in Magwi County – most of whom fled to and returned from Uganda – as they reestablish themselves in South Sudan. The FDS collects multi-topic data on the socioeconomic and living conditions of these returnees, and this briefing focuses on demographics and displacement history, access to basic needs, economic and financial inclusion, social protection, safety, community engagement and subjective well-being.

Data at a glance

1 in 10
have ID

70%
experienced
≥ 1 shock

7%
have bank acct

14%
mobile money

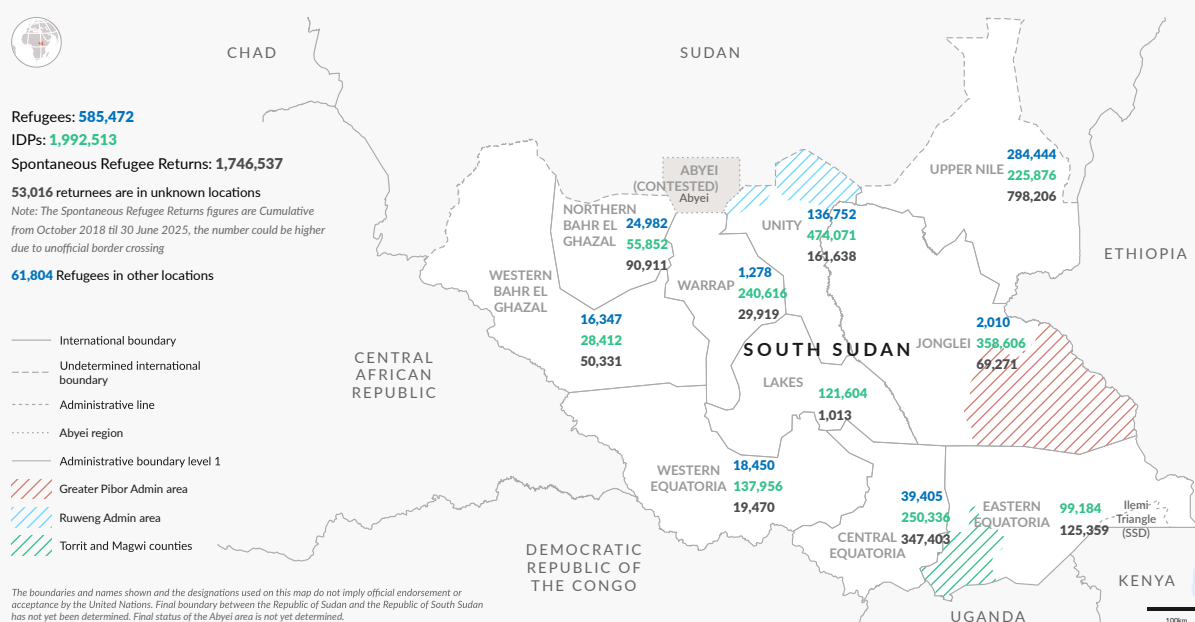
³ The Refugee sample is the FDS in nationally representative, with the exception of Juba. However, since the sample was drawn before the Sudan crisis, it does not include the new arrivals due to the Sudan crisis. The sample for the host community was geographically limited to the North of the country (Upper Nile and Unity State).

⁴ UNHCR (2024). "Forced Displacement Survey – South Sudan 2023." <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/reports-and-publications/data-and-statistics/forced-displacement-survey/forced-displacement-survey-south-sudan>, and the data is available on the [UNHCR Microdata Library](#). The FDS and this report would not have been possible without financial and technical support from UNHCR's Division of Resilience and Solutions, the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, and the Government of Denmark.

Country Context

Since the signing of the revitalized peace agreement in 2018, a cumulative 1.53 million South Sudanese refugees have spontaneously returned to South Sudan. The majority returned from Sudan (744,482, including 558,580 following the outbreak of the Sudan conflict in 2023/24) and Uganda (455,786, including 255,905 in 2021/22), with the largest numbers settling in Renk (174,144), Yei (142, 294) and Magwi (141,901) counties. ^{5,6} Refugee returnees often live alongside internally displaced persons (IDPs), returned IDPs and refugees, as well as non-displaced populations.

FIGURE 1. Refugees, returnees, IDPs in South Sudan in 2023

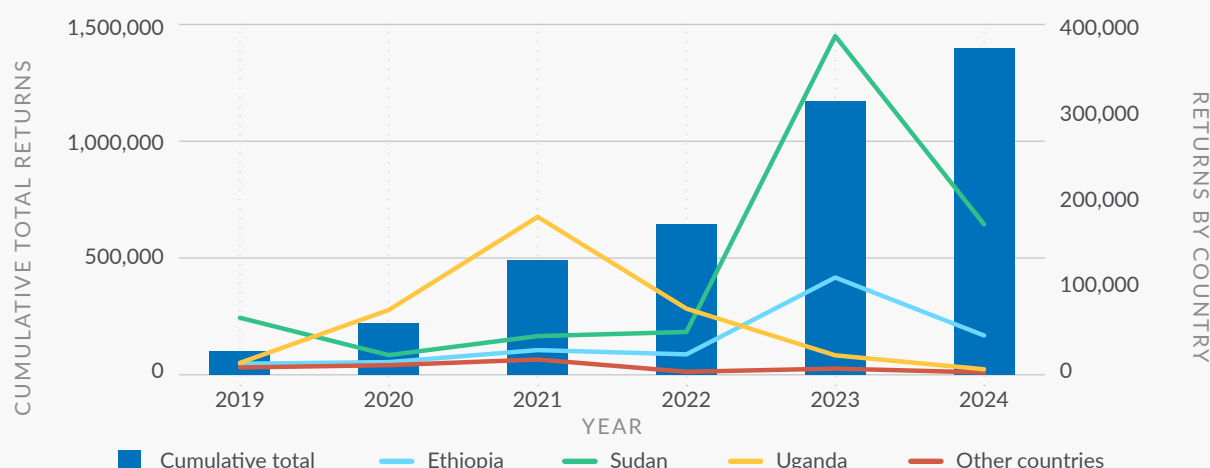


Source: UNHCR and IOM DTM (2025)

⁵ Based on the security, human rights and humanitarian context, UNHCR maintains a non-return advisory for South Sudan (Update IV, May 2024). However, it also recognizes individuals' fundamental human right to return to their country of origin. Any assistance provided by UNHCR in the context of return to South Sudan aims at supporting individuals who, being fully informed of the situation in their places of origin or an alternative area of their choice, decide to return. Any action by UNHCR to support returns to South Sudan, including efforts aimed at sustainable reintegration for returnees and IDPs in South Sudan, should not be construed as an assessment by UNHCR of the safety in South Sudan for individuals who have applied for international protection in countries of asylum. It should be noted that voluntary, informed returns on the one hand and forced return on the other are processes of a fundamentally different character, engaging different responsibilities on the parts of the various actors involved. UNHCR (2024). "Position on returns to South Sudan – Update IV." <https://www.refworld.org/policy/countryspos/unhcr/2024/en/147589>

⁶ UNHCR (2024). "South Sudan – Spontaneous Refugee Returns Dashboard" (spontaneous means that the returnees return by their own means with UNHCR and governments having little or no direct involvement in the process of return). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/108426>

FIGURE 2. Refugee returns to South Sudan, 2018-2024 (annual returns, left axis; cumulative returns, right axis)



Source: UNHCR Population Statistics

For refugee returnee populations, reintegration is a complex process. The decision to return is often driven by the search for security and livelihood opportunities or the desire to reconnect with familial ties and broader kinship networks. At the same time, it may also be influenced by push factors in countries of asylum, such as a reduction in food rations or overall support or deterioration in the security situation there, as is the case with Sudan currently. Households that have been displaced multiple times are common, as are “pendular” movements, with groups or individuals crossing borders to explore return opportunities or check on property.^{7 8}

The Government of South Sudan’s Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action for Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Host Communities (2024), together with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Durable Solutions Framework, guide the implementation of durable solutions in South Sudan to ensure displaced persons are able to rebuild and sustain their lives with dignity.⁹ Criteria for successful return cover physical, material and legal safety aspects and include protection, access to livelihoods and social cohesion (see Annex for a list of IASC durable solutions criteria and indicators).

The Pockets of Hope Initiative is a solutions-oriented, area-based and status-blind effort to target high return and refugee areas through an investment in medium to long-term interventions to build resilience, government ownership and responsibility. In line with the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD) Support Platform and its Sudan- South Sudan Solutions Initiative, the vision for Pockets of Hope in 7 selected states is to ensure that South Sudanese, returnees and

⁷ Samuel Hall, South Sudan Community Based Assessment (UNHCR, 2024)

⁸ Research and Evidence Facility (REF). (2020a). Circular refugee returns between Kenya and Somalia. London and Nairobi: EU Trust Fund for Africa (Horn of Africa Window) Research and Evidence Facility.

⁹ Republic of South Sudan (2024). “Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action for Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Host Communities (2024).” <https://reporting.unhcr.org/south-sudan-durable-solutions-strategy-and-plan-action>; IASC (2010). “Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Durable Solutions Framework.”

the refugees they host can have a fresh start in a peaceful, climate-adapted environment through area-based and development-oriented approaches that prevent further displacement and foster reintegration.¹⁰

Box 1. What is a returnee?

According to [UNHCR](#), the term ‘returnee’ refers to a refugee or internally displaced person who has returned to their country or area of origin to remain there permanently, but has not yet fully reintegrated into their community. Upon return, UNHCR, national authorities and development partners support reintegration into communities to ensure that returnees can access the same services as their fellow citizens, such as housing, employment opportunities, schools and health care.



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¹⁰ UNHCR (2022). "The Pockets of Hope Initiative: Realizing Solutions in South Sudan." <https://www.unhcr.org/media/explainer-pockets-hope-initiative-realizing-solutions-south-sudan>.

Data and Methodology

The FDS collects information on households and randomly selected members aged 15 years and older, children under the age of five, and women who gave birth in the two years before the survey. The FDS South Sudan refugee returnee dataset is based on an experimental sample collected between October 17th and December 19th, 2023, covering 460 households in Magwi County who returned to South Sudan since 2018. Refugee returnee households were sampled using an innovative combination of key informant interviews, the Google Open Buildings database, and targeted listing¹¹. The main unit of observation is the household. In addition to information at the household level, the FDS also collects information on individual members of the household aged 15 years and older, children under the age of five, and women who gave birth in the two years prior to the survey. The returnee data were collected following data collection for refugees and host communities using the same questionnaire.

Because the primary samples covered only refugees in the North and South and host communities in the North, direct comparisons are not possible. However, limited comparisons to these population groups are made where appropriate. Additionally, reference is made to the recent household data collected for refugee returnees in Magwi and Torit as part of a separate community-based assessment by UNHCR and the consultancy Samuel Hall under the “Pockets of Hope” Initiative.¹² Indicators aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are footnoted.

¹¹ To target listing, 500 seed buildings were sampled from the Google Open Building database (v2) proportionate to the estimated number of refugee returnees in each admin3 division of the county (admin2) of Magwi. A circular buffer including the 8 nearest buildings in the Google Open Buildings database to the seed building determined the area for listing (therefore, these smaller in areas of higher building density) - and all households which occupied a building within these areas were listed. The sampling frame was the refugee returnee households identified through this process.

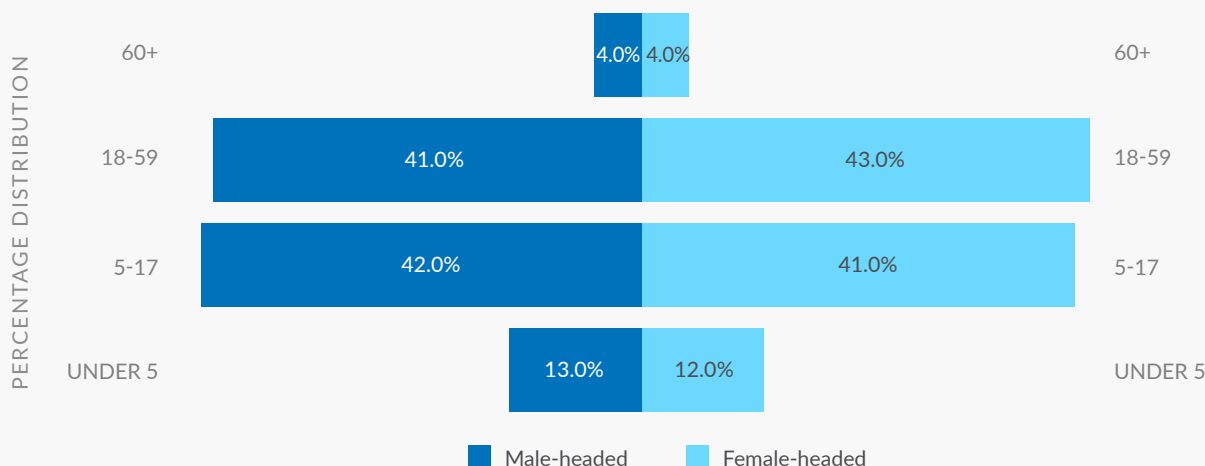
¹² UNHCR/Samuel Hall (2024, forthcoming). “South Sudan Community Based Assessment.”

Main Findings for the FDS Magwi County Refugee Returnee Dataset

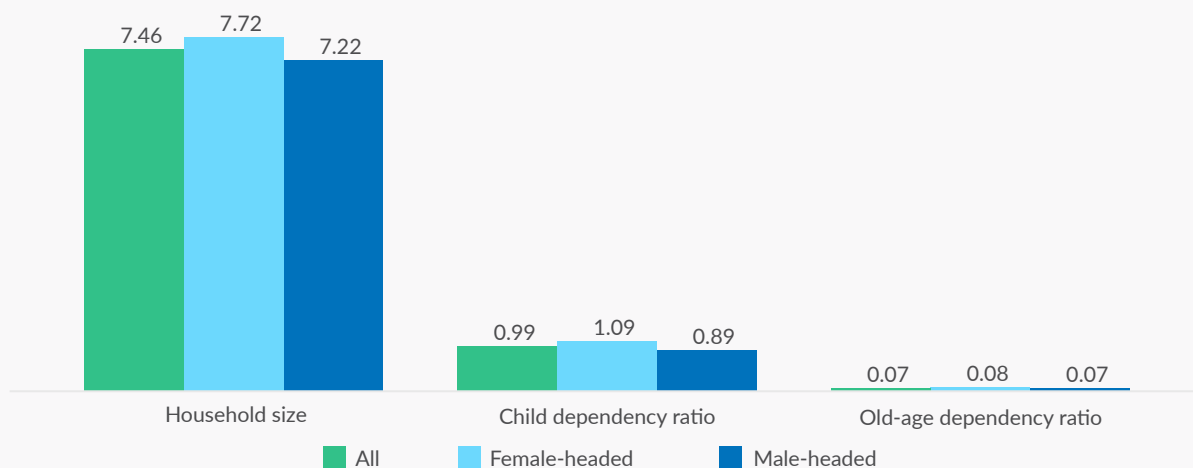
Demographics and Displacement History

Refugee returnee households in Magwi tend to be young and contain many dependents, with some differences between female- and male-headed households. The overall percentage of the population under 18 years is around 54%, showing a youthful demographic structure. The average household size is 7.5 members. Almost half of the head of households are married (47%), with a difference between female-headed (50%) and male-headed (44%) households. A small percentage of women between 20 and 24 were married before the age of 15 (3%), and a further quarter (27%) were married between the ages of 15 and 18. Female-headed households are more likely to include dependents: a higher percentage of female-headed households (90%) have at least one child under the age of 15 compared to male-headed households (81%). Female-headed households are also more likely to have at least one person aged 65+ in the household (24%) compared to male-headed households.



FIGURE 3. Age pyramid of returnees

Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample

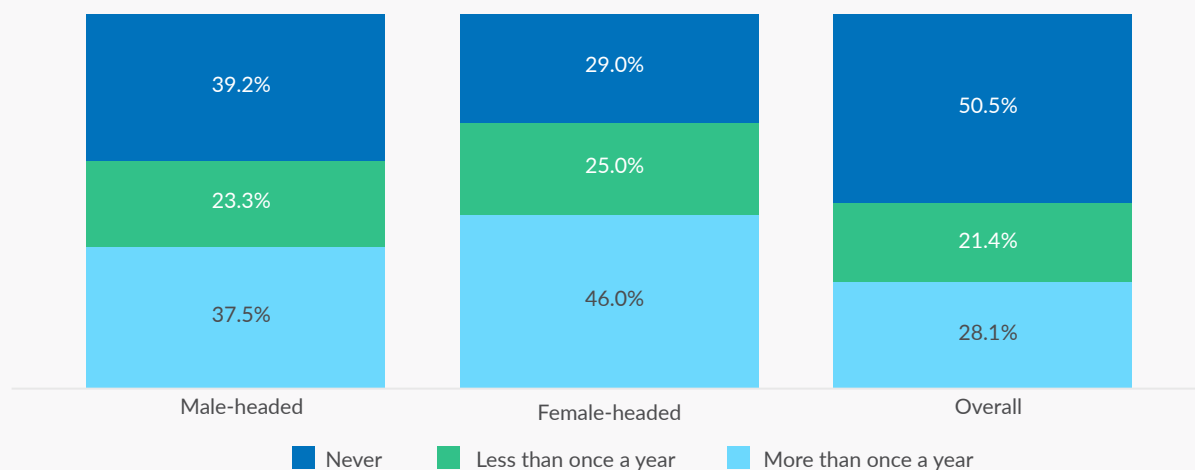
FIGURE 4. Household characteristics

Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample

Most refugee returnees initially fled to Uganda in 2016/17 and maintained connections to South Sudan through regular visits, particularly among male-headed households. Nearly half of male-headed households (46%) and over a quarter of female-headed households (28%) visited South Sudan annually during their time in Uganda. The primary reasons for these visits included checking the status of property (64%) and visiting family and friends (53%). Gathering information about potential returns was also a significant goal of these trips (45%), along with business-related activities, such as planting and harvesting (31%). Before settling in their current area of residence, about 7% of returnees relocated from other parts of South Sudan.

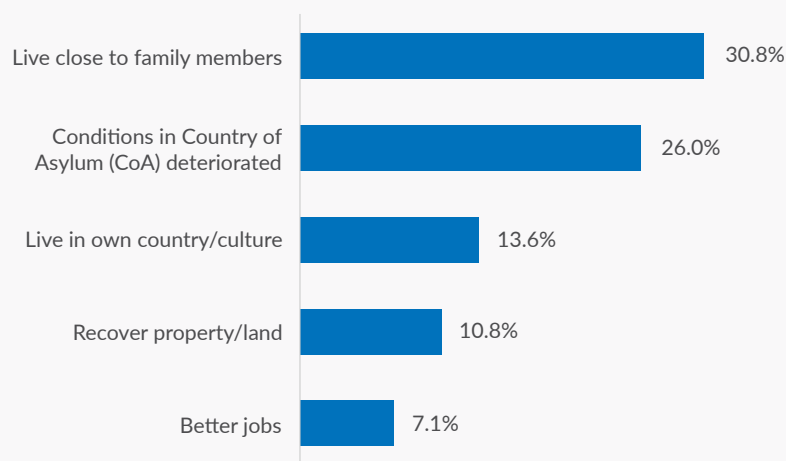
The main reason for returning to South Sudan was to live close to family members (31%), followed by difficult conditions as a refugee in the last country of residence (26%). Other reasons include the desire to live in their own culture (14%), the possibility of recovering their house or land (11%), and the possibility of getting a better job (7%).

FIGURE 5. Number of times visiting South Sudan while in country of asylum



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

FIGURE 6. Reasons for returning to South Sudan



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

Box 2. A fluid reality of returns¹³

The return of South Sudanese refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) often embodies a complex spectrum of mobility strategies, including circular, yo-yo, go-and-see, and back-and-forth movements. These patterns underscore a transitional phase wherein individuals oscillate between various locations before potentially settling more definitively. Such mobility highlights the fluid nature of return decisions and the process of reintegration as gradual evolutions over time, rather than instantaneous resolution.¹⁴

This nuanced understanding of return dynamics reveals how South Sudanese refugees, particularly those in Uganda, navigate the precarious balance between displacement and return. Maintaining simultaneous connections to both their homeland and places of refuge, individuals and households engage in regular movements across borders. These movements are not merely responses to the conflict's ebb and flow but strategic decisions aimed at keeping future options open.^{15 16}



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¹³ Extracted from UNHCR/Samuel Hall (2024).

¹⁴ Hovil, L. (2010). Hoping for peace, afraid of war: the dilemmas of repatriation and belonging on the borders of Uganda and South Sudan. Retrieved from <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/698529>

¹⁵ Buchanan, E. (2019). No Simple Solutions: Women, Displacement and Durable Solutions in South Sudan. London: Oxfam International, Nile Hope, Titi Foundation, Danish Refugee Council, Norwegian Refugee Council, and CARE.

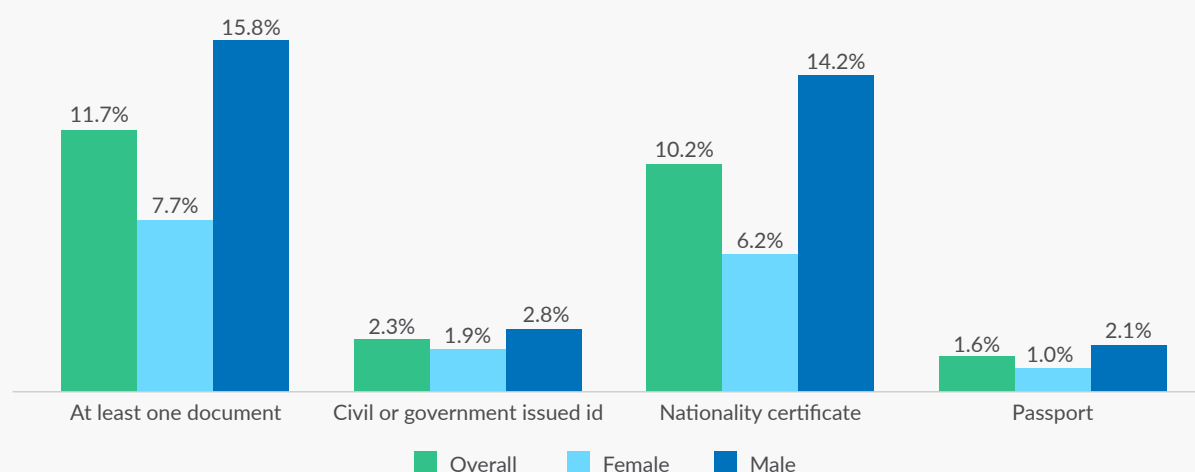
¹⁶ Macdonald, A., & Porter, H. (2020). The Politics of Return: Understanding Trajectories of Displacement and the Complex Dynamics of "Return" in Central and East Africa. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 33(4), 639–662. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa118>

Access to Documentation and Basic Needs

Only a small proportion of returnees have access to at least one legal document, with rates twice as high among males (16%) compared to females (8%). Documentation is a recognized enabler for development: government-issued identification documents can enable access to a wide range of services, including social benefit payments, school registration, medical care and financial services.¹⁷ Among returnees, only 14% have a nationality certificate, 3% a civil or government-issued identification document and 2% a passport. Many returnees report that none of their members possess any legal documents.



FIGURE 7. Proportion of returnees with access to documents

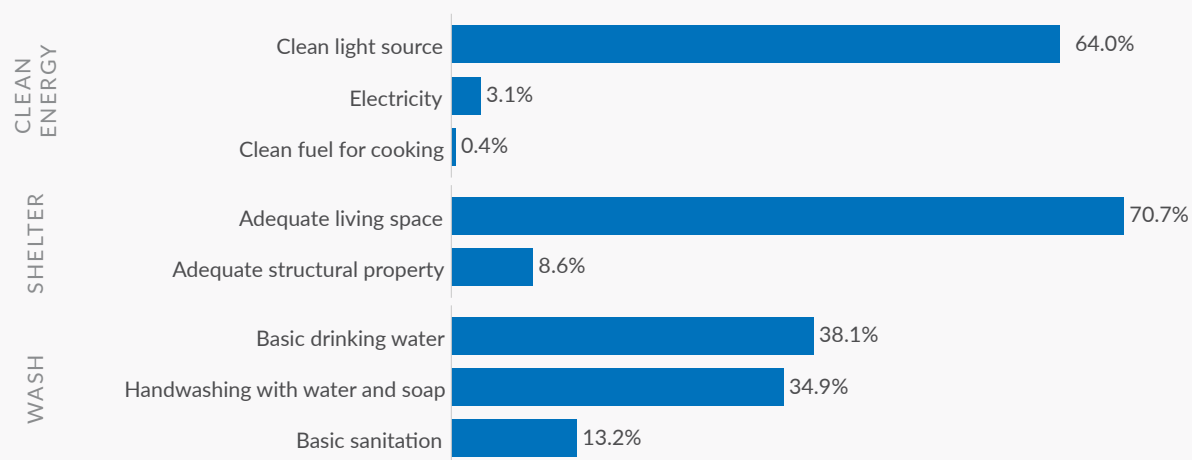


Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

¹⁷ World Bank (2024), "Trends in Access to ID in Sub-Saharan Africa"

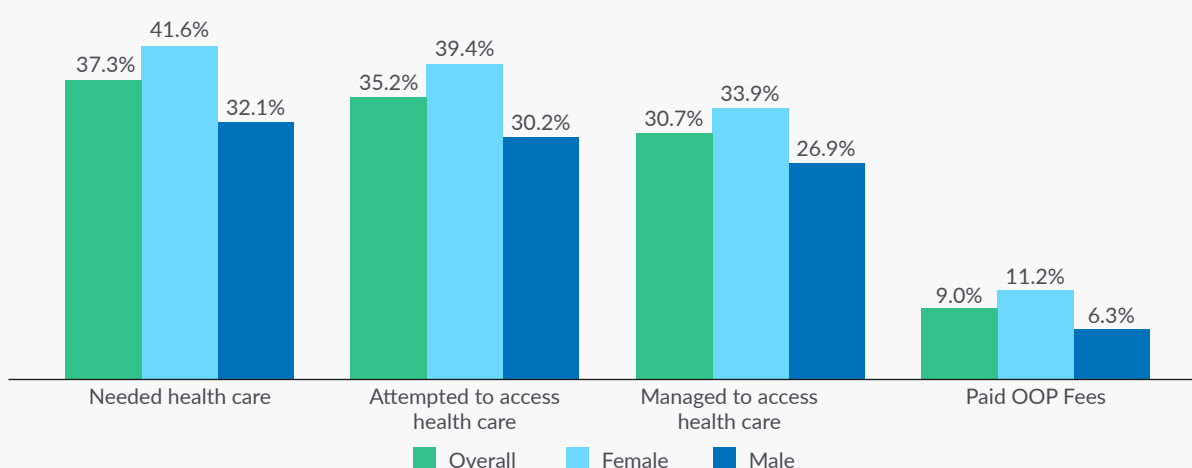
Access to water, sanitation, energy, and shelter remain very low, while access to healthcare is reportedly more positive. Few refugee returnees in Magwi have access to quality housing: only 7% of shelters have improved walls or flooring, though most (71%) are of adequate size. Clean lighting is common (64%), but clean fuel for cooking (0.4%) or electricity (3%) is exceedingly rare, and many households are without basic sanitation (13% have access) or drinking water services (38% have access). While 87% reported managing to access care when needed, facility assessments in Magwi/Torit indicate limited capacity and quality shortfalls, suggesting access may entail long waits, costs, or lower-quality services.

FIGURE 8. Proportion of household heads with access to water, sanitation, energy and shelter



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

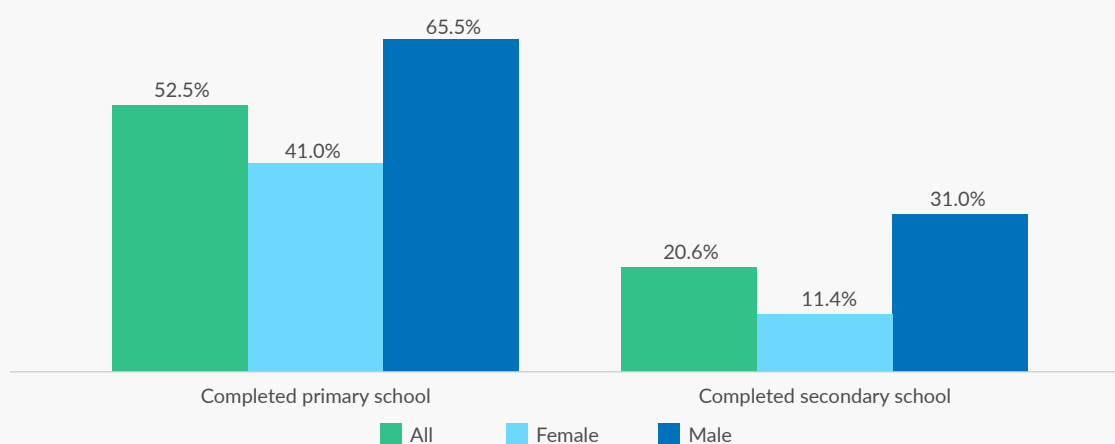
FIGURE 9. Access to health care services in the month preceding the survey, random adult



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

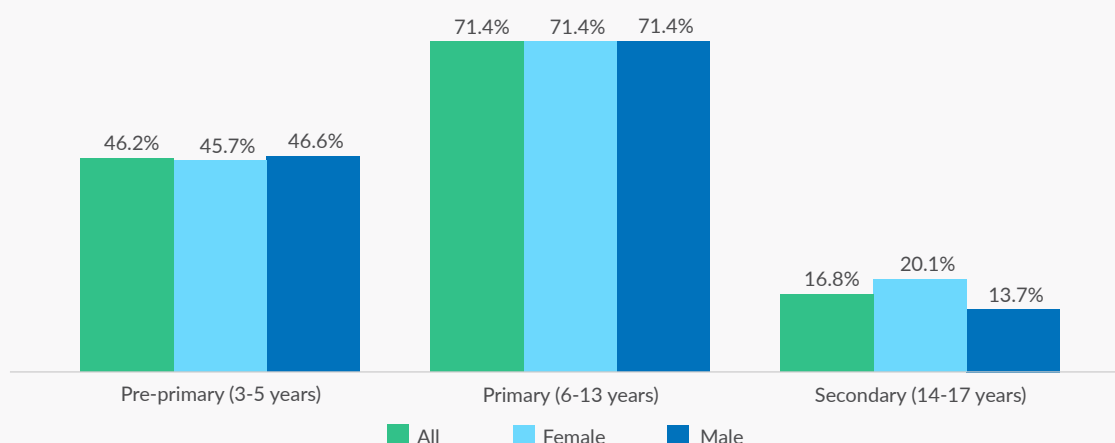
Half of returnees (52%) between the ages of 14-34 have completed primary school, but few have secondary schooling (20%), while among school-age children the rates of primary and secondary enrolment stand at 70% and 17%, respectively. Completion rates for females are 35% lower than men at primary level, and almost a third at secondary.¹⁸ Only 11% of females completed secondary school. Comparatively, primary completion rate is higher than either of the refugees (41% overall in the North and South) or host community samples (27% in the North), suggesting higher levels of access to education when they were refugees in Uganda and Kenya.

FIGURE 10. Completion rate, primary and secondary school (%)



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

FIGURE 11. Net enrolment rate (%)



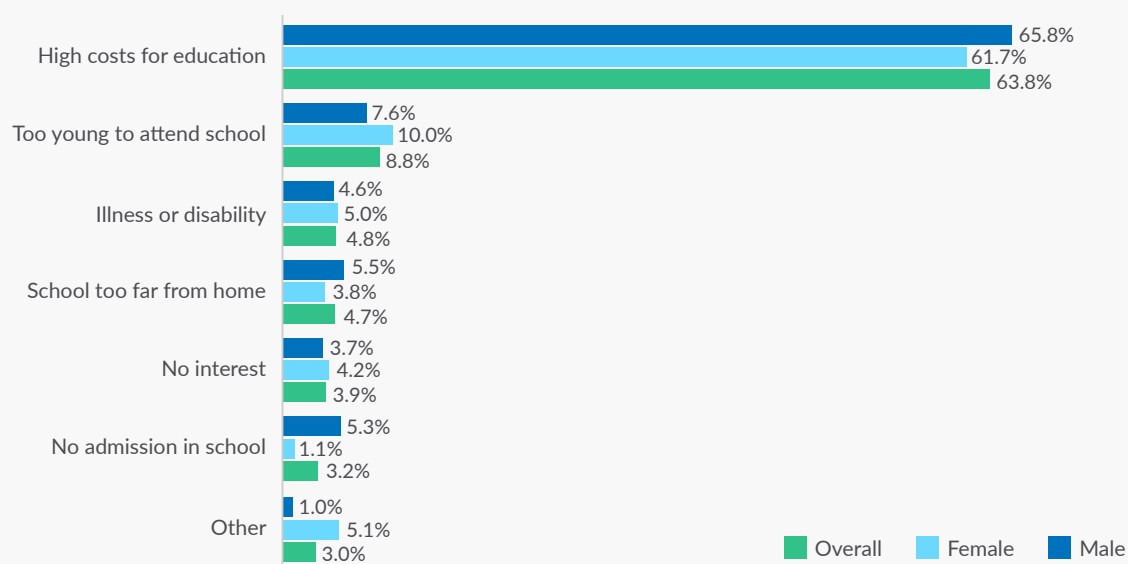
Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

¹⁸ Completion is considered the first six years of education, following the International Standard Classification of Education.



Interruptions to education are common in South Sudan, but appear to be particularly frequent in refugee returnee households, in large part due to the high costs of education. Among returnees, 58% have experienced educational interruption, including 69% in the past year, significantly higher than the 15-36% found in the FDS refugee and the host community samples.¹⁹ Among those with interrupted schooling, high cost was the primary reason across all three groups. While schools are free in South Sudan, the cost of uniforms and books is a barrier.

FIGURE 12. Reasons for interruptions to education (%)



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 - returnee sample

¹⁹ Question applied to refugees under age 24, so those either still in school or recently finished with school.

Box 3. Complementary data and evidence on refugee returns to South Sudan

In 2024, [UNHCR and Samuel Hall](#), with support from the European Union (DG INTPA), carried out a comprehensive assessment in four “Pockets of Hope” counties – Aweil, Magwi/Torit, Raja/Wau and Yei/Kajo-Keji – to understand return intentions and identify service gaps within communities witnessing a surge of returnees.²⁰ In Magwi and neighbouring Torit Counties, results from nearly 400 household surveys, focus group discussions and an infrastructure assessment paint a picture consistent with the FDS returnee sample.

Reason for return: 88% of refugee returnee respondents arrived since 2020 (34% in 2023), with the majority coming from Uganda (79%) and Kenya (16%). Reduction in humanitarian assistance was the primary reason for return in Magwi and Torit (74% of respondents), followed by improvements in the local security situation (55%). Easier access to land and a sense of belonging were also factors.

‘Another thing that made me come back is the issue of land. For land is hired in order to cultivate. So I decided to come back to my home land where there is abundant land to cultivate freely. (Focus Group Returnee, Magwi)

‘I’m feeling very happy and free when and in this particular place, though there are some challenges we are facing I more comfortable than settling in any other place than here.’ (Returnee Case Study, Torit)

Intentions: While 92% of refugee returnee respondents stated their intention to settle in their current location permanently, there are still movements across the border with movements back and forth common to bring families from camps, access services and sometimes aid, which can be a vital resource to support and sustain reintegration to South Sudan.

‘When men and women come back, they will stay here while the children are left back in the camp. When they worked for a full year and realized good harvest, the woman will be sent to bring the children to settle permanently. If you see them still going back, it means that they have been working here but still have not harvested their crops. He works here meanwhile goes back to the camp to receive the support ratios. For he has no money to buy, he goes to the camp to get those food items to help him in the time that he will be working here. When the crops yield, he goes back and brings the children at once and never goes back again.’ (Host Community Case Study, Torit)

²⁰ Aweil is not a designated Pocket of Hope county, however, it was added to the analytical programme in order to provide actionable information to address the influx of returnees and refugees from Sudan.

Physical, Material and Legal Safety: While a majority of respondents report feeling safe across day-to-day activities, trust levels and support networks vary significantly between displacement categories in Magwi and Torit. Host population reports the highest levels of trust (50%) and access to support networks (44%), indicating strong community ties and confidence in their neighbours, compared to moderate levels of trust (40%) and support (32%) among returnees²¹. While sharing resources was reportedly common, land could be a source of tension.

'We, the host communities, received the returnees as their brothers of Abara Boma, they accommodated them, they assisted them with food, allowed them to share basic services like health services, education, water and others together. (Key Informant Interview, Magwi)

'Yes, there had been issues of land dispute because some host communities had settled on an occupied land which belonged to the returnees or IDPS hence brought a lot of tensions.' (Key Informant Interview, Magwi)

Livelihoods: Returnees typically do not have the same resources to complete livelihood activities as host community members due to financial barriers. Host community members often have better access to equipment, enabling them to engage in larger scale agricultural activities. Further, they are not necessarily able to employ skills developed outside of South Sudan due to a lack of local demand.

'Some of the returnees came back with new skills like welding, conflict management and some also managed to go back to school and finish studies but now they are with us here there is no job for them.' (Focus Group Discussion Host Community, Torit)

"Returnees and IDPs do small-scale farming like maize growing using family labour, whereas hosts farm on a larger scale with crops like cassava, maize, and beans, often employing capital in their gardens."

Service access and absorption: Infrastructure data from Magwi and Torit suggests that available health, education and water resources are extremely strained, with little capacity for the absorption of additional populations. This is due to a number of factors, including the relatively high population of these areas compared to other Pockets of Hope, insufficient number of existing facilities, and a number of assessed facilities not meeting minimum standards and thus being excluded from capacity calculations. For example in Magwi and Torit, only 4 of the 20 assessed health facilities met these standards.²² No health facilities in either Torit or Pageri met the minimum standards.

²¹ Returnee, when not specifically stated as refugee returnee, includes IDP returnees as well as refugee returnees. Only 24 IDP returnees were encountered out of a total of 784 quantitative surveys.

²² Minimum standards for healthcare facilities include: a maximum patient to doctor ratio of 50 to 1, few incidents of violence affecting the health facility in the recent past, the building infrastructure is in good condition, the facility has toilets, the facility has access to water and a supply of medicines for up to at least a week.

Economic and Financial Inclusion

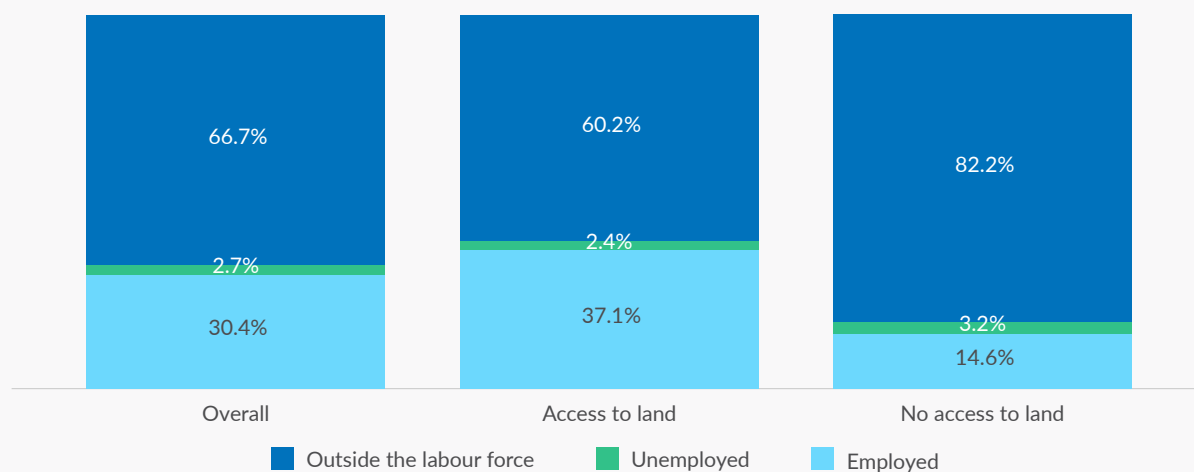
A majority of returnee households have access to or own land, though formal documentation of ownership is rare. Overall, 67% of returnee households own a plot of land in South Sudan and 71% own the plot they live on, similar to findings from the community-based assessment (CBA) (in which 73% of refugee returnee respondents in Magwi/Torit own land through informal or formal agreements). For returnees, the primary use of land is for residential purposes (95%) and agriculture (82%). Other uses like horticulture, pastoral activities and commercial purposes are much less common. A high percentage of households (89%) claim ownership rights to their plots and, while few have formal documentation, the likelihood of eviction is considered quite low. Land is predominantly acquired through inheritance (53%), followed by bequeathed by family members (22%). Purchasing land is less common, and receiving land as a gift from non-family members is rare.

While most returnees (almost 70%) are outside the labour force, those whose household have access to land are more than twice as likely to be employed. The employment rate for those with access to land is 37% compared to 15% for those without land, highlighting the importance of land for livelihood activities. Returnees with access to land are predominantly involved in agriculture, livestock, forestry, and fishing (50%), while those without access to land are more likely to be involved in service-related activities (38%). Manufacturing and handicraft activities show minimal involvement overall.



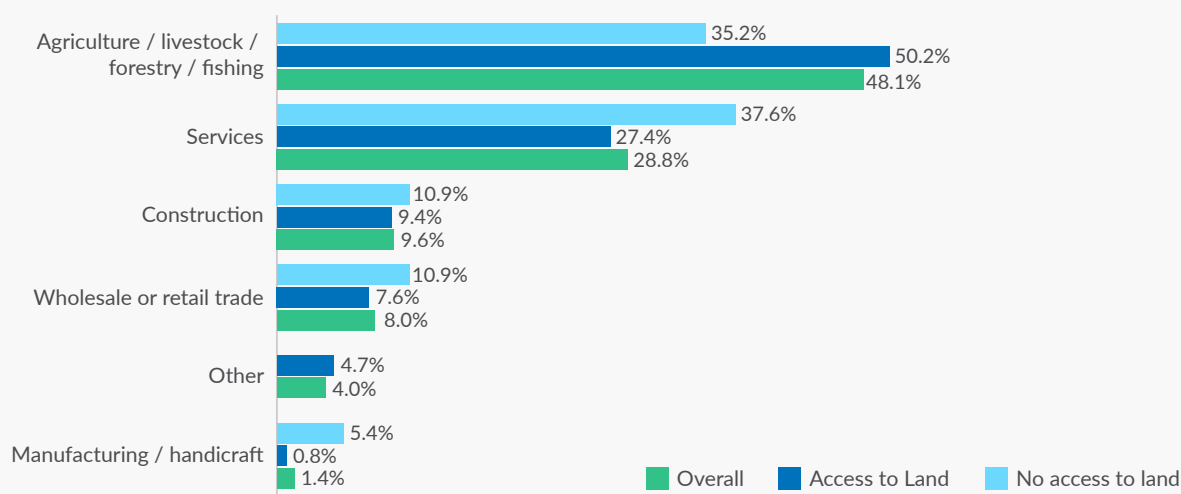
Among those not in employment, most tend to have family responsibilities (27%), study or train (19%) or farm or fish to produce food for the household (15%). Women are more likely than men to have family responsibilities (twice as likely as men), but less likely to study or train (less than half as men). A significant percentage of respondents also feel discouraged by a lack of jobs or skills.

FIGURE 13. Labour force status by household's access to land



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

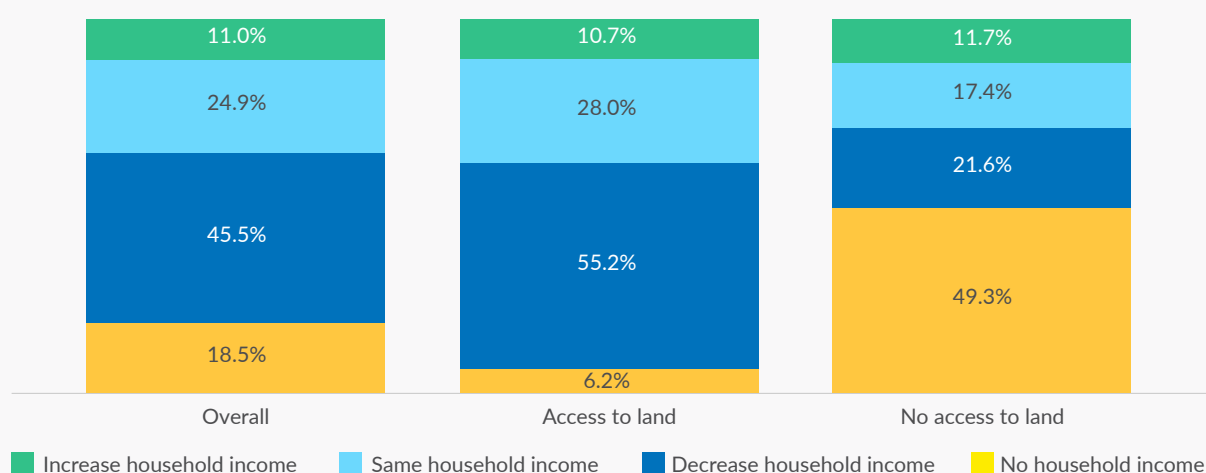
FIGURE 14. Employment sectors



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

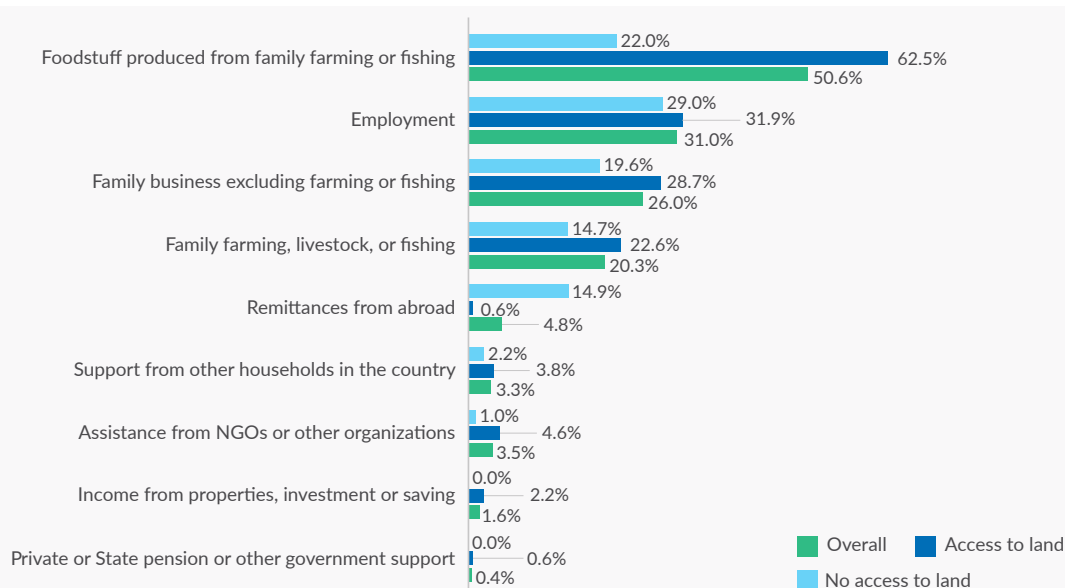
Access to land is also closely associated with income stability and reduced dependence on assistance. Almost half of the returnees had experienced a reduction in income in the last year, including three quarters of those working in agriculture/livestock, as a high proportion of households experienced climate or crop-related shocks. However, those with land still fared better than those without land, as a large proportion of households without access to land have no household income at all (49%). Households with access to land are more self-reliant and involved in sustainable livelihood activities such as business activities, farming, fishing, and family businesses for income compared to those without access. Households without access to land rely more heavily on remittances and outside assistance.

FIGURE 15. Change in household income by access to land, last 12 months



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

FIGURE 16. Main source of household income by access to land

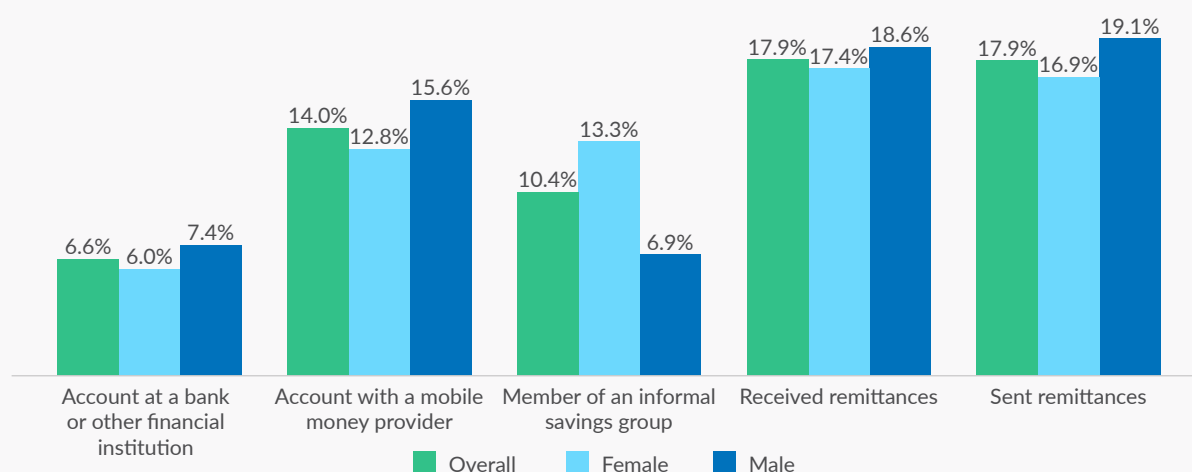


Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.



Few people use formal financial services, due primarily to “financial inadequacy” or lack of resources. Consistent with the FDS refugee and host community samples, access to financial services is limited – only 7% of returnees have a bank or other formal financial institution account – though slightly more access mobile money (14%). Formal loans are notably inaccessible for both men and women, while women are more likely to get loans from family and friends. Women are also more likely than man to have informal savings. The major barrier to financial inclusion is financial inadequacy, as most people feel they do not have enough money to justify using formal financial institutions. Other barriers, such as lack of knowledge, documentation, and trust, play a much smaller role.

FIGURE 17. Access to financial services (%)²³



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

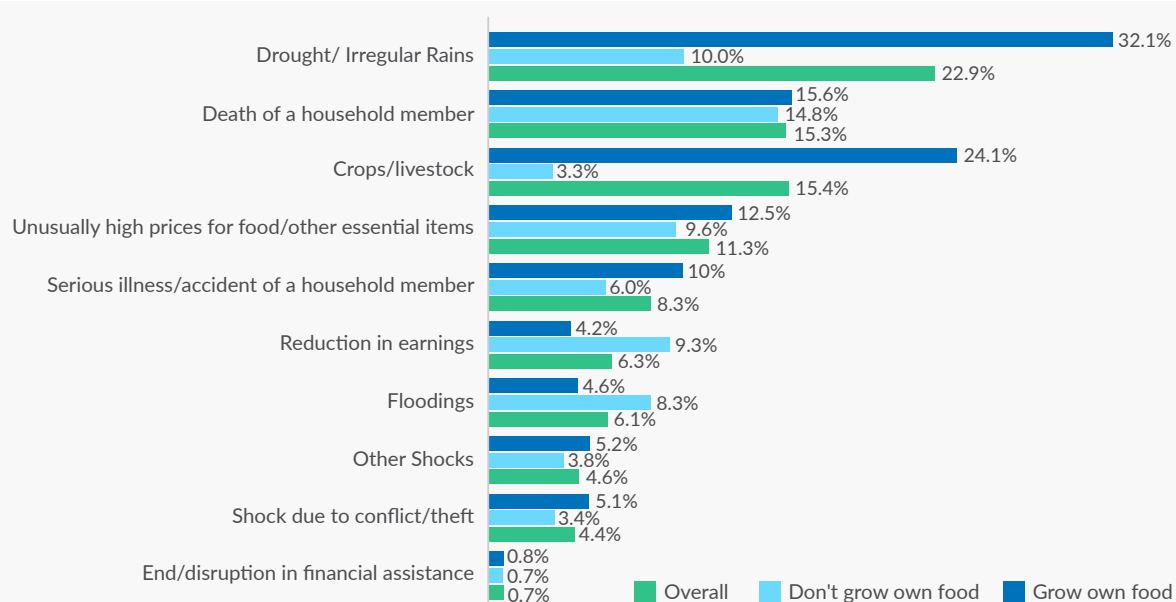
²³ Proportion of adults with a formal bank account and/or mobile money account corresponds to Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Indicator 8.10.2.

Social Protection and Shocks

A significant portion of households (70%) experienced at least one shock in the past year.

Households who grow their food are significantly affected by drought/irregular rains (32%) and issues with crops/livestock (24%). Households that do not grow their food are more likely to be impacted by a reduction in earnings (9% compared to 4% of self-sustained households) and flooding (8% compared to 5%). To cope, many households reduced food consumption (29%) or consumed lower cost food (27%), though some did nothing (30%) – perhaps those with little consumption to forego. Other households resorted to selling assets or reducing non-food consumption.

FIGURE 18. Shocks experienced in the previous 12 months (%)

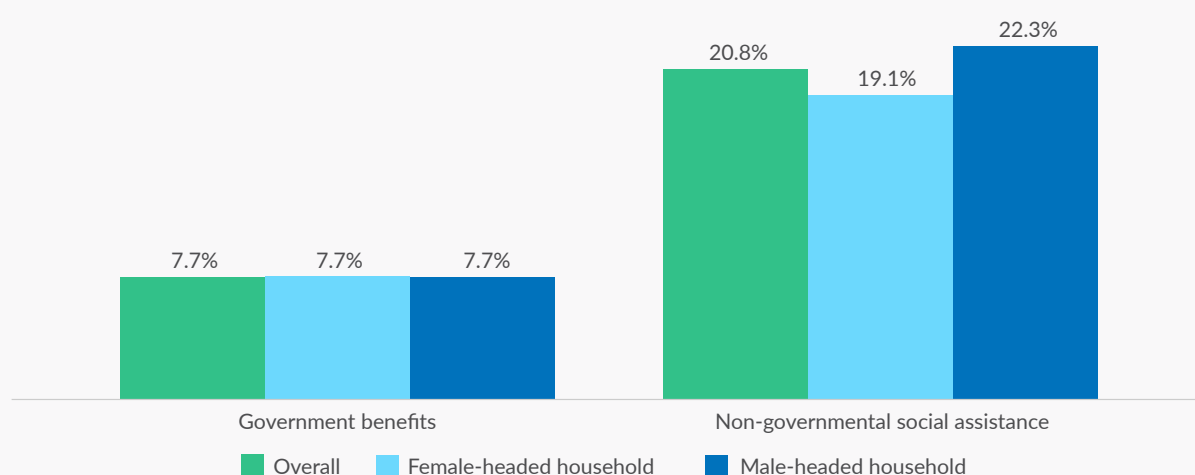


Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

Government social assistance is very low (8%), with non-government actors filling the gaps.

Assistance from non-governmental organizations reaches a fifth of all households. Non-food assistance is the most common type, with male-headed households receiving slightly more help (13%) compared to female-headed households (10%). Non-Governmental food assistance is provided to 4% of households.

FIGURE 19. Social assistance, previous 12 months



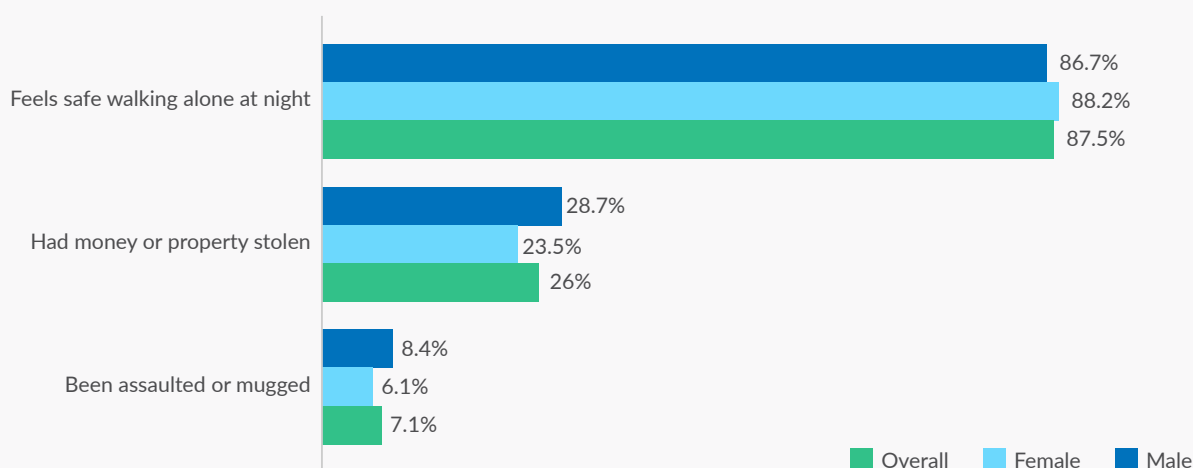
Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.



Safety and GBV

The majority of people feel safe walking alone at night, though instances of theft or violence in the past year were not uncommon. A high percentage of people feel safe walking alone at night (88%), with no difference between men and women, similar to findings from the CBA but higher than the results from the main FDS sample for adult refugees and host community. Nevertheless, 29% of respondents reported having money or property stolen in the past year and around 8% reported being assaulted or mugged. The street is the most commonly reported unsafe location, especially for men. Women feel more unsafe in locations like water points and open defecation sites compared to men.

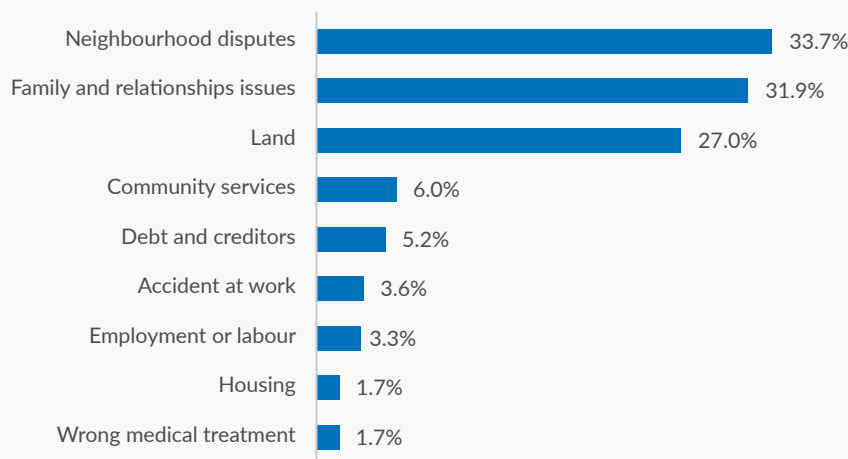
FIGURE 20. Perception of subjective safety, reports of theft and assault in the past year (%)²⁴



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 - returnee sample

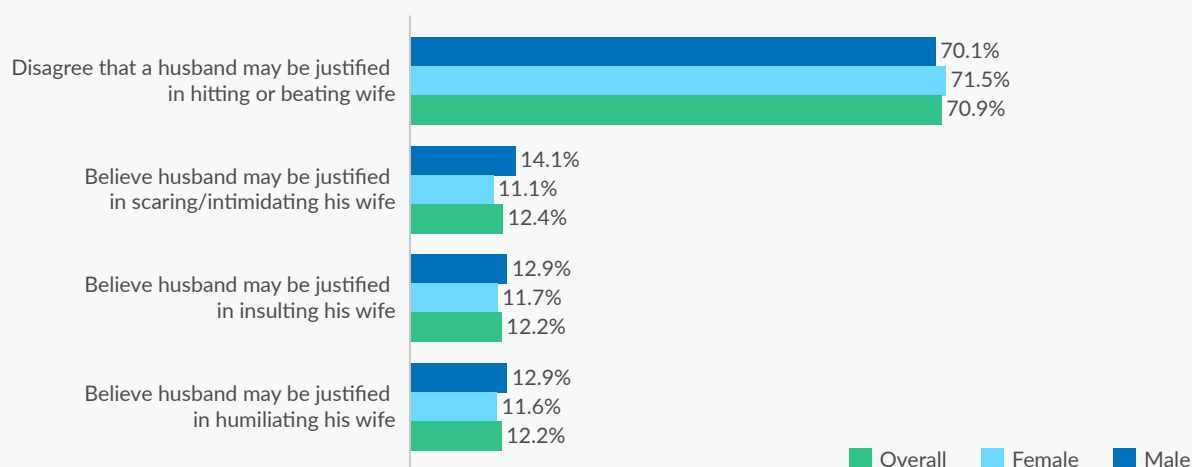
Disputes are generally uncommon, and community leaders and personal networks are the primary sources of support, rather than formal mechanisms. Overall, 14% of respondents experienced a dispute in the past two years, most commonly those involving family issues, relationship breakups, and neighborhood disputes. Land disputes were also common. Community leaders are the most relied-upon resource for resolving disputes (60% of cases), followed by family and friends (50%). Formal mechanisms such as police and courts are the least relied upon (6% of cases), suggesting potential barriers to access or trust in these institutions for resolving disputes.

²⁴ Feels safe walking alone at night corresponds to SDG Indicator 16.1.4.

FIGURE 21. Type of dispute (among those who experienced dispute), %

Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

There is a very high level of acceptance of intimate partner violence among both men and women, and only moderate knowledge about specific gender-based violence services. A significant portion of the population (almost 30%) believes that a husband is justified in hitting or beating his wife under certain scenarios. Acceptance of insulting or humiliating a wife is lower, but still notable, with around 11% of respondents. Over 69% of respondents know at least one gender-based violence service, including health services (68%), policy (55%) and legal services (22%). Women generally report higher awareness across most services except for legal assistance.

FIGURE 22. Acceptance of intimate-partner violence, %

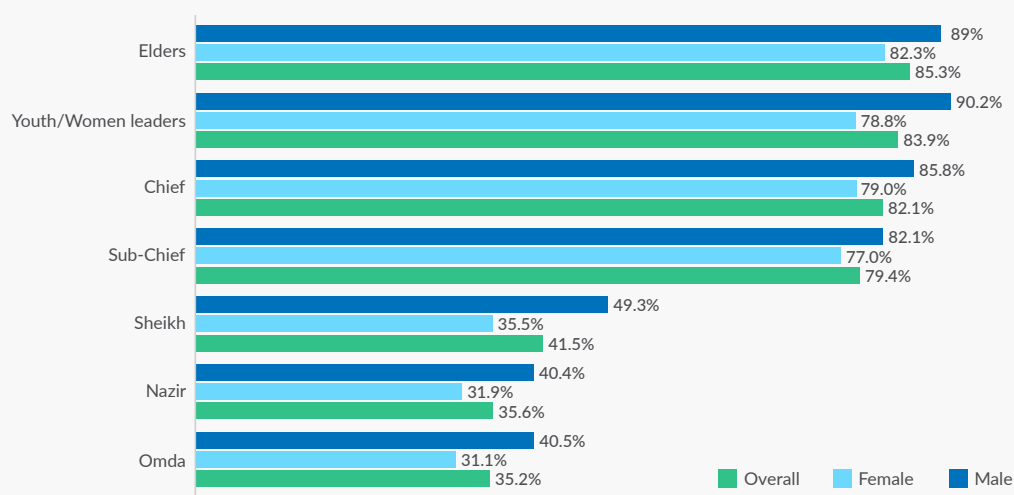
Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.



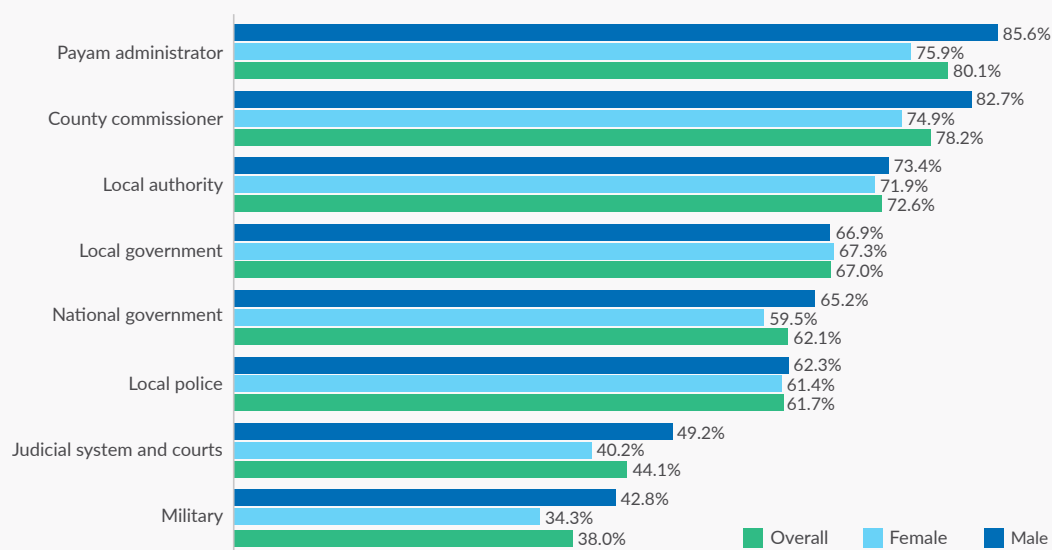
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Community Engagement and Subjective Well Being

Trust is highest among community leaders and local officials, but falls when it comes to central or formal authorities. There is a relatively high level of trust in community leaders across the board. When it comes to government entities, trust is higher in local-level government entities, such as payam administrators and county commissioners, but decreases as the level of the entity becomes more centralized or formalized, such as the judicial system or the military. In general, men tend to trust government entities slightly more than women across most categories. The most significant gender disparity is seen in trust towards the military and the judicial system and courts, where men exhibit a notably higher trust level than women.

FIGURE 23. Trust in Community Leaders

Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

FIGURE 24. Trust in Government Entities

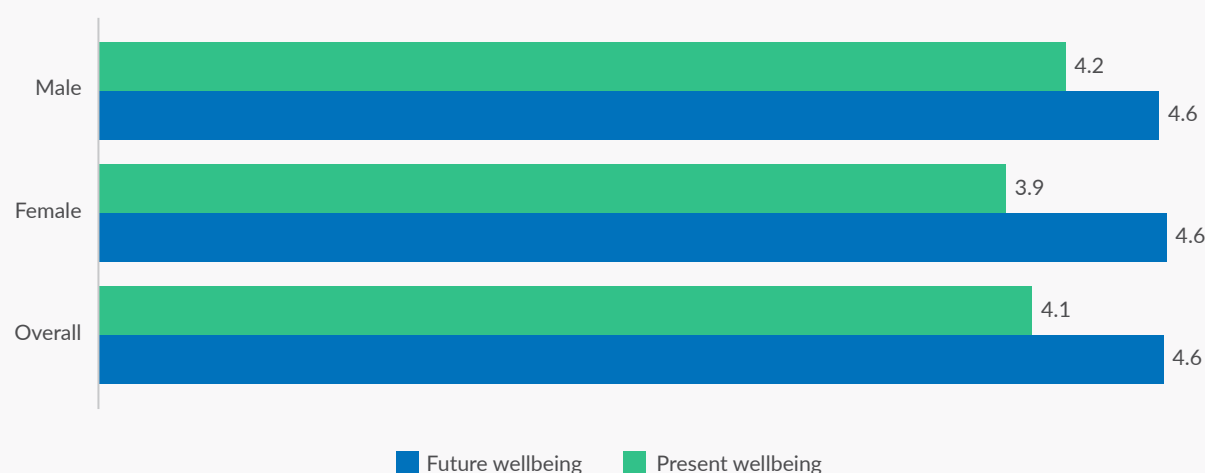
Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

According to subjective measures, the majority of the population is struggling, but there is a more optimistic view of the future.

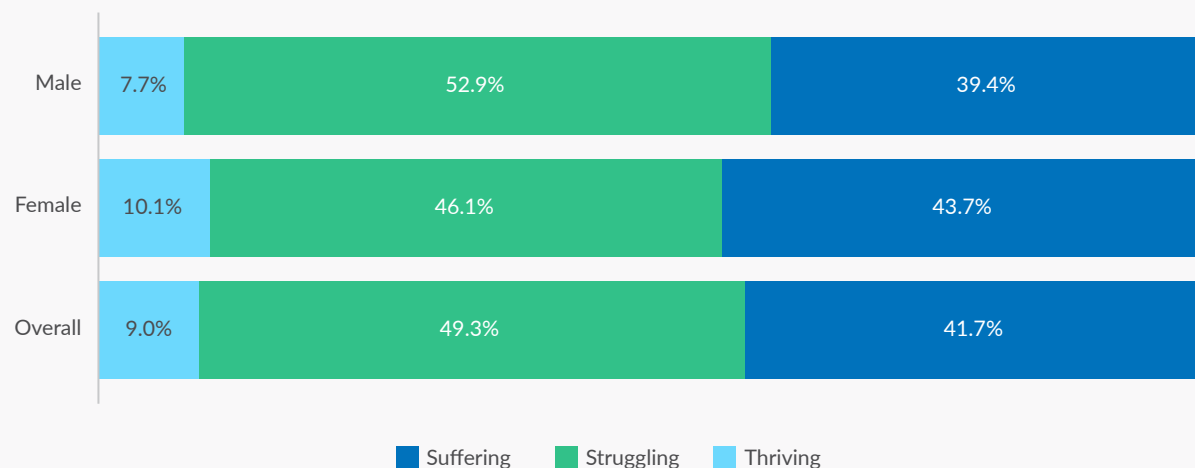
The Cantril Ladder Scale evaluates subjective well-being. Adults report their quality of life on a scale from 0 to 10, representing the worst to the best, with the scale measuring both well-being in the present and expected well-being in one year. Average subjective well-being for returnees is 4.1, significantly higher than either the main FDS refugee (2.7) or host community (1.9) samples, though both also rise when it comes to future well-being. The Life Evaluation Index groups current and future scores into categories: 42% of returnees are “suffering”, 49% are “struggling” and only 9% are “thriving”. However, again, these rates are an improvement on the other samples, whereby only 5% of refugees and 3% of host communities in the North are thriving.



FIGURE 25. Cantril Ladder of Life Scale



Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

FIGURE 26. Life Evaluation Index Categories (%)

Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 – returnee sample.

When comparing subjective views across life domains, personal relationships are associated with the most satisfaction, while jobs, standards of living and life achievements receive the lowest scores. Safety and membership in community also score highly. The scores for standard of living, achievement in life, access to food, and job satisfaction are generally low, indicating dissatisfaction in these areas.

FIGURE 27. Satisfaction across life domains

Source: FDS South Sudan 2023 - returnee sample

Conclusions and Recommendations

For refugee returnees in Magwi County, the data illustrate a return and reintegration process that is both complex and dynamic. Many households travelled back to South Sudan before their return – nearly one-half of male-headed households and one-quarter of female-headed ones – and while the majority intend to stay permanently, family members commonly stay behind in the settlements of Uganda, suggesting that back-and-forth movements and cross-border ties are likely to continue to be a significant part of livelihood strategies in these communities.

Documentation is a recognized enabler for development and an area of unmet opportunity for refugee returnees. Allowing people to establish and verify their identity facilitates their use of services, access to financial tools and economic opportunities, and the exercise of a range of rights, such as property ownership and public participation. Only 1 in 10 refugee returnees in Magwi County has a national identity document. Expanding access to documentation offers new potential for these populations, though the results also show that barriers to services extend beyond documentation.



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Access to land is also closely associated with employment, income stability and reduced dependence on assistance. Refugee returnees with land are more than twice as likely to be employed as those without (37% vs. 15%), underscoring land's role in livelihoods. Most received their land through inheritance (53%) or bequeathed by family members (22%), and few have formal documentation. While the threat of eviction is assessed to be quite low, clarity of tenure offers other benefits as well. For those without land, innovative approaches to formalize rental arrangements – such as those [being studied in Uganda](#) – may offer hope for improved trust, social cohesion, agricultural practices, and food security.

Area-based approaches, such as the ones advocated for under Pockets of Hope, seek to raise the availability and quality of services for all populations. In complex environments like Magwi County, where refugee returnees live alongside IDPs, returned IDPs and non-displaced populations, delivering services without regard to status is all the more important for sustaining social cohesion. New approaches, such as the service absorption component of the UNHCR/Samuel Hall community assessment for high-return areas, aim to help measure the quality and availability of services and infrastructure and identify priority gaps for investment.

South Sudan's Durable Solutions Strategy and Plan of Action for Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, Returnees and Host Communities (2024) calls for more data and evidence for successful implementation. The FDS South Sudan 2023 refugee returnee sample demonstrates the potential for household data to provide critical insights into the solutions agenda at the policy and programmatic levels. As the FDS is expanded into return settings, this experience offers important lessons for the design of the sample and adaptation of the questionnaire. At the same time, it provides important learning for the Government of South Sudan in its own commitments to further inclusion of displaced and stateless persons into its national registration, surveys and statistical system.²⁵

The Forced Displacement Survey - South Sudan 2023 Magwi County sample also provides important learning about the collection of data on refugee returnee households. As with refugees, comparability to non-displaced populations provides important context for the results. In areas of high density of returns, household listings are able to efficiently identify refugee returnee households. In areas of lower density, or where distances are dispersed, innovative sampling methods are required. Survey instruments should also be further adapted to capture multiple stages of returnee movement and other particularities of the refugee returnee experience, such as services and experiences in exile.



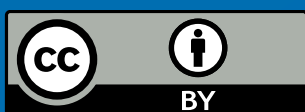
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²⁵ At the Global Refugee Forum 2023, the Government of South Sudan pledged to include displaced and stateless persons into its National Statistical Systems for use in national planning and inclusion in service provision by the government and stakeholders as part of multistakeholder pledge on statistical inclusion (GRF-07191).

Annex

IASC and durable solution criteria

IASC SUB-CRITERIA	DURABLE SOLUTIONS INDICATOR	OUTCOME INDICATORS
PHYSICAL SAFETY		
Protection	Having suffered violent crimes or experiences	Facing discriminatory restrictions of freedom of movement
Safety and security	Having access to police and judiciary	Feeling safe in place of residence
Social cohesion	Facing stigmatisation	Feeling acceptance in the community
MATERIAL SAFETY		
Adequate standards of living	Food consumption scores	GAM / SAM / MAM
	Access to potable water, sanitation, hygiene	Access to healthcare
	Access to formal education	Access to safety net interventions or remittances
Access to livelihoods	Absence of legal / administrative obstacles to employment	Employment
	Sustainable employment conditions	Poverty levels
Housing, land & property	Adequate housing	Mechanisms to ensure access to land / secure tenure
	Resolution mechanisms for HLP claims	Documents for HLP ownership
LEGAL SAFETY		
Participation in public affairs	Absence of obstacles to working in public service	Participating in community / social organisations
	Involvement in decision-making processes	
Access to documentation	Mechanisms to obtain / replace documents	Having documentation such as birth certificates, ID cards



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This document along with further information on global displacement is available on UNHCR's statistics website: <https://www.unhcr.org/forced-displacement-survey-south-sudan-2023>.



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Further information on the Forced Displacement Survey is
available on UNHCR's FDS website :
<https://www.unhcr.org/fds>