

# The Pockets of Hope Initiative: Realizing Solutions in South Sudan

**Protection and Solutions | Peace | Development | Climate Adaptation**

UNHCR South Sudan  
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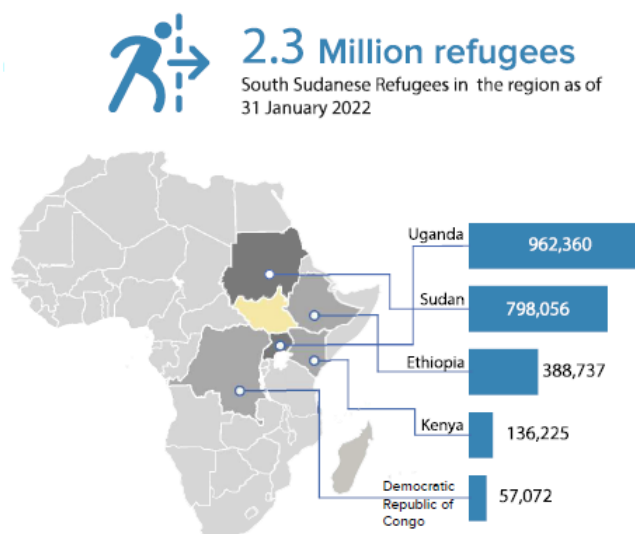
## INTRODUCTION

The world's newest nation is plagued by violence, climate crises, underdevelopment and poor governance. An astonishing two-thirds of the population is in need of humanitarian assistance. And the international community, which was so instrumental in guiding this ancient land to nationhood, is losing patience.

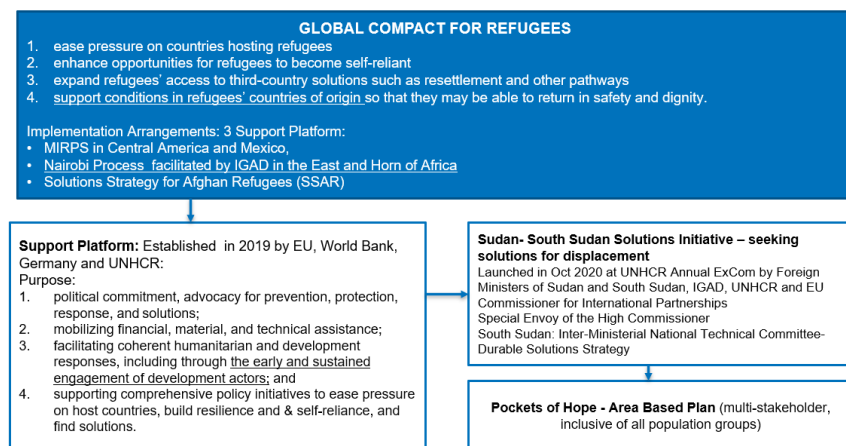
Yet amidst the bleakness, there is hope, and with this hope an imperative for the international community to prudently build on it and help to construct a better future for South Sudan. One striking indicator has been the spontaneous repatriation of South Sudanese refugees from neighbouring countries. Since the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018, over 507,000 have returned home. They have done so without encouragement or assistance, leaving the security and the safety nets afforded them in refugee camps, and by their own actions demonstrating that their future lies at home.

Their return has not been evenly sequenced or distributed. It has rather been to specific areas, places that they have chosen because of low conflict, low famine and the possibility of earning a livelihood. UNHCR South Sudan has visited returnees across the nation, and spoken with them of their decision, and of their dreams. While each response is different, one element in common is that each refugee took her or his own decision, and that having come home, they do not regret the decision.

We honour their decision, and we follow their lead. Our pledge and our action is to nurture their aspiration, county by county, and help them to achieve peace and development, in a climate adapted manner. The county as a whole is not ready for a comprehensive approach, but on the periphery and in specific counties, the people have spoken and we are working with them, to develop Pockets of Hope. In 2019, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD), European Union, Germany and the US with support from UNHCR launched the Support Platform for the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) and the Nairobi Declaration. Through this platform IGAD members seek to advance the implementation of the GCR and facilitate enabling conditions for durable solutions through a stronger collective response, provide for the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees through a sustainable and development-oriented approach.



## Overview of the Sudan- South Sudan Solutions Initiative:



There are over 2.3 million refugees from South Sudan hosted in the region, and another 2 million displaced in the country. There are more than 3 million Sudanese internally displaced, mainly in the Darfur region, and over 700,000 Sudanese refugees located in neighbouring countries.

In view of the forced displacement in the region and need for collective effort to address this, in October 2020 as a flagship activity of the IGAD Support Platform, the Solutions Initiative was launched by the

Governments of Sudan and South Sudan, IGAD, EU and UNHCR. The Solutions Initiative seeks to galvanize international support towards the early recovery and longer-term peacebuilding and resilience needs of over seven million internally displaced people, refugees and returnees, as well as their host communities, in the two countries. This effort aligns with the aims of the IGAD Nairobi Declaration, an agreement by IGAD member countries (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda) to pursue comprehensive regional approaches to deliver durable solutions for refugees while also maintaining protection and promoting self-reliance in countries of asylum.

Under the leadership of the governments of South Sudan and Sudan, national strategies and accompanying action plans are being developed, through consultations with a wide range of stakeholders. Refugees, internally displaced people, returnees and host communities were extensively included in national dialogues, ensuring that their needs and interests are included in the planning and management of these national processes. An inclusive regional strategy and action plan that is expected to inform the deliberations at the IGAD Special Summit of Heads of States and Governments is also underway.

In 2021, there were over 2 million IDPs and some 335,000 refugees (92% of whom are from Sudan) in South Sudan. 2.3 million South Sudanese remain refugees hosted in neighbouring countries, including Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo. According to UNHCR, Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) and partners estimates<sup>1</sup> since September 2018, over 507,000 South Sudanese refugees have spontaneously returned from neighbouring countries.

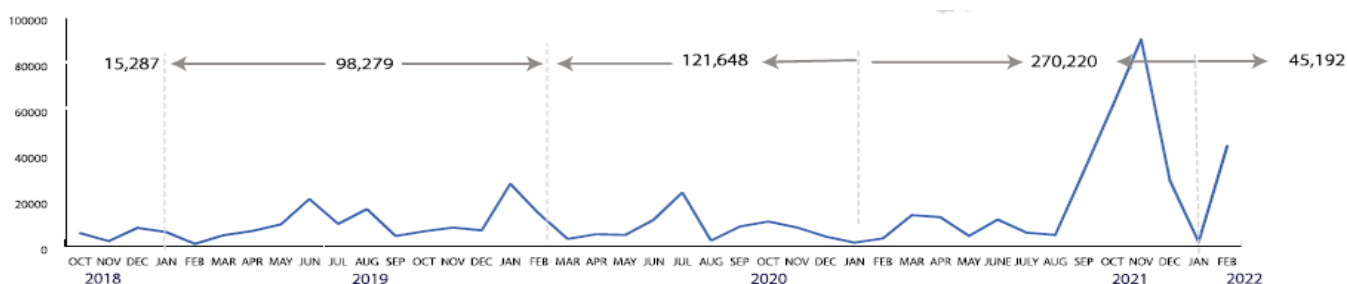


Figure 1: Returns from 2018-2022

In case of exacerbated national and regional instability, refugees from neighbouring countries to South Sudan and internal displacement can be expected to grow. In view of the current trends, returns (of refugees and IDPs) can be anticipated to continue to increase, albeit with downward trends in case of political instability or localised conflict within South Sudan. The ongoing spontaneous refugee returns are partly driven by the desire to search for livelihood opportunities in the country of origin, family reunification, closure of schools due to Covid-19, family reunification, food cuts and growing unstable conditions in countries of asylum.

<sup>1</sup> See South Sudan Household Level Refugees Returnee Monitoring Report Oct to Dec 2021. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/90507>

It is important to prepare and build on this return trend. We need to provide a comprehensive response that takes into account the current spontaneous returns to ensure that they are lasting, and that any further risk of displacement is prevented. UNHCR will work on this with the South Sudanese Government and partners within the parameters set out in **UNHCR's Position on Returns to South Sudan – Update III**, which calls on the need to maintain asylum space in refugee hosting countries and uphold the principle of non-*refoulement* and voluntary returns<sup>2</sup>:

- **International Protection Need of South Sudanese:**

Para 26. UNHCR considers that persons fleeing South Sudan are likely to meet the criteria for refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention, or would otherwise meet the criteria contained in the refugee definition in Article 1(2) of the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugees in Africa. In this respect, UNHCR welcomes the fact that South Sudanese fleeing the conflict continue to enjoy prima facie refugee status in all neighbouring states, in line with Article 1(2) of the 1969 OAU Convention.

- **Bar on Forcible Return of South Sudanese:**

Para 27. While political, security, human rights and rule of law changes are underway in South Sudan, the impact of these changes on the ground are not uniformly witnessed across the country and may compromise the feasibility of return under conditions of safety and dignity in some locations. **Therefore, UNHCR reaffirms its call on States to refrain from forcibly returning South Sudanese nationals or habitual residents of South Sudan to any part of the country.**

Para 28. The bar on forcible return serves as a minimum standard and needs to remain in place until such time as the security, rule of law, and the human rights situation in South Sudan has significantly improved to permit the promotion of safe and dignified returns of those determined not to be in need of international protection.

- **Spontaneous Returns**

Para 29. **Any assistance provided by UNHCR for 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, choose voluntarily to return.** Any action by UNHCR to support voluntary repatriation, 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 repatriation and forced return are processes of a fundamentally different character, engaging different responsibilities on the parts of the various actors involved.

- **Solutions Initiative**

Para 25. Despite a number of challenges, UNHCR continues to work with key stakeholders to ensure the active involvement of refugee and IDP representatives in ongoing peace initiatives, the development of solutions strategies, and constitution making processes. Similarly, UNHCR supports the development by the Government of South Sudan, with the facilitation of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), of a National Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan that will build on the 2019 National Framework for Return, Reintegration and Resettlement of Refugees and IDPs and its Action Plan adopted in 2020.

## Vision

The vision is to ensure that South Sudanese and 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. The growing number of returnees underscores the need to implement this vision in a timely manner.

The POH initiative is solutions-oriented, area-based and status-blind; targeting high return areas and refugee areas through an investment in medium to long-term interventions to build resilience and government ownership and responsibility. The approach is in line with the South Sudan Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan and grounded in peace frameworks<sup>3</sup> and the reality on the ground. Given the fragility of peace, a protection, peace and conflict

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR Position on Returns to South Sudan – Update III (October 2021), <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/617676f04.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> This includes chapter 3 of the R-ARCSS which confirms the right of refugees and IDPs to return in safety and dignity; UN Security Council Resolution 2667(2021) which calls on UNMISS to foster a secure environment for safe & dignified solutions for displaced South Sudanese; and the South Sudan National Dialogue: SSD cannot move forward without its displaced populations going back to their ancestral homes'; the Conference resolved that the Government shall 'undertake repatriation of IDPs and refugees before the end of the Transitional Period [and] along with international partners support refugees for 6 months after their return' (para 78).

sensitivity lens will remain imperative, with full incorporation of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) approach, ensuring that any form of assistance and development action is inclusive of all population groups and advances peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and peace outcomes.

**UNHCR will implement this in close collaboration with the Government, which will facilitate government-led interventions, and through strategic cooperation and operational delivery with other UN agencies, donors, development and peace actors.**

## Objectives

Through the Pockets of Hope, the following objectives will be achieved:

- i) Create the conditions for a sustainably secure and safe environment to attain durable solutions for returnees and local communities, delivered through a protection-centred, conflict sensitive lens.
- ii) Support community-based protection and basic services and infrastructure to support and sustain durable solutions.
- iii) Enhance self-reliance through socio-economic activities and integration of refugee/IDP returnees and local communities including livelihoods.
- iv) Strengthen institutional capacities of the Government, including local authorities.
- v) Bolster Government ownership, capacity, partnership arrangements and coordination mechanisms.

## POH locations- Refugee & Return Areas

The POH intervention is a multi-sectoral **modular approach** in response to South Sudanese refugees and IDP returns, and local communities. It will be rolled out in specific locations in 7 states in South Sudan:

1. Magwi & Torit (Eastern Equatoria State)
2. Raja (Western Bahr el Ghazal State)
3. Rubkona (Unity State)
4. Yei (Central Equatoria State)
5. Akobo (Jonglei State)
6. Maban (Upper Nile State)
7. Jamjang (Ruweng Administrative Area)

These locations have been selected based on:

1. High concentrations of refugees and/or formerly displaced populations.<sup>4</sup>
2. Relative conducive conditions to implement the interventions and more returns are expected.
3. Access to these locations.
4. Commitment and willingness of local authorities to support returnees and refugees.
5. Low incidence of food insecurity.
6. Low incidence of violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the prerequisites are that these areas are accessible, relatively safety, with existing governance structure and political will to protect civilian population and their property, and allow for conducive climatic conditions for implementation.

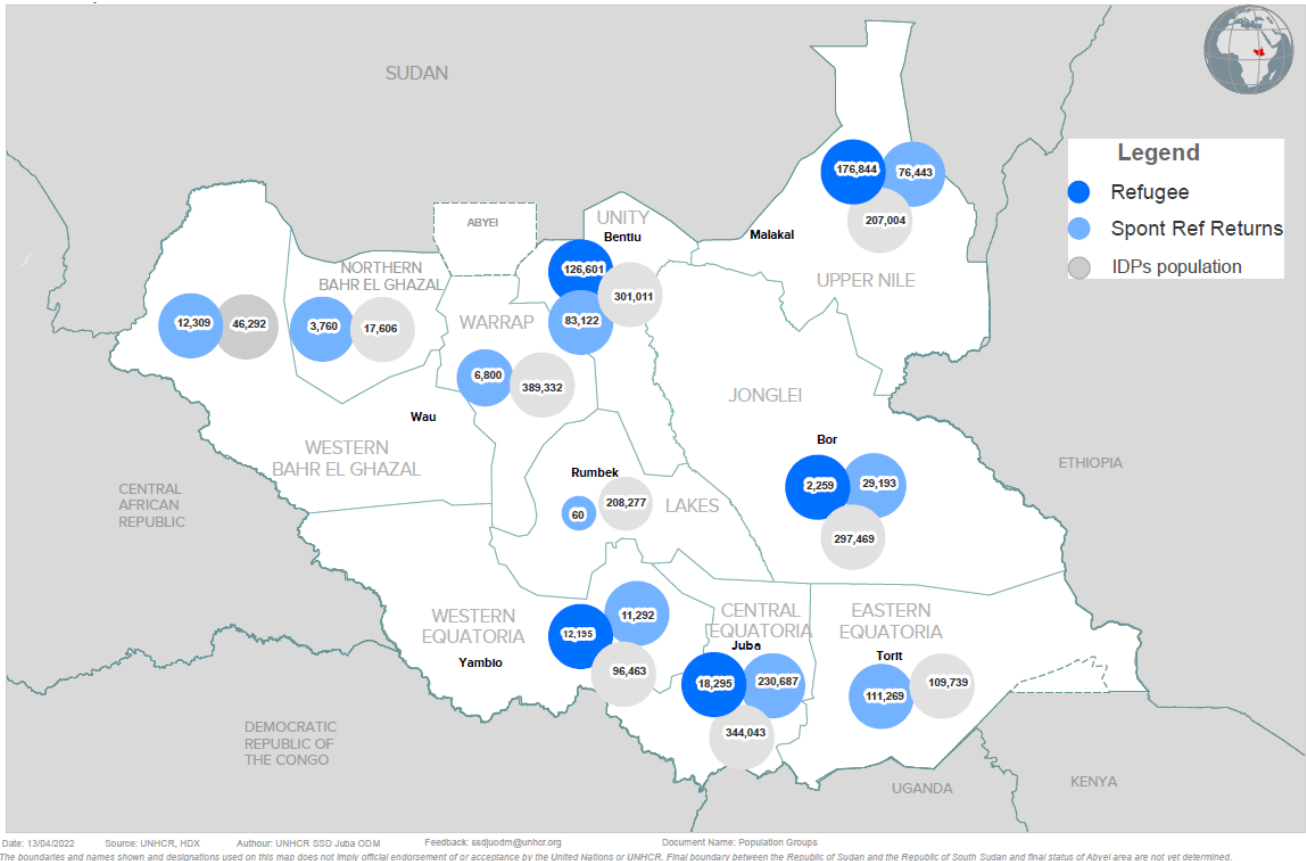


Figure 2: Population of Refugees, IDPs and Spontaneous Refugee Returns per State (as of April 2022)

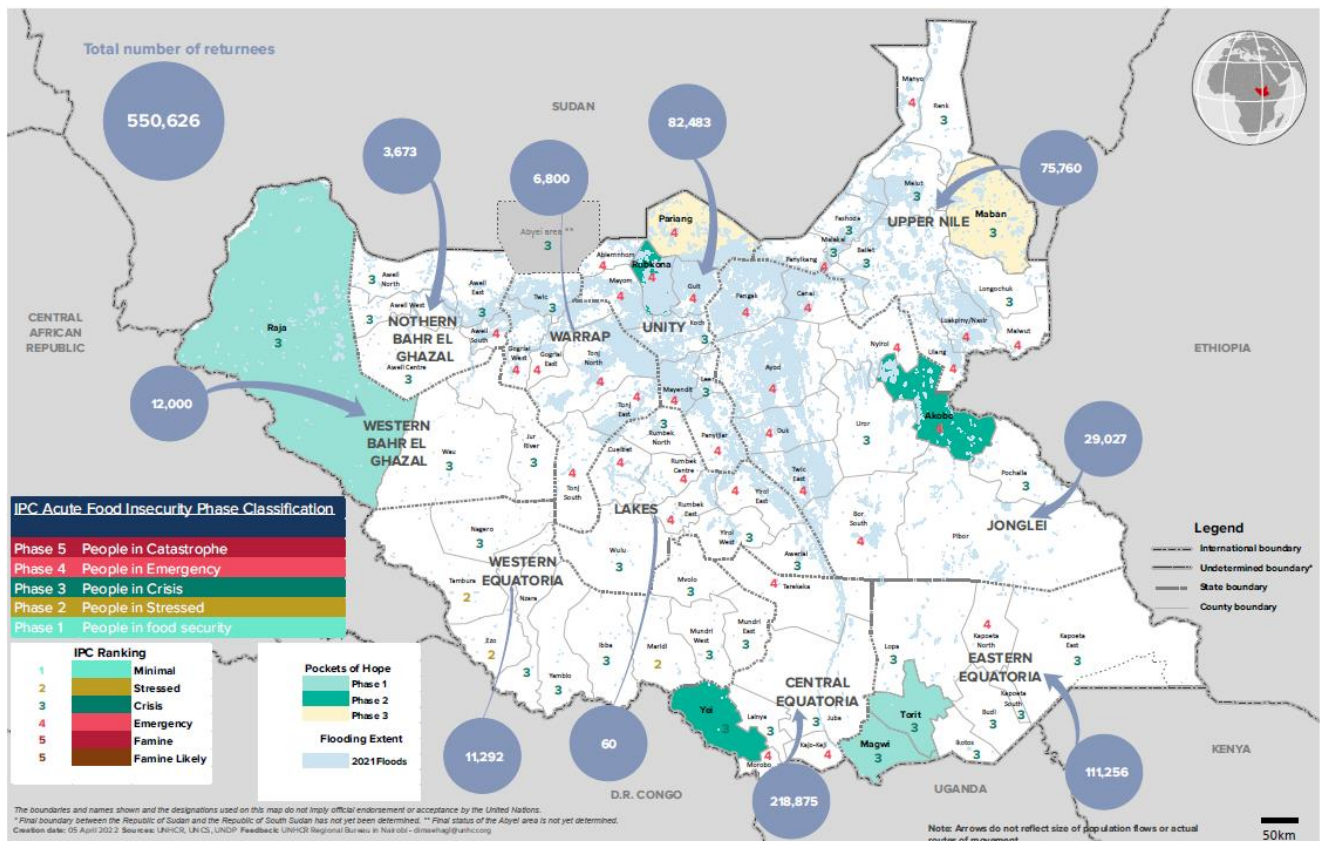


Figure 3: Map of Pockets of Hope locations (multi-layered with number of returnees, IPC food insecurity ranking, and flood-prone areas)

## Target Communities:

The POH is an area-based approach that is community driven, conflict sensitive and inclusive. It will **target all population groups in the selected areas inclusive of refugees and communities that host them; spontaneous refugee returnees, IDPs and IDP returnees and the local host communities** already residing in the targeted locations. Individual assistance for protection and persons with specific needs and vulnerabilities will be undertaken. Development action and efforts that are inclusive and have greatest impact and outcomes for all population groups will be prioritised such as investment in governance, institutional strengthening, infrastructure facilities and integrated services, agricultural efforts through cooperatives/community groups, and climate risk mitigation efforts.

## Components of the Pockets of Hope Approach

Following the mapping of existing services and initiatives, basic services will be established and enhanced in the identified areas. This includes the **strengthening of local systems** of health, education and the support of local capacity to address shelter, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), agriculture, livelihood activities, private sector investments as well as environmental challenges. In addition, infrastructure facilities will be created as needed in collaboration with development actors.

A **community-led approach** will be taken, ensuring that returning and local communities can make choices that impact their lives and are at the forefront of rebuilding their lives. By putting communities at the centre and ensuring a conflict sensitive, community-driven approach through community mobilization, adequate information provision, and meaningful inclusion and participation of returnees, IDPs and host population, social cohesion among different groups will be strengthened. This will be done by establishing and using community structures, or setting new groups as required such as agriculture cooperatives, peaceful coexistence, market, livelihood committees, and providing capacity development and training opportunities, especially for women and youth, and seed money to start them on path of self-reliance. In addition, we will strengthen cross-country coordination and collaboration on data, as well as skills mapping of returnees through a mapping exercise. By identifying and strengthening the skills of refugees in countries of asylum, these skills can also contribute to the socio-economic efforts initiated in South Sudan in the event of a spontaneous return, thereby facilitating smooth reintegration. Meanwhile UNHCR and partners in coordination with government will maintain and strengthen protection monitoring of return/cross border movement trends at border points and in return areas to inform situational and conflict analysis and sustainability of returns and reintegration.

To protect returnees and host communities from recurring shocks, social protection measures are needed in the long run that aim to preserve or protect them from poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion. This will help strengthen their resilience and ensure the sustainability of the measures put in place. Emphasis needs to be particularly placed on vulnerable groups and persons with specific needs. In line with UNHCR's Strategic Roadmap for Inclusion in Social Protection Systems and through coherent action by all actors across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and a government-led transition action plan, a comprehensive safety net can be built up that is inclusive of all population groups. The government must be supported through capacity building to establish social protection systems that include both returnees and host communities, thereby ensuring the sustainability of the measures put in place.

To enhance inclusive economic growth for local populations and returnees, UNHCR and relevant stakeholders will contribute resources and expertise to promote economic opportunities, decent work, job creation and entrepreneurship programmes to benefit all population groups in the identified areas including women, young adults, older people and people with disabilities. This will be complemented by engaging the private sector to increase the wage- or self-employment of returnees and local populations through advocacy efforts and investments in/development of employability initiatives (e.g., trainings and skill development programmes). We will also support the growth of financial capital in communities through the establishment/strengthening of Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and access to financial services and regular cash flows and other social protection activities. In order to bridge the digital divide, especially for girls and women, computer skills training and educational technologies will be provided, and connectivity enhanced. Access to civil documentation will be a key element to ensure access to rights, social protection, and employment. Housing, land and property issues and disputes will also need to be addressed. All efforts will be underpinned by peaceful coexistence, social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts.

Recognizing that South Sudan is firmly on the frontlines of climate crisis and the impacts of climate change are already being profoundly felt in several areas, the initiative has a built in component on climate adaptation, including climate smart interventions such as greening of the POH locations, agro-forestry, and solarization. Following UNHCR's Strategic Framework for Climate Action, the aim is to strive to preserve and rehabilitate the natural

environment and mitigate environmental degradation in POH locations (Objective 2.1 of the Strategic Framework); and enhance the resilience of returnees and local populations to climate-related and other environmental risks (Objective 2.2 of the Strategic Framework). This is in line with the Government's pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum to plant 100 million trees and establish inclusive community-based forestry structures in accordance with the national reforestation programme and policy.

Through cooperation with development and peace actors in the Pockets of Hope, an investment in medium to long term interventions will be made focusing on the following areas and cross-cutting sectors:

### Inclusive partnering

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has a legitimate concern and role for the consequences of return. As the overall approach would be multi-year and straddles the development and peace spectrum, firmly defined partnerships are needed. These include peace actors such as UNMISS (peace pillar, already linked to UNHCR via the existing Principles of Partnership agreement); sister UN agencies, international, national and local NGOs, academia as well as private sector, micro-finance institutions and development /financial institutions. The Government, both local and national, is an essential leader for this effort while the communities will continue to remain at the centre.

Through these targeted partnerships with humanitarian, development and peace actors, the joint objective of working towards comprehensive and durable solutions for returnees (IDPs/refugees) with a triple nexus approach will be achieved. Humanitarian, development and peace interventions will be integrated to avoid parallel systems and to respond to immediate, medium, and long-term needs of the target population in return areas, based on high-quality, shared, and concerted data.

### Complementarity and alignment with other development, humanitarian and peace action

The priorities and approaches of the POH will be grounded in the Government of South Sudan's National Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan. Complementarity will be ensured with ongoing or planned humanitarian and development action, especially under the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) and UN Strategic Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and the National (and County) Development Strategy as well as the UNMISS lead peace efforts and its strategy for South Sudan. The existing area-based approaches, such as the Partnership For Recovery And Resilience Framework (PfRR), will be a critical avenue not only to draw lessons learnt and technical advice but also to ensure complementarity and amplification of collective efforts (already underway in Raja and Torit).

### Coordination Arrangements

The National and State Level Solution Task Forces on Returns led by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) and co-led by UNHCR will be used to mobilise and coordinate partners (UN agencies, I/NGOs). For refugee areas, the existing Refugee Coordination Model, led by the Commissioner of Refugees Affairs (CRA), County Commissioner and UNHCR will be used. Both coordination mechanisms bring together line ministries, UN agencies, I/NGOs partners.

The area-based plans developed will be implemented through a multi-stakeholder approach with development (and peace) actors playing a crucial role in implementing key measure. Local government, particularly County Commissioners and Line Ministries will play a leading role ensuring uptake of its responsibilities and ensuring complementarity, comparative advantage of agencies and actors are harnessed to deliver a well-coordinated, efficient and sustainable effort. In line with localisation commitments under the GCR and Grand Bargain, local and national partners as well as refugees, returns and IDPs will play a key role.

### An incremental and phased approach

Given that development interventions require a long-term view, the plans will be developed through a multi-stakeholder approach and activities will be designed in a phased manner over the next 4-5 years with enough flexibility to allow for changes in case and mitigation of risks caused by resurgent local conflicts/ flooding/ drought etc.