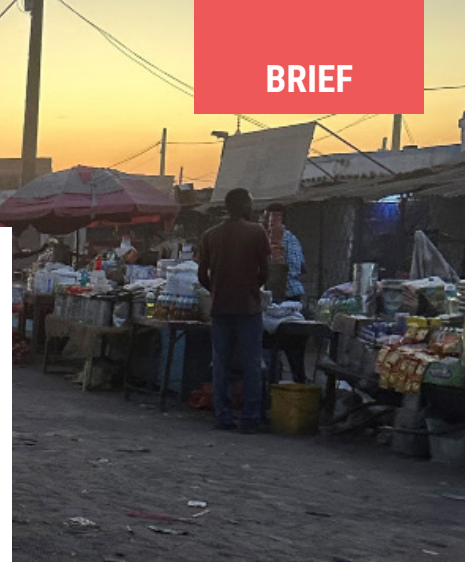


Sudan Crisis: Social Cohesion Among Refugees, Returnees and Host Community in Renk Town

December 2023 | Renk County | South Sudan



CONTEXT

Since the onset of the Sudan crisis in April 2023,¹ Renk town has provided refuge for individuals fleeing Sudan.² As of 28 February 2024, 508, 656 individuals had crossed into South Sudan through the Joda-Wunthow border point in Renk. Most of these individuals are South Sudanese (64%), while Sudanese nationals comprise 36%.³ Renk town is home to the transit centre, which temporarily accommodates refugees from Sudan before their relocation to the Maban refugee camp and the returnee's onward movement to their areas of origin within South Sudan or elsewhere.⁴ Upon arrival in Renk town, some returnees also choose to settle among the host community by residing with friends and relatives or establishing their households outside the transit centre.⁵

Humanitarian actors have set up an intervention to facilitate the onward movement of returnees and refugees arriving at South Sudan's borders to avoid a buildup of people in border areas that are remote and difficult to access.⁶ National and state authorities in Renk are involved in supporting displaced populations affected by the Sudan conflict and have communicated to the humanitarian community their agreement that no returnee or refugee camps should be set up in border areas.⁷ However, since July 2023 to January 2024, flooding has rendered the roads to Maban impassable, and thus, UNHCR had to pause the onward transportation of refugees.⁸ Due to this, refugees stayed at the Renk transit centre for extended periods as they awaited transport to Maban. Returnees, on the other hand, are usually expected to remain in the transit centre for a short time before they voluntarily sign up for onward movement to other parts of South Sudan or their areas of origin.⁹

In line with the above-highlighted dynamics, REACH conducted an assessment from 29 November to 13 December 2023 to understand the interplay of social cohesion among returnees, refugees and the host community in Renk town. The assessment sought to uncover insights into social cohesion dynamics and to identify proposals to enhance social cohesion from the communities' perspectives. Findings from this assessment will help humanitarian actors and government bodies in Renk determine how they can maintain or improve social cohesion between the various population groups.

KEY FINDINGS

- In Renk town, solidarity has emerged among Sudanese refugees, South Sudanese returnees, and the local community. This solidarity has been fostered by shared and respectful access to services in the same areas. Moreover, their shared experiences of conflict have brought them closer together. Focus group discussion (FGD) participants reported that all people were mutually aware of their interdependence. Given that all these groups have encountered the negative repercussions of conflicts at some stage in their lives, they can empathise with the ongoing difficulties and are making efforts to coexist harmoniously.
- Findings suggest that sharing a common language and shared cultural traits has reportedly contributed to the development of social cohesion in Renk town as there is ease in communication in shared spaces, such as places of worship and markets.
- The availability of opportunities for new arrivals (term refers to both returnees and refugees) to access decent work¹⁰ in Renk town appears to be one of the drivers of social cohesion. Most respondents cited that securing employment encourages them to integrate and fully engage with the community in Renk town. The new arrivals persons bring skills acquired during their time in Sudan, and potential employment in Renk town would offer them a means to support their families financially. However, most respondents cited that it was difficult to secure a job due to lack of job opportunities, and a lack of skills. This lack of a source of livelihood in Renk meant they could not support themselves and had to rely on humanitarian assistance or community members wishing to help, such as family members or neighbors in Renk.
- Based on the feedback gathered from surveyed populations, humanitarian partners are encouraged to adopt a comprehensive approach to aid distribution, encompassing all demographic groups rather than solely prioritizing newcomers. FGD participants mentioned that some host community members may face challenges fulfilling their basic needs, underscoring the significance of integrating them into humanitarian programmes. Neglecting to involve the host community in humanitarian assistance may pose a risk to social cohesion dynamics, as community members might interpret humanitarian assistance as solely directed towards new arrivals. Therefore, FGD participants recommended that humanitarian organisations implement programs that include both the host community and new arrivals to foster inclusivity and mitigate potential tensions.

The concept of social cohesion

Social cohesion is the extent of trust in government and within society and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals. Social cohesion includes horizontal social cohesion, which is social cohesion between groups, and vertical social cohesion, which is social cohesion between groups and the state.¹¹

Social cohesion at the community level stems from common acceptance, trust and understanding as individuals share similar work, personal, educational and religious backgrounds. It is the ongoing process of developing well-being, a sense of belonging and voluntary social participation of the members of society. It's also the process of developing communities that tolerate and promote a multiplicity of values and cultures while at the same time promoting equal rights and opportunities in society. Social cohesion encompasses three core aspects: a sense of belonging, social relations and orientation towards the common good. In a society where social cohesion is rife, people accept individuals with different backgrounds and lifestyles as equal members. The individuals also believe they are being treated fairly in society and have a high level of confidence in the political institutions.¹²

The host community, returnees and refugees co-exist in Renk town, and must share the available limited resources. Social cohesion is therefore crucial in ensuring stability and fostering good relations among them. Despite having diverging experiences of displacement as refugees and returnees, the new arrivals share some common experiences that foster cohesion.

FACTORS ENHANCING SOCIAL COHESION

As of 28 February 2024, Renk town is hosting 57,028 returnees displaced by the Sudan crisis.¹³ Thus, social cohesion has become an important subject, as the refugees and returnees find their space in the town either temporarily or permanently. Findings from FGDs and key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with the host community, refugees and returnees suggest that social cohesion in Renk manifests as horizontal social cohesion, spearheaded by individuals with limited involvement of community leaders in each community. From the assessment, the following are the factors enhancing social cohesion in Renk town:

Intercommunity dynamics

Host community respondents reported that since the Sudan conflict began, they have learned to accommodate the new arrivals in their town and co-exist harmoniously. The host community has reportedly extended empathy towards newcomers impacted by the Sudan conflict, drawing from their own experiences when some of their members were in similar circumstances during the conflict that was witnessed in South Sudan.

Upon their arrival in early April 2024, some returnees and refugees were reportedly supported by the host community. The support came in the form of either food, shelter, or land to set up their homes. This was mainly common at the start of the Sudan crisis (April to May 2023) before the scale-up of humanitarian response.

Participants in the FGDs reported that the host community faced similar struggles to meet their daily needs, just like the returnees. As a result, some returnees residing with the host community shared the assistance they received from humanitarian actors. These gestures have reportedly fostered a sense of solidarity and trust, with individuals from different groups feeling united during this crisis.

Language

The harmonious existence of the groups in Renk may be partly credited to the commonality in culture and language between the Sudanese and South Sudanese nationals in the area. Due to Renk County's proximity to Sudan, individuals in Renk and those in Sudan share many similarities. This proximity has over time resulted in them adopting similar cultural, social and religious practices. These similarities include using Arabic as their primary language of communication and adherence to certain cultural norms. New arrivals reported that the everyday use of Arabic by themselves and the host community has helped ease their stay in Renk.

Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a bond connecting individuals from various population groups. In Renk town, language emerges as a significant unifying element, as both FGD participants and KIIs reported that Arabic was being used as the primary mode of communication in places of worship, markets, and social gatherings.

However, language reportedly poses a barrier to refugees accessing formal education. Refugees have reported difficulties in accessing schools in Renk as the education system in Sudan is in Arabic, while in South Sudan, the education system is in English. **Refugee respondents expressed a desire for humanitarian actors to offer short English language courses to enable them to learn English for educational purposes and employment opportunities.**

Employment

Economic inclusion of new arrivals in Renk town by having access to jobs has reportedly emerged as an important driver of social cohesion in Renk town. The latest new arrivals reported that finding gainful sustainable employment would make them feel integrated into the broader community living in Renk town. Returnees reported having access to opportunities to work in Renk town, in both the formal and informal sectors. Reports indicate that some returnees had gotten formal and informal job placements with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Renk town. Participants in FGDs with the host community reported that the growing presence of NGOs in Renk had had a beneficial effect by creating more job opportunities for local residents. These organisations have reportedly employed individuals with a range of skilled and unskilled labour backgrounds.

Joblessness may harm social cohesion as it can cause disputes in communities. Refugee respondents reported that they could not find any job placements in Renk town, even after several visits to the labor office. However, some interviewed refugees reported that a few had been able to get some informal jobs with the NGOs in the transit centre, but they cited that these jobs were scarce, and the opportunities were few and far between. **Access to employment opportunities is one of the drivers of social cohesion, and efforts should be made to provide equal employment opportunities for all communities in Renk, according to respondents.**

Access to social rights and public services

In most of the FGDs, it was reported that new arrivals in Renk town are being locally integrated through equal access to services. New arrivals living in the transit centre reported that they can freely move around Renk town and avail themselves of its services.

The primary obstacle to accessing these services cited by respondents is the lack of funds to purchase goods or pay for services. Returnees reported that despite differences



between communities, most of them have not experienced discrimination based on their tribe affiliation. However, new arrivals recounted an incident that occurred early in the response, where a dispute over access to water at a water point in the transit center reportedly led to an altercation between individuals from different communities, resulting in a fatality.¹⁴ Following this incident, the government and humanitarian actors intervened, separating the two communities, who now reside separately in the various informal settlement sites in Renk town. The limited resources in the transit centre reportedly strained relations between these communities and gave rise to social cohesion issues among the new arrivals.¹⁵

Moreover, the physical separation of these communities within informal settlement sites may hinder their access to services provided by humanitarian actors, which are reportedly available in the transit centre. Returnees living at the Abukhadra site reported that due to the site's considerable distance from the transit centre, they opted to utilise health services by humanitarian actors in Abukhadra on designated clinic days. The relocation of communities to informal sites to preserve peace at the transit centre could unintentionally result in feelings of social exclusion.

Refugee respondents reported that they had difficulties getting jobs in Renk, as they were reportedly informed by the labour office, that they were not legally allowed to work in Renk due to legal and administrative barriers. Refugees living within the transit center reported that even as they await transport, they would have liked to access education services for their children. Humanitarian partners in the transit centre reportedly only provide education in emergency services, so school services are only accessible in the host community. The lack of cash to pay for school fees and documentation required to sign children into schools within the host community was reported to hinder refugees' access to education services.

Humanitarian assistance

Humanitarian actor KIs reported they have created programs targeting new arrivals. The programs vary from facilitating voluntary onward movement for returnees to provision of education services, health services, protection services and cash assistance. The implemented programs bring together different stakeholders to improve Renk town's inclusion of new arrivals.

Respondents in the FGDs reported that the assistance they received so far has acted as a tool for social integration in Renk town. This is especially true for water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) assistance provided by humanitarian actors to returnees living within the host community through water points. The waterpoints are stationed within the host community and available to people of all population groups. The water points have not only made life easier for the returnees, but they have, by extension, positively impacted the lives of the host community as water is now more accessible for some host community households. Besides making water accessible to the population, they provide new arrivals and the local host community with an opportunity to socialise.

Humanitarian actors serving all people together in this way is significant for social cohesion. To serve the communities effectively, humanitarian actors depend on community leaders representing each population group to distribute information about the services provided in the transit centre. This includes informing them about onward transportation options, the availability of protection services, and facilitating the reunification of unaccompanied children with their parents. The influx of new arrivals accessing amenities in Renk town has reportedly led to heightened competition for essential commodities in local markets and overcrowding at health facilities, therefore

impacting the local host community.¹⁶ **In line with these, participants in the host community FGDs reported they would like to access the same aid resources provided to the new arrivals by humanitarian actors.** This stems from the host community's vulnerability that has been reportedly exacerbated by the rising cost of living in Renk and factors like limited access to food, considering that according to the 2023 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis, Renk County is projected to be in phase 4 "Emergency" between April and July 2024, with 75% of people expected to experience acute food insecurity.¹⁷

Participants in FGDs with the local host community reported they sometimes felt excluded from aid distribution, particularly regarding cash assistance. As a result, host community respondents called on aid actors to include them in aid distributions. The perceived sense of exclusion could potentially strain relations between the host community and new arrivals in the future, undermining social cohesion. **According to respondents, humanitarian actors can reportedly create an environment conducive to fostering social cohesion by adapting programs based on feedback from both the host community and new arrivals.**

Land

Land access for new arrivals in Renk town is reportedly determined mainly by the local authorities in Renk. Participants in the FGDs and the KIs cited that the government had assisted new arrivals by allowing the humanitarian actors to set up the transit centre. Returnees living within the host community have reportedly been sheltered in some public schools and government buildings within the town.

The host community, however, reported that they desired the government to consult them before the land was issued to new arrivals. Land in some parts of Renk town is communally owned, while land in the central business district has already been commercially divided and is individually owned. The communal aspect of land ownership makes the host community want to be included in decisions about the issuance of land to new arrivals.

MOVEMENT INTENTIONS

The majority of respondents in the FGDs conducted with new arrivals reported that they had access to the necessary information to make a decision regarding their future settlement. Humanitarian actors were reportedly the primary source of this information. KIs reported that upon arrival, returnees receive information about the security situation in their area of origin and that humanitarian partners will provide free transportation to these areas. Returnees are then allowed to choose whether they wish to travel to their areas of origin or other parts of South Sudan.

For the most part, refugees are hosted by UNHCR at the transit centre while awaiting transportation to the Maban refugee camp. Refugee respondents reported that humanitarian actors frequently communicate with them about the reasons for the delay in their transfer to Maban. Most of the new arrivals reported they prefer receiving information directly from NGO staff, while a few cited that they would be comfortable receiving the information from their community leaders.

Barriers to onward movement

Most returnee FGD participants reported they intend to go to their areas of origin or move to other areas of South Sudan. However, some are facing impediments to their intended move. A lack of money was the most commonly reported reason cited by returnees as to why they had yet to pursue their preferred move.

Finances are reportedly a challenge for most returnees as they left Sudan suddenly without carrying any personal items or money once the war broke out. Most returnees are also yet to attain employment to support themselves, and therefore, they feel that on returning to their areas of origin, they will have no means to provide for their families.

Perceived insecurity in the area of origin has also reportedly dissuaded some returnees from leaving Renk and moving to their areas of origin; some returnees left their homes in South Sudan during the South Sudan crisis. There is, therefore, an inbuilt fear that war will likely break out again, and they would have to move again. Another overarching reason most returnees were reportedly choosing to remain in Renk is the perceived lack of services in their areas of origin. For new arrivals looking to return to Sudan, recruitment into armed groups within Sudan was reportedly one of the reasons why they had not pursued this option.

Intention to return to Sudan

At the time of data collection, most participants in the FGDs reported that they had no plans to return to Sudan in the foreseeable future. The prevailing conflict in Sudan was identified as the primary factor influencing individuals' decisions against returning to the country. Furthermore, the new arrivals reported that no actors were offering aid to those considering a return to Sudan at the time of data collection. Instead, individuals who wanted to return were required to finance their return journey, which posed a significant challenge as many lacked the funds. As of now, those returnees who did not want to stay in South Sudan for any reason reported that they would find ways to travel to neighbouring countries, such as Egypt, as refugees.

CONCLUSION

Findings illustrate that population groups and communities in Renk town are cooperating. This cooperation spans intra-communal and intercommunal interactions, with horizontal social cohesion emerging as the primary method through which the local host community accommodates new arrivals. However, the ongoing influx of individuals to the area poses a risk of exacerbating existing challenges, potentially undermining the existing social fabric. These issues encompass strained employment opportunities, limited access to education, and uncertainties regarding land ownership.

Regarding employment, refugees and returnees encounter hurdles in securing work due to various factors. Refugees often lack the necessary legal documentation to work in South Sudan, while some returnees face difficulties stemming from the loss of academic credentials during conflict-induced displacement. According to participants, collaboration between humanitarian agencies and the South Sudanese government is key to tackling these barriers. This collaboration could involve broader policy initiatives within South Sudan or specific programs led by the Renk County government to facilitate employment opportunities for refugees and returnees, thereby reinforcing vertical social cohesion and trust in governmental institutions.

Language barriers also hinder access to education and livelihoods, particularly for individuals accustomed to the Arabic-language education system in Sudan transitioning to an English-language system in South Sudan. **According to participants, addressing this challenge requires targeted capacity-building efforts, such as short English language courses, to enhance refugees' and returnees' employability. For example, participants mentioned that short English courses can be offered to fast-track the children's settlement into primary and secondary schools in South Sudan.**

Moreover, participants mentioned that confusion regarding policies related to working conditions contributes to uncertainties for new arrivals seeking employment in Renk. While skilled returnees may find contract opportunities, many are wary of informal work arrangements due to concerns about exploitation. Establishing clear working conditions and policies is crucial for fostering a supportive environment and maintaining social cohesion.

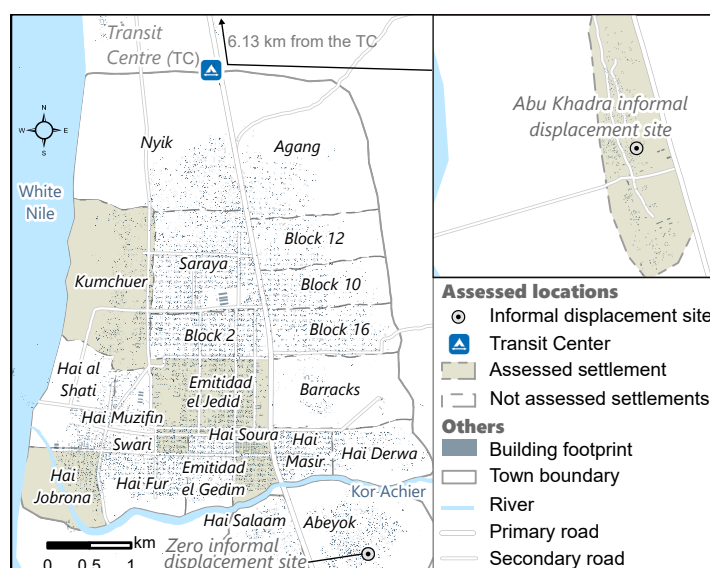
Similarly, land access and ownership ambiguities pose challenges for returnees and refugees. Conflicts may arise when returnees seek to reclaim their land, which others may now occupy. According to participants, collaborative efforts between humanitarian organisations and the government are vital to develop policies guiding land ownership, repossession, and resettlement, mitigating potential conflicts and ensuring the welfare of all stakeholders. Addressing the challenges reported by surveyed populations requires coordinated efforts between humanitarian agencies, government entities, and local communities to develop inclusive policies and initiatives that support the integration and well-being of refugees and returnees in Renk and across South Sudan.

METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

This assessment used a qualitative approach; primary data was collected using two qualitative components: FGDs and key informant Interviews (KIIs). 22 FGDs were conducted with participants from the refugee, returnee and host community populations. Each FGD consisted of a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 6 individuals. Among these 22 FGDs, 10 FGDs were conducted with returnees, 8 FGDs were conducted with host community members, and 4 FGDs were conducted with refugees residing in the transit centre. Out of the 10 FGDs conducted with returnees, 2 targeted returnees in the transit centre, 4 in informal settlements, and 4 in the host community. Further, 6 KIIs were conducted with humanitarian actors working in Renk and community leaders representing each population group (host community, refugees, and returnees).

REACH developed two tools, one for the FGDs and another for KIIs. The tools were customised to incorporate discussions on topics pertinent to each group. Overall, the findings from this assessment are indicative. Data collection occurred between 29 November and 13 December 2023 in various locations in Renk town. For more information, see the 2023 ABA Terms of Reference (ToR) [here](#).

ASSESSMENT COVERAGE MAP



ENDNOTES

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- 2 United Nations Peacekeeping, [As Sudan crisis continues, twice displaced returnees in Renk South Sudan, face mounting challenges](#), 23 August 2023
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- 4 UNHCR, [Sudanese refugees fleeing conflict find safety in South Sudan](#), 27 June 2023
- 5 IOM, UNHCR, RRC, [Arrivals from Sudan to South Sudan | Displacement Tracking Matrix \(iom.int\)](#)
- 6 UNHCR, [Sudan Situation: UNHCR Emergency Response in South Sudan \(29 April 2023\)](#), 29 April 2023
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- 8 The Dawn, [UN delays relocation of refugees to Maban due to flooding](#), 1 December 2023
- 9 UNHCR, [Site planning for transit centers](#), 30 October 2019
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- 11 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), [Strengthening Social Cohesion: Conceptual Framing and Programming Implications](#), 2020
- 12 Fonseca, Lukosch, and Brazier, [Social Cohesion Revisited: A New Definition and How to Characterize It](#), Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research 32, no 2(2019):231-53.
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- 14 The guardian, [The South Sudanese families stranded while trying to return home](#), 26 May 2023
- 15 Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), [Seeking harmony in hardship: A conflict sensitivity report on Renk, South Sudan](#), August 2023
- 16 REACH Initiative, [Emergency Overview: Sudan-South Sudan Cross Border Displacement](#), June 2023
- 17 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), [South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for September – November 2023](#), 6 November 2023

ABOUT REACH

REACH is a leading humanitarian initiative that collects primary data and produces in-depth analysis to help aid actors make evidence-based decisions in support of crisis-affected people. With this in mind, our flagship research programmes aim to inform the prioritisation of aid according to levels of need - both crisis-level planning and targeted rapid response - as well as decisions around appropriate modalities of aid. Through our team of assessment, data, geospatial, and thematic specialists, we promote the design of people-centred research and set standards for collecting and analysing rigorous, high quality data in complex environments. Visit www.impact-initiatives.org and follow us @REACH_info.

