UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

SOUTH SUDAN

SUDAN SITUATION: SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE

January 2025

Country Context

Thirteen years after gaining independence, including three years after signing the most recent peace agreement, people in South Sudan continue to face deteriorating humanitarian conditions amidst a worsening economy. Conflict, subnational violence, public health challenges, climatic shocks, and large-scale displacement have severely affected people's livelihoods and hindered access to essential services. Forced displacement in South Sudan is highly complex, with large numbers of internally displaced persons, refugees, and returnees living side-by-side with host communities.

Since the onset of the conflict in April 2023, more than 836,000 individuals have arrived in South Sudan from Sudan, including returnees, refugees, and asylum seekers. About 175,000 newly arrived Sudanese refugees in South Sudan have been transferred to existing refugee settlements in Upper Nile and Ruweng Administrative Area and to a newly established settlement in Aweil in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. More than 600,000 South Sudanese who had sought refuge in Sudan before the conflict were forced to return under adverse circumstances. Upon arrival in South Sudan, returnees indicate their intention for onward destinations – primarily to Upper Nile, Unity State, Central Equatoria, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Warrap and Western Bahr el Ghazal. Returnees are also finding their way to peri-urban centres such as Juba, Bor, Torit, Yei, and Malakal.

The conflict in Sudan has had a catastrophic impact on South Sudan, disrupting trade and leading to a rise in food and fuel prices. This price surge exacerbates protection risks and vulnerabilities, particularly in South Sudan's northern states, further straining access to essential goods and services. It has also increased these communities' food insecurity, negative coping mechanisms, and humanitarian needs.

On top of this, climate change poses a significant additional threat to South Sudan, the second most vulnerable country to natural hazards globally in the 2024 INFORM Risk Index. Hazards, such as drought and flooding, have profoundly impacted the country, with floodwaters from the 2019-2020 rainy season lingering in some areas. This persistent climate crisis and short-term changes, such as altered rainfall patterns, indirectly contribute to instability, conflict, and food insecurity.

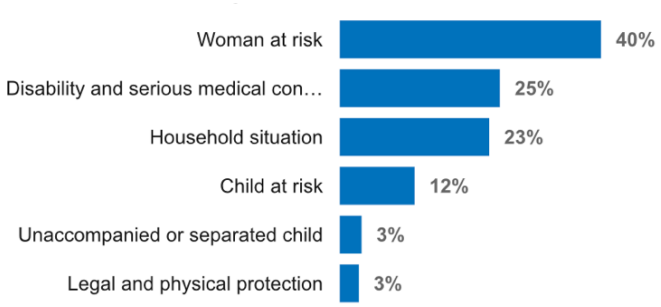
Despite being deeply impoverished, climate-impacted and underdeveloped, especially in border areas with high displacement and refugee hosting, the Government of South Sudan maintains an open-door policy. It grants access to its territory to all individuals arriving from Sudan, including Sudanese refugees, other refugees, returnees, and third-country nationals. The government has granted prima facie status recognition to all Sudanese affected by the current crisis. This conducive policy environment creates the momentum to facilitate development approaches that support local authorities, host communities, and forcibly displaced and returnee populations. Additionally, UNHCR is leading the Area-Based Coordination Leadership in Malakal (Upper Nile), which hosts a Protection of Civilians site for IDPs and a high number of returnees from Sudan. UNHCR has facilitated the government and multi-agency Durable Solutions Roadmap for Upper Nile. UNHCR, together with IGAD, has also supported the formulation of the National Durable Solutions Strategy for IDPs, Returnees, Refugees and Host Communities.

Socioeconomic Characteristics of Displacement

Border Monitoring

Enhanced border monitoring, led jointly by the Government's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), UNHCR, and IOM, provides updated information on those entering and leaving the country. It shows the high level of vulnerability of those entering South Sudan—one in four households contains a vulnerable household member, with the largest number of women at risk. This collaboration has resulted in the development of a joint dashboard, providing live information on inflows and intentions supporting the identification of protection, rehabilitation, reintegration, and early recovery needs of refugees and returnees, informing efforts to provide protection and assistance to returnees. Based on the border monitoring, as of 29th September 2024, South Sudan has received 202,113 households, totalling 811,550 individuals. Among these, 77% (624,452) are South Sudanese, including 622,192 permanent returns and 2,260 temporary returns, while 22% (181,788) are Sudanese. Most arrivals (82%) crossed through Joda/Renk in Upper Nile State, with smaller groups entering via Majokyinthiou (4%), Panakuach (3%), Abyei Amieth (3%), and Kiir Adem (2%). Regarding destinations, 43% plan to go to Renk, 11% to Juba, and the rest to various locations. In terms of origin, 41% came from Khartoum, 36% from White Nile, and smaller numbers from other parts of Sudan. Data from the border shows high levels of vulnerability among incoming households – one in four households has at least one vulnerable household member, the majority of whom are women at risk.

Figure 1: Vulnerability breakdown from border monitoring



Source: UNHCR Border Monitoring Dashboard (2024)

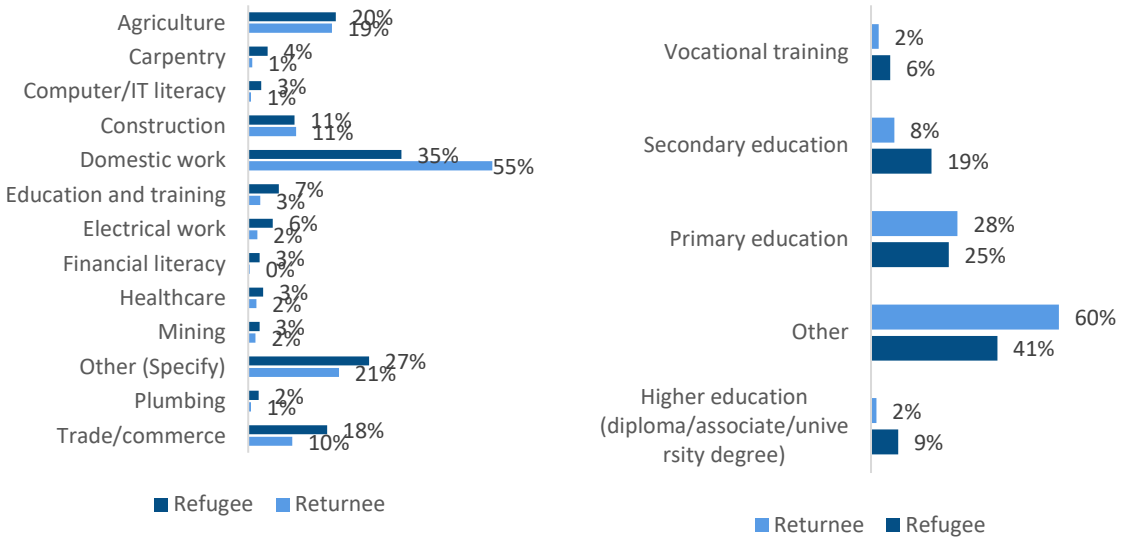
Socioeconomic Profiling of Returnees and Refugees in Renk

Socioeconomic profiling from Renk conducted in in June 2024, provides insight on the profiles of refugees and returnees from Sudan in terms of skills, education, income and occupation. The profiling involved 5,440 interviews, comprising 82% from returnee households and 18% from refugee households.

Refugees are more likely to have skills in education and training compared to returnees, which could be leveraged for community development and capacity-building programs. Refugees tend to have higher educational attainment, with 8.73% reaching higher education, compared to only 1.72% among returnees. While both groups exhibit similar primary education

levels, there is a noticeable gap in secondary education, where 19.44% of refugees qualify, in contrast to just 7.51% of returnees. Additionally, refugees are more likely to have vocational training programmes (6.15%) than returnees (2.45%). This educational advantage gives refugees a wider array of technical skills, such as carpentry, IT, electrical work, and financial literacy. In contrast, returnees are more involved in domestic work, with 55% engaged compared to 35% of refugees.

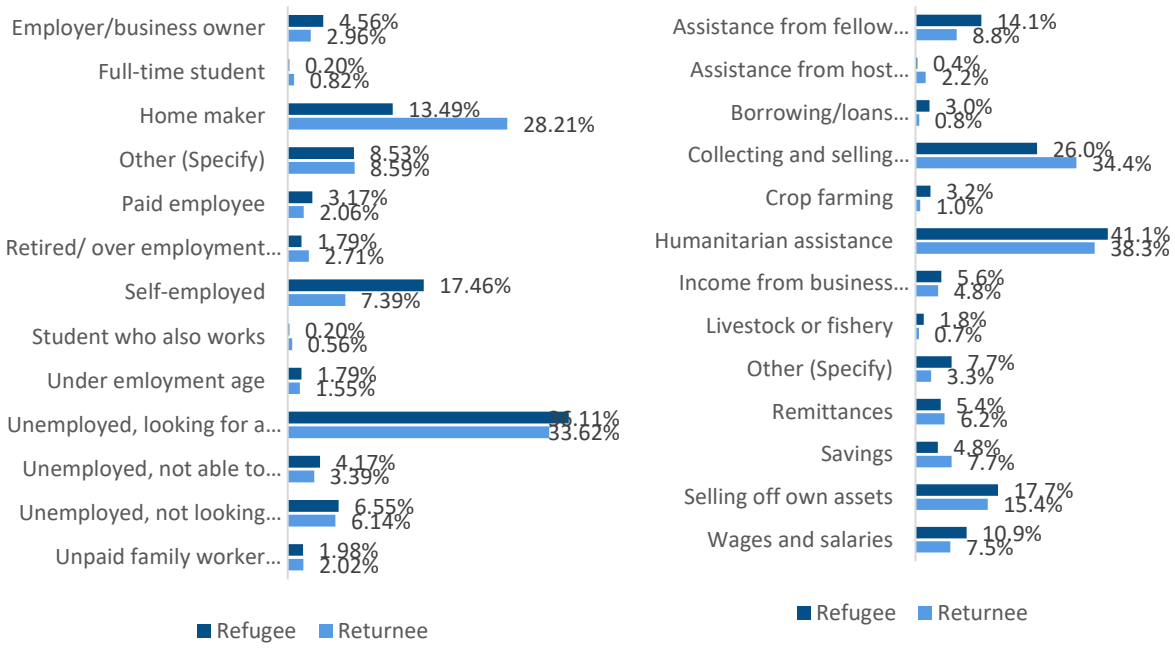
Figure 2: Skills (left) and Education (right)



Source: UNHCR Renk Socioeconomic Profiling (2024)

While both groups primarily relied on daily wages for income (58.5% of returnees and 40.5% of refugees), refugees had a higher percentage of salaried income (23.6%) than returnees (7.9%). Refugees also had a more substantial reliance on agriculture (10.9%) compared to returnees (3.4%), and they were more engaged in business activities (13.9% versus 5.2%). Both returnees and refugees experience high unemployment, with 46.83% of refugees and 43.15% of returnees actively seeking jobs. A more significant proportion of returnees (28.21%) are homemakers compared to refugees (13.49%), while refugees are more likely to be self-employed (17.46% vs. 7.39% for returnees). In terms of income over the past 30 days, both groups heavily rely on humanitarian assistance, with refugees slightly more dependent. Returnees are more likely to engage in collecting and selling activities and rely on savings and remittances. Refugees, on the other hand, are more inclined to sell off assets and borrow money, and they have a higher percentage of income from wages and salaries compared to returnees.

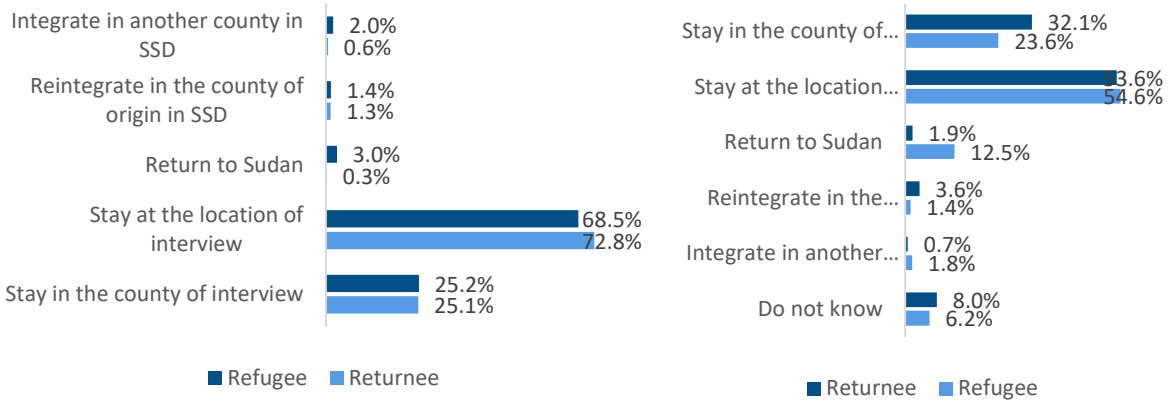
Figure 3: Current occupation type (left) and main source of income (right) in South Sudan



Source: UNHCR Renk Socioeconomic Profiling (2024)

The majority of both refugees (68.5%) and returnees (72.8%) prefer to stay at their current location of the interview, indicating a strong inclination towards immediate stability and familiarity. Although a fraction of refugees (12.5%) is interested in returning to Sudan, only 1.9% of returnees share this intention. In the medium term, this sentiment persists, with most respondents showing an inclination to stay in their current counties, signifying both groups' pursuit of stability and steady socio-economic integration.

Figure 4: Intentions in the short (left) and long (right) term



Source: UNHCR Renk Socioeconomic Profiling (2024)

Community-Based Assessment in Aweil

UNHCR, with support from EU-INTPA, is currently implementing a comprehensive service gap analysis in four areas of high return (Aweil, Torit/Magwi, Raja and Yei/Morobo), considering the needs of both local and displaced populations. As part of this project, UNHCR interviewed 824 individuals in Aweil, including returnees, host community members, IDPs, and refugees, including 419 returnees, primarily from Sudan. A majority faced challenges settling in their intended destinations due to land and housing shortages. The return journey was difficult, with 41% of returnees encountering security issues like theft or violence. Despite these challenges, 80.7% of returnees feel physically safe in their current location. Strong community support exists, but hosts benefit more from these networks than returnees, with little conflict reported between the groups.

Both host and returnee populations experience considerable food insecurity and economic difficulties, but returnees report worse conditions after returning. Housing remains a critical concern, as 58% of returnees struggle to find adequate shelter. Economically, hosts show slightly better outcomes, with marginally higher rates of formal employment, while returnees tend to earn less, even though they have more working members in their households. Many returnees developed work skills during their time in Sudan, but they find it challenging to utilize these skills in Aweil due to a weaker local job market. Additionally, 74.9% of all households, both hosts and returnees, report that their income falls short of meeting basic needs.

Access to land poses a significant problem for returnees, with only 31% owning land compared to 61.3% of the host community, yet most intend to stay in Aweil. Land disputes impact nearly 19% of returnees and affect their choices around staying or moving. Many returnees require help to resolve these disputes and obtain legal land titles. Despite challenges related to land, jobs, and access to healthcare and education, 84% of returnees intend to stay in Aweil. Nevertheless, 70% of those surveyed feel that Aweil cannot accommodate more returnees, pointing to land and housing shortages, environmental degradation, and inadequate infrastructure as significant barriers.

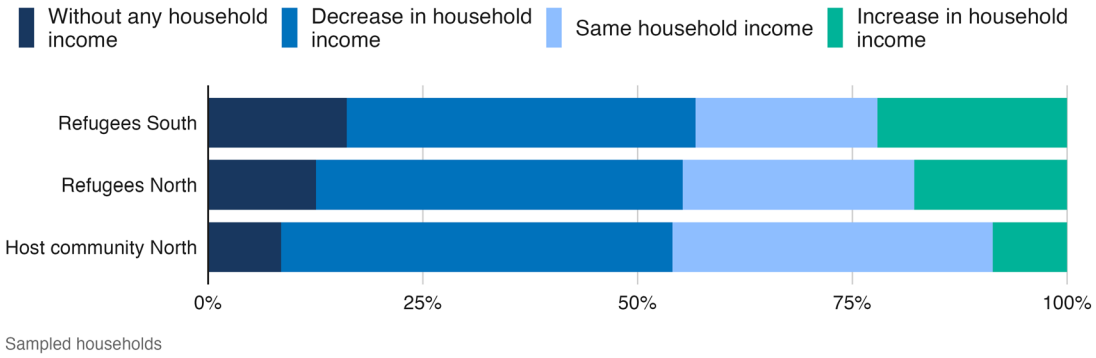
UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey

The UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey (2023), a large-scale household survey of refugees[1], reveals that even before the current crisis and arrivals, those forced to flee to South Sudan often arrive in rural areas and face severe challenges. Limited basic services, high unemployment rates, a lack of education and livelihood opportunities, poor infrastructure, and overcrowded shelters are common. Even before South Sudan's economy was further disrupted by the war in Sudan, particularly resulting from the closure of the country's main oil pipeline, over two-fifths of refugees and the host community saw their incomes from all sources fall relative to the previous year, while a large group of refugee

[1] The Refugee sample in 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 county (Upper Nile and Unity State),

households (11 per cent) report not having any income at all (8 per cent among the host community).

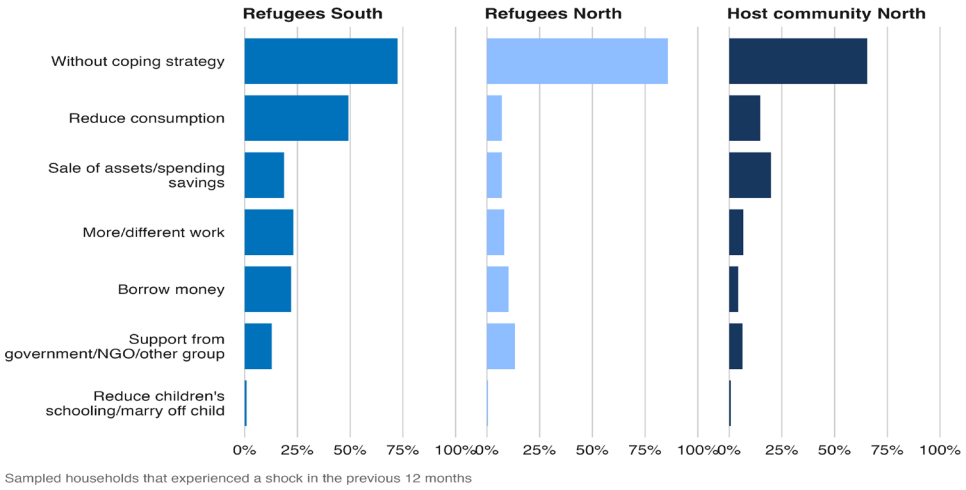
Figure 5: Changes in household purchasing power, last 12 months



Source: UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey – South Sudan (2024)

Half of the country's refugees faced one or more significant challenges in the past year, such as disruptions caused by floods. However, almost three-quarters of refugees did not or were not able to respond to the shocks they faced, while many were forced to reduce consumption (UNHCR 2024).

Figure 6: Coping strategies for shocks, last 12 months



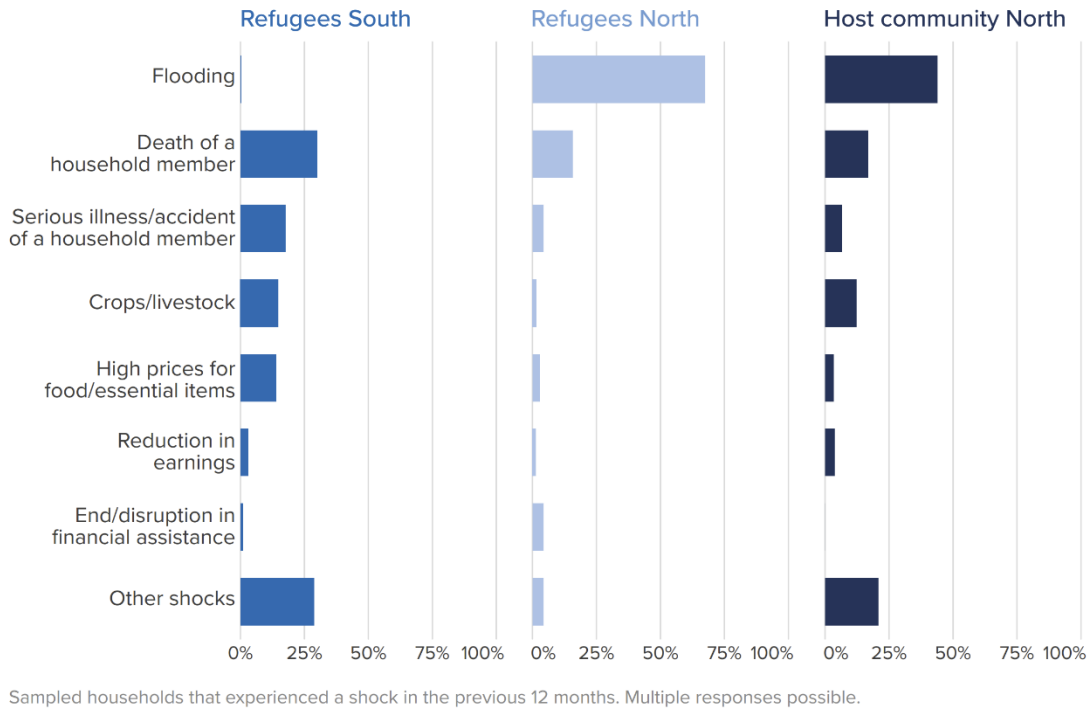
Source: UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey – South Sudan (2024)

The unemployment rate among refugees and the host community in the North is the same (20 per cent and 19 per cent, respectively). The unemployment rate is the number of people without a job who are actively seeking employment and who are available to work as a percentage of the labour force. The unemployment rate is lower among refugees in the South, at 11 per cent. Overall, 18 per cent of the refugee population is unemployed.

Half of all refugee households experienced one or more shocks in the 12 months preceding the survey. Among refugee households in the South, 73 per cent experienced a shock (or several) in the previous 12 months. In the North, 46 per cent of host community households experienced a shock, as did 42 per cent of refugee households. Exposure to

shocks is particularly high among refugees in Maban (60 per cent of households). For three-quarters of households that experienced shocks there, flooding was the cause. Flooding also affected a large part of the surrounding host community in the North (44 per cent of households). The most common type of shock for refugees in the South was the death of a household member (30 per cent of households), followed by serious illness or accident of a household member (18 per cent).

Figure 7: Shocks



Source: UNHCR Forced Displacement Survey – South Sudan (2024)

Additional Insights from Recent Analysis

- **Food insecurity and vulnerability**: Post-distribution monitoring indicates widespread food insecurity among refugees, with up to 90 per cent of households in some locations (in particular Gorom and Jamjang) either moderately or severely food insecure, even before the onset of the current crisis in Sudan. Similarly, more than 75 per cent of refugee households in all camps, are either extremely or highly vulnerable. Data from expanded border monitoring shows high levels of vulnerability among incoming households – one in four households have at least one vulnerable household member, the majority of whom are women at risk (UNHCR/IOM 2024).
- **Gender disparities:** Recent research also revealed that female-headed households are 18 percentage points more likely to be poor than male households (World Bank 2021). Notable gaps also exist among returnees in terms of decision-making, the importance of land and housing tenure issues on household income, and concerns about security and safety (Samuel Hall 2023).

- **Urbanisation**: Recent research by the World Bank finds that cities serve as places of both refuge and risk, and urban fragility is exacerbated by poor governance over land rights, increased crime, and social exclusion of displaced populations, especially women and youth. Key urban centres like Juba, Bor, and Malakal are impacted by inter-communal conflicts, land disputes, and high crime rates, often linked to elite patronage networks. With few options for salaried work or entrepreneurship, youth often turn to criminal networks or informal means of survival. IDPs in urban areas tend to rely on aid but face challenges in integrating into the urban economy due to the need for formal employment opportunities. There appear to be two distinct groups of IDPs: those with wage or business-based livelihoods before displacement (mostly from Equatoria) settled in cities like Juba and Bor, while those with agricultural livelihoods, larger households, and higher poverty (mainly from Unity State and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal), settled in places like Bentiu and Wau (World Bank, 2024).