

Regional Bureau East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes
**REGIONAL INTENTION SURVEY OF
SOUTH SUDANESE REFUGEES**

Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, Uganda



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
South Sudanese Refugees' Intentions to Return	5
Analysis Dashboards	7
Key Highlights from 2022-2024 South Sudanese Intention Survey	8
Key regional findings	9
South Sudanese Refugees' Intentions to Return	9
Key Findings from the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	18
KIIs Regional Findings by Thematic Area	19
Recommendations	26
Contacts	30

Introduction

The South Sudan situation remains the one of the largest refugee crises in Africa with nearly 2.3 million South Sudanese refugees¹ majority of them living in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. In South Sudan, protracted conflict, environmental disasters, and outbreaks of sub-national intercommunal violence have left over two million South Sudanese displaced across all 79 counties. An estimated 75% of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are residing with host communities, whilst the remaining stay in camps or camp-like settings. Despite continued pockets of localised insecurity, more than 1.6 million South Sudanese have returned to their countries of origin since October 2018² from various countries of asylum of the region. Self-organized returns have taken place, often to areas where access to basic services is limited.

Profile of Respondents

South Sudanese refugees

4,124 respondents

60% female - **40%** male

Average age: **38** years old

69% are married

63% fled South Sudan due to violence and security reasons

In this complex context, UNHCR seeks to better understand intentions of South Sudanese refugees on solutions in the foreseeable future. In recognition of developments within South Sudan, and within the framework of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Sudan and South Sudan Solutions Initiative, UNHCR, IGAD, and the Government of South Sudan have coordinated on the development of durable solutions strategies, which consider opportunities to support or respond to returns of refugees to South Sudan.

The Regional Bureau for East, and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes (EHAGL) region along respective Country Operations initiated a survey to map the intentions of South Sudanese refugees residing in four countries of asylum: Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. The main objective of the survey is to assess the intention of, and impediments to, refugees returning to their place of origin or habitual places of residence in their country of origin. This report seeks to outline the factors that affect the choices made by refugees in long-term displacement about returning to their home country, including when, why, and who makes these decisions. The emphasis on refugee decision-making represents an important way to comprehend the dynamics and likelihood of sustainable solutions for displaced populations. Moreover, the initiative aims at informing planning and assumptions with specific focus on durable solutions, protection, and assistance needs.

The Regional Intention Survey is part of a process to identify and inform appropriate durable solutions. Understanding the expectations and intentions of refugees can help to better integrate their needs and opinions into the voluntary return and reintegration planning process. Durable solutions approaches should be tailored to fit the profile of returning refugees and suit the complex range of circumstances within which refugees find themselves. Strategies must factor in the duration and nature of asylum, the factors that resulted in displacement, the specific needs, and capacities of the individual or community, links with the community in the place of origin, and the prevailing circumstances in the area from which they fled. This must include the security situation, socio-economic prospects, environmental and infrastructural capacity

¹ As of December 2024, UNHCR South Sudan Situation Data Portal: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/southsudan>

² Internal data as of 31 December 2024

of areas of return, the capacity of national and local authorities to provide protection and assistance and the status of any humanitarian and development work in areas of return.

During the previous exercise of Regional Intention Survey conducted in 2022 for South Sudanese (and Sudanese refugees at the time), the following key objectives were identified for the qualitative research of the Intention Survey, which remain valid for this exercise:

- Identify which refugee subgroups have protection concerns in the Country of Asylum and the Country of Origin and what these concerns are, to be factored into the design of any planning for returns.
- Explore the decision-making processes of refugees, to understand their current intentions and to support predictive analysis of potential future movements beyond the next 12 months.
- Document the sources of information utilized by refugees to inform their decision-making, and identify gaps, to identify opportunities for improved information-sharing.
- Determine what type of assistance people may need in the places they go to/ stay in, to help design comprehensive return interventions.
- Understand why refugees engage in pendular movements and any concerns they have that prevent them from returning permanently.

This Regional Intention Survey for South Sudanese refugees was conducted in late 2024. A previous exercise was conducted in 2022, and an older one in 2019 (for both South Sudanese and Sudanese refugees at the time). This exercise helps in ensuring community participation in planning returns, using the Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) framework. It aims to gather information on the protection concerns, decision-making processes, information needs and sources, support needs in the Countries of Asylum and of Origin, and the concerns of pendular movers. It also helps in identifying the expectations, needs, fears, concerns and capacities within refugee communities, possible solutions proposed by refugee communities or specific subgroups, priority needs to be addressed as expressed by refugees, and urgent follow up protection or programming actions required in both countries of asylum and origin. This information contributes to overall efforts to ensure that voluntary repatriation exercises happen voluntarily, in safety and dignity and that the principle of family unity is upheld.



Key findings

South Sudanese Refugees' Intentions to Return

In 2024

- **About a quarter** of South Sudanese refugees -**27%**- **express plans to return in the next 12 months**, while **63% do not plan to return** in the coming year.
- Plans to return vary across the four countries of asylum. **39%** of refugees **in Sudan plan to return**, followed by **Ethiopia, where one in four plan to return**, followed by Uganda and Kenya indicating no intention to return.
- **Main reasons for not wanting to return** are related to **lack of security and safety**, possible renewal of conflict, concerns about the political process, and the lack of education and livelihood opportunities in South Sudan.
- More than half of refugees -**52%**- feel they have sufficient information to make an informed decision regarding return. The majority of those not having sufficient information indicate a need for more information on the security and political situation, assistance provided to returnees in South Sudan, as well as health services.
- 26% of South Sudanese had an occupation back home but are not working in their country of asylum, while a quarter has kept the same occupation as previously. About a third report having acquired job skills, while nearly 59% have not acquired any job-related skills in their country of asylum.

Compared to 2022

- **In 2024, the number of refugees who plan to return in the next 12 months increased to 27%**, as compared to 19% in 2022.
- **The number of refugees who do not plan to return in the next 12 months has also increased to 63%** compared to 60% in 2022, because undecided refugees have decreased.
- **Sufficient information to make an informed decision regarding return has increased to 52%** in 2024 from 27% in 2022.
- The main reasons behind no intention to return/ undecided to return in 2024 continues, as in 2022, to be lack of safety and security, fear of renewal of conflict, and lack of trust in the political processes.

Sudan in the spotlight - Due to the ongoing conflict that erupted in April 2023, some noticeable changes in Sudan were observed, compared to the 2022 exercise.

- ✓ In 2024, **the number of refugees who plan to return in the next 12 months increased to 39%, compared to 32% in 2022**, which is however a limited increase in view of the current context.
- ✓ Sufficient information to make an informed decision regarding return has increased by twofold to 63% in 2024 from 32% in 2022, which is highly positive.

Data Limitations

The full methodology as well as concept note are available in the Annexes to this report. Please refer to page 30.

It is important to note a few key limitations of the intention survey:

Due to political and security developments, as well as some internal logistical delays, data collection took place at slightly different times (one to two months across the four countries) across the region and the original methodology had to be slightly adjusted in different locations. The regional findings need to be interpreted with little caution given these limited constraints. Refugees' intentions represent a single point in time and might have changed since the time of response, due to a myriad of factors.

Given the impact of the crisis in Sudan, the sample size was adjusted to be representative at the State level in White Nile. Therefore, in Sudan, data collection was conducted via telephone due to the ongoing situation and this made the survey to be limited to a much smaller population who are registered and have active phone numbers.

Logistical constraints, including the impact of insecurity, staff capacity and rainy seasons on accessing populations, resulted in a smaller-than-anticipated sample in several locations, while other locations exceeded their target sample size, however following a review of the final sample, the 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error remains valid. Most of the respondents in Sudan were from White Nile.

For Ethiopia, data collection in the camp was done on face-to-face, while telephone calls were conducted in the urban location in Addis Ababa.

In Kenya, the tribal fighting in the Kakuma and Kalobeyi settlements between different communities led to delays in the exercise compared to other operations.

For the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), some enumerators did not closely follow the interview guide and did not provide a full transcription of the discussions, but rather a summary of the key points, potentially losing some of the detail and nuance of the discussion and introducing the perspective and bias of the facilitator.

Analysis Dashboards

The full results of the 2024 survey are available on this interactive dashboard:



Regional Bureau for East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Regional Return Intention Survey: South Sudanese



4,124

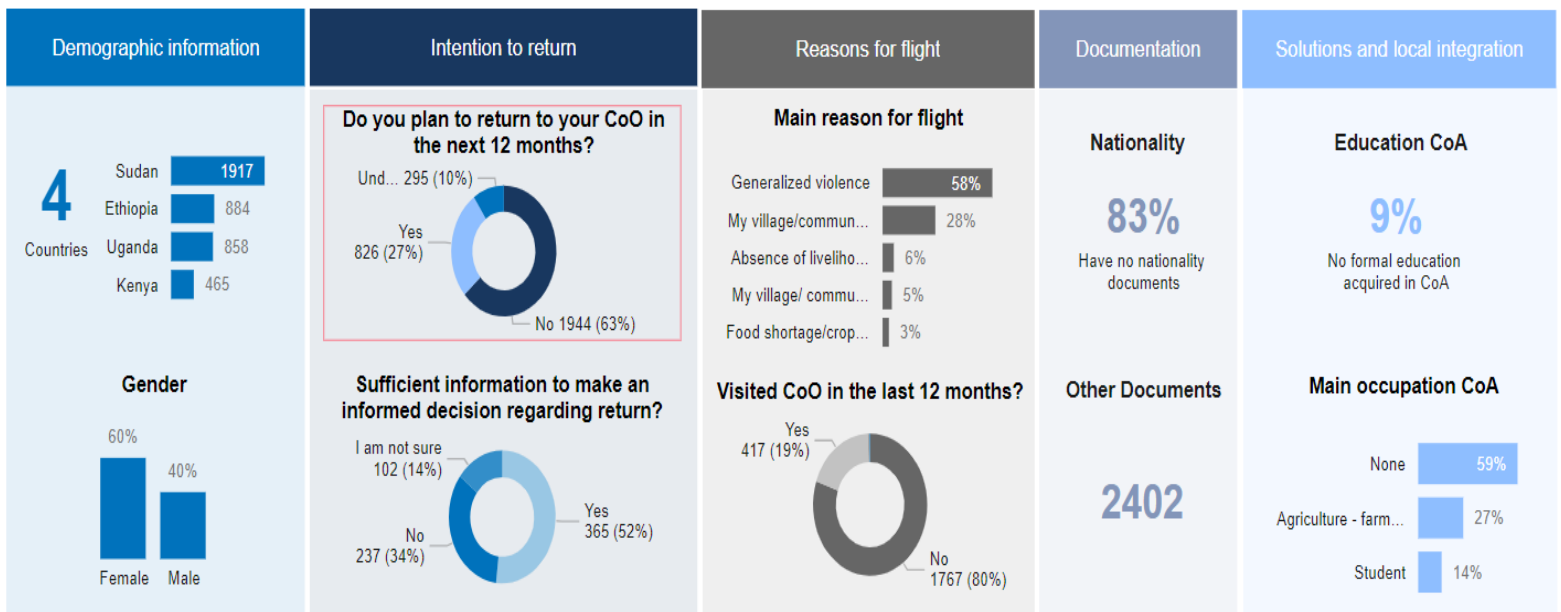
People interviewed



Click on the colored bars below to see results on specific themes

This dashboard presents the results of the regional survey on return intentions from South Sudanese refugees. The questionnaire was applied in Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan from November 2021 to July 2022. Use the filters below to interact with the results. Geographic information can be filtered to lower levels (state, province, county / payam). Graphs from multiple choice questions are displayed in numbers, while single choice are displayed in percentages.

Country of Asylum	Location of Origin	Intention to return
<input type="checkbox"/> Ethiopia	<input type="checkbox"/> (Blank)	<input type="checkbox"/> (Blank)
<input type="checkbox"/> Kenya	<input type="checkbox"/> South Sudan	<input type="checkbox"/> No
<input type="checkbox"/> Sudan		<input type="checkbox"/> Undecided
<input type="checkbox"/> Uganda		<input type="checkbox"/> Yes



Contact: DIMA RBEHAGL dimaehagl@unhcr.org

[South Sudanese Respondents - Dashboard](#)

Key Highlights from 2022-2024 South Sudanese Intention Survey

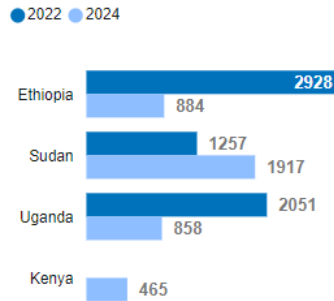
Total Interviewed in 2022

6,236

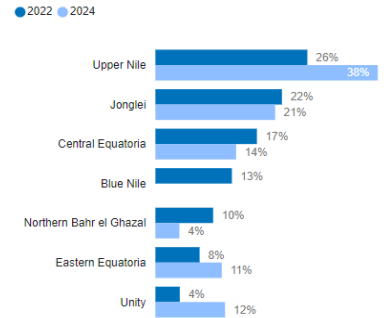
Total Interviewed in 2024

4,124

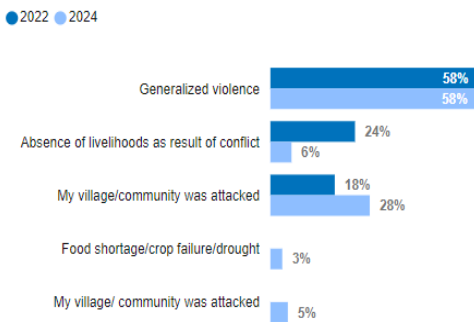
People Interviewed in 2022-2024



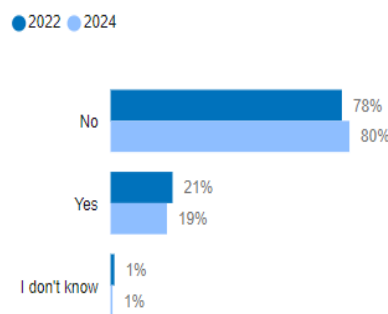
Location of Origin (CoO) (Top 10)



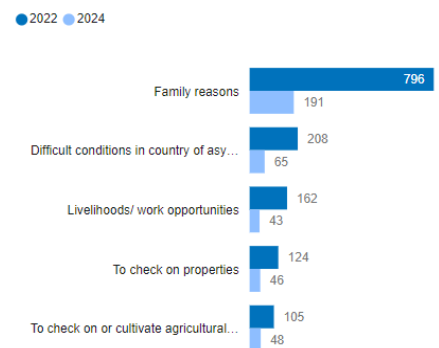
Main Reason for Flight (CoO) (Top 5)



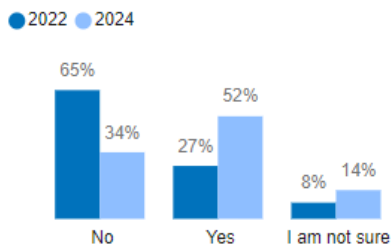
Visited CoO in the last 12 months?



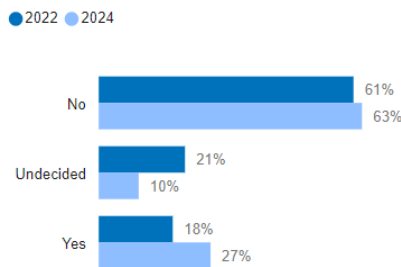
Main Reasons to have visited (Top 10)



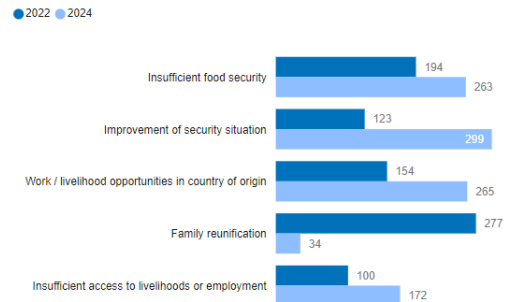
Sufficient Information to make an informed decision regarding return



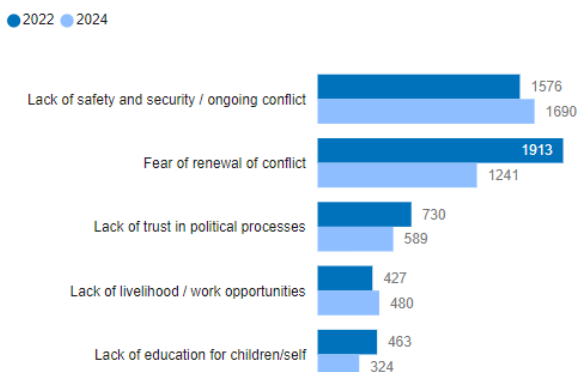
Plan to return in next 12 months?



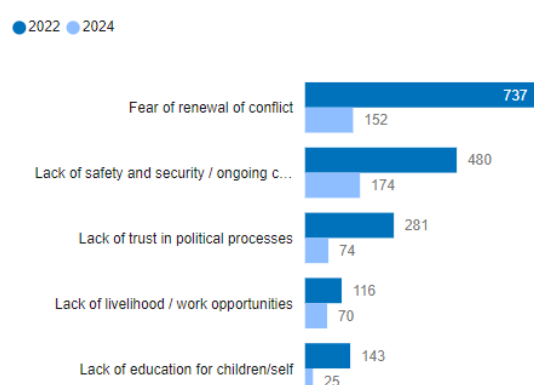
Intention to return: Main Reasons



No intention to return: Main Reasons



Undecided to return: Main Reasons



Key regional findings

South Sudanese Refugees' Intentions to Return

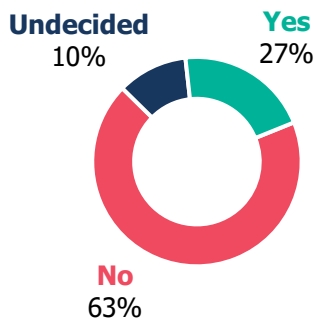
A total of 4,124 South Sudanese refugees participated in the Regional Intention Survey, including 884 in Ethiopia, 465 in Kenya, 1,917 in Sudan and 858 in Uganda. Among the respondents, 60% are female and 40% are male. The average age of respondents is 38 years old. Some 69% of respondents are married, 14% are single, 12% are widowed, and 3% are divorced. The average household size is 7 people.

Close to **two thirds of respondents (63%)** reported that they **fled South Sudan due to violence and security reasons**. The majority (84%) indicated this was the first time they had fled South Sudan.



South Sudanese Refugees' Return Intentions at a glance

Do you plan to return to South Sudan in the next 12 months?



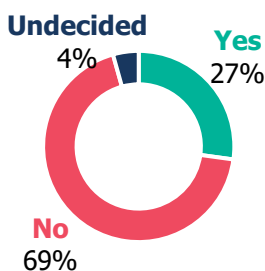
One in four South Sudanese (27%) refugee respondents expressed plans to return to South Sudan in the next 12 months. Another 10% reported they were undecided, while the remaining 63% indicated they did not plan to return to their country of origin in the coming year.

Most of the respondents (87%) were the designated head of household, who are often thought to be the primary decision makers around return. However, respondents were also asked 'Have you been / are you involved in the discussion on whether to return to your Country of Origin?'; and only 13% responded in the affirmative.

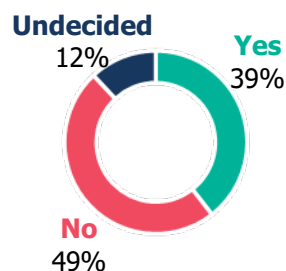
Return intentions did not vary between those who were the designated head of household and those who were not (27% of both groups indicated they plan to return). However, among those who indicated they had been involved in discussions on returns in the household, 72% plan to return in the coming 12 months, compared to 19% of those who indicated they have not been involved in discussions. Future research into decision-making dynamics within and between families and households would be important to provide a more comprehensive picture of overall decision-making on returns.

Country Spotlight

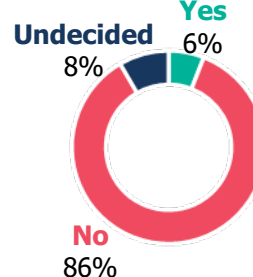
Respondents in Ethiopia



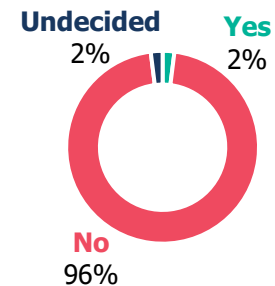
Respondents in Sudan



Respondents in Uganda



Respondents in Kenya



Plans to return to South Sudan varied across the four countries of asylum. Close to two fifth of respondents in Sudan reported plans to return in the coming 12 months, the highest affirmative response in the region. This was followed by Ethiopia, where 27% of respondents indicated plans to return, then Uganda with 6%, and Kenya with 2%.

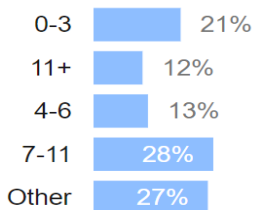
In Sudan, around one in eight respondents remained undecided about their return plans, compared with 8% in Uganda, 4% in Ethiopia, and 2% in Kenya.

South Sudanese refugees planning to return in the next 12 months

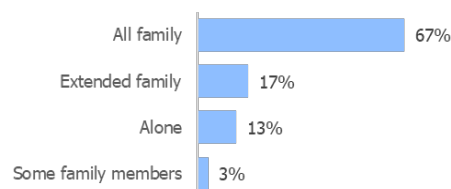
A total of 27% of respondents indicated they plan to return to South Sudan in the next 12 months. These respondents were asked further questions regarding their plans and motivations. Close to one quarter (21%) plan to return in the next three months, however the most common timeline reported was to return in 7 to 11 months (32%). The majority plans to return with all their family (67%), though up to one quarter plan to return alone. Of these respondents, 64% wished to check the situation before bringing their families, 21% reported their families were already in South Sudan, and 15% noted they have no family in their country of asylum.

Most respondents (78%) plan to return to their place of origin / residence. Respondents were able to share up to four main reasons why they are planning to return, with the most common being family reunification (pull factor), insufficient food security in the country of asylum (push factor), fatigue of living in asylum due to personal reasons (push factor) and work/livelihood opportunities in South Sudan (pull factor).

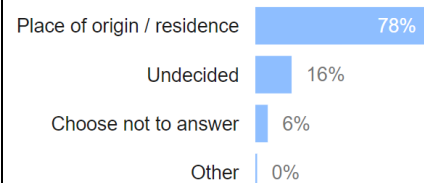
When are you planning to return? (months)



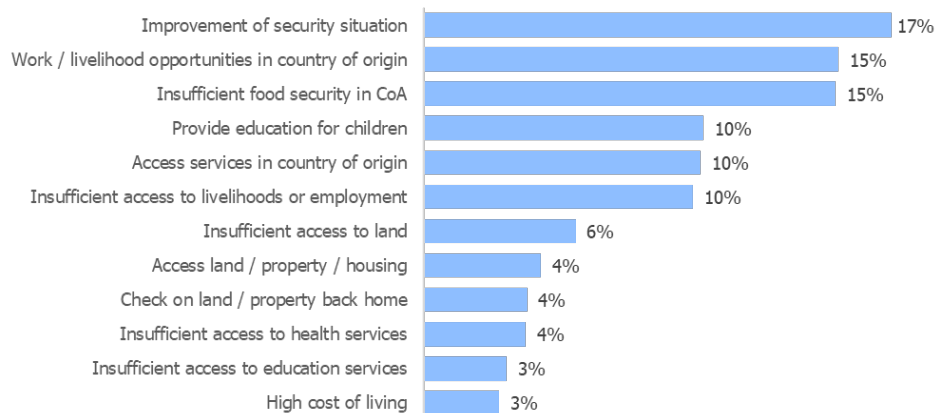
Whom are you planning to return to South Sudan with?



Where would you return?



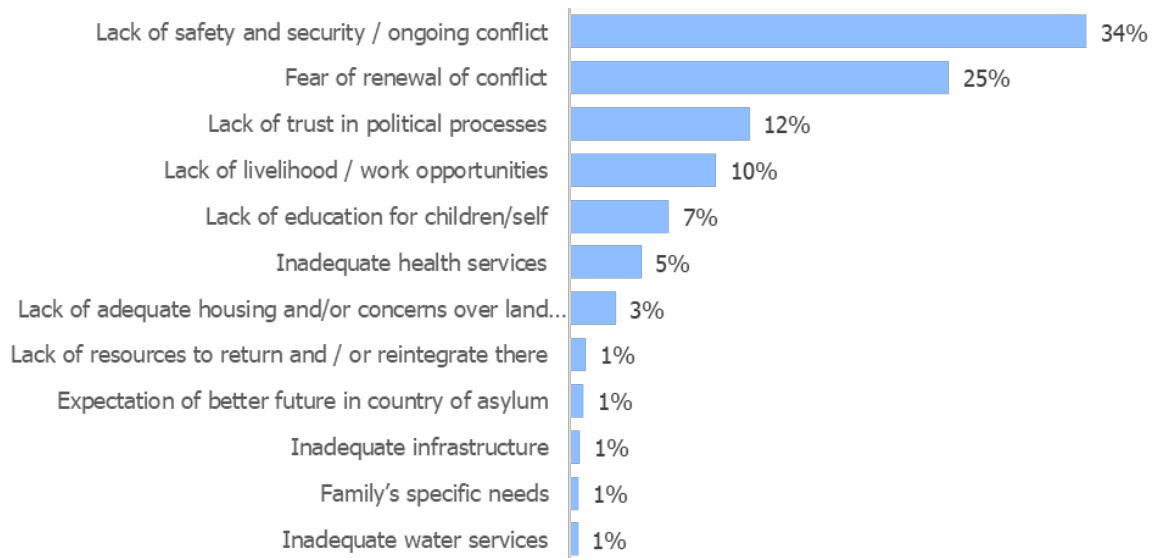
What are the main reasons why you are planning to return to South Sudan in the next 12 months? (top 12 main reasons cited)



South Sudanese refugees not planning to return in the next 12 months

Almost two third of respondents – 63% – do not plan to return to South Sudan in the coming year. Respondents’ main reasons as to why they do not plan to return are mostly **related to security and safety, concerns about the political process, and the lack of education and livelihood opportunities in South Sudan.**

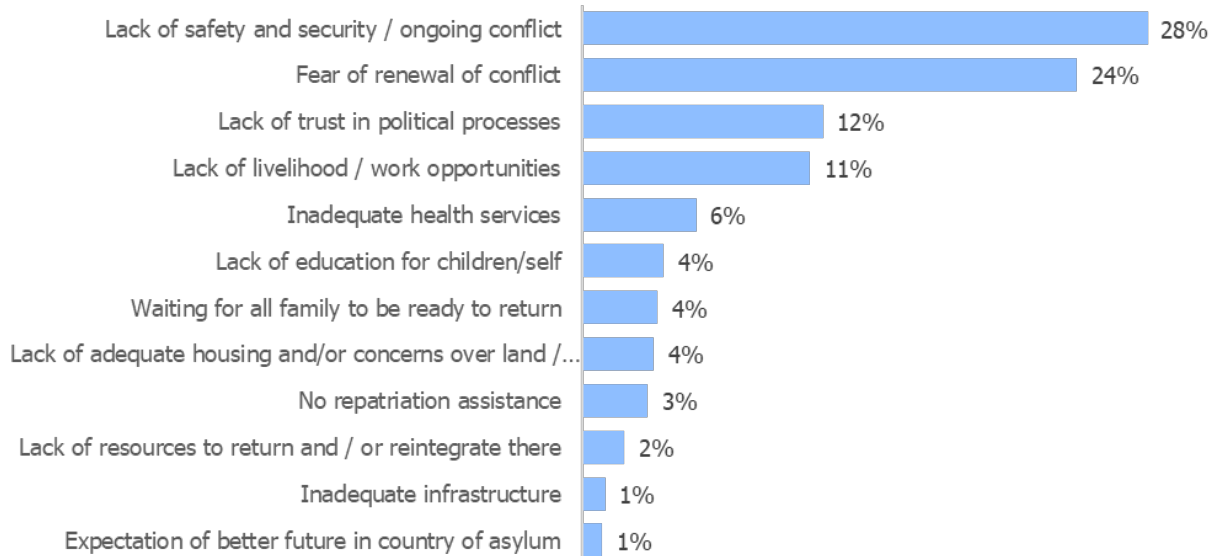
*Question asked if respondent answered having no plan to return in the next 12 months: **What are the main reasons why you are not planning to return to South Sudan in the next 12 months?** (top 12 main reasons cited)*



South Sudanese refugees undecided on return

The remaining 10% of respondents were undecided about their current return plans. Their main reasons for indecision were similar to those given by respondents not planning to return.

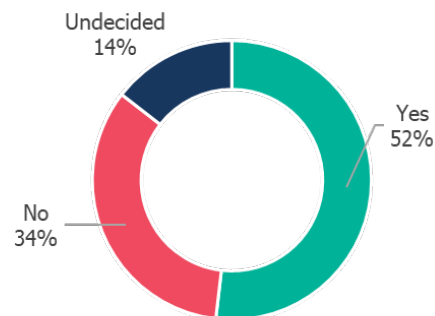
Question asked if respondent was undecided on their plan to return in the next 12 months: **What are the main reasons?** (top 12 main reasons cited)



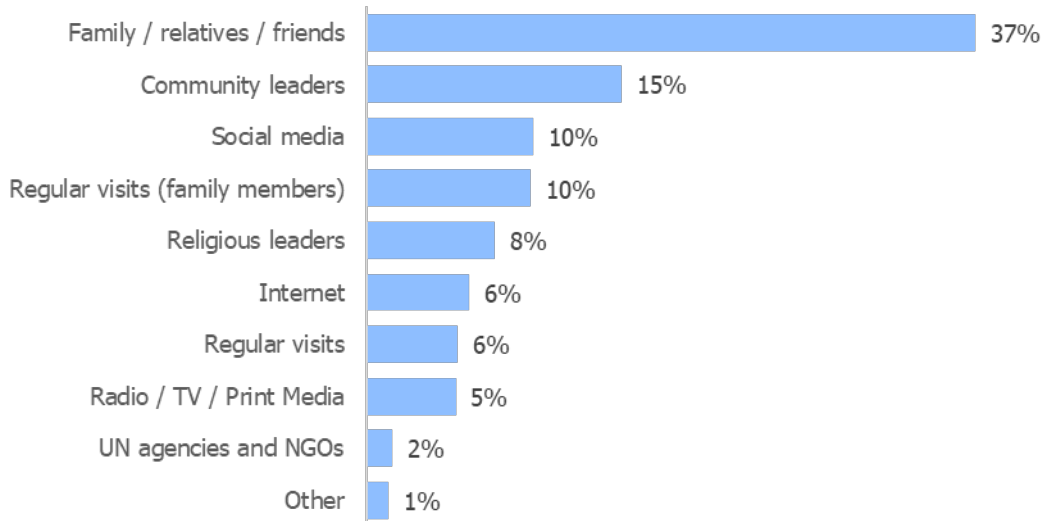
South Sudanese refugees' access to information

Information about the conditions within the country of origin is vital for refugees to make informed decisions on return. **More than a half of respondents felt they have sufficient information about their intended area of return**, with most reporting they get their information from family, relatives, and friends. Of those who reported **they did not have sufficient information (34%) or were undecided (8%), the majority indicated a need for more information on the security and political situation, assistance provided to returnees in South Sudan, as well as health services.**

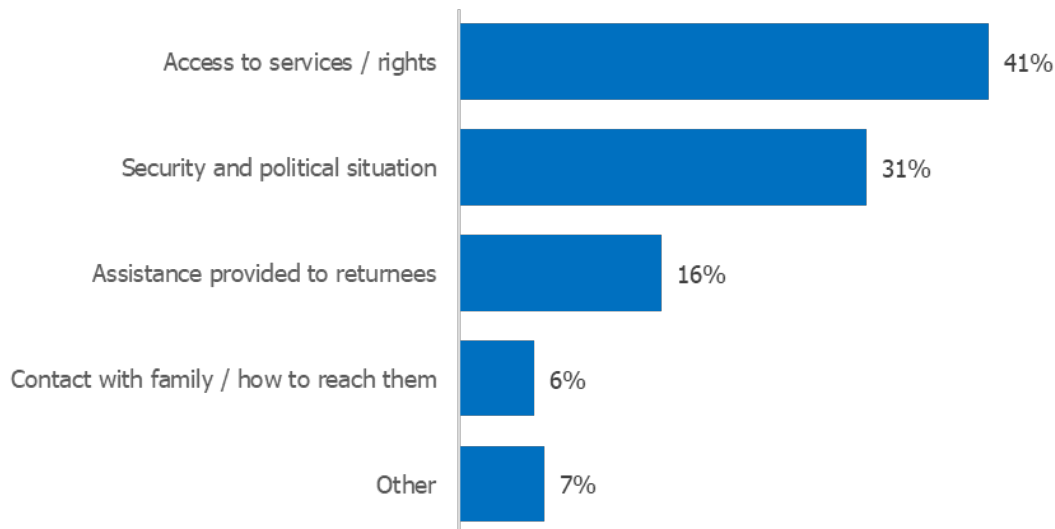
Do you believe you have sufficient information about the intended area of return to make an informed decision regarding return?



*Respondents who answered yes were asked: **Who/What are your sources of information on the situation in your place of origin or habitual residence?***



*Respondents who answered no / I am not sure were asked: **What additional information do you need?***



South Sudanese refugees' documentation

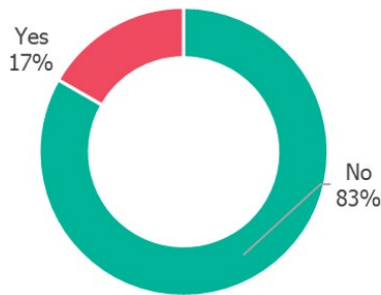
Possession of individual identity (ID) documentation is highly important for both refugees in countries of asylum and for those returning to their country of origin. Birth certificates, national ID cards, passports, residence permits, even a driver's license—are necessary to prove one's identity to the authorities in the

country of asylum, and to the authorities in the home country when it is safe to return. A lack of identity documents significantly increases the vulnerability of those who have been forcibly displaced, whether in their own country or across international borders. This is not only in the context of flight, but also when return home becomes possible.

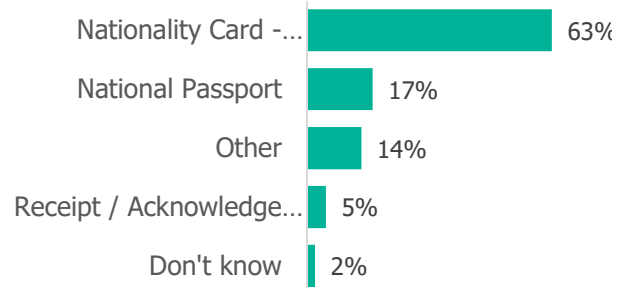
Only one in five respondents (17%) have a nationality document from South Sudan, most of whom report holding a nationality card / certificate. Most of the remaining **83%** of respondents without a nationality document indicated they had never applied for a document, or they had lost it, or it was left in South Sudan at their time of flight.

However, **almost half of respondents (45%) indicated they hold another form of identification**, most commonly a refugee ID or family attestation letter.

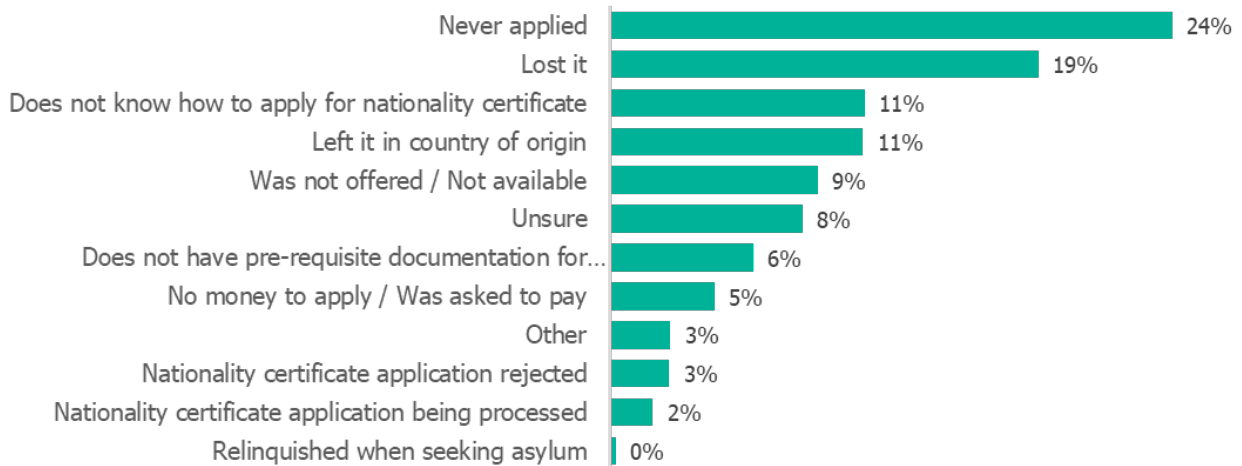
Do you have any nationality document from South Sudan?



Respondents who answered yes were asked to select all documents that applied:



Respondents who answered no were asked why:

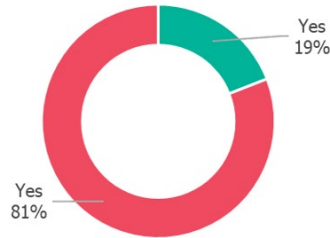


Pendular movement of South Sudanese refugees

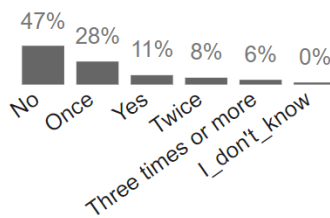
Regionally, 19% of respondents indicated they or a family member had visited South Sudan in the past year. However, this varied by country of asylum; 16% of respondents in Ethiopia, 20% of respondents in Kenya, while 22% of respondents in Uganda reported undertaking a visit.

The majority have made just one visit (28%), and most reported travelling for family reasons.

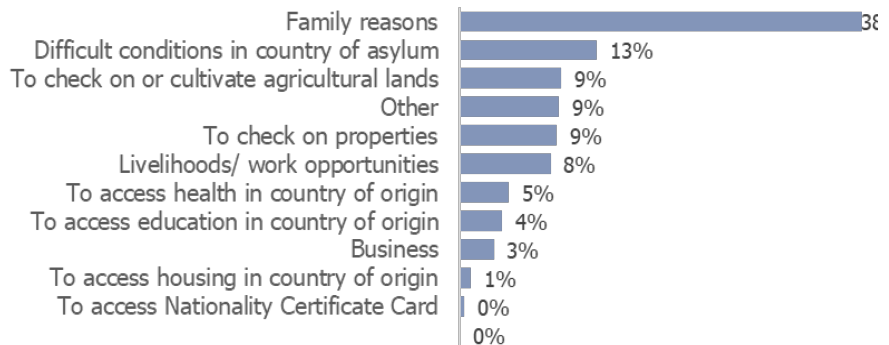
Have you or any of your family undertaken any visits to South Sudan in the past 12 months?



Respondents who answered yes were asked:
How many times have you/they returned to South Sudan?



Respondents who answered yes were asked: **Why did you / they return?**

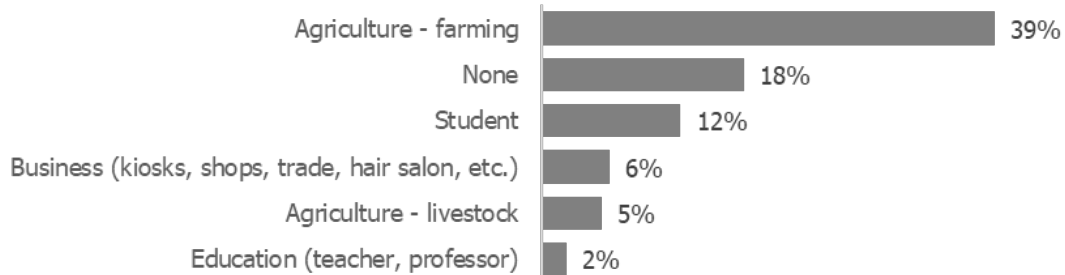


Prospects for local solutions and local integration

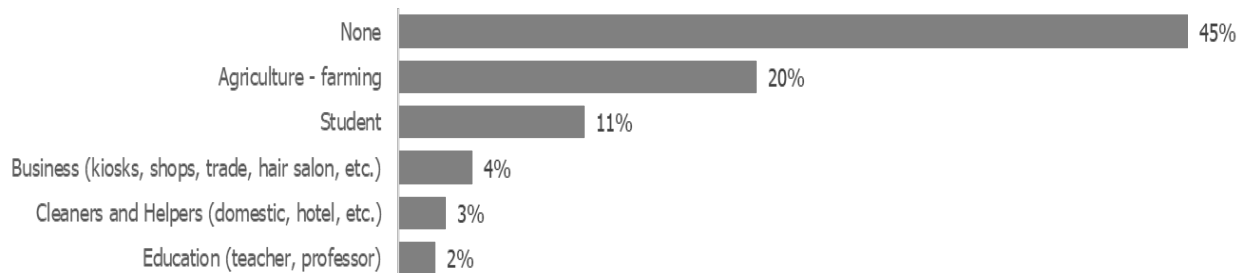
Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their occupation and education. **A total of 26% of respondents reported they had an occupation in South Sudan but are not working in their country of asylum. Another 25% have kept the same occupation as previously,** 14% have changed occupations since seeking asylum, 12% had no occupation in either country, and the remaining 5% have an occupation in their country of asylum after previously having no occupation in South Sudan.



What was your main occupation prior to fleeing South Sudan?



Currently, what is your main occupation in the country of asylum?



Regarding job skills and education, 32% of respondents reported acquiring job skills, mostly in agricultural trades, basic entrepreneurial skills, hospitality trades and building and construction. The remaining 68% indicated they have not acquired any job-related skills in their country of asylum. Some 42% of respondents reported receiving formal education in their country of asylum, including secondary education (30%), primary education (29%), vocational training (16%), tertiary education (13%) and basic literacy for adults (12%).

UNHCR Staff conducting intention survey interview in Bidibidi Refugee Settlement

© UNHCR/ UNHCR Uganda



Key Findings from the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

The following are the findings that were identified from the KIIs of the Regional Intention Survey for the South Sudanese caseloads in Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda.

The findings and analysis of the Intention Survey focused on the below thematic areas:

1. Protection concerns
2. Decision-making processes
3. Information needs and sources
4. Support needs
5. Concerns of the pendular movers

Introduction

The Regional Intention Survey sought to understand the perspectives of South Sudanese refugees regarding voluntary repatriation, focusing on protection concerns, decision-making processes, information needs and sources, and support needs in the country of origin and countries of asylum. The survey, conducted in Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda relied on Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) to provide in-depth insights (not in Sudan due to the current context). Respondents ranged from community leaders to implementing partners, capturing diverse viewpoints on the challenges and opportunities surrounding returns to South Sudan.

The findings and analysis which emanated from the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) of the Regional Intention Survey for South Sudanese refugees have been summarized below together with the recommendations:

Locations where KIIs were conducted by country breakdown

Kenya: Interviews were held in Kakuma and Kalobeyi settlements, hosting most South Sudanese refugees.

Ethiopia: Interviews were conducted in Assosa, hosting a significant number of South Sudanese refugees.

Uganda: Interviews were conducted in multiple locations: Adjumani, Palorinya, Palobek, Rhino, Bidibidi, Imvepi, and Kiryandongo, encompassing Uganda's largest refugee-hosting locations for South Sudanese refugees.

Note: KIIs were not conducted in Sudan due to the current operational context.

Profiles of Key Informants by country breakdown

Kenya: Respondents in Kenya were refugee community leaders, Department of Refugee Services (DRS) representatives, World Food Program (WFP) staff, and implementing partners such as the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) staff.

Uganda: Respondents were diverse groups including refugee community leaders, youth leaders, religious leaders, business owners, persons with specific needs (PSNs), minority groups, health workers, and teachers.

Ethiopia: Respondents were staff from Plan International, an international NGO supporting refugee programs.

KIIs Regional Findings by Thematic Area

1- Protection concerns

Thematic objective: Identify which subgroups have particular protection concerns in CoA and CoO and what these concerns are, so diversity can be factored into the design of any return intentions.

As indicated in survey responses, **minority refugees face significant protection concerns in their country of origin (CoO), which heavily impact their decision to return. Many refugees still fear a recurrence of the violence and human rights violations that forced them to flee**, including tribal killings, arbitrary arrests, sexual violence, forced recruitment, and targeted persecution based on ethnicity or political affiliation. One respondent highlighted: *"Minority groups are targeted because of their tribal affiliations. Concerns include tribal killings, restricted movement, and lack of quality education."* Additionally, the lack of comprehensive peace agreements and effective law enforcement in South Sudan heightens these fears. Another participant remarked: *"The lack of effective protection by law-enforcing organs is a particular concern for minority groups."* For many refugees, these unresolved safety concerns, coupled with the trauma of past experiences, make the idea of returning untenable. As one refugee explained: *"The thought of previous violations and conflicts might give them trauma which affects their decision-making process."*

Similar protection challenges exist in the country of asylum (CoA), where minorities report systemic discrimination, insecurity within camps/settlements, and limited access to equal services. For instance, ethnic conflicts from South Sudan often spill over into refugee camps, disproportionately affecting minority groups. One respondent explained: *"Minority groups fear discrimination in community engagements and are easily targeted whenever there is a conflict, even when in a neutral position."* **Women and girls from minority groups face additional risks, including gender-based violence and exploitation**, further exacerbating their vulnerability. Furthermore, the exclusion of minority refugees from community services and support intensifies their sense of insecurity, making their situation in CoA precarious.

These protection concerns in both the CoO and the CoA significantly deter refugees from returning. **The fear of violence and persecution outweighs the potential benefits of return, especially when safety and security cannot be guaranteed.** One participant stated: *"Since they have been through high human rights violations in their country of origin, they expect the same things might happen to them if they go back."* The lack of trust in both the South Sudanese government and local authorities to provide adequate protection adds to their reluctance. Another refugee noted: *"The government of South Sudan cannot provide protection for its citizens, with ongoing human rights violations."* In this context, minority refugees feel trapped, unable to either safely return to their CoO or fully integrate into their CoA. **These**

ongoing risks and the absence of durable solutions perpetuate a cycle of displacement and uncertainty for minority refugees.

2- Decision-making processes

Thematic objective: Explore their decision-making processes, to understand current intentions and to predict potential future movements beyond the next 12 months (as focused on in the survey)

Decision-Making Processes Among Different Groups

Different groups of refugees of different age, gender and diversity have distinct decision-making processes when it comes to returning. Men often return to seek livelihood opportunities and to support their families. In Kenya, men return to find food, seek employment, to support their families. They also return to visit relatives and take care of family matters. **Women are generally more hesitant to return due to safety concerns.** They fear possible conflict and are often traumatized by past experiences. In Kenya, women who are survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are particularly reluctant to return. They also return to see relatives and take care of elderly family members. One respondent mentioned: *"Women hesitate to go back. They are still living in fear of possible conflict."* **Youth have different motivations for returning.** In Uganda, youth are not willing to return because they have schooling opportunities in the settlement. They fear being forced to join the army and prefer to stay where they can continue their education. In Kenya, youth with skills acquired in the settlements may return for employment opportunities. Persons with specific needs (PSNs) are particularly hesitant to return due to poor social services and ongoing insecurity. They require additional support and are often the last to be considered in decision-making processes. In Ethiopia, it was noted that vulnerable individuals, including PSNs, should have an equal say on returns.

Popular Perceptions of the Right Time to Return

The perception of the right time to return varies among refugees, but several common themes emerge. Different groups have distinct motivations and decision-making processes, and **their perceptions of the right time to return are shaped by their individual circumstances and experiences. The primary condition for return is the establishment of durable and reliable peace.** Refugees believe that any peace agreement should be properly implemented on the ground to ensure their safety. In Ethiopia, it was noted that durable and reliable peace is a precondition for return. One respondent stated: *"Durable, and reliable peace is the precondition for return."* Refugees need assurance that their safety and security will be guaranteed. **They believe that the cessation of conflict, political stability, and the absence of human rights violations are essential for their return.** In Ethiopia, refugees stated that safety and security should be granted by the government. The availability of basic services such as healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities, is crucial. Refugees need to know that they will have access to these services upon their return.

Good Reasons to Return

Refugees identify several good reasons to return to their country of origin. **The resolution of conflict and the establishment of peace are seen as the most important reasons to return.** Refugees

believe that the issue of conflict should be resolved and that there should be no human rights violations against any group. **Political stability and the provision of physical protection by the government are essential.** Refugees hope to rebuild their lives and live normal lives according to their cultural norms. **They want to explore and advance the skills they have acquired and contribute to the development of their country.**

Meanings Ascribed to the Decision to Return

The decision to return is often seen as a complex and multifaceted choice. Refugees ascribe different meanings to this decision. Many refugees see the decision to return as a hope for peace and stability. They believe that returning will allow them to rebuild their lives and contribute to the development of their country. Despite the hope for peace, many refugees are reluctant to return due to fears of insecurity and instability. They are concerned about the possibility of conflict and the lack of protection. The decision to return is often an individual choice, influenced by personal circumstances and capacities. Refugees make decisions based on their skills, financial capabilities, and family situations.

Variations in Perceptions According to Age, Gender, and Diversity

Perceptions of the decision to return vary according to age, gender, and diversity. Younger refugees are more likely to prioritize education and employment opportunities. They are less willing to return if they have access to schooling and vocational training in the CoA. **Older refugees may return temporarily to take care of family matters** or to die and be buried on their land. Women are generally more hesitant to return due to safety concerns and past trauma. **They prioritize the safety of their children and are more likely to stay in the CoA. Men are more likely to return to seek livelihood opportunities and support their families.** Minority groups and persons with specific needs have distinct concerns and decision-making processes. **They are more vulnerable to discrimination and require additional support to facilitate their return.** One respondent mentioned: *"PSNs are not willing to return due to poor social services, and most people prefer not to return until there is total peace."*

3- Information needs and sources

Thematic objective: Document refugees' sources of information and identify gaps, to identify opportunities for improved information-sharing.

Information Needed for Safer Return Decisions

Refugees need comprehensive and reliable information to make safer return decisions. **This information includes the current security situation in their country of origin, the political stability, and the absence of human rights violations.** Refugees need to be assured that the conflict has been resolved and that there is no discrimination. One respondent from Ethiopia emphasized the need to *"make sure the situation in South Sudan is safe, with no human rights violations, political stability, or non-discrimination, and make sure the conflict is resolved once and for all."* Additionally, refugees need detailed information about the availability of basic services such as healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities. **This information helps them assess whether they can sustain themselves and their families upon return.** In Kenya, refugees expressed the need for reliable information on the security status of their villages of origin and how to access services in South Sudan. They trust UNHCR to provide this information.

One respondent mentioned: *"They need to know when South Sudan will be safe for them to permanently return to their home."* This information is crucial for refugees to make informed decisions about their return.

Trusted Sources of Information

Refugees trust various sources to obtain the information they need for safer return decisions.

In Ethiopia, **refugees rely on neutral media, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the UN** for accurate and unbiased information. One respondent stated: *"Neutral media, INGOs, UN are trusted sources."* In Kenya, **refugees trust UNHCR and other agencies operating in the camps** to provide timely and reliable information. **They also rely on contacts in South Sudan** who have firsthand knowledge of the situation on the ground. One respondent noted: *"Information through contacts in South Sudan, who know exactly what is going on there are the primary information on the decision to return."*

In Uganda, **refugees trust partners such as UNHCR, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), and international media outlets like BBC and Voice of America. They also rely on information from relatives and friends.** One respondent mentioned: *"They trust UNHCR and the government for information."*

Role of Leaders in the Decision to Return

Leaders play a significant role and are crucial in the decision-making process for refugees considering return. Refugee community leaders, political leaders in the CoO, and political leaders in the CoA all have important roles to play. They provide valuable information, cross-check the safety and security of the CoO, and help ensure that the return is based on accurate and reliable information. Refugees rely on their leaders to guide them through the complex process of making a safe and informed decision about returning to their CoO.

In Ethiopia, leaders help cross-check the safety and security of the country, the political stability, and the intentions of the returnees. They ensure that return is based on the "do no harm" principle. One respondent stated: *"They cross-check the safety and security, and the political stability of the country, and the right intention of the returnees, they can make sure that their return is based on the 'do no harm' principle."*

In Kenya, leaders are seen as 'gatekeepers' of information. They influence the decision of the community by providing or withholding information. Leaders are responsible for ensuring that the community is sensitized on safe returns and that they receive informed messages from UNHCR and partners. One respondent mentioned, *"Leaders are gatekeepers of the information to the community, through them, they influence the decision of the community."*

In Uganda, the role of leaders varies by individual community. Some leaders play an active role in guiding information-sharing and helping refugees make informed decisions. Others may not be as involved. One respondent noted: *"The role varies by individual community."* Leaders can help ensure that the community receives accurate and timely information about the situation in South Sudan and the possibilities of return.

4- Support needs

Thematic objective: Determine what type of assistance people may need in the places they go to stay in, to help design any return interventions.

Characteristics of Those who want to Return

Refugees who consider returning to South Sudan often have specific characteristics and motivations. They hope for a cessation of conflict and the establishment of a secure environment where they can rebuild their lives. For instance, South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia expect to live in peace in the CoA or a resettlement country, as they have experienced significant war and displacement in their CoO. In Kenya, some refugees expect to earn a living and have a stable and reliable income. They hope to rebuild their lives according to their cultural norms and explore the skills they have acquired, such as working with NGOs.

The primary concern for many refugees is safety. In Kenya, refugees expressed fears of being killed if they return, as some who have returned before were attacked and injured. One respondent noted: *"There is still war, and they fear to be killed if they return."* Youth in Kenya fear that their freedom of expression and access to education will be limited in South Sudan. They also risk being conscripted by the state or forced to join ethnic militia groups. Women, particularly survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), fear for their safety and are hesitant to return due to the trauma they have experienced. A respondent stated: *"Some youth fear that in SSD they may not have freedom of expression and their chances to go to school will be limited."*

Refugees need comprehensive support to facilitate their return. This includes information on the safety and stability of their country of origin, financial assistance, and access to basic services such as healthcare and education. In Uganda, refugees expressed the need for infrastructural rebuilds, such as schools, and the control of soldiers to ensure their safety. The decision to return is often influenced by the skills and capacities of the refugees. For example, youth with vocational and technical skills acquired in the camps may return to South Sudan for employment opportunities. In Kenya, the turnover for teachers trained in the camps is high, with many returning to South Sudan for gainful employment. A respondent noted: *"Youth with skills, who are not able to find jobs in the camps, choose to return to SSD or reside outside the camps, for gainful employment."*

Support Needed to Make Safe Return Decisions

Refugees need comprehensive support to make safe return decisions. **This includes reliable information about the current situation in their country of origin, financial assistance, and access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and livelihood opportunities.** In Ethiopia, refugees emphasized the need for information, transportation, financial support, and livelihood activities such as housing and cash support. One respondent mentioned: *"Information, transportation, financial support, livelihood activities e.g., housing, cash support, recovery, proper documentation."*

In Kenya, refugees need assurance from UNHCR and partners that the places of return are safe for them to stay long-term. They also need a return package and services that ensure they can be sustained for a sufficient and relevant period of time to allow sustainable reintegration.

Support in the Country of Asylum

In the CoA, refugees would like to have more opportunities for resettlement and support in various areas such as food, housing, health, psychosocial support, and protection. In Ethiopia, refugees are supported by humanitarian organizations in different thematic areas, including food, housing, health, psychosocial support, and protection. One respondent mentioned: *"Depending on the humanitarian organizations' program, they are being supported in different thematic areas, such as food, housing, health, psychosocial support, and protection."*

In Kenya, **refugees need continuous engagement with leaders and focus groups to boost information sharing on returns**. They also need improved service delivery in both Kakuma and Kalobeyei settlements to foster service delivery.

Support in the Country of Origin

In the CoO, **refugees need support to rebuild their lives, including financial assistance, livelihood activities, and proper documentation**. In Ethiopia, it was noted that support can be extended to ensuring a proper and safe return process for refugees with the intention to return to South Sudan. UNHCR can help in assessing the feasibility and safety of returning to their CoO.

In Kenya, refugees need reliable information to make the decision to return. **They also need financial and material assistance to travel back and establish themselves. Leaders across the age, gender, and diversity (AGD) spectrum need to be trained on how to relay information to the community in a timely manner**. One respondent noted: *"They need reliable information to make the decision to return. If peace is realized some would return on their own volition, some will need financial and material assistance to travel back and establish themselves."*

5- Concerns of Pendular movers

Thematic objective: Understand why refugees engage in pendular movements and any concerns they have that prevent them from returning permanently

Concerns of Pendular Movers

Pendular movers, who frequently move back and forth between their CoO and the CoA, **have several in-depth concerns that influence their decisions. One of the primary concerns is safety. The ongoing conflict and unpredictable security situation in South Sudan make it difficult for refugees to stay permanently**. One respondent from Ethiopia noted: *"The main reason for the back-and-forth movement is lack of comprehensive and durable peace in South Sudan. Sometimes some places seem peaceful, but things usually changed spontaneously, and the place becomes unstable."* **This instability therefore forces refugees to return to the CoA where they feel safer.**

Another significant concern is the lack of basic services and poor living conditions in South Sudan. Refugees face challenges such as inadequate healthcare, lack of education facilities, and insufficient food supply. One respondent mentioned: *"Some areas do not have easy access to food hence returnees are forced to come back to Kenya."* The absence of essential services makes it difficult for refugees to sustain themselves and their families in South Sudan, prompting them to return to the CoA.

Discrimination and threats are also major concerns for pendular movers, particularly for minority groups. These concerns make it unsafe for them to stay in South Sudan. **The fear of being targeted and the lack of protection compel refugees to return to the CoA.**

Reasons for Returning to the Country of Asylum

Refugees who return to their CoO sometimes choose not to stay and come back to the CoA for several reasons. The primary reason is **the ongoing instability and threat of violence in South Sudan**. Refugees fear for their safety and the safety of their families. One respondent from Kenya mentioned: *"There is still war, and they fear to be killed if they return."*

Poor living conditions and lack of basic services also contribute to the decision to return to the CoA. One respondent noted: *"Poor security situation, poor living conditions, discrimination."* These challenges make it difficult for refugees to sustain themselves and their families in South Sudan, prompting them to return to the CoA where they have better access to basic services.

Economic instability and lack of livelihood opportunities in South Sudan are additional factors that influence the decision to return to the CoA. Refugees struggle to find employment and support their families in their CoO. The lack of economic opportunities makes it difficult for refugees to rebuild their lives in South Sudan, leading them to return to the CoA in search of better opportunities.

Family ties and responsibilities also play a role in the decision to return to the CoA. Refugees often return to South Sudan temporarily to take care of family matters or to support their families. However, the ongoing instability and lack of basic services make it difficult for them to stay permanently. One respondent noted: *"They might be supporting their families by going here and there to search for sufficient food."* The need to support their families and the lack of stability in South Sudan compel refugees to return to the CoA.

The concerns of pendular movers are deeply rooted in the ongoing conflict, poor living conditions, economic instability, and discrimination in South Sudan. These concerns significantly impact their decision to return to the CoA, where they feel safer and have better access to basic services and livelihood opportunities.

Please note that the individual Country Analyses for the four operations are available in the Annexes of this report; See on page 30.

Recommendations

The Regional Intention Survey sought to gain a realistic understanding of refugees' intentions to return to South Sudan and allow these intentions and expectations to inform the long-term implementation of durable solutions plans and strategies. Based on the findings of the survey, and similar as in the 2022 exercise, **many South Sudanese refugees do not wish to return to their Country of Origin in the foreseeable future**, and thus Countries of Asylum, UNHCR and partners should remain **prepared to support the protection, humanitarian, and development needs of this refugee population across the region**. At the same time, some households may wish to return and therefore, Countries of Asylum as well as South Sudan operations should continue to enhance efforts to strengthen **planning, protection interventions, and programming to ensure adequate preparation for such potential returns**.

Understanding the needs, concerns, and expectations of South Sudanese is a key part of any durable solutions strategy, and vital to ensuring that refugees can take an active role in shaping their futures. The intention survey data will enable UNHCR and its partners to better integrate the concerns and requirements of potential returnees into durable solutions strategies and ensure refugees' concerns are factored into current and future plans, strategies and programming in both Countries of Origin and Countries of Asylum.

Durable solutions are underscored by the freedom of choice and full participation by refugees in any decision process regarding the range of possibilities. The voluntary nature of repatriation and the necessity of favourable conditions within South Sudan for sustainable return and reintegration define a truly durable solution. Options that respond to the needs expressed by refugees will have a greater chance of sustainability. The difference in refugees' intent to return across the different categories surveyed underscores the necessity for developing differentiated approaches, and flexible options to address the range of different expectations and needs that were captured in the results.

As the region plans for returns of refugees, swift action is required for those intending to return soon. Meanwhile, state building and peacebuilding efforts, alongside initiatives to restore housing and determine employment or livelihood opportunities for those who do not intend to return at this time, is also important to consider in longer-term planning. Engagement with the South Sudanese people and refugees remains an essential part of the process to ensure that durable solutions meet refugees' needs and expectations.

The following are some key recommendations generated from the interviews of the KIIs, lessons learnt, and challenges encountered in the Regional Intention Survey 2024 exercise:

1. Establish systems that facilitate regular monitoring of the return intentions of South Sudanese refugees

Suggested actions

- **Conduct regular intention surveys:** Operations should conduct the exercise every two years, either in all countries of asylum, or by targeting specific operations as hotspots, based on needs.
- **Integrate surveys in programming:** Include the surveys in planning and budgeting within the OL.
- **Ensure leadership support:** Ensure Senior Management, Government, and partner support.

- **Regionalise the exercise:** Operations should adopt a regional or situational approach to intention surveys, in coordination with the Regional Bureau to ensure comparable data and facilitate cross border planning and implementation.

2. Monitor and mitigate risks by continuously assessing the security and socio-economic conditions in South Sudan

Suggested actions

- **Conduct regular risk assessments:** All operations should conduct field assessments, surveys, and reports to identify potential risks and vulnerabilities of refugees and returnees.
- **Update contingency plans:** All operations should develop and regularly update contingency plans to address identified risks.
- **Early warning systems:** South Sudan operation should implement early warning systems to detect and respond to potential emerging threats that can hinder safe and dignified return.

3. Enhance host country support and protection by strengthening education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities in countries of asylum

Suggested actions

- **Maintain asylum space:** UNHCR should work with governments in countries of asylum to ensure that South Sudanese refugees in need of international protection continue to exercise their right to asylum in accordance with national and international laws. Their protection and assistance needs should remain of primary focus, and they shall be protected from all measures that may induce less than voluntary return movements to South Sudan.
- **Collaborate with governments and partners:** Countries of asylum should strengthen joint programs with the respective governments to improve service delivery in refugee settlements and host communities.
- **Targeted support:** Both countries of asylum and South Sudan needs to implement specific programs for vulnerable groups, such as women, children, persons with specific needs, and persons with disabilities, to ensure they receive enhanced adequate protection and assistance support.
- **Promote self-reliance:** All countries of asylum should create livelihood programs that provide skills training, microfinance opportunities, and job placement services. All those trained on specific technical skills should be provided with startup kits according to availability of funding. This may be adapted to the particular context of Sudan at time of writing.

4. Protection and assistance programs for persons with specific needs including minority groups should be implemented by devising targeted support programs

Suggested actions

- **Develop specific interventions for persons with specific needs including minority groups:** Both South Sudan and countries of asylum should create or strengthen programmes that address particular needs, such as legal assistance, protection services, and advocacy.

- **Ensure access to services:** Both South Sudan and countries of asylum work with local authorities and service providers to ensure persons with specific needs can access essential services without discrimination.
- **Promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence:** All operations should organize community structure systems and activities fostering understanding and integration between different groups.

5. Ensure comprehensive information sharing by developing and disseminating detailed, neutral, and timely information about conditions in South Sudan to make informed decisions

Suggested actions

- **Use trusted sources of information:** Countries of asylum should collaborate with governments, community and traditional leaders, and reliable media outlets to distribute objective and regularly updated information on the current conditions in South Sudan. Be aware of positive role community leaders can play but also their potential position as “gatekeepers” and mitigate against factors that may compromise decision-making and consequently affect the voluntariness to return. Use standardized tools developed in the region such as the Areas of Return Information Sheets to develop contextualised information brochures and provide counseling to refugees on conditions in South Sudan.
- **Awareness raising:** Organize information sessions in refugee settlements at the community level and provide opportunities for individual counseling through repatriation help desks.
- **Organize Go and See and Come and Tell Visits:** Operations to organize for a selection of refugees including, but not limited to, representatives and community leaders.

6. Ensure inclusive decision-making by engaging all demographics in discussions about return options or other solutions

Suggested actions

- **Organize focus groups:** Countries of asylum should conduct focus group discussions with different demographic groups, including women, youth, minorities, and PSNs, to gather their input on returns in a regular manner.
- **Community meetings:** Hold regular community meetings needs to be held in countries of asylum to discuss return options and gather feedback on return.
- **Incorporate feedback:** Use the feedback from these community meetings and focus group discussions to inform planning and implementation of return strategies.

7. Support informed self-organized voluntary returns by developing voluntary return and sustainable reintegration programmes

Suggested actions

- **Distribute objective and regularly updated information on the current conditions in South Sudan:** as described above, to support refugees make informed decisions.
- **Ensure safe transport:** Countries of asylum should coordinate with transportation service providers to ensure refugee returnees can access safe travel arrangements to the border points.

- **Monitor reintegration:** South Sudan operation needs to reinforce its monitoring system to better track the reintegration process and provide ongoing support as needed to ensure enhanced sustainable reintegration.

8. Provide capacity building and vocational training to equip refugees and returnees with self-reliance skills

Suggested actions

- **Offer vocational trainings:** All operations should develop training programs in various areas (e.g., carpentry, driving, farming, tailoring, agriculture, ICT, etc.) linked to local labor market needs.
- **Support entrepreneurship:** All operations should provide training and resources for refugees and returnees to start their own businesses, including access to microfinance and mentorship.
- **Collaborate with private sector:** All operations should partner with businesses to create job and internship opportunities for refugees and returnees.

9. Create an enabling environment in South Sudan for access to education and livelihood opportunities, considering skills acquired by refugees during displacement

Suggested actions

- **Offer training services:** Determine whether there is either a lack of interest by refugees, or interest but lack of availability of training services, and plan for support in providing more of these services.
- **Support access to livelihoods:** Provide direct assistance for returnees to set up immediate livelihood and employment opportunities according to their needs, including provision of seeds, agricultural tools, and livestock, etc.
- **Align acquired skills:** Organize skills mapping to ensure that vocational trainings provided in countries of asylum are aligned and meet the job market needs and opportunities available.
- **Strengthen cross-border livelihoods programming:** Operations to strengthen programming between UNHCR, Government authorities and development and private sector actors.
- **Systematize refugee skills data collection:** Systematize the update of proGres database in the countries of asylum with the various skills of the refugee populations in the region to better inform the livelihood interventions required in South Sudan.

10. Strengthen community engagement by conducting regular outreach and engagement activities

Suggested actions

- **Organize community meetings:** All operations should endeavor to hold regular meetings to discuss issues, share information, and gather feedback from refugees and returnees.
- **Participatory approaches:** Participatory methods should be used by South Sudan operation and countries of asylum to involve refugees and returnees in decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard.
- **Stakeholders' engagement:** Country operations should foster strong relationships and engagement with community leaders, local authorities, and other stakeholders to support community engagement efforts.

Acknowledgements

The Regional Bureau for East, Horn of Africa, and Great Lakes wishes to extend its deepest appreciation to all participants who took part in the Regional Intention Survey for their valuable contributions during the entire exercise planning and design process, inputs, implementation, and systematization of data captured in all the thematic areas. Thanks should also go to UNHCR Heads of Units in the Country Operations, for providing staff members who made the data collection and sharing possible. Many thanks also to the data collectors in all the Country Operations that undertook this exercise. Special mention to all the respondents who participated in the exercise for their inputs, contributions, and responses. Special thanks also to all the Facilitators who coordinated the whole process and all the staff in the Country Operations who were involved in any manner on the overall coordination of the 2024 Regional Intention Survey exercise for South Sudanese refugees in the EHAGL region.

Contacts

This final report on the Regional Intention Survey of South Sudanese refugees was produced by the UNHCR Regional Bureau EHAGL with assistance of Country Operations in Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. For more information, please contact:

UNHCR Regional Bureau East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes

Durable Solutions Unit (DSU)

kenrbdursol@unhcr.org

Data, Identity Management and Analysis (DIMA) Unit

dimaehagl@unhcr.org

Annexes - Country Level Analysis



SSD Refugees
Country Analysis.pdf

Annex 1: Concept Note

Annex 2: Methodology and Sampling

Annex 3: Intention Survey Questionnaire

Annex 4: KII Questionnaire



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency