

The long road home: Sudan

An ODI study in Southern Sudan has changed policy debate on reintegration at the national and international levels. Worldwide, efforts to return people to their homes after conflicts tend to focus on headcounts and logistics. The ODI study on Southern Sudan has shown the importance of looking beyond the numbers to address underlying issues that can, if neglected, threaten hard-won peace agreements.

Some two million people have returned to Southern Sudan since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 and peace has paved the way for lasting development. But the scale of the return has stretched basic services – such as health, education and water – to breaking point, with some areas unable to cope with the influx.

ODI has worked with the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) since 2007 to analyse reintegration, with funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and the Canadian and Danish International Development Agencies. A team of international and Sudanese experts met people in more than 40 communities across Southern Sudan to hear their views, as well as key players from the Government, UN agencies and non-governmental organisations.

Land emerged as one of the biggest issues, with unresolved questions over who owns what. Conflict over land was cited as the biggest risk to returnees and local communities in Southern Kordofan, and lack of access to land was preventing access to housing and services in Juba. Yet land issues were not being addressed, even in areas where tensions over land were extremely high. The ODI study picked out the most urgent issues, including multiple occupation of land and housing, illegal building and the seizure of land by opportunists, as well as the lack of appropriate legislation and coherent mechanisms to address land problems. People also cited unemployment, urbanisation and insecurity as key challenges. Add to these serious language issues, with many returnees speaking English rather than Arabic, and the potential for friction remains. The study also revealed that scarce resources can be flashpoints for tensions between those who have returned and those who never left. A ‘hierarchy’ can even be seen in water queues, with former refugee women expected to wait at the back of the line.

The study carried these concerns to the highest policy circles. As a result, the Government of Southern Sudan took the lead on a series of workshops in January 2009 to develop an action plan based on its results – a rare chance for ministries, UN agencies, donors and NGOs to work together. And the study prompted a reflection on the need for a policy shift within UNMIS, with underlying issues – including land – being placed at the heart of its debate and the development of a renewed strategy.

‘The ODI study has laid out the critical issues for addressing and sustaining peaceful reintegration of the displaced within the overall implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement’

Dr. Luka Biang Deng, Minister of Presidential Affairs, Office of the President, Government of Southern Sudan

Going home at last, but what awaits them?

