

## **Policy Brief**

# **Urban internally displaced persons (IDPs): The South Sudan's experience with a focus on Juba**

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### **Summary**

This brief highlights the emerging problem of growing number of urban IDPs in Juba. It draws attention to their unique experiences and challenges which the COVID-19 has exacerbated owing to their already poor living conditions and lack of access to basic social services. The brief argues that urgent and bold actions need to be taken to ensure that urban IDPs are not left behind in South Sudan's development agenda. In particular, it recommends that; (i) the measures adopted by the government in fighting COVID-19 needs to prioritise urban IDPs and urges coordination with aid agencies to ensure that risk communication strategies are tailored to their needs and circumstances; (ii) that the government ensure provision of basic food aid to cushion sudden loss in income due to disruptions in the economy caused by COVID-19 and to ensure that the most vulnerable amongst urban IDPs are protected. Finally, it emphasises the need for the government to support long term settlement in areas that are surveyed and safe for them.

## 1 Introduction

The world's youngest country, the republic of South Sudan is rapidly experiencing a surge in internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and other massive population movements. The reasons for these displacements are many but protracted armed conflict, floods, hunger and seasonal immigration by pastoralists are most prominent. It is estimated that 1.9 million people have been internally displaced since 2013 when the conflict erupted. Displacement patterns vary but the majority occurs in summer at the height of inter-communal violence due to competition over resources. Depending on the reasons for displacement, vast majority of displaced persons tend to relocate to urban areas in South Sudan in order to access economic resources. However, communities displaced on a large scale often choose to settle in camps in order to gain access to humanitarian assistance from charity organisations.

In three sections, the brief examines the situation of IDPs in urban areas in South Sudan. The first part sets out an overview of the situation of IDPs in urban settings with a focus on Juba, the capacity city of South Sudan. The second part examines the trends, patterns and needs of the IDPs on the basis of triggers and hazards as well as the legal framework on IDPs applicable to South Sudan. The third section concludes the brief and outlines three actionable recommendations to various stakeholders.

## 2 Overview of urban IDPs in Juba

Population displacement has heightened in the wake of widespread conflict, intercommunal violence and natural catastrophes such as floods. Born in 2013, the world's youngest country was engulfed in a self-inflicted war two years into its birth. Whilst there are many plagues bedevilling South Sudan (Akech 2020), armed conflict accounts for a vast majority of displacement but cumulatively, about 1.9 million people are IDPs with an estimated 200,000 people living across five protection of civilian sites (PoCs).<sup>1</sup> The numbers of IDPs could rise as ethnic tension increases and the high prospects of spontaneous and organised returns of refugees from neighbouring countries. Regardless of the trigger of displacement, IDPs find themselves living in deplorable conditions across the country. The declining economy and the COVID-19 situation have

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<sup>1</sup> The PoCs are UN run camps (Wau, Juba, Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal) housing civilians who fled conflict of 2013 and 2016 respectively.

diminished sources of income for a vast majority of urban IDPs who already face unique challenges in accessing basic services – food, water, clothing and shelter.

### **3 Challenges facing urban IDPs in Juba**

The requirements for social distancing, handwashing and sanitisation are luxuries for urban IDPs who are already living within limited means and lacking in basic services prior to COVID-19. With noticeable rise in urban IDPs, there is an increase in the number of children living and working on the streets in Juba. This comes at the backdrop of over 2.2 million children who are not already going to school in South Sudan. The urban IDPs are also experiencing challenges in accessing land which is increasingly ethnicised. A case in point is a dispute over land between the Dinka Bor community who settled in Mangala – a suburb area outside Juba – and the resident of that area. The IDPs had been displaced by floods from perennial rains and rising Nile waters. There, it is alleged that they started allotting land to themselves thus sparking tension with local communities. In Juba, IDPs are living in camps like PoCs, Mangateen and informal settlements in areas like Konyokonyo, Juba cemetery and Shirikat.

#### **3.1 Limited access to basic social services and adequate housing**

Urban IDPs lack clean drinking water, food and medical services which expose them to increased risks of COVID-19. In this situation, measures like social distancing and handwashing become luxury to urban IDPs who live in crowded places and lack clean drinking water, access to healthcare and food. In the PoCs and Juba suburbs where IDPs live, social distancing is not practically enforceable as communities living in these settlements share makeshift shelters that cannot allow physical distancing and other COVID-19 measures to be observed. A report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees noted of urban IDPs that (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2014):

*economically, they can be found in challenging circumstances including severe food insecurity, requiring them to resort to begging, scrounging for wild fruit and/or dependence upon limited host community capacity to provide support. Most neighbourhoods do not have an accessible source for safe drinking water and many of the new arrivals do not have the resources to purchase water.*

More pressingly perhaps, is the health concerns of children of urban IDPs who reportedly are threatened by malnutrition and childhood illnesses: pneumonia, malaria and

diarrhea. Due to conflict and economic collapse, 'people's ability to live in conditions of dignity, health, safety and well-being have been jeopardised as the scale of displacement exacerbates' (International Organization for Migration, 2019, 7).

### **3.2 Risk of eviction**

Other than basic social welfare services, urban IDPs mostly live in areas not surveyed and or public lands such as schools, public grounds and or private properties. Some even live in cemeteries such as those in Konyokonyo area. These communities are consequently at risk of eviction by either local authorities or private property owners. However, the vast majority of urban IDPs are living in PoCs, Magateen and other areas in Juba. Another challenge is the possibility of removing PoCs in light of the decision by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan to transition PoCs into IDP camps (United Nations Mission in South Sudan 2020). It is therefore expected that the urban IDPs are likely to be repatriated away to other sites or supported to return to their places of choice anywhere in South Sudan. Inasmuch as conflict has exacerbated urban IDP situation, it is to be noted that rural-urban migration is induced by socioeconomic challenges and communal violence. These factors are increasingly contributing to urban settlements and in places not gazetted, surveyed or on private properties thus risking eviction (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2009, 1-5).

Other than the above socioeconomic and political challenges, the legal framework that should protect urban IDPs is inadequate. However, South Sudan has ratified the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (Kampala Convention) which should allow it to ensure appropriate legal protection for the IDPs (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2019). It has also enacted the Land Act, 2009 and ensured that land rights of all South Sudanese are guaranteed under the Transitional Constitution, 2011 as amended. Despite these legal frameworks, urban IDPs still risk evictions and are not able to access land even for farming.

## **4 Conclusion and Recommendations**

Urban IDPs face unique challenges relating to access to land, social welfare services like food, water and healthcare. The COVID-19 has aggravated these conditions and further exposed urban IDPs to risks of eviction, starvation and COVID-19. The declining

economy, intercommunal violence and natural hazards are major factors responsible for the surge in displacement in South Sudan. For as long as inter communal and armed conflict rage, the humanitarian situation and economic decline will push more families into towns to either seek for protection or access better economic opportunities. To address the growing urban IDP situation, this brief proposes the following for South Sudan:

- *Firstly*, the government and aid agencies should prioritise provision of soap, water and sanitizers to urban IDPs to ensure that they are better protected from COVID-19 pandemic. This should include behaviour change risk communication strategies that are tailored to their needs and circumstances.
- *Secondly*, the government and aid agencies should priorities provision of basic food aid to cushion sudden loss in income due to disruptions in the economy caused by COVID-19 and to ensure that the most vulnerable amongst urban IDPs are protected.
- *Thirdly*, the government, both national and local should ensure no urban IDPs are evicted especially in this time of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the long run, ensure their allocation to gazetted places where they can settle in.

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### About the Author

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