

Effects of Returnees Re-Integration on the Livelihoods of Host Communities in Leer County, South Sudan

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Abstract

Although international press has covered the conflicts in the Sudan region extensively, the effects of returnees' reintegration on sustainable livelihoods of host communities have not received much attention. Findings from Leer in South Sudan indicated that contrary to expectation, host communities play a leading role in the returnees to socio-economic reintegration than government, the international community and civil society organisations. Immediate support provided by host communities centred on the provision of basic needs like food, water, shelter, productive assets and start-off money, all of which are hinged on established traditional kinship ties and relationships of trust and reciprocity. Nevertheless, the influx of returnees resulted into competition for various scarce resources creating conflicts and tensions that threatened the realization of durable peaceful co-existence between the returnees and their hosts. Although a burden in the short term, reintegrated returnees collectively participate in community activities and make their contribution to the improvement of their conditions and general development of the area using diverse skills that they possess and or acquire over time in the displacement and or refugee camps. National and international effort on sustainable returnee re-integration should focus on strengthening the participation of host communities, provision of critical basic needs and services, accelerated access to land, and decisive internal political stabilization.

Keywords: Returnees, Host Communities, Re-integration, Livelihoods, South Sudan

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Republic of South Sudan attained its independence on the 9th of July 2011 after cessation from the Sudan. The cessation followed a protracted armed struggle that pitted the largely Christian southerners against their northern Muslim foes. According to Collins (2004), the war broke out in 1983 when the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army launched a rebellion against the Khartoum regime following a unilateral abrogation of the 1972 Addis Ababa Peace Agreement that had granted the southern region semi-autonomous status and the right to self determination. The war lasted for 21 years and ended with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005; only for another civil war ignited by a political struggle between *President Salva Kiir* and his former *Vice President Riek Machar* to erupt and escalate into ethnic violence with severe human suffering. According to the global conflict tracker on internal violence in South Sudan, an estimated ten thousand people have been killed and more than 1.6 million have been internally displaced since civil war broke out in South Sudan in December 2013 (<http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/?marker=33>). Despite such suffering, the international community's effort to mediate peaceful settlement of the political crisis has been slower than expected.

The root causes of the conflict in the Sudan between the former southern and northern foes were not however limited to religious and ideological differences. Inter-tribal and intra-tribal clan based conflicts, fuelled mainly by socio-cultural, economic and political factors such as cattle raiding and competition for resources (land, water and pastures) raged in the south, causing destruction, deaths, internal displacements and untold suffering of civilians. According to Johnson (2003), Khartoum regime adopted a scorched earth policy that maimed, killed and uprooted millions of southern Sudanese from their villages and towns during the long running civil war that was mainly consigned in the then southern Sudan.

Overall, it is estimated that 2.5 million people died during the war from armed combat, diseases and hunger. Four million others were internally displaced, mostly to northern Sudan while another about 600,000 were exiled to mostly neighbouring Eastern Africa countries among others. Several thousands were forced into exile under asylum status in Europe, America, Australia, Canada and Cuba (Collins, 2004). By all accounts, this has been a very expensive war with devastating effects on the socio-economic development of South Sudan, rendering the country one of the poorest in the world with high prevalence of diseases, illiteracy, hunger and poverty (Abdelnour, 2010; Collier, 2002).

The signing of the CPA in 2005 granted the southern region of Sudan semi-autonomous status and the right to self determination, leading to the formation of the Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) for an interim period of 6 years, beginning from 9th January 2005 to 8th July 2011 (CPA, 2005). The formation of GOSS in 2005 heralded a new era of peace, stability, liberty and prosperity in the region that triggered a frenzy of a return phenomenon by millions of South Sudanese living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees within

and outside Sudan (Sarah et al., 2007). On the July 9th 2011, Southern Sudan attained its independence and was renamed the Republic of South Sudan.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) Report (2009) indicated that a total of 2,343,347 South Sudanese (representing about 28% of the total population of the country) had returned to South Sudan by end of 2009. Returnee tracking reports indicated that a further 116, 518 individuals returned in 2010 while another 209,109 returned in 2011 bringing the cumulative total of all the returnees to South Sudan to 2,668,997 between 2005 and 2011 (IOM, 2010, 2011). It is now 2015 but the well-being of returnees and their host communities continue being undermined by various factors including reintegration challenges, access to basic services and political instability occasioned by the current civil war.

1.2 Re-integration Dynamics

Policies, strategies and guidelines necessary to achieve smooth reintegration of returnees as well as challenges of reintegration are well documented (Allen, T. et al., 1994; Black, R. & Koser, K., 1999; Maniraguha, 2001). However, poor planning and coordination, together with limited resources and complex nature of conflicts have often made it difficult to fully realize smooth re-integration of returnees. Long delays in the delivery of support packages have often led to transfer of huge responsibilities on resource poor host communities (Webber, 2011). According to Zimmerman (2010) safety and reintegration prospects, hope for change, host country policies, home country political dimensions and returnees' own perspectives determine the return decision. The influx of returnees after the signing of the CPA in 2005 had a lot to do with prospects for positive change, but due to internal political turmoil, people's hopes have been dashed as the international community and more specifically eastern Africa nations play more lip service than offering practical solutions to stabilise the new Republic of South Sudan. Little research has also been done focussing on how livelihood conditions and the bio-physical environment of host community are affected by the influx and reintegration of returnees. This paper discusses this knowledge gap, based on a study done in Leer County, in the Republic of South Sudan in order to support decision-making for sustainable returnee management.

1.3 Armed Conflicts in Africa

Kingma (1997) observes that between 1980 and 2011, no less than twenty eight Sub-Saharan African countries have been at war, and the major causes of these wars have been attributed mainly to political corruption; lack of respect for the rule of law; human rights violations; racial, ethnic and religious animosities; and ideological fervour. Conflict and war in South Sudan has been documented by among others (Collins, 2004; Paglia, 2003; and Antony, 1991). Repatriation of refugees remains one of the most advocated for solution to the refugee crisis (Black and Koser, 1999). However, safety; reintegration and status of social services play a major role in the return decision (Abdelnour, 2010). These concerns may illustrate the large presence of South Sudanese in Kenya and Uganda, long after independence of South Sudan was attained. Nigar *et al.* (2008) acknowledges that returnees' perspectives play key role in the return decision with the main considerations being hope, family ties, hardship conditions, restricted freedom, limited privileges and social pressures in the host countries. Annan *et al.* (2009) points out that the return phenomenon is not usually only about IDPs and refugees but also demobilised and disarmed soldiers returning home to civilian life after end of armed conflict. Their potential impacts on the socio-economic and political status of host communities cannot be overemphasised.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Area

This study was conducted in Leer County, South Sudan between the months of April to June, 2012. The newly independent state of South Sudan has a federal system of government that comprises ten states that make up the Republic of South Sudan. Each state is made up of between five to nine counties and each county is further divided into administrative units known as *payams* which are further divided into *bomas* that are made up of clusters of villages. Leer County is one of the nine counties in Unity State and has nine payams (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Location of Leer County in Unity State (Source: International Crisis Group, 2011)

According to the 5th Sudan Population and Household Census of 2008, Leer County has a population of 53, 022 (7,044 households). The average household size is six. However, due to the huge influx of returnees to the area since the last census, the population has increased significantly and by end of May 2011, the population of Leer stood at 55, 272, representing 9, 212 households. Of these, 2,284 households were returnee households, representing 24.8 % of the total population (IOM, 2011). The effects of this population influx on host communities' well-being remains largely un-researched, hence the gist of this paper.

2.2 Research Design

This study adopted the survey research design, which involved collection of quantitative and qualitative data to answer specified research questions. The target population was the host community in Leer County, which included people that are residents in surveyed urban settlement of Leer and Adok as well as those residing in peri-urban and rural villages in the various *payams*. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions at the county and community level mainly targeted representatives of the UN agencies, NGOs, CBOs and other civil society groups operating in the area. Representative officials of the local administration and traditional authorities (Chiefs), heads of education and health departments and village social services committees and Church leaders were also interviewed for data collection. Sections of returnees were also interviewed to gain insight into their experiences. A sample size of 363 was used and allocated proportionally to all the *payams* based on the relative population sizes.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Data was collected by use of questionnaire surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and observation-based transect walks. A range of secondary sources of information particularly specific reports on returnees and reintegration issues was also used to enrich data. Qualitative information obtained from in-depth interviews with key informants and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Quantitative data from questionnaires was analysed using standard procedures by means of SPSS software.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Host Community Support to Returnees Reintegration

Availability of food and shelter for the returnees were immediate and continuous critical support requirements (Figure 2), which however were limited by the host community's own food insecurity situation. The kind of support provided was voluntary and in most cases strongly associated with the traditional kinship ties between the returnees and their supporting host community members. Provision of food (65.6%), shelter (53.7%) and livestock assets (cattle, sheep and goats combined) (41.7%) constituted the most important form of support that was provided to the returnees by the host community.

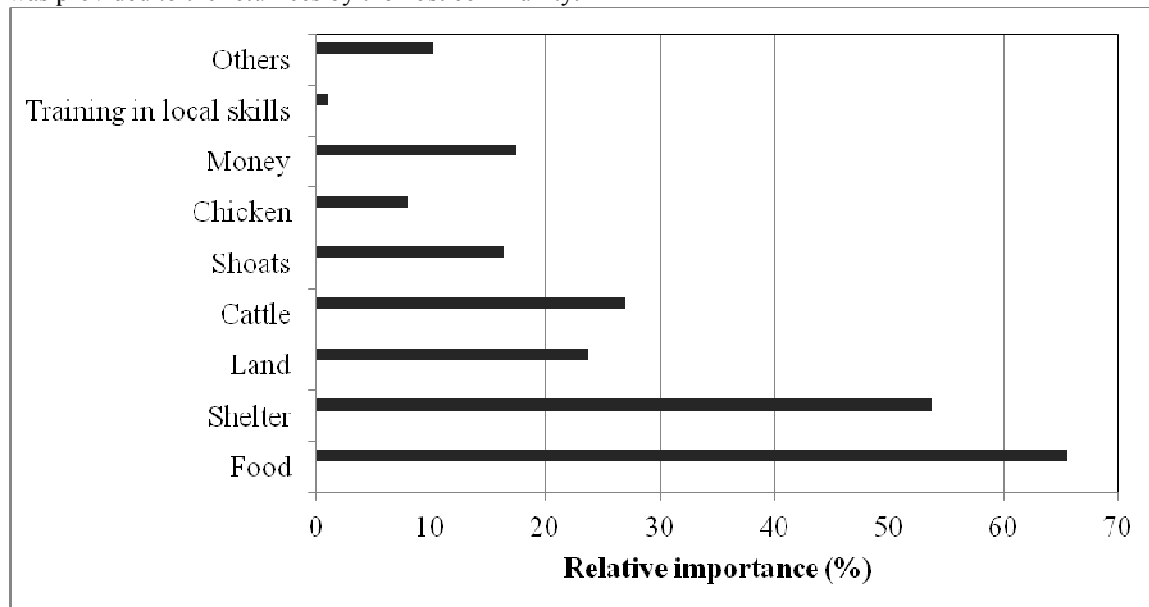


Figure 2: Type of support provided to returnees by host community

According to returnees, food that was given on arrival by the UN got finished after two to three months, thus leaving relatives as main fall-back source of support. Although shelter was very important, given a choice, returnees preferred food to it. This translated into returnees becoming a burden on host communities as their household resources gradually got depleted - a situation that was often aggravated by the inherent poverty-driven vulnerabilities within the host community (Sarah *et al.* 2007).

Being a critical agricultural resource, access to land was crucial in getting the returnees to get started. Despite the enormous sacrifice of resources by the host community in support of their kin, 69% of returnees felt that the support was inadequate. On the contrary, up to 74% of the hosts felt that resettlement and reintegration of returnees in their own areas was successful. This can be interpreted to imply a tacit disapproval of the handling of the reintegration process by the responsible authorities while on the other hand approving of the community's effort in supporting the returnees (Figure 3). Results showed that about 99% of the respondents were happy to receive returnees back into their community. Similarly, 95% of the respondents were of the view that the community was generally ready and willing to receive returnees, which was a manifestation of the host community's solidarity with kinsmen and women and a willingness to unite and forge a new relationship and beginning as a people of one united nation. By implication official support from government, INGOS, and local NGOs was deemed wanting.

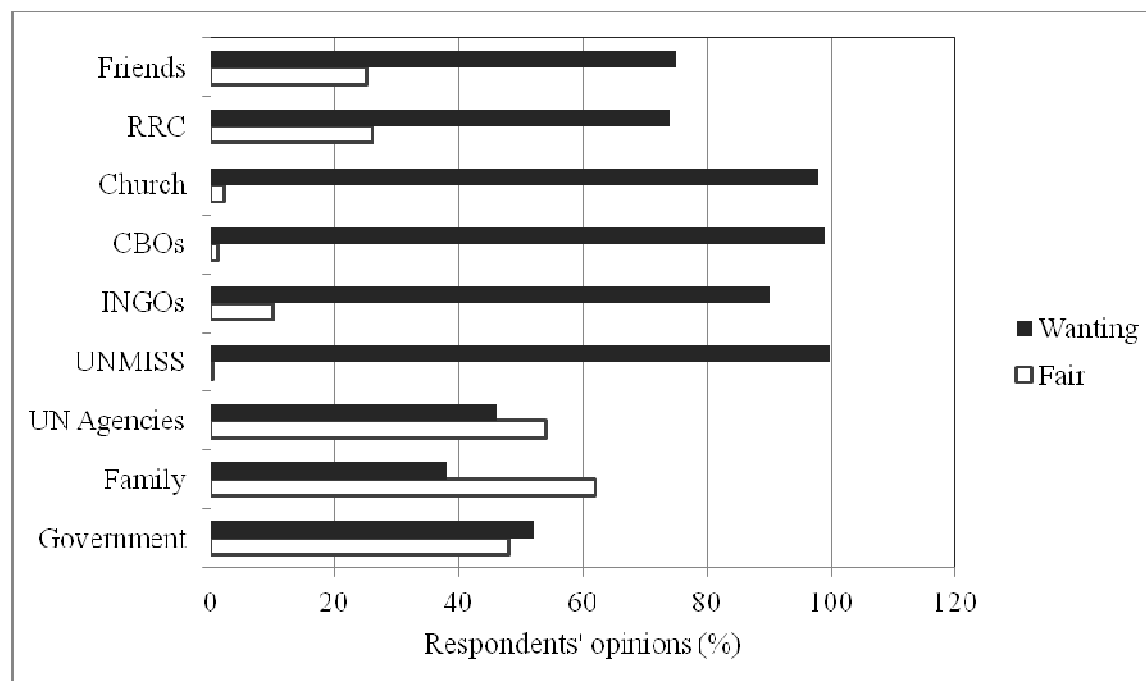


Figure 3: Perceptions on the role of actors in supporting returnee reintegration (where RRC = Relief and Rehabilitation Commission; CBOs=Community-Based Organisations, INGOs=International Non-Governmental Organisations)

From the above results, it can be noted that family and friends, who combined constituted the host community provided the highest combined support (73.2%). The outcome that rated the role of government above INGOs was attributed to the knowledge that government is seen through three lenses; the local administration, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and the traditional authority system of Chiefs. Targeting processes for all kinds of UN Agencies and INGO programmes for vulnerable groups, especially returnees in this case, are usually done through these arms of government as the lead agents. These include beneficiary selection, beneficiary registration and in most cases even actual delivery and distribution of supplies such as food and non-food item kits. This level of interaction with communities implies that government agents are more visible and acknowledged as the authority behind all processes in support of returnees. Besides, aid organizations work under the overall supervision and coordination of these arms of government. That is why the community perceives them as agents of government. Inherent in this complex relationship is the need for trust and good logistical organisation.

3.2 Effects of Returnees Influx on Livelihoods of Host Community

High demand for food (65.3%), shelter (46.3%), livestock assets (29.8%), land (29.5%), and access to water (22.9%) were indicated as the main areas of constraint on host communities (Figure 4). Most housing units were single roomed grass thatched houses that are vulnerable to adverse weather conditions and pests infestation but which provided the easiest way to settle in returnee population. Influx of returnees also meant congestion at water points, health facilities and in schools. Commodity shortages and ever increasing prices were common features and trends in the local market functions. This was not however directly linked to returnees influx but rather issues of political and economic nature. Access to employment and availability of employment opportunities were reported by at least 70% of the respondents to have been negatively impacted following the influx of returnees in the community mainly due to a combination of factors. Overall, low literacy levels among host community, lack of vocational skills training opportunities, low level of private sector investments and competition from better educated, better trained and skilled returnees were the main causal factors that disadvantaged the host community. Returnees on the other hand held the view that they were given less consideration in government jobs, mainly due to the tendency to reward “liberation heroes” who remained behind to fight during the war, irrespective of literacy levels, skills and training possessed. An element of stigma is attached to returnees who ran away during the war when things were hot and only came back recently to rip the fruits of a struggle of which they were never part of.

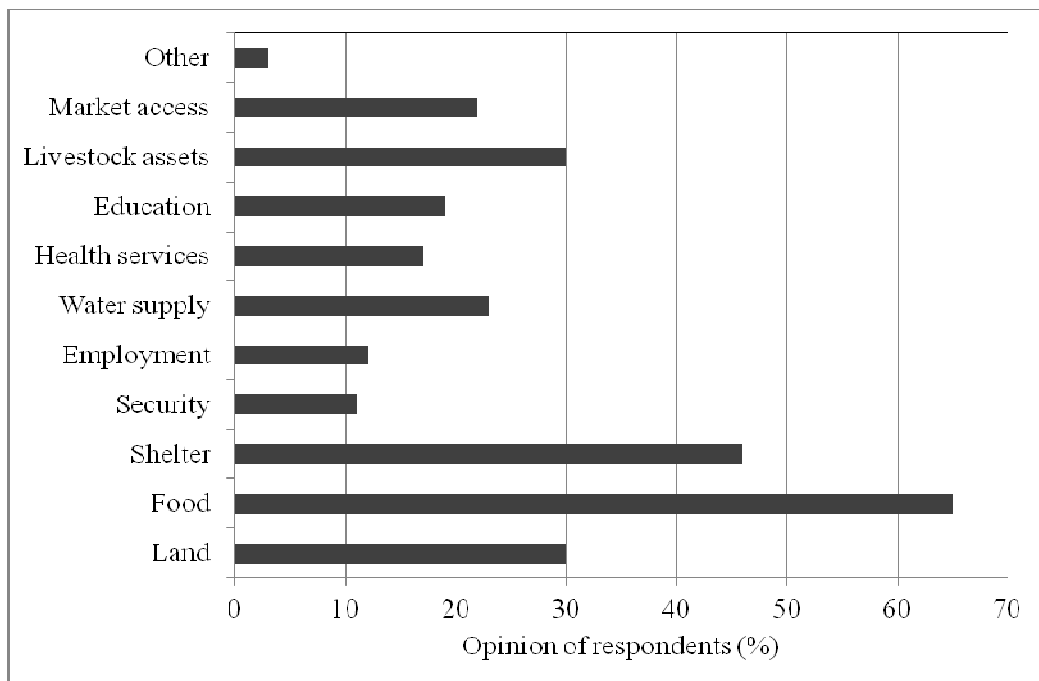


Figure 4: Host community perceptions (%) on livelihoods and socio-economic constraints

Food was particularly a major concern given that the area experiences cyclic food insecurity. Tension between South Sudan and Sudan had resulted in closure of borders between the two countries and stoppage of oil production, thus affecting free movement of goods and foreign exchange inflows. The resultant inflation coupled with bad roads distorted local market functions and affected access to food and other essential commodities. High food prices (93.4%), food shortages (92.6%) and reduced food production (53.2%) were the main challenges experienced by the host community following the influx of returnees. With more than 60% of households harvesting 5 bags and below, food production in a normal season was unsustainable and exacerbated the food insecurity situation (Figure 5) (Figure 5).

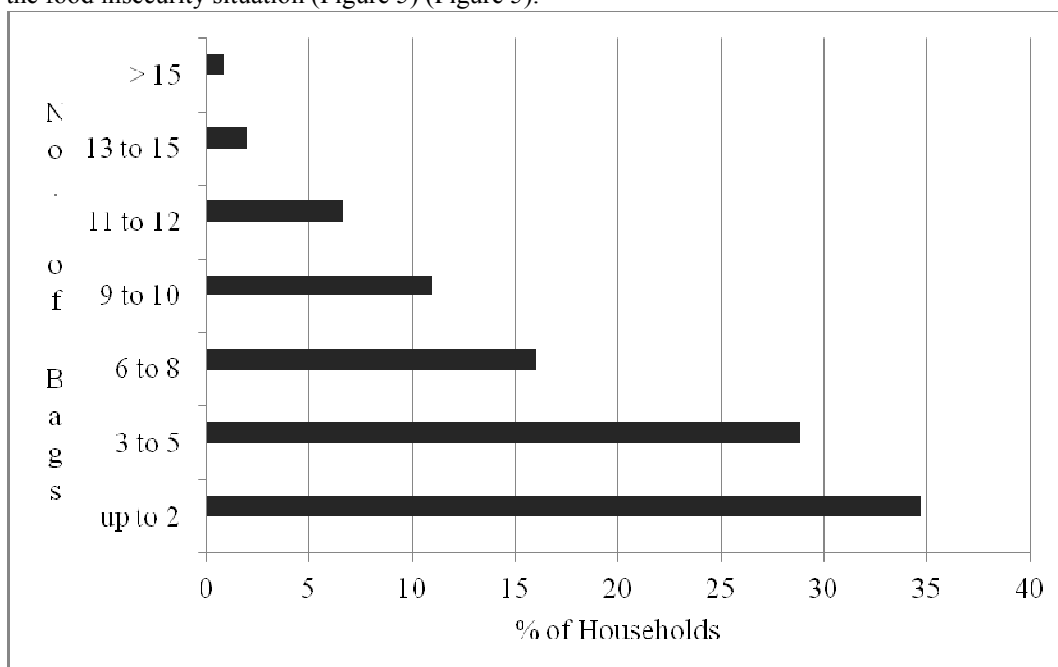


Figure 5: Number of 90 kg bags of sorghum produced per household in normal season

An average household of 6 people required one 90 kg bag of sorghum in a month to be food secure. From these results, a total of 90.6% of respondents reported producing less than 12 bags in a normal year and this underlined the chronic food insecurity situation in the area and the constraint associated with food resources. Consequently, investing in food and nutrition security should be priority areas in returnee integration. The necessary extension service expertise could be out-sourced from the neighbouring eastern Africa countries in the

short to medium term. The government of South Sudan should however facilitate rapid yet equitable access to land by returnees through reforms in the national land tenure systems.

3.3 Effects on Access to Land and Land Use Policy

Results indicated that 68.3% of the respondents believed that there was enough land in the community to meet the needs of both the host community and the returnees.. The Constitution of South Sudan spells out ownership of land as communal and every community member has equal right of access to land. Theoretically, all returnees were expected to be allocated land by the government on arrival for settlement in the surveyed areas and by their kin in the villages for farming activities. This was however not always the case and many returnees reported to be landless, due to various factors revolving around land tenure topping the list (Figure 6). Reduced grazing land has serious impact on livestock, which are considered a very important asset in the community, because of their role as a source of food that can be carried along even during war, and also being their mobile bank and source of dowry. Other constraints reported by respondents included compulsory acquisition of land by the government for the construction of rural access roads, fraudulent title transfers and illegal double registration of land. These factors combined undermine land management and administration leading to unsustainable land use practices and their consequences.

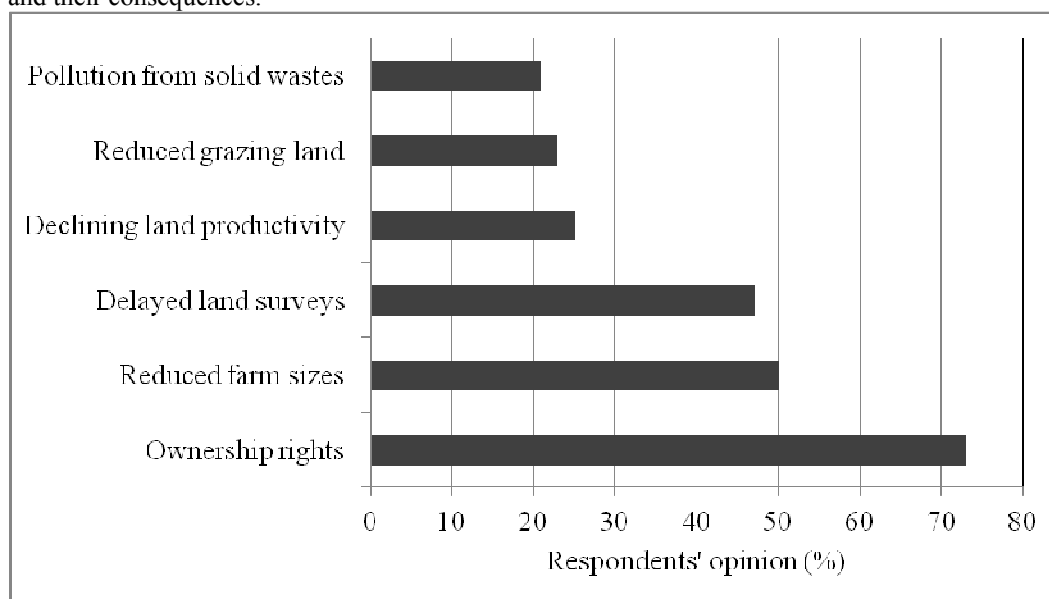


Figure 6: Constraints to maximising benefits from land use

Urban and peri-urban land areas were as matter of policy surveyed and allocated to residents and returnees alike upon payment of fees for registration and title. Poor residents and returnees in many cases failed to raise the fees and thus could not access land. In communal areas, habitable and arable land space in the high ground areas were limited and already had “owners”. Ownership was transferable only along lineage lines. Conflicts over land ownership were therefore inevitable even among clan and family members. Mounting pressure on land for farming and settlement by the host community and returnees alike resulted in diminished traditional grazing spaces, thus fuelling local conflicts between farmers and livestock keepers over encroachments. As a new country, the government of South Sudan would do well to avoid land tenure mistakes that Kenya and Zimbabwe made and whose effects still undermine their national stability and development to date (Waswa *et al.*, 2002).

3.4 Effects of Returnees Influx on Health Services and Education

In terms of health services, congestion at health centres was reported by over 80% of respondents as a major challenge. This resulted in shortage of medicine and personnel as indicated by 73% and 28% of respondents respectively. Similar cases of congestion and constrained education services were reported by respondents (Figure 7). Up to 77% and 94% of the respondents reported having no primary school and secondary school respectively in their *payam*. The situation was made worse with the arrival of returnee children who competed for space in the few available schools. Unlike in the health sector where hundreds of community-based health workers were trained by aid organizations over the years, there was evidence of acute shortage of qualified teachers in the area. Since education is a basic right and need within international development agenda, practical steps need to be taken by relevant stakeholders to ensure that this service continues with or without returnee influxes. Structured out-sourcing of expertise from the East Africa Community, but with clear phase-out strategies as locals acquire the necessary competencies may be a cost effective option for the government of

South Sudan to address the acute shortage of teachers that limit access to quality education by South Sudanese School-going children.

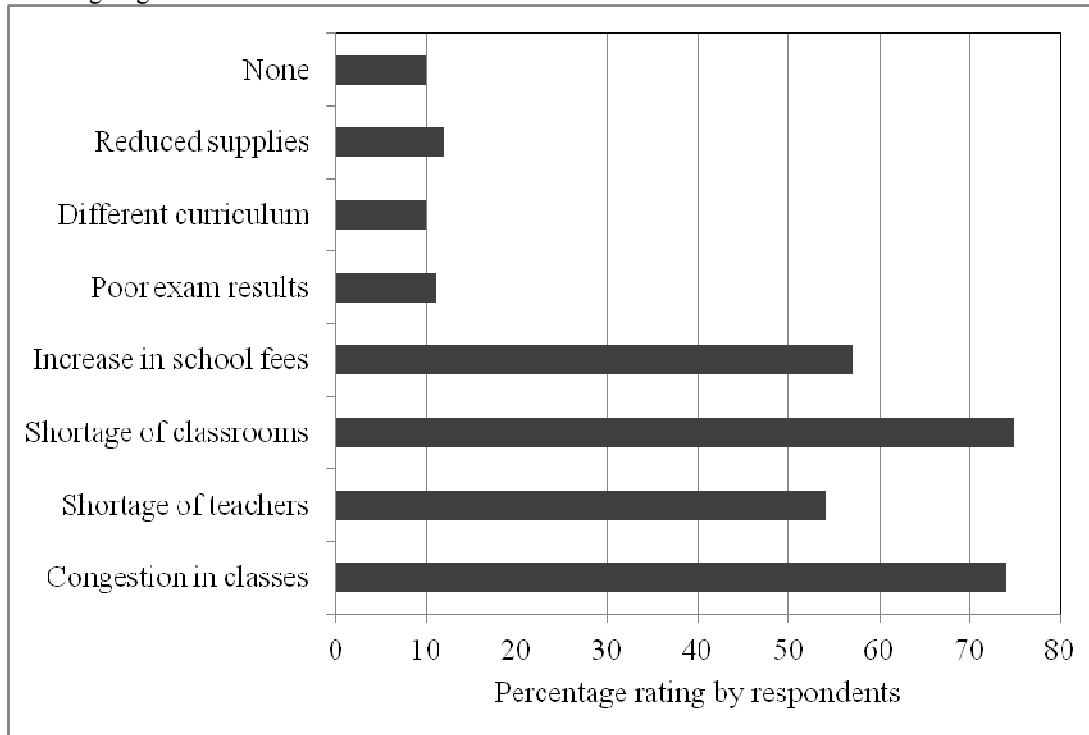


Figure 7: Challenges experienced with education services

3.5 Effects of Returnees Influx on Water and Sanitation Services

Majority of respondents indicated that rivers (82.1%), boreholes (56.7%), swamps (47.7%), and hand dug wells (43.8%) were the main sources of water for domestic use (Figure 8).

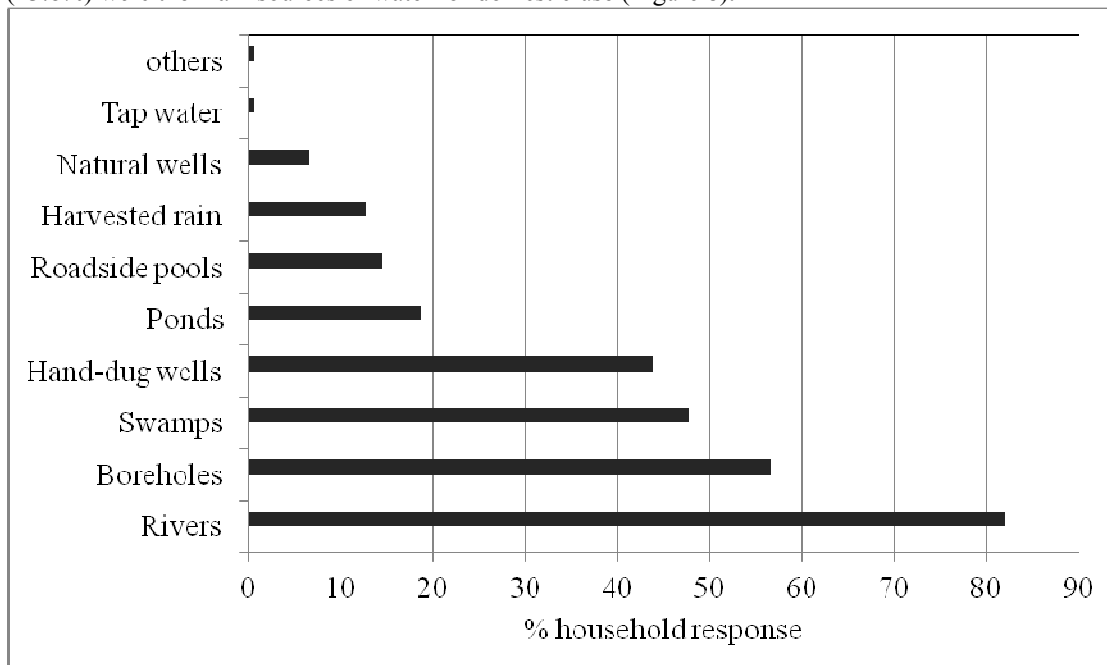


Figure 8: Community sources of domestic water

Others sources of water were indicated as ponds and roadside pools. Having a borehole in one's area did not however imply automatic access to water. Of the respondents who reported having a bore hole in their areas, 89.9% indicated that borehole water was not enough for the needs of everybody in their areas. Congestion and long queues at borehole points were frequently observed. Conflicts among women and girls at water points that often snowballed into clan based tensions and conflicts were reported. Providing water services became the

single most important appeal by community members during focus group discussions. Access to water had assumed a security dimension and hence an environmental hotspot that needs urgent attention in returnee re-integration policy.

With about 83% of households not having toilets, the risk of poor sanitation and hygiene and hence a public health disaster in the waiting was high. Poor sanitation was however noted to be more of a cultural issue than a constraint associated with the influx of returnees. Traditionally people practiced open defecation in the surrounding bushes near their homes, although the community seemed to be aware of the risk of contamination of their water sources by human wastes (Figure 9).

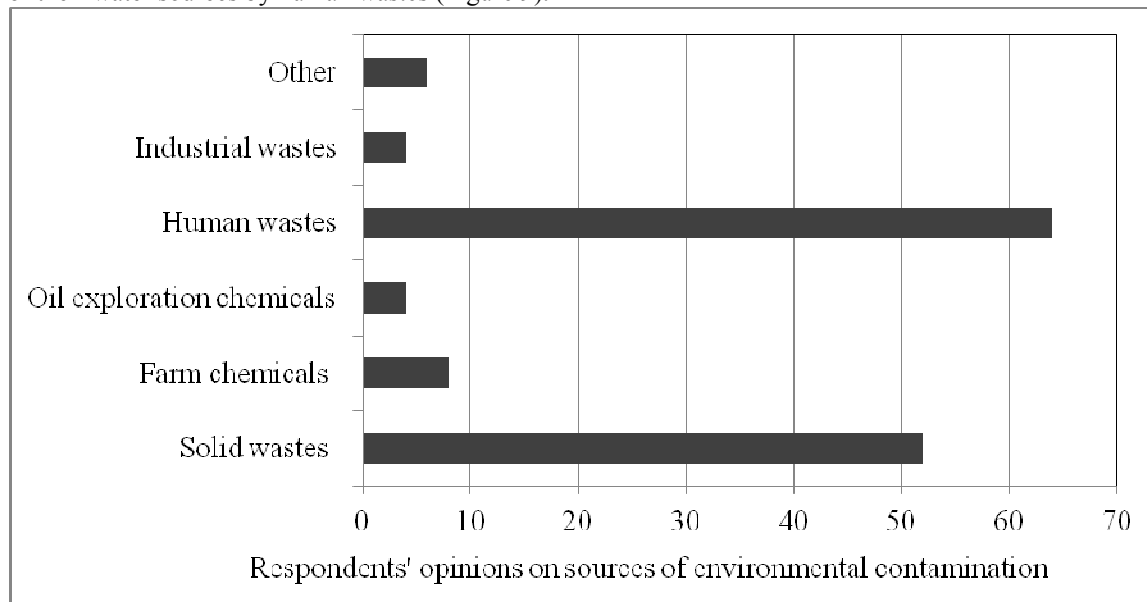


Figure 9: Sources of contamination of water for domestic use

An overwhelming majority of respondents (63.6%) acknowledged human waste as a major contaminant of water sources followed by solid wastes (52.2%), particularly plastic wastes. Returnee re-integration programmes thus need to deliberately have a practical strategy of supplying clean water, particularly for domestic use and in health centres. This would work best in properly planned settlements based on long term land use master plans.

In terms of household sources of energy, 99% of households dependent on firewood for cooking, lighting and heating. Herein is the risk of environmental degradation through loss of tree cover and vegetation. This situation was made worse by the fact that wood is also used widely in shelter construction, while charcoal burning is equally a major source of income.

3.6 Positive Attributes of Returnees

Returnees were not entirely a necessary evil to host communities. Respondents acknowledged that returnees constitute a critical source of human capital in their community based on the diverse skills that they brought home, which contributed to the introduction and diversification of skills and livelihood options in the community. Many returnees that had professional skills found employment either with government or aid organizations and were making useful contribution to the socio-economic development of the study area. Others skilled in construction provided vital services in construction work, brick making and artworks. These skills are gradually transferred to their hosts through apprenticeship initiated by some of the enterprising returnees. Others who were Chiefs in their former communities were integrated in the local leadership structures and were making their contribution in promoting social justice. Consequently, a returnee integration programme needs to include skill identification and placement for community and national service in order to avoid a dependency syndrome scenario from developing.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Although many actors were involved in the process of returnee reception, hosting and reintegration, the host community played a major role in supporting the returnees to realise sustainable socio-economic reintegration. Although well resourced, government, the international community and civil society were perceived as playing a minor and peripheral role, hence the notion of “burdened host communities”. Support from host communities was mainly offered in the form of food, shelter, productive assets and money, all of which are hinged on established traditional kinship ties, networks, connectedness and relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchanges.

In view of this participation of the host community in the official decision-making processes on returnee reintegration is very essential.

The influx of returnees had adverse effects on various socio-economic factors of the host community notably land, water sources, health, education and employment opportunities resulting in competition and creating conflicts and tensions that threatened the realization of durable peace, stability and sustainable reintegration of returnees. To reduce pressure on these resources and services, and accelerate settlement of returnees, the government of South Sudan should invest in people-friendly land tenure systems based on a long term master plan.

Although perceived as a “burden” in the short term, reintegrated returnees collectively participate in community activities and make their contribution to the improvement of their conditions and general development of the area using diverse skills that they possess and or acquire over time from their displaced or refugee camps. A returnee re-integration policy should include deliberate efforts to identify and nurture skills through vocational skills training programs that involve host communities in order to put them to meaningful use, reduce dependency syndromes and cut costs of re-integration.

Ultimately, re-integration of returnees needs an environment of predictable peace to succeed, and hence the need of the international community to do more in stabilizing South Sudan, including use of community driven peace initiatives, national reconciliation dialogue mechanisms and UN-endorsed mediation efforts, including the use of military interventions (peace keeping missions), economic sanctions and arms embargo options.

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