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Returning to fund refugeehood: dispersal and survival between Uganda and South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

Return movements of refugees, even when gradual or temporary, are typically understood as part of a process of full repatriation or as a ‘strategy’ for leveraging socio-economic opportunities across borders. However, for some refugees, return is neither a step towards repatriation nor an empowering strategy. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from Uganda and South Sudan, this article shows how, due to gradual reductions in aid and the lack of livelihood opportunities in Uganda, South Sudanese refugees travel back to their homeland in order to financially support their relatives who remain in exile. These return movements and the phenomenon of split households among South Sudanese are responses to severe hardship and, paradoxically, are deployed to sustain their life in Uganda. While cross-border migration enables refugees to access subsistence opportunities, this article argues that it underscores how refugees must now find their own means to ‘fund’ their refugeehood, given ongoing reductions in international assistance for protracted displacement.

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Return migration; split return; refugee livelihoods; South Sudan; Uganda

1. Introduction

Like many of the residents of Mayom County in South Sudan’s Unity State, Nyagoa left the region for Juba in 2015 as fighting spread throughout this part of the country.¹ She was 31 at the time, a mother to three boys and one girl. She lived in Juba for a year, in a protection of civilians site, before fleeing to Uganda in 2016 and settling with her children in Pagirinya refugee settlement in Adjumani District. By 2017, Nyagoa decided to leave her children with a neighbour in the settlement and travel back to Juba. She did not have enough money to sustain her family in Uganda. She was also sick and unable to afford medical treatment. Nyagoa stayed in Juba for five months, working intermittently at a street restaurant, before returning to Uganda to see her children. However, due to deteriorating living conditions in the settlement, Nyagoa returned to Juba in October 2018. Again, she found work at a small restaurant and sent money to Uganda weekly. After nine months in Juba, she went back to Uganda.

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Nyagoa spent less than a year in Pagirinya, before deciding to return to Juba in 2020. By then, the food rations provided to refugees were reduced, her children's needs were pressing, and she was fed up with begging her neighbours for support. This time, she did not find regular work in Juba, so decided to sell *mandazi* (fried bread) on the street. She resided in a small camp for internally displaced populations (IDPs) in Mangateen area of Juba (Figure 1). By 2022, when we met her, her situation remained the same. At that time, she earned around South Sudanese Pounds (SSP) 1,000 (roughly USD 1.6) per day and sent most of this to her children in Uganda.² She had no intention to bring them along to South Sudan. The sole purpose of her return to Juba was to support her children as refugees. 'When I am here, I can buy food and charcoal for them, and [earn] some money for school fees,' she explained. 'When I am there [in Uganda], they don't go to school. If I come here [Juba], they can go to school.'

Nyagoa's story is not unusual. Due to the gradual reductions in the aid provided to refugees in Uganda's settlements and the lack of alternative ways to generate an income in exile, it has become common for South Sudanese to travel to their homeland to support relatives who remain in exile as refugees. Drawing upon qualitative and quantitative data collected between March 2022 and July 2023 in Uganda and South Sudan, this article explores this trend. We argue that return movements and split households among South Sudanese are not liberatory and empowering strategies, as they are often portrayed in scholarship and policy language, nor a transitory measure geared towards repatriation. Rather, they are expensive and undesired responses to extreme adversity, undertaken to allow refugees to financially cover the most basic needs of their families in exile.

Empirically, we draw upon mixed-method research conducted on both sides of the border to present new data on the return movement of South Sudanese from Uganda,



Figure 1. A woman walking through Mangateen IDP camp in Juba.

a contemporary phenomenon that has so far attracted limited scholarly attention. Our research is unique both in drawing upon first-hand qualitative and quantitative data and in following specific community networks across the border. Conceptually, we offer an analysis of return practices that challenge existing studies of refugee return movement by interrogating the meanings, causes, and effects of refugee return from an emic perspective. Studies of refugee return mobilities tend to approach the subject with an instrumentalist, etic lens, emphasising the agency of refugees and their strategic efforts to leverage opportunities across borders. An emic perspective allows us to problematise the positive thrust of the literature on return and transnational mobility and show how cross-border movement is not always a step towards repatriation or an empowering act, even if it is pragmatic and manifests the agency of refugees. Rather, and perhaps counterintuitively, ‘return’ movement may also be undertaken in order to enable refugee-hood to continue.

In the following section, we describe the mixed-methods, multi-sited research upon which this article draws. Section 3 reviews the key scholarly debates to which we contribute, namely, the forced migration literature on return and transnational mobility. This is followed by contextual background: a review of the reception of South Sudanese in Uganda, current policy conversations around their return to South Sudan, and an introduction to Pagirinya refugee settlement and its residents, the main case study in this article. Sections 5–8 then present our main findings regarding the scope, drivers, and consequences of cross-border movements and family splits between Uganda and South Sudan. Section 9 concludes, highlighting some of the implications of our findings for policy and scholarly debates.

2. Methodology

To develop a nuanced understanding of people’s circumstances and decisions, we chose to focus our study on refugees in and from one settlement in Uganda: Pagirinya refugee settlement in Adjumani District. Pagirinya was selected following preliminary consultations with humanitarian actors and refugee-led organisations in Kampala in early 2022. Data collection then took place between June 2022 and July 2023 in Uganda and South Sudan. Throughout the project, our approach was exploratory, as we endeavoured to follow up on issues brought up in early consultations, interviews, and group discussions as our research progressed. We deployed qualitative and quantitative methods and conducted fieldwork on both sides of the border, but consistently targeted participants who resided in Pagirinya during our research or had lived there in the past.

We conducted group discussions and interviews with 55 refugees or returnees. In Uganda, 14 participated in group discussions and 22 were interviewed (18 women and 18 men), and in Juba, 19 were individually interviewed (12 women and 7 men). Our work in Pagirinya began in June 2022, with group discussions with refugees from different communities. This preliminary visit was followed by a second research trip in August 2022, during which we conducted life-history interviews with refugees individually. We also visited the Elegu-Nimule border-crossing, the main gateway into South Sudan, and interviewed government officials and refugee traders there. In October 2022, we interviewed two South Sudanese refugees from Pagirinya who study in and

around Kampala, and in November, we visited Juba, where we interviewed refugees who left their families in Pagirinya and travelled to South Sudan. In July 2023, we returned to Pagirinya to conduct additional interviews with refugees in households where at least one member returned to South Sudan.

We also conducted a survey in Pagirinya between January and February 2023. Previous research has shown that South Sudanese refugees in Uganda have wide transnational networks and are highly mobile (O'Byrne and Ogeno 2021; Gidron 2022; Vancluysen 2022). However, so far, no attempt has been made to quantify such mobilities, making it impossible to weigh the significance and implications of different patterns of movement. The questionnaire was based on our preliminary research in Pagirinya, and its key aim was to gather descriptive statistics on the mobility practices of adult refugees currently living in the settlement, as well as the location and occupation of refugees who had left. In total, our survey sampled 112 South Sudanese households (56 Nuer from Unity State and 56 Ma'di from Eastern Equatoria State) and recorded the mobility practices of 374 adult refugees residing in Pagirinya and the location and occupation of 115 adult refugees who had left the settlement to return to South Sudan.³ The results were weighted to produce statistics that are representative of the settlement's population.

Interviews and group discussions were conducted by both authors together or by Yotam Gidron, with the support of research assistants and translators based in the research sites. In Pagirinya, we worked with the Youth Empowerment Foundation (YEF), a refugee-led organisation based in the settlement. YEF staff, who are all refugees residing in Pagirinya, helped liaise with the settlement's leadership, identify interviewees, and translate interviews when necessary. After receiving training, and under our supervision, a team of four enumerators also administered the survey in the settlement. In Juba, our research was supported by the Bridge Network, a local research organisation. We worked with two South Sudanese researchers who identified interviewees and translated interviews. Most interviews were conducted in Arabic, Ma'di, and Nuer, with the support of a translator. A few interviews were conducted in English. Yotam speaks Arabic and Nuer, and this helped cultivate trust with participants, monitor the quality of the translation, and pick up cultural and linguistic subtleties.

3. Refugee returns in protracted displacement

While returning to one's country of origin is often viewed as the ideal solution to refugeehood, a large body of scholarship demonstrates that rather than a simple unidirectional move, it is a complicated process marred by a wide range of social, cultural, and economic hurdles (Tegenbos and Vlassenroot 2018). Exploring these hurdles, scholars have emphasised that return movement is very often inconclusive, hesitant, or gradual. Some employ 'provisional' returns, whereby refugees travel to their home countries to visit relatives, celebrate rituals and festivals, engage in religious pilgrimages, or assess the possibility of more long-term return (Long and Oxfeld 2004; Omata 2017). Others undertake 'split' returns in which 'households split when returning from exile to their country of origin, keeping some members behind while others start rebuilding their lives at home' (Harpviken 2014, 57). Such return movements have often been conceived by policymakers as 'transition measures' (ibid: 60), that ultimately lead to full repatriation.

Nonetheless, over the past two decades, a growing scholarly focus on the mobility of refugees has shown that return processes may ultimately, even if unintentionally, result in long-term dispersal, as they intermesh with other migratory patterns and livelihood strategies. Monsutti (2005; 2010) sheds light on the multi-directional movements of Afghan refugees across Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. Afghan's pre-war mobility patterns endure as a livelihood strategy, and cross-border movements continue, so that return 'does not necessarily mean the end of displacements' (Monsutti 2008, 61). Other scholars have described similar patterns of movements as 'revolving' returns (Hansen 2007), 'part-time' returns (Hammond et al. 2011) or 'circular' returns (Vlassenroot, Mudinga, and Musamba 2020; Manji 2020). As research conducted among Eritrean (Adugna, Rudolf, and Getachew 2022), Somali (Betts et al. 2016), and Burmese refugees (Bree 2010) has shown, such movements often forge trans-local livelihoods which contribute to overcoming some of the challenges associated with protracted displacement (Jacobs et al. 2022; Wake and Barbelet 2020).

Because of their apparent instrumentality, the transnational mobilities of refugees are often portrayed in overtly positive terms. The literature on refugees, as the literature in the social sciences more broadly (Salazar 2016), typically associates mobility with agency, freedom, and the capacity to strategize and leverage opportunities. Movement allows refugees, for example, to diversify livelihoods, maintain transnational relations, and improve their welfare and protection as well as the future life trajectories (see also, Manji 2020; Etzold and Fechter 2022; Long 2014). Return movement can lead to establishing 'dual foothold' among refugee households – using refugee camps as a 'safety net' where refugees can always go back and access what they need, including education, health care, and livelihood opportunities (Jansen 2016; Betts, Omata, and Sterck 2021). Through moving back and forth, refugee households generate 'room for manoeuvre' (Long 2001), maximising the benefits in both their country of origin and asylum to meet the different needs and objectives of family members (Manji 2020).

Nevertheless, critical scholarly work also highlights that displaced people move in response to necessity or exacerbating conditions in exile. Humanitarian agencies are often unable to meet all the needs of refugees in exile nor support them in establishing sustainable livelihoods. For many, full political and economic integration remains elusive for years and decades. In such circumstances, return may be something refugees are compelled to consider. Drawing from ethnographic research with Eritrean refugees, Cole and Belloni (2022, 133) propose the concept of 'retreat' to illustrate how return may not be part of a process of 'rebuilding or re-establishment' but rather, a 'tactical' step refugees undertake 'due to both a lack of substantive opportunities in exile and the possibility of upholding certain professional or familial expectations' at home. In this article, similarly, we go beyond describing return migration as nonlinear (in spatiotemporal terms) or instrumental (in socio-economic terms) to suggest that it may also be undertaken due to the precarity of life in exile.

We contribute to the conversation by shedding light on a type of 'return' movement that is, paradoxically, geared towards allowing refugees to continue sustaining themselves and their relatives in exile. Unlike the Eritreans Cole and Belloni met, some of whom returned from Uganda because they assumed that it would be more legitimate for them to ask other relatives in the diaspora to send monetary support to Eritrea (Cole and Belloni 2022, 137), the South Sudanese we spoke to have been returning to South

Sudan so that they could generate an income and support the refugeehood of their families in Uganda. Furthermore, forced migration researchers, particularly those focusing on displacement within Africa, have paid limited attention to the emotional and affective implications of transnational dispersal (Tiilikainen et al. 2023). In this article, we highlight the hidden costs associated with practices of ‘split return’ among South Sudanese and the ways in which border-crossing and separation bear on the well-being of household members.

Given the freedom of movement that refugees enjoy in Uganda and the large number of refugees the country hosts, several works on South Sudanese mobilities in this country and across its borders have been published in recent years (Vancluysen 2022; O’Byrne and Ogeno 2021; Gidron 2022). Drawing from qualitative data, these studies investigate the ‘everyday mobilities’ of refugees and highlight the extent to which their informal cross-border mobilities represent an ‘empowering’ strategy (Vancluysen 2022) and a ‘powerful manifestation of their agency’ (O’Byrne and Ogeno 2021). Building upon these works, our article aims to elucidate the perceptions and intentions embedded in return movements and conceptualise mobile practices based on the lived experiences of South Sudanese refugees. Using qualitative data from both Uganda and South Sudan, we explore the meanings, perceptions, and consequences of return movement from refugees’ own perspectives, problematising the positive analytical tone of previous research. Quantitative data, meanwhile, allows us to gauge both the scope of the phenomena we are describing and their economic implications.

4. Context and site selection

Mobility was a common feature of life in the pre-colonial history of many of the societies inhabiting what is today South Sudan, but colonial violence (the British ‘pacification’ of southern Sudan continued into the 1930s) and post-colonial warfare led to new forms of displacement. Sudan’s first (1963–1972) and second (1983–2005) civil wars resulted in the mass movement of refugees across the country’s borders, and each was followed by large-scale repatriation campaigns that also entailed continuous cross-border movement and dispersal (Hovil 2010; Kaiser 2010). The outbreak of civil war in South Sudan in late 2013, slightly more than two years after the country’s hopeful independence, resulted in what is today Africa’s largest refugee crisis, with more than 2.2 million South Sudanese hosted as refugees in neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2023). Of these, more than 935,000 live in Uganda.

Most South Sudanese in Uganda left their country due to the civil war that broke out in December 2013, although a small number of them are refugees who fled during Sudan’s second civil war and never returned. It was, in particular, the spread of the conflict into the southern parts of South Sudan throughout 2015, and the collapse of the 2015 peace agreement between the South Sudanese government and the armed opposition in 2016, that led to mass displacement into Uganda. Most South Sudanese refugees are hosted in settlements in northern Uganda. Uganda’s approach to refugee support has long promoted ‘self-reliance’ through access to cultivable land. However, in practice, due to the large number of refugees hosted in the country, most South Sudanese have been granted small plots and cannot sustain themselves through cultivation. Refugees are

free to move within Uganda and settle in urban areas, but those who do forego the limited aid, land, and shelter that is provided in the settlements. Refugee affairs in Uganda are overseen and managed by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) through its Department of Refugees.

As noted above, to examine the motives for and consequences of return movement to South Sudan, we chose to focus our study on refugees in or from one settlement. Established in 2016, Pagirinya is the second-largest settlement in Adjumani District in Northern Uganda and is located roughly 22 km south of the border (Figure 2). At the time of research, Adjumani was Uganda's largest refugee hosting district, with a population of more than 220,000 refugees, almost exclusively South Sudanese. By September 2022, and following a 'verification' exercise, the number of refugees formally registered in Pagirinya was 37,806. The majority of the settlement's residents (74.5% at the time of research) are Ma'di refugees who fled Magwi County in South Sudan's Eastern Equatoria State. The second-largest community is Nuer (7.5%), almost all of whom originate from Mayom County in Unity State.⁴ Other minorities in the settlement include Lotuko, Acholi, Kuku, and Bari from South Sudan's Eastern and Central Equatoria, as well as Dinka refugees. Pagirinya settlement is located within the territories of Pagirinya village, home to a small population of close to 2,000 Ugandan Ma'di.

Livelihood opportunities for refugees are limited in Pagirinya and Northern Uganda more broadly, a region with some of the highest poverty indicators in the country



Figure 2. Pagirinya settlement and the South Sudan-Uganda borderlands.

(Kakumba 2022). While all households in Pagirinya were granted small plots of land by the Ugandan government for shelter and agriculture, these are not sufficient for cultivation beyond a small ‘kitchen garden’. Therefore, refugees who wish to cultivate need to rent or borrow land outside the settlement from host communities. Since land is rented primarily for cultivation for self-consumption, it can be challenging to retain it over seasons. Employment or casual labour opportunities are few in and around the settlement, while business opportunities are severely limited due to the modest purchasing power of the settlement’s population. Most refugee traders in Pagirinya’s markets are women who engage in small-scale trade of food items. This type of trade entails buying goods in bulk and reselling them in smaller portions, often for tiny margins.

At the regional level, the question of refugee returns has attracted considerable attention from policy makers since the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in late 2018. The South Sudanese government, with donor support, developed a National Framework on Return, Recovery, and Reintegration in 2019, which was followed by an Action Plan on Return, Reintegration and Recovery. In October 2020, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), with support from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Governments of South Sudan and Sudan, launched a ‘Solutions Initiative’ for Sudan’s and South Sudan’s displacement crises (UNHCR 2020). As part of this initiative, and with UNHCR’s support, the South Sudanese government has been developing an additional National Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan. Nonetheless, amidst high levels of violence and instability across the country, slow and partial progress with regards to the implementation of the peace agreement, acute humanitarian needs, and fears of return to war, humanitarian agencies and donors have generally been more reluctant to encourage returns.

UNHCR and South Sudan’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) publish regular updates on ‘spontaneous refugee returns’ which draw upon ‘monitoring’ activities and interviews conducted by the RRC at border points across the country. According to their data, between the signing of the R-ARCSS in October 2018 and September 2023, more than 997,000 refugees had ‘spontaneously’ returned, of which more than 359,000 came from Uganda (UNHCR 2023). The methodology informing this data may be questionable, but the figures do point to a trend whose precise nature and implications are yet to be fully understood. UNHCR’s position remains that countries hosting South Sudanese refugees should refrain from forcibly sending them back to South Sudan (UNHCR 2021). However, in what it describes as a pragmatic and careful attempt to respond to realities on the ground, the agency does endeavour to support individuals who are returning ‘spontaneously’ to several relatively stable areas it recently labelled ‘pockets of hope’ (UNHCR 2022).

5. Return movements from Uganda

South Sudanese refugees in Uganda often travel to their country of origin, and cross-border movements are widely acknowledged and rarely concealed (Vancluysen 2022; O’Byrne and Ogeno 2021; Gidron 2022). Refugees in Pagirinya openly spoke about trips across the border for a wide range of reasons: burying the dead and attending funerals, farming and protecting ancestral lands, retrieving documents and certificates,

attending religious events, as well as simply visiting family relatives. At the centre of Pagirinya, there is a taxi 'stage' where small vehicles depart to Adjumani town and Elegu when full (Figure 3). Humanitarian agencies and government officials working with South Sudanese refugees in Uganda are aware of such movements, not least because the refugees they interact with – volunteers and 'incentive workers', 'beneficiaries' of projects, refugee leaders – occasionally disappear from the settlement. Border officials are also aware that many of those crossing are refugees, but accept that such movement cannot and should not be prevented. As one official told us: 'You can be a refugee for one week, and then you cross, and then come back.'

In line with our qualitative data, our survey findings highlight the extent to which cross-border mobility among South Sudanese refugees in Uganda is common. As part of our survey, we asked all adult refugees in the households sampled about their trips to other urban areas in Uganda and to South Sudan over the past three years, that is, since February 2020. Our data shows that mobility across the border is far more common among refugees than movements between the settlement and urban areas in Uganda (Figure 4). More than half (53%) of the adult refugees in Pagirinya reported visiting South Sudan at least once in the past three years. However, within the same period, only 15% visited Gulu, a major urban hub located 90 km away (about one and a half hours by bus), and merely 7% travelled to Kampala, Uganda's capital city (nine to ten hours by bus).

The reasons for movement highlight the importance of transnational socio-economic networks. In our survey, the most common reasons for travelling to South Sudan (Figure 5) were family visits and meetings, attending funerals, and working (including engaging in casual labour). It was also common for refugees to cross the border to



Figure 3. The road to Pagirinya (left), and the settlement's main public transport stage (right).

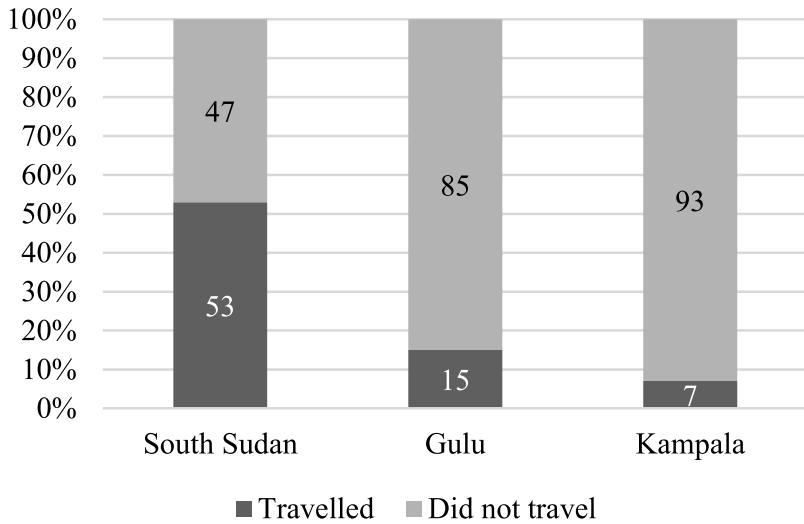


Figure 4. Percentage of refugees who travelled to different destinations in the past three years.

farm, trade, and attend to sick relatives.⁵ Nonetheless, it is important to note that economic and socio-cultural factors are closely intertwined in this context. For example, burying the dead in their ancestral land carries immense cultural importance, but is also an act with economic implications. Land-grabs have been a major source of friction in South Sudan’s civil war and graves commonly serve as evidence of land ownership. In the same vein, a family visit can be a pretext for soliciting economic support. One refugee, for example, explained that when he travels to visit family relatives, they always share some crops or cash to support him and his family in Pagirinya.

While refugees often undertake short trips to unite with relatives and seek economic opportunities in South Sudan, some travel for more extended periods of time or have left the settlement altogether. Our survey shows that in close to half of the households in

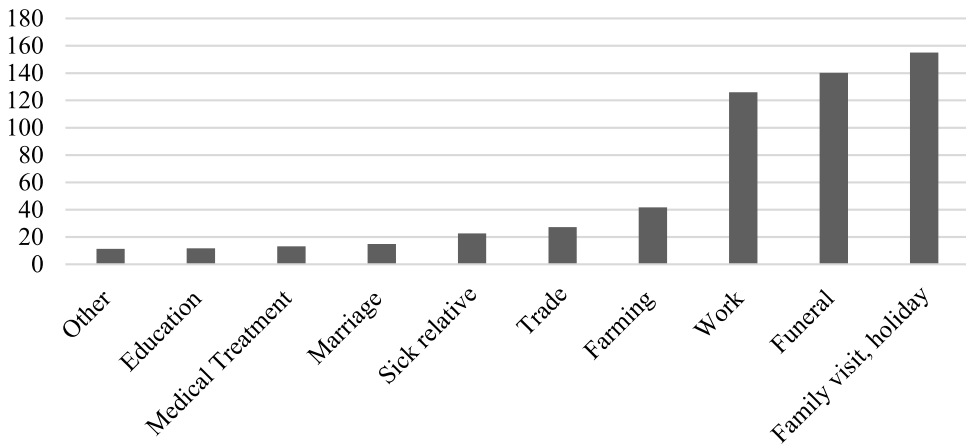


Figure 5. Number of trips to South Sudan undertaken for different reasons. Survey respondents were asked to report all trips they undertook in the past three years.

Pagirinya (47%) at least one person had left for South Sudan or was not regularly residing in Uganda at the time of data collection.⁶ Crucially, the type of cross-border movements we recorded in our research are not reflected in official statistics, because, as our survey data also indicates, 65% of the refugees who had left Pagirinya for South Sudan were still registered as refugees in the settlement.⁷ In the following sections, we take a closer look at the economic challenges motivating return movement, the way returnees in South Sudan support their relatives in Uganda, and the high emotions toll associated with this kind of dispersal.

6. Returning to fund refugeehood

As opposed to short trips, which are mostly undertaken for the purpose of family visits and funerals, the most common reason refugees cited for travelling to South Sudan for longer periods was the need to generate an income to support family relatives who remained in the settlement. Respondents particularly noted that this income was needed to allow them to buy food and cover the costs of education. As discussed earlier, opportunities to engage in income generating activities in Adjumani are extremely limited. Reductions in the humanitarian aid provided to the refugees in recent years have further contributed to their economic precarity. The rations distributed to refugees were first cut by 30% in April 2020 and then reduced by an additional 10% (to 60% of the full ration) in February 2021. These cuts had a particularly acute impact in light of rising commodity prices and inflation since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The lack of livelihood opportunities combined with reductions in aid increasingly made it impossible for parents to find money to feed their children and keep them in school. This led to a rise in return movement that is primarily geared towards supporting refugeehood in Uganda. One Nuer man in his forties, for example, originally from Mayom County, explained why he decided to leave his eight children and wife in Pagirinya in 2020 and move to Juba:

There are two reasons. When you see your children hungry, you are forced to look for any means to survive. The other one is the money of school [*yiow duëlggɔɔrää*]. You don't take your children to Uganda to see them again at home without going to school. When they introduced the [school] fee, they need money, and you can't afford. That is why I decided to come to Juba. To look for money. [...] I knew that when those things happened, I don't have options, I have to leave. [...] If I was there, everybody will be suffering. Life is better when I am here and they are there.

Similar narratives were repeated throughout our interviews in Juba. In Gudele area of the city, we interviewed a mother of eight who fled from Nimule to Pagirinya in 2016, but two years later, decided to leave her family in the settlement and travel to Juba. As noted by other refugees from Pagirinya, as well as the male refugee cited above, she deemed her own area of origin in South Sudan, in Eastern Equatoria, unsafe. She came to Juba to try to earn some money in order to support her family in Uganda and found work washing clothes (Figure 6). Because she was still registered in the settlement as a refugee, she had to travel to Uganda regularly to attend food distributions. She also travelled to the settlement for the 'verification' campaign in 2022. From Juba, she regularly sent her family in Uganda money and food items. She explained:



Figure 6. Laundry drying outside the house of a returnee from Pagirinya in Juba.

Money is hard [to get] in the camp. I was looking for money. The kids need medication, clothes, school ... I came back – stopped briefly in Nimule and came to Juba. The killings were still there, in Nimule. You cannot find money. Here [in Juba], I went to a hotel and I was washing clothes. These clothes here [hanging in the garden], I bring them from the hotel. [...] If I was in Pagirinya, I could not make money to support my family.

Tuition fees vary between schools in Pagirinya, but even the cheapest options are challenging to cover. This means that external support is crucial, particularly in households with several children. It cost about Ugandan Shillings (UGX) 9,500 (USD 2.55) per term at the time of our research to send a child to Pagirinya Primary School, the only government school in the settlement. This does not include associated costs such as school materials (notebooks, report cards, pencils, pens) and the termly exam fee of UGX 2,000 (USD 0.55). Private primary schools charge more. Pagirinya Secondary School, a private institution led by refugees but supported by some NGOs, is the only secondary school in the settlement. A term in this school costs about UGX 75,000 (USD 20.5), excluding school materials and the initial admission fee. In most schools, children are also required to cover the cost of food – several kilos of maize and beans per term.

Interviewees agreed that the practice of splitting families across the border to fund life in Uganda is new. Many of the refugees residing in Pagirinya today were refugees in Uganda during Sudan's second civil war. Nonetheless, livelihood opportunities were more available in Uganda during that time, not least because refugees were fewer and had greater access to cultivable land. Moreover, the accelerated commodification of education in South Sudan occurred in the years following Sudan's second civil war, as cash became more accessible and formal education was seen as key for accessing opportunities with NGOs and the government. This led to school fees becoming a major expense in

South Sudanese households (Aquila 2021). As one refugee who was born in the 1990s to a South Sudanese refugee family in Uganda summarised, ‘Nowadays, school fees are an issue. Those days, some kids didn’t go to school and no one bothered.’ Today, Uganda’s education system is considered to be of high quality among South Sudanese, and parents are keen to keep their children in school in Uganda for as long as the situation in South Sudan remains unstable.

It is telling that none of our interviewees in Juba reported making any concrete plans or preparations to bring his or her family to Juba or anywhere else in South Sudan. Further, none of the refugees interviewed in Pagirinya who had a partner or relative in South Sudan reported making any preparations for joining them, and none saw the return of their relatives to South Sudan as a step in a process of full repatriation. This is because there is generally little faith that the peace agreement in South Sudan will hold for long. ‘The peace in South Sudan is not very optimistic; people don’t really believe this peace,’ one male refugee in Pagirinya noted. As another female refugee from Magwi County, interviewed in Pagirinya, summarised:

When we talk about voluntary repatriation, this is when you go to OPM and they will remove your refugee status. But some people go illegally – their refugee status remains. They move with a lot of difficulties. This is why I am saying, voluntary repatriation is not happening. Those who move cannot be considered as voluntarily going to South Sudan.

It may be tempting to interpret the cross-border ‘return’ movements of refugees from Uganda to South Sudan as part of a gradual and cautious process of repatriation. After all, a peace agreement has been signed, and the South Sudanese government’s position, as described to us by a senior government official, is that all refugees are encouraged ‘to come and build the country together.’ Our data, however, tells a different story.

7. Casual labour in Juba and remittances to Pagirinya

Juba attracts returnees from Uganda because it offers opportunities for South Sudanese to engage in casual labour, locally known as ‘*yaumia*’ (‘daily’, in Arabic) or ‘*leja-leja*’ (in Ma’di and Acholi). For men, the most accessible income generating activity in Juba today is casual labour in the field of construction, working as porters, digging latrines, building houses, mixing cement, and so on. Social networks and a shared language help identifying opportunities, but incomes vary and fluctuate. ‘Contracts’ generally range from several days to even weeks, but some may be as brief as a few hours. Daily payments range between SSP 4,000 and 10,000 (USD 6.5–16.5) at the time of research. Women are more likely to find work washing dishes at small restaurants, selling food on the street, or washing clothes for individuals or hotels. Their daily incomes from such activities tend to be lower than those made by men in the construction sector, but their engagements also tend to be more regular and continuous, rather than *ad hoc*, meaning that earnings may be more predictable.⁸

Monetary support from across the border plays an important role in the livelihoods of the settlement’s residents. Studies of transnational networks often emphasise the role of remittances sent from individuals in the ‘Global North’ to relatives in ‘developing’ countries. Less attention is paid, however, to the distribution of resources among

communities *within* the ‘Global South’. Our data from Pagirinya indicates that the support refugees in the settlement receive comes primarily from relatives in South Sudan, and, to a lesser extent, from relatives or friends in Uganda. While 41% of the households in the settlement reported receiving at least some support from South Sudan over the past year, only 11% reported receiving support from Uganda and 0% reported receiving support from any other country, whether in Africa or outside it (Figure 7).

As most people who leave their families in Uganda typically engage in casual labour, the frequency in which they send money and the sums they send fluctuate. Some try to save and send every once in a while. A Nuer woman who cooks food in Mangateen area in Juba said she sends money weekly: ‘I get sometimes [SSP] 1,000 [USD 1.6 per day] and put it in the box. Then, at the end of the week, I take it out and send to the children. Every week I send [SSP] 5,000 [USD 8].’ One man explained that he sends money to his family once he manages to accumulate SSP 20,000 (USD 32.25). He said this happens ‘at least once every two months’. As the needs in Pagirinya press, however, some send funds more often, without attempting to accumulate, even if this means sending very small amounts. One woman who was making SSP 1,500 (USD 2.4) daily working at a small restaurant had only spent a month in Juba at the time she met us, but she had sent money to her children in Pagirinya twice within that period. The total amount of money she sent was SSP 9,000 (USD 14.5).

Ultimately, the sums of support sent from South Sudan to Pagirinya are small. Only 18% of the households that reported receiving support from South Sudan over the past year received, over this period, an amount that exceeded USD 200 (Figure 8). Cash is sent either physically with individuals who travel across the border or using mobile money through ‘agents’ in South Sudan. These agents maintain Ugandan mobile money accounts and are therefore able to charge their clients in SSP and send UGX to Ugandan mobile accounts for a fee.

The investments split households choose to make also point to their orientation towards survival in exile rather than return to South Sudan. One Nuer mother of five,

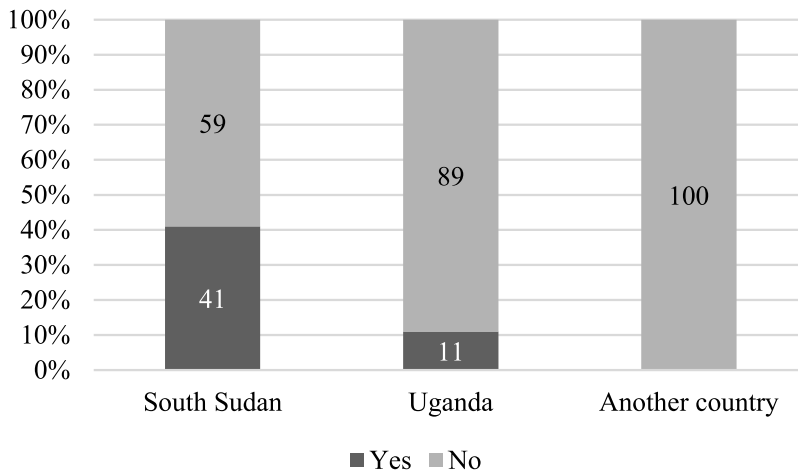


Figure 7. In the past year, has the household received any support from someone in ... ?

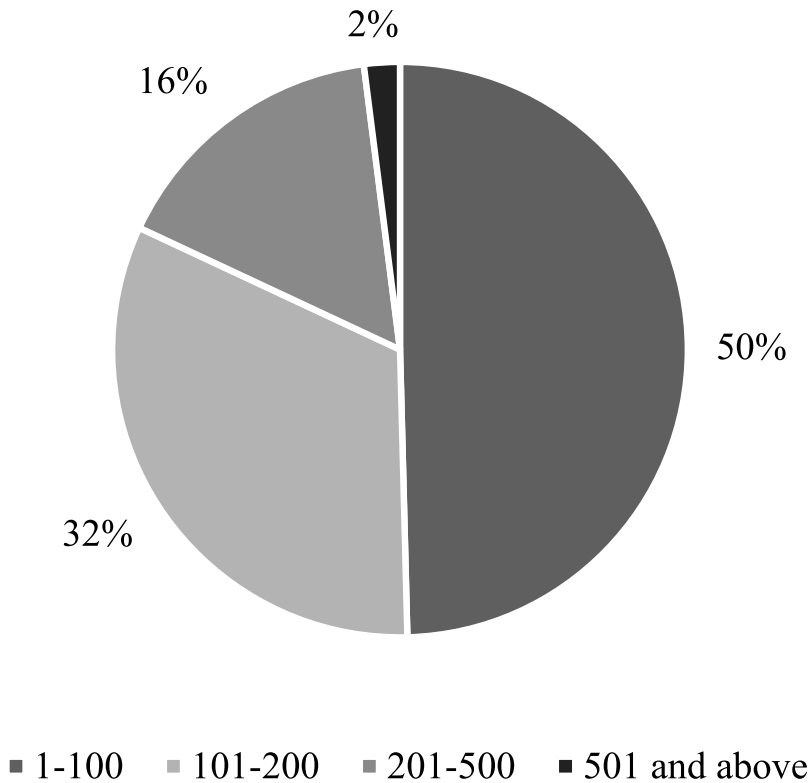


Figure 8. Amount of support sent from South Sudan to households in Pagirinya over the past year, of all households that reported receiving support from South Sudan (in USD).

for example, recounted how her husband left Pagirinya for Juba in 2020, and then came back to visit in 2021 with enough money to build a small tin-roofed bricks house for her and the children. After building the house, he returned to Juba, where he works and occasionally sends money to the family. Another interviewee in Pagirinya, a male refugee whose wife left for Juba, explained that while he would like to return to South Sudan one day, he does not plan to do so at the moment. His area of origin in South Sudan's Eastern Equatoria State is not safe, and the family is not making any preparations to travel to Juba. His wife only travelled to Juba to support her family in Pagirinya. Once she has enough money to return to the settlement and start a small business there, the interviewee explained, she plans to do so: 'We stay far-far because of the school fees. [...] After getting enough [to start a business], she can come and stay here.'

8. The costs of dispersal

Our interviewees in South Sudan and Uganda did not speak about their split households and mobilities in victorious terms or with pride. Rather, they emphasised the emotional challenges of living away from their families and children for extended periods of time. Regularly crossing the border to visit family members in-person is not affordable for those engaged in casual labour, even though the trip between Juba and Pagirinya only

takes a few hours. Transport from Juba to Nimule cost, at the time of our research, SSP 7,000 (about USD 11), and the trip from the border-crossing at Elegu to Pagirinya another UGX 20,000 (USD 5.5). During the holiday season – around Christmas and the new year – prices rise sharply. In this context, regular communication over the phone is often the only option people have. ‘We only speak on the phone, twice a day,’ a mother who has not seen her children for two years explained. Yet, over extended periods of time, mobile communication is not only expensive but barely addresses the emotional tolls that come with dispersal and separation.

First, interviewees spoke of the challenges split households present in relation to raising children. A woman who left her children in Pagirinya and came to Juba to work explained: ‘I am bearing it because I want to support them. [...] I miss them and I feel bad because they are far away.’ Another woman in Mangateen IDP camp, when asked how she feels about her life in Juba, said that it is ‘very bad’ and described how she is often unable to sleep and when she does, dreams of her children in Uganda: ‘There are nights that I don’t sleep, and sometimes I travel at night [in my dreams], and in the morning I come back [*la yōthā kē wäär, kē runwan bā luny jōk*],’ she explained. ‘Even when I am sitting, I imagine that I am in that place. But sometimes I find myself here.’ A man who left his family in Pagirinya for Juba explained:

I feel bad with the situation, [but] you need to shut these feelings or cover them. Every day, in the evenings, you talk to them, encourage them. When they ask for something, you have to give them, through the telephone [with mobile money]. Clothes, soap ... you have to tell them to be patient.

Other parents shared similar reflections. One mother who left her children in Pagirinya explained:

Where your children live, this is where you want to be. You have to see your children. But if you live in a certain place only to work and sleep, you cannot be happy. [...] When you have children, it is meant for you to stay close to them, but if you are away from the children, you cannot like it. If there is another reason that takes you away [from them], there is nothing you can do [*thiele mi deri lel*].

Others spoke about the challenges split household situations create when it comes to educating children. ‘Now the children are growing, and when they grow like that, especially the boys, when the voice of the man is not there, their upbringing will not be fine,’ one female refugee in Pagirinya, a woman whose husband left for Nimule in 2021, explained. Another man we interviewed in Pagirinya explained that his wife initially came with the children to Pagirinya while he remained in South Sudan, where he farmed and supported them with his income. After two years apart, he decided to join his family in the settlement because his boys were growing up and he and his wife felt that ‘they need the voice of a man’ in the house. ‘When my wife tells the children to do something, now I am here to support her,’ he explained. ‘Like, if they are going to disco at night [we tell them not to do so].’ After three years in the settlement, however, the couple struggled to cover their children’s school fees and the cost of food. This time, his wife decided to travel to Juba to find work. He stayed in Uganda with the boys, while his wife travelled with their youngest child, a girl. He explained:

It is not good to stay apart. If there was none [of] these whatever problems, we would not separate from each other. [...] I wish we could be together. If there was a way to stay

together, no need for us to stay separate. Like now, I am here and she is there. If we were together, we could talk every evening and share ideas. Let God help us to be together. When you are with the kids together, in the evening you sit with them, teach them about the importance of education, you move together to church, you have to stay together. The family sits together. It brings the family together in a good way. Now, she is there and I am here ...

Relations between partners also come under strain when families split. Some women residing alone with their children in Pagirinya spoke of a sense of suspicion and lack of trust that had developed over time between them and their partners, who were living in South Sudan. A mother of four whose husband left for South Sudan, where he works as a motorcycle taxi driver, explained:

Now he is there and we are here. Sometimes, he doesn't even know what is taking place here. You tell him that there is sickness, sometimes he doesn't believe. Even if you sleep here without eating, he cannot know. [...] For men, they sometimes think women are deceiving them.

Because women carry most responsibilities associated with taking care of children, there is often more pressure on them to move back to the settlement on a regular basis, despite the cost of such movement. This adds to the stress and sense of lack of control that family dispersal and households splits entail. One woman we interviewed in Juba, for example, travelled from Pagirinya with her youngest child to find work and support her other kids in the settlement, but had to return to Uganda the same month as one of her children fell ill. Since she was not able to find any work in Juba and did not earn any money, she had to collect donations for her trip back to Uganda. We interviewed her outside the Manga-teen IDP camp, the day before she left for Pagirinya. She was, in fact, scheduled to meet us later that week, but showed up for an interview earlier because she had to travel. 'I came to look for small work so that I can send money to the children. I came back to Juba, only with the baby,' she explained. 'But I am now going back because the child in the camp, the one who follows this one [the baby] is very sick. [...] I want to go and bring the sick child here and look for work.'

9. Implications and conclusions

The cross-border 'return' movement of South Sudanese we described in this article is undertaken to secure basic necessities due to the deteriorating living conditions in exile. Given the gradual reduction in food aid and absence of livelihood opportunities in Uganda, it has become financially inviable for refugees to make a living in the settlement. Therefore, many travel to their homeland, even though they still view South Sudan as an insecure and unstable place. None of our interviewees in Juba mentioned making any concrete plans to bring their family to the city or anywhere else in South Sudan, and none of our interviewees in Pagirinya had any intention to join those who went back to South Sudan as a step towards repatriation. These refugees are not abandoning their lives in exile. Rather, and somewhat paradoxically, many South Sudanese have been 'returning' to their country so that they can remain refugees in Uganda. At the time of our study, many refugees regarded Pagirinya settlement as a place to be invested in; a place that supported their own and their children's well-being and a place for protection. However, the only viable way for them to secure this protection was splitting their households across the border.

While various categories of return movement based on spatial and temporal features have been developed ('revolving', 'circular', 'pendular', and so on), in this article we examined the meaning of return movement from an emic perspective. We argue that for South Sudanese refugees from Pagirinya, 'return' is better described as a form of temporary economic migration for maintaining refugeehood. The policy language and conceptual framework of 'return' and 'repatriation' fail to represent in any meaningful way the cross-border practices of South Sudanese refugees between Uganda and South Sudan today, because their movement to Juba is primarily geared towards 'funding' life in exile. Moreover, while recognising that 'return' movements are logical and instrumental, we have shown that they do not promise upward socio-economic mobility. The small income 'returnees' generate from precarious labour in Juba is often remitted immediately back to Uganda in order to secure basic needs such as food and primary education. Refugees' 'return' movements may reflect their agency and help them establish a 'dual foothold' that takes advantage of opportunities across the border, but there is no prospect for sustainability or growth in their practices of border-crossing; if living conditions in the settlement do not improve, they may have to continue moving back and forth in order to maintain the status quo of refugee life.

Furthermore, we have shown that return movement and household splits entail hidden emotional costs. Interviewees both in Juba and Uganda spoke negatively about their dispersal and the impact of household splits on family bonds and child-rearing. Our findings indicate that 'split return' practices should be analysed holistically, rather than from a purely economic, instrumental vantage point, so as to allow us to understand how these practises affect relationships between spouses, parents, and children. This has implications for both scholarly research and policy. As noted above, globally and within the East African region, there has been a growing interest in mobility as a development-oriented solution to protracted displacement. But romanticising cross-border movement and household splits as innovative and empowering strategies or as manifestations of agency risks downplaying the fact that such measures are undertaken in the face of extreme adversity and come with high costs. Ultimately, the 'returns for funding refugeehood' we described here highlight how, with ongoing reductions in international assistance for protracted displacement, refugees must now find their own means to financially sustain their exile.

Notes

1. Names have been changed.
2. Conversion rates here and elsewhere refer to the time of our research.
3. Ma'di and Nuer mostly resided in separate clusters. For the Ma'di sample, we randomly selected ten clusters out of all of the settlement's Ma'di-dominated clusters (30 in number), and then randomly selected five to six households within each. Nuer only dominated five clusters in the settlement, so we employed one-stage cluster random sampling: We included all Nuer clusters and randomly selected 11–12 households to be sampled.
4. Data on the ethnic identity of refugees in Pagirinya was shared with us by OPM.
5. Trips to Kampala and Gulu were few and mostly geared towards family networks and access to education and health services. No refugee reported travelling to Gulu in order to work in the last three years, and only one refugee reported ever travelling to Kampala in order to work.

6. For the purpose of our survey, a person who spent most of his or her time outside the settlement over the past four months was considered to have left it. For instance, a refugee who regularly resided in Juba for the past four months but visited Pagirinya twice over this period, for a week each time, was recorded as living outside Pagirinya. Given the unpredictability of cross-border movement and the diverse reasons behind it, we acknowledge that any definition adopted in this context is somewhat arbitrary and there is no single, universally applicable definition that distinguishes between a mere 'trip' to South Sudan and a 'return' to the country. Therefore, the survey data on refugees who 'left' the settlement is analysed in light of other data from the survey and qualitative interviews. Typically, a refugee who fails to attend food distribution for three consecutive months is considered by humanitarian agencies to have 'left' the settlement. Following a series of discussions with refugees and based on our qualitative data, we chose a slightly longer but still relatively short period of time for our survey.
7. Our research in Pagirinya coincided with the 2022 'verification' exercise, during which all refugees in the settlement were required to register with their biometric data. At the time, it was not uncommon to meet in Pagirinya visitor who made their way from South Sudan for the purpose of retaining their refugee status in Uganda.
8. Some returnees who completed their secondary education in Uganda have been able to find work as teachers in schools. In most cases, however, even such employment opportunities tend to be extremely precarious and low paying.

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Data availability statement

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to its political sensitivity. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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