

CASE STUDY

SOUTH SUDAN 2023-2024 / COMPLEX CRISIS

CONTEXT / SETTLEMENT		SHELTER TYPE	SUPPORT METHODS
CRISIS	Complex (internal communal conflict, disasters and returns and refugees from Sudan)		
PEOPLE DISPLACED	188,000 people displaced in Malakal across crises (incl. 17,669 ind. for 2022 floods* and 16,672 returnees from the Sudan crisis in 2023**)		
PEOPLE WITH SHELTER NEEDS	8,000 people in Malakal as of 2023 (1,300–1,600 households)***		
PROJECT LOCATION	Malakal, Upper Nile state		
PEOPLE SUPPORTED BY THE PROJECT	1,045 people (186 HH, out of which 108 female-headed HH and 18 people with disabilities)		
PROJECT OUTPUTS	186 shelters constructed 3 safety audits conducted 5 HLP awareness sessions delivered		
SHELTER SIZE	18 m ²		
SHELTER DENSITY	3-3.6 m ² per person		
DIRECT COST	USD 650-700 per shelter		
PROJECT COST	USD 850-900 per household		

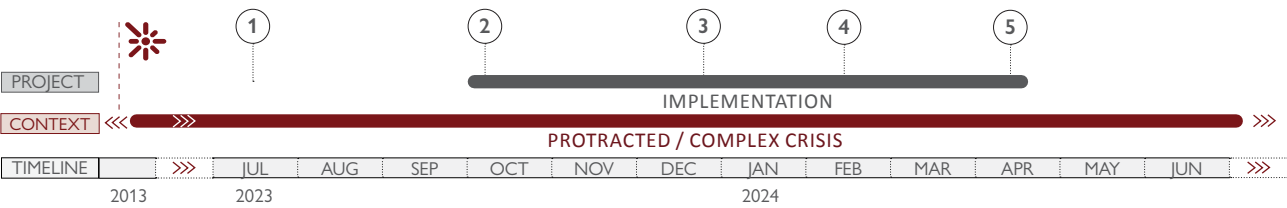


PROJECT SUMMARY

This project supported 186 households in Malakal between over four months through the construction of semi-transitional shelters, five HLP awareness sessions, and continuous land verification support. It combined shelter provision with safety audits, post-construction monitoring, community engagement, and referral pathways through a standing HLP desk linked to the Ministry of Housing, Land and Public Utilities. The intervention strengthened tenure security, safer occupancy, and community-based dispute resolution while generating practical lessons on how HLP engagement and user feedback can improve shelter programming in urban return settings.

* Sources: RRC & local authorities; ** UNHCR;

*** UNHCR/IOM and Ministry of Housing assessments.



- 1 Jul 2023: Needs assessment and planning conducted in Malakal; coordination with UN agencies, Ministry of Housing, and NGOs.
- 2 Oct 2023: Official project launch; start of shelter construction.
- 3 Dec 2023: Completion of first batch of shelters; safety audits conducted to ensure standards.
- 4 Feb 2024: Land rights awareness sessions delivered; collaboration with the Ministry of Housing for land verification.
- 5 Apr 2024: Handover of 186 shelters to households; monitoring and evaluation initiated.



The project supported people returning from Sudan who had land in Malakal.

BACKGROUND

The project took place in Malakal, Upper Nile State, during an overlapping period of needs. From April 2023, the war in Sudan drove significant return movements into South Sudan, including Malakal (see case study A.05 for more details on the crisis background). The intervention was designed to help vulnerable returnees access safer, more dignified shelter while navigating unresolved HLP issues that complicate occupancy and reintegration in urban areas.

SITUATION BEFORE THE CRISIS

Before successive waves of conflict and displacement, households in Malakal commonly self-built or incrementally improved homes with familiar techniques using timber, poles, bamboo, mud plaster, and lightweight cladding. Land access often relied on customary arrangements, local administration and social networks. Even then, tenure could be fragile; when homes were destroyed and populations dispersed, competition over plots intensified and previous informal arrangements were harder to reclaim, particularly for households returning after years away.

SITUATION DURING THE CRISIS

The influx of returnees linked to the Sudan conflict sharply increased shelter demand. Many new arrivals stayed with relatives, occupied public buildings or moved through the UN-military secured Protection of Civilians sites (PoCs), lacking however adequate housing and documentation to prove plot rights. In this context, the effectiveness of shelter investments depended on plot verification and the right to use the land, not only on materials and construction. The project's targeted caseload remained small relative to unmet need; reports indicated that over 1,600 returnee cases had been verified by the State Ministry of Housing, Land and Public Utilities (MoH) but were still awaiting support.

NATIONAL SHELTER STRATEGY

The project aligned with the South Sudan Shelter and NFI Cluster framework. This included the use of endorsed typologies and a mixed supply approach that drew on the availability of internationally procured common pipeline items for certain components and local procurement for others, accompanied by coordination with authorities for land processes. The approach situated a small-scale construction project within a system that harmonized technical choices, facilitated materials flow, clarified responsibilities between state and cluster actors, and linked individual cases to MoH verification, complaint handling and dispute resolution mechanisms.

PROJECT DESIGN

The project combined direct construction of transitional shelters with a standing HLP interface and community engagement. The design adhered to cluster-aligned specifications and a blended supply chain: bamboo, wooden poles and plastic sheeting were requested through the common pipeline after approval of the needs analysis and pipeline request; iron sheets, timber, nails, hinges, locks and binding wire were procured locally. This approach helped standardize core shelter inputs while using local markets for complementary materials and adapting to beneficiary preferences.

This design reflected the cluster's wider scope from the previous purely emergency arrangements to more durable and transitional solutions outside the protected sites. The HLP desk, referrals to MoH and community-based dispute resolution were integral to the strategy to mitigate eventual delays between the construction and the legal right for occupancy.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Implementation in Malakal was carried out by a team including a project officer, field associates, community engagement and accountability staff, community mobilizers and contracted labor. Activities followed a practical sequence that helped coordinate case sequencing, materials flow, complaint handling and occupancy support:

1. **Stakeholder and authority engagement:** early meetings aligned the caseload and clarified the role of the MoH and the HLP committee in verification and case follow-up.
2. **Needs analysis and pipeline request:** cluster review and approval allowed release of pipeline items to the organization's storage.
3. **Beneficiary and plot verification:** eligibility focused on vulnerable returnees; plots were verified to confirm land status before construction.
4. **Procurement and transport:** local contracting supplied iron sheets and hardware; pipeline items moved from the common pipeline warehouse to organization storage, then onward to sites.
5. **Construction supervision and quality control:** project staff supervised works carried out by local contractors and laborers, with community mobilizers maintaining communication and collecting feedback during delivery.
6. **Aftercare and follow-up:** three safety audits and a post-construction monitoring exercise informed risk reduction, complaint handling and occupancy support after handover.

TARGETING

Targeting prioritized vulnerable returnee households linked to the Sudan crisis, including female-headed households, widows, older persons, persons with disabilities and pregnant or lactating women. The process involved the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), MoH, returnee leaders and the HLP committee. Only upon verification of land status did construction proceed.

Targeting was made explicit early in the process because land casework and verification underpinned the project's operational choices and sequencing.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement ran alongside verification, construction and aftercare. Five HLP awareness sessions covered property rights under the Transitional Constitution, documentation pathways, plot verification steps, dispute channels and women's tenure security. A standing HLP complaints and legal-advice desk received and referred cases to MoH and the HLP committee. Community mobilizers conducted regular visits, held meetings with leaders and gathered feedback on preferences for the shelter walls, with a particularly strong demand for mud plastering of walls (over a bamboo frame, wattle and daub) over exposed plastic sheeting to improve privacy, thermal comfort and habitability standards, once the land claim had been resolved positively.



Materials for the shelter frames were procured from the Common Pipeline, while roofing sheets and hardware items came from local contractors.



Most families preferred the wattle-and-daub shelters with mud plastering.

RISKS AND MITIGATION MEASURES

Three participatory safety audits used household interviews, FGDs with women, men, older persons and persons with disabilities, observation walks and key informant interviews. Recurring risks included inadequate lighting on access routes, unsafe movement at night, limited privacy and accessibility barriers to latrines and water points, and fire risks when cooking near plastic-sheet walls. Responses included strengthened safety briefings, promotion of safer cooking practices, referrals to WASH and protection partners, encouragement of stronger doors and locks, simple fencing where possible and recommended accessible paths and ramps for households with mobility needs. Findings were shared in community briefings, reinforcing safer occupancy messages.

HANDOVER

Shelters were handed over to beneficiaries, often in the presence of MoH representatives. Handover was connected to complaints management and post-construction follow-up rather than treated as a purely technical step. Community briefings and safety-audit discussions supported safer occupancy and reinforced confidence during the transition into the new shelters.

OUTCOMES AND WIDER IMPACTS

Post-construction monitoring found that 90 per cent of respondents were sleeping in the constructed shelters after handover, compared to earlier arrangements such as staying with relatives, public premises or open areas. Regarding satisfaction levels, 69 per cent were satisfied, 28 per cent partially satisfied and only 3 per cent dissatisfied; concerns focused on shelter size, the desire for mud-plastered walls, heat and durability. The same monitoring indicated that 92 per cent of affected people felt shelter was accessed in a safe, accessible, accountable and participatory manner. The most-used complaint channels were the MoH, community leaders, NGO staff and the HLP team, with just over half of reported complaints resolved by the time of monitoring. Beyond direct outputs, the project strengthened coordination, land-verification systems and community feedback mechanisms, while underscoring the magnitude of unmet shelter needs in Malakal.



Beyond shelter, the project supported families with increased tenure security.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

STRENGTHS

- ✓ **Integrated shelter–HLP delivery for safer occupancy.** The project intentionally coupled construction with a standing HLP desk, MoH referrals and plot verification, avoiding a situation in which families receive structures they cannot legally or safely occupy. This integration made a small shelter intervention more impactful in an urban return setting with complex HLP dynamics.
- ✓ **Coordination across authorities and clusters.** The MoH and HLP committee handled verification and disputes; the Shelter and NFI Cluster reviewed the needs analysis and released common pipeline items. These linkages aligned standards, synchronized supplies and connected household cases to state processes.
- ✓ **Participation informed technical choices.** Community mobilizers and focused discussions surfaced a strong preference for mud-plastered walls over exposed plastic sheeting, allowing the team to adapt on site and improving usability, privacy and comfort.
- ✓ **Safety audits as a live risk management tool.** Three participatory audits fed directly into implementation adjustments (on issues like safer cooking, shelter access and security, lighting and accessible paths), helping refer and reduce protection risks.
- ✓ **Measured outcomes after handover.** High reported occupancy, majority satisfaction and strong perceptions of safety, accessibility, accountability and participation demonstrate the value of combining construction with HLP and community interfaces.

WEAKNESSES

- ✗ **Land verification slowed some starts.** Many households lacked documentation after years of displacement; some cases required extended MoH review before construction, affecting sequencing and creating uncertainty for families.
- ✗ **Targeting list gaps and complaint closure.** List discrepancies and unresolved grievances complicated implementation; just over half of complaints had been resolved at the time of monitoring, indicating the need to reinforce follow-up and case closure.
- ✗ **Design acceptance required on-site flexibility.** Demand for mud plastering necessitated adjustments in messaging and delivery. Earlier formalization of this option could have reduced friction and improved satisfaction more uniformly.
- ✗ **Labor rate disputes increased management load.** Concerns from masons about payment led to mid-course rate revisions; while this addressed tensions, it added complexity and indicates the value of clearer early communication on wages.
- ✗ **Not all shelters were occupied immediately.** Some households hesitated or were unable to move in at handover, requiring additional engagement with beneficiaries and MoH to address concerns and activate occupancy.



FURTHER READING ON SHELTER PROJECTS

On South Sudan Common Pipeline:
[SP 15-16 / A.24](#); and [SP 10TH ED. / A.04](#).

On shelter and HLP support for returnees:
[SP 8TH ED. / A.05 ETHIOPIA](#); [SP 17-18 / A.04 NIGERIA](#).

LESSONS LEARNED

- **Make HLP interfaces core to urban return shelter projects.** In urban contexts with layered displacement and fragile tenure, plot verification and an HLP desk with clear referral pathways should be embedded from the outset. This maximizes the likelihood that shelters are safely occupied and reduces disputes.
- **Institutionalize participatory safety audits.** Treat safety audits as a repeated operational tool linked to action tracking. Regular audits with specific groups (women, adolescent girls, older persons, people with disabilities) help teams respond to dynamic risks and direct referrals to WASH/protection partners efficiently.
- **Lock in user-preferred walling options earlier.** Given strong preferences for mud plastering, program designs in Malakal and similar contexts should promote and resource mudding earlier, clarifying roles, materials and timelines so that comfort and privacy improvements are delivered by design rather than ad hoc.
- **Anticipate labor market sensitivities.** Engage contractors and laborers early on wage rates, work organization and quality control. Clear agreements and swift, transparent adjustments where needed can reduce friction that otherwise slows works.
- **Strengthen complaints tracking to closure.** Publish multiple channels (MoH, community leaders, NGO staff, HLP desk), invest in case tracking and communicate aggregated complaint trends back to communities to reinforce accountability and alignment with expectations.