

CASE STUDY

SOUTH SUDAN 2023-2024 / SUDAN CRISIS

CONTEXT / SETTLEMENT		SHELTER TYPE	SUPPORT METHODS			
CRISIS	Sudan Crisis					
PEOPLE AFFECTED	11.1 million people affected* 150,000 (individuals)* lost lives					
PEOPLE DISPLACED	3.1 Million people displaced*					
PEOPLE WITH SHELTER NEEDS	25,000 people with shelter needs					
PROJECT LOCATION	Renk County, Upper Nile State, South Sudan					
PEOPLE SUPPORTED BY THE PROJECT	9,318 individuals (56% female, 44% male; 1,436 people with disabilities)					
PROJECT OUTPUTS	7 emergency communal shelters built 29 semi-permanent shelters constructed NFI and e-shelter kits distributed to 10,563 ind. 5 registration centers built at Joda border Site level activities: 1,670 m of access roads built; 3,140 m of drainage system installed; 200 solar-powered lighting facilities installed.					
SHELTER SIZE	96 m ² communal shelter size (16 x 6 m)					
SHELTER DENSITY	3.5 m ² per person					
DIRECT COST	USD 22,635 per shelter (material and labor)					
PROJECT COST	USD 55,555 per shelter (incl. site activities)					

Map showing the location of the project in Renk County, Upper Nile State, South Sudan. The map includes labels for Sudan, Ethiopia, Central African Republic, DRC, Uganda, and Kenya. A legend indicates the Project Location.

PROJECT SUMMARY

The project provided dignified communal shelter and critical site infrastructure for South Sudanese returnees and refugees transiting through Renk. Activities included site planning, the construction of semi-permanent communal shelters, improved access roads and drainage, and the installation of solar lighting at WASH and communal points to enhance safety and mitigate protection risks. A harmonized shelter design endorsed by the national cluster supported quality and consistency; the semi-permanent structures were planned to serve the host community and local authorities after the crisis.

* Sudan Situation UNHCR Emergency Response in South Sudan

PROJECT

CONTEXT

TIMELINE

1

2

3

4

5

6

PLANNING

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE 1

IMPLEMENTATION PHASE 2

HANDOVER

CRISIS

APR

MAY

JUN

JUL

AUG

SEPT

OCT

NOV

DEC

JAN

FEB

MAR

APR

MAY

JUN

JUL

AUG

2023

2024

✱

1

2

3

4

5

6

Apr 2023: Sudan Crisis started and still continuing.

Aug 2023: Land allocation.

Aug 2023: Land clearing and setting up land for shelter construction.

Oct 2023: Community engagement and negotiations with host community that had halted construction works.

Jan 2024: Completion of access roads with drainage systems.

Jan 2024: Installation of 200 solar powered streetlights.

Jul 2024: Handing over of completed shelters.

The project constructed communal shelters with inclusive design features.



Many South Sudanese returning from Sudan arrived at transit centers in Renk, leading to unsafe living conditions and makeshift shelter arrangements.



The existing transit sites were overcrowded and lacked privacy for returnees.

CONTEXT

Renk County is located near the border with Sudan and has a marked seasonal cycle (wet from June to October and dry from November to May). The area is home to several ethnic communities and livelihoods are largely based on agriculture, livestock and fishing, with some trade and natural resource production. As of 2020, prior to the Sudan crisis, population estimates suggested around 188,564 people. The county's northern location is relatively arid compared with other parts of South Sudan, and its border position supports regular cross border movement.

SITUATION BEFORE THE CRISIS

Sudan was a safe haven for many South Sudanese who fled the 2013 and 2016 conflicts that followed the establishment of the country. Renk county had had a history of multi-group coexistence even if the conflict had reached it, but overall conditions had improved following the 2018 peace agreement, with a gradual stabilization and recovery. Since 2014 Renk had also been serving as temporary state capital after Malakal fell to opposition forces, further elevating its administrative profile. Its border location nonetheless maintained Renk's role as a primary entry point for refugees, returnees and other nationals, often hosted in transit centres.

SITUATION AFTER THE CRISIS

The outbreak of conflict in Khartoum on 15 April 2023 triggered a sustained influx through South Sudan's northern border. Many of those refugees who had settled in Sudan were once again forced to return in search of safety. By November 2024, South Sudan had received approximately 848,540 cross-border arrivals, of whom more than 698,000 entered via Renk. Over 91% were South Sudanese returnees; the remainder were refugees and third-country nationals. An estimated 45% were children.

The returnees initially took shelter in the university compound, disrupting classes and other academic activities. Many families—predominantly women and children—were sheltering under fabric and blankets with minimal protection from weather and safety risks. In response, the Renk authorities, with the support of humanitarian partners, allocated land for new transit centres to decongest the university premises, accommodate the growing influx of returnees, and enable teaching to resume.

Transit centers and informal settlements faced escalating pressure on water and sanitation services, with vulnerability compounded during the rains. In October 2024, Renk experienced a cholera outbreak that subsequently spread to other regions. The capacity of host communities to absorb new arrivals waned, underscoring urgent needs in shelter, protection and WASH.



The project secured land for new transit facilities and adopted a coordinated approach to site planning and communal shelter provision.



Semi-permanent communal shelters were constructed alongside basic facilities and clearly organized areas in the site.

PROJECT DESIGN

The project's aim was to deliver communal shelter solutions and site improvements that restored dignity, reduced protection risks, and supported safe, orderly transit. Priorities at the national level included reducing protection threats and incidents faced by vulnerable individuals and ensuring that affected people had safe, timely and dignified access to appropriate services.

The project targeted 10,000 of the most vulnerable people by constructing communal shelters at the transit site. Designed to provide 3.5 m² per person, each 16 × 6 m shelter was sized to accommodate up to 27 occupants. The transit centre was intended for short stays, typically around two weeks, before returnees and refugees would move onward, enabling continuous rotation as new arrivals enter the site. At full occupancy, the 29 shelters provided capacity for up to 783 people at any given time.

Key parameters were harmonized across partners and endorsed by the national cluster. The project developed communal shelter typologies to house multiple households for temporary stays, enabling rotation as onward transport was arranged. The technical design integrated fire safety, drainage and accessibility and was later endorsed by the technical working group of the national cluster. Four core activities defined the approach:

- Site layout and planning. Adhering to global shelter standards while aligning with local practice. Sectorized blocks, safe walkways/passages and corridor planning prioritized accessibility and safety.
- Construction of semi-permanent communal shelters designed for dignified living conditions in transit. With a dual-purpose horizon: to serve immediate humanitarian needs and retain value for host communities or local authorities after the crisis.
- Safety and WASH enhancements. Improved lighting was installed within the site and at WASH facilities to mitigate protection risks, particularly at night.
- Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP). Training clarified stakeholder roles and responsibilities, criteria for beneficiary selection and entitlements. The program strengthened feedback mechanisms and emphasized key messages to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

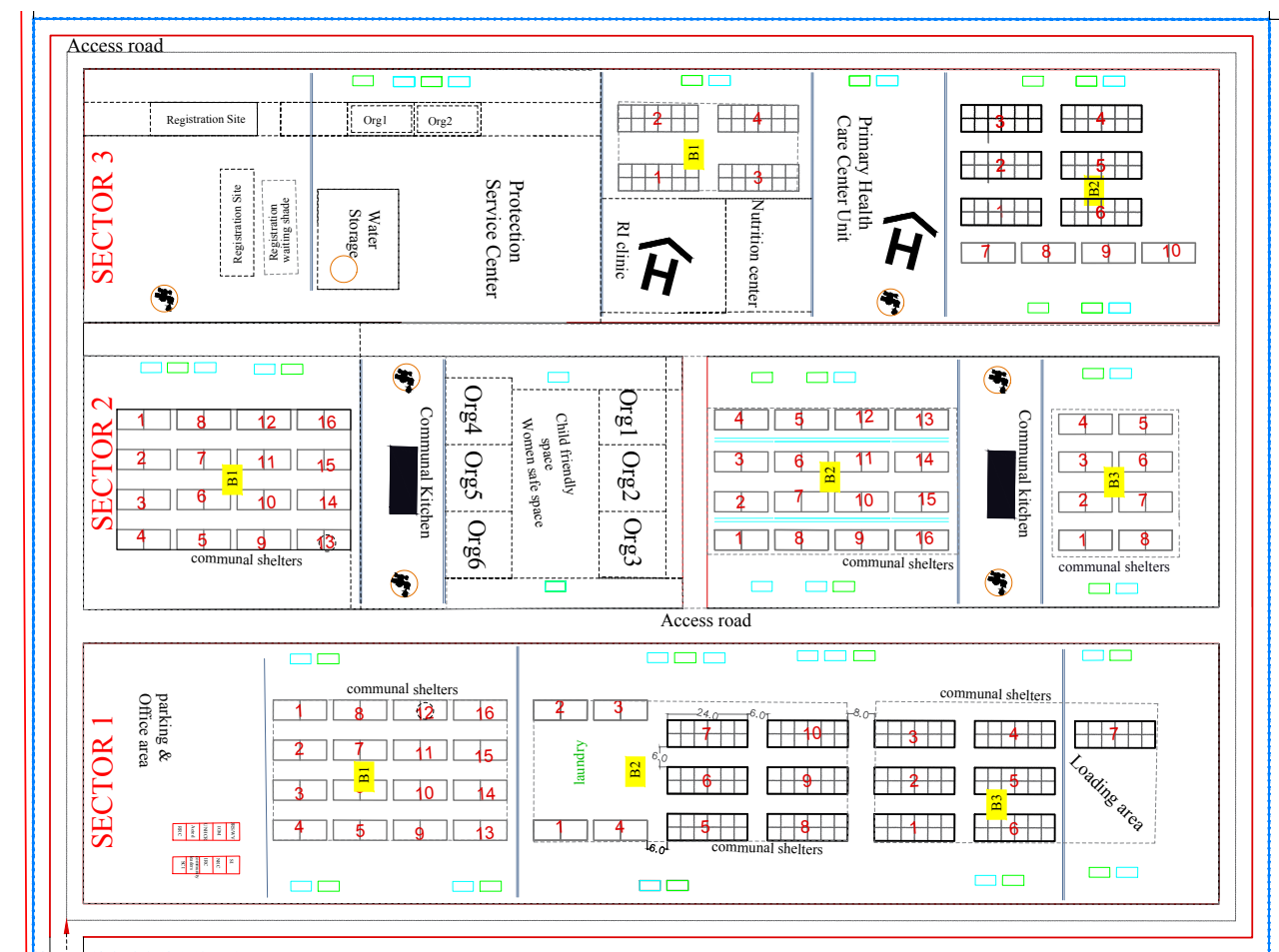
The site planning process was led by a multi agency technical team of engineers in close collaboration with the county land surveyor, local government officials and community chiefs. Authorities and host communities allocated one square kilometer for the transit center, of which approximately 350 m × 250 m was used initially. The area was divided into three functional blocks for shelter construction, WASH corridors, temporary learning spaces, women- and child friendly spaces and a hospital area. The layout incorporated four horizontal roads intersected by a single vertical road, organizing access and services coherently across the site.

Land issues resolution and community negotiations were central to the project's feasibility. Negotiations were conducted by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) on behalf of government and by humanitarian partners, with local chiefs representing the host community. The final agreement confirmed the land allocation for humanitarian use (right of use, not ownership), alongside defined community benefit commitments and youth prioritization for job opportunities. It also established that, once the crisis subsides, the land and any infrastructure developed would be handed back to the host community.

As implementation progressed, pricing shocks and logistics affected the supply chain, and the organization engaged a local contractor to manage the construction of communal shelters.

The overall implementation method balanced direct organization oversight with localized execution. A full time field Shelter Coordinator and a WASH/Shelter Officer were based in Renk, supported by technical specialists in the capital. Additional technical guidance from cluster coordination contributed to adherence with standards and alignment with the inter-agency design. While the construction works were carried out by a selected local contractor (involving the local community as well), other program components—such as education and protection—were delivered directly by the organization.

Training was conducted for shelter occupants and staff covering topics such as HLP, community dispute resolution, PSEA, complaints and feedback mechanisms, and GBV prevention, mitigation and reporting.



The site was organized in coordination with humanitarian partners and local authorities, ensuring clear access to spaces for communal shelters and site services.

TARGETING

Targeting focused on families arriving from Sudan, in urgent need of shelter prior to onward transportation beyond Renk. In cases where arrivals had no family connections or support networks, shelter at the transit center remained essential. In line with Shelter/NFI cluster criteria, priority was given to the most vulnerable: women, older people and persons with special needs. This approach functioned amid continuous construction of additional shelters and the onward movement of others to their destinations.

COORDINATION

The organization had been serving as co-lead of the national Shelter and NFI cluster for years and actively led coordination efforts within the response and beyond the project. Designs were coordinated and approved through the Cluster, allowing partners to construct with a single agreed typology. With CCCM structures facilitating the broader multi sector response, other essential service (including WASH, protection, health and food security) were coordinated and provided by partners with different funding streams. Daily and weekly meetings supported gap analysis, sharing of updates and adjustments. The Relief and Rehabilitation Commission and local authorities remained closely engaged throughout.

MATERIALS AND SUPPLY

Local supply constraints made reliance on distant supply lines costly and slow. The contractor approach leveraged longstanding ties to Sudanese markets where conflict impacts were uneven, accessing suppliers operating outside conflict areas, and helping source and deliver needed materials in Renk despite cross border disruptions and import bottlenecks. This solution complemented efforts to source some materials locally (e.g., sand, aggregates), while essential items such as iron sheets, timber, box pipes and fasteners were brought in from the capital.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

Environmental sustainability was addressed through an environmental screening and an accompanying management plan. The assessment flagged deforestation risk (outpacing regenerative capacity), limited solid waste management capacity, sanitation issues, potential disease transmission and carbon emissions associated with generators and machinery. Mitigation included community engagement to identify local environmental concerns and resource availability; using dried timber and diversifying the material palette; emphasizing the potential for future recycling, re-use or repurposing of components; and installing solar streetlighting to reduce carbon emissions and improve safe access at night.



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Affected people were engaged in the planning and implementation process. Most of the returnees were women, boys and girls.

OTHER CHALLENGES

Many returnees had been away from South Sudan for prolonged periods and had lost contact with families and places of origin, including access to land and property. Onward transport assistance was also less effective for some returnees, who chose to remain in Renk to monitor the security situation in Sudan rather than relocate. Extended stays further increased congestion in the initial transit center structures, contributing to heightened public-health risks, including a cholera outbreak.

During negotiations to expand the transit centre, the host community conditioned access to additional land on parallel investments including the construction or rehabilitation of a health facility and upgrades to key access roads. Community representatives also expressed concerns that assistance (particularly cash and vouchers) was favouring new arrivals over long standing residents, which increased the risk of friction and delayed agreement on the expansion.

OUTCOMES AND WIDER IMPACTS

On one hand, the increased shelter capacity allowed to host new arrivals in dignified conditions. On the other, site layout and planning established a coherent framework for services and movement. Access roads and drainage reduced exposure to hazards and facilitated service delivery, while solar lighting in circulation areas and at WASH points mitigated protection risks, especially at night, and improved the sense of security.

Lastly, the national cluster endorsed the harmonized communal shelter design, with inclusive features such as access ramps, internal partitions for privacy and gender segregation, and lockable door shutters. Outcomes monitoring and exit interviews also indicated very high satisfaction with the shelter solution.



FURTHER READING ON SHELTER PROJECTS

On South Sudan crisis: [SP 15-16 A.23-25 / SOUTH SUDAN](#)

On site planning: [SP 17-18 A.09 / SOUTH SUDAN](#)

On communal shelters: [SP 17-18 A.08 / SOUTH SUDAN](#)



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The living conditions of returnees posed safety and privacy concerns (left). The project provided communal shelters using durable materials to the families on the move (right), also ensuring that clear agreements were in place with the host communities for handover of the facilities after the crisis.

STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND LESSONS LEARNED

STRENGTHS

- ✓ **Inclusive design.** Shelter partners developed and agreed on coordinated designs meeting recommended technical standards and tailored to context. Inclusive features prioritized accessibility for persons with disabilities, older persons, pregnant women and those with serious illnesses.
- ✓ **Community engagement and accountability.**
 - The project embedded Do No Harm and AAP principles across activities. Engagement with the host community paused works where necessary to allow meaningful dialogue, leading to a common understanding and minimized conflict.
 - Additionally, agreements included support to the host community (e.g., a dam/reservoir, hospital road upgrade), and training enhanced awareness of rights, entitlements and feedback channels.
- ✓ **Coordination and partnerships across levels.**
 - Planning was collaborative, bringing together local authorities, humanitarian partners and the host community, which helped mitigate potential conflicts and supported acceptance of the site plan and shelter typology. Strong coordination with those actors and the affected people produced timely, harmonized implementation and improved acceptance.
 - Utilizing local contractors supervised by technical staff combined contextual knowledge, market access and technical oversight. Partnerships at multiple institutional levels supported negotiation over land and alignment with authorities.
- ✓ **Durability and future use of shelter solutions.** Higher quality materials and improved designs enhanced durability and resilience. In addition, the project operationalized the humanitarian development peace nexus with an exit concept: temporary living conditions during the crisis, followed by handover to authorities for development benefits after the emergency phase.

WEAKNESSES

- × **Coverage and scale.** Renk continues to receive a higher proportion of South Sudanese returnees and refugees than other border points. Shelter needs remain acute and expansion of transitional options is warranted; however, insufficient funding constrains scaling and leaves future phases uncertain. Humanitarian partners continue focusing on Onward Transport Assistance so transit centers can serve as temporary accommodation for at least two weeks.
- × **A tight project timeline** did not fully account for contingencies such as land negotiations, seasonal changes, market access challenges or surges in arrivals—factors that could interrupt ongoing work when newcomers occupied unfinished shelters.
- × **High expectations from the host community** increased the scope of requested support tied to land access; unclear communication from local authorities to the community on exit strategy further contributed to delays in formalizing an agreement for using the land.
- × **Administrative and access complexities.** Managing multi stakeholder negotiation and compliance during a rapidly evolving cross border crisis added complexity and contributed to delays in implementation at times.

RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

- Hold regular community meetings prior to project start to address concerns and strengthen communication between the host community and implementing partners. Extend services, where feasible, to vulnerable host community members in the surrounding area to uphold Do No Harm and foster social cohesion.

LESSONS LEARNED

- Address land allocation and HLP issues early with local authorities and host communities; formalize agreements through a tripartite MoU before construction to prevent disputes.
- Involve local communities, returnees and refugees in construction to generate income and foster social cohesion among groups.
- Adhere to established, harmonized shelter designs to ensure consistency, manage expectations and minimize tensions among affected populations.
- Promote inter cluster coordination and collaboration to enable integrated outcomes and smooth delivery across sectors. Task forces can expedite technical exchanges and coordination with national inter-cluster group, government and other actors.
- Engage closely with government counterparts throughout to support acceptance, sustainability and collaborative problem solving in rapidly changing conditions.