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Urbanization
as a result of displacement

A case study of Bentiu, South Sudan

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Background paper to the main report
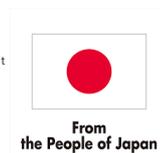
Urbanization as a Result of Displacement

A Case Study of Bentiu, South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

This report explores urbanization in Bentiu and Rubkona towns in Unity State, South Sudan. Using a host community perception survey and qualitative interviews conducted in August of 2018, this case study examines the impact that the introduction of a Protection of Civilians site has had on urbanization, establishes the perception of the host community, and clarifies what constitutes urbanization in a South Sudanese context. The findings revealed that insecurity in the area had interrupted development in both towns, which had consequently hindered urbanization in the area. The state's access to oil revenues was seen as a viable funding source for future development and economic stability, however respondents noted that this was contingent on security in both the locality and the country at large.

INTRODUCTION

In December 2013, political tensions in South Sudan's capital sparked widespread violence across the country. The outbreak of conflict interrupted fledgling development and state-building, which was initiated in 2005 when the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. During the current crisis, the people of South Sudan and humanitarian agencies have grappled with significant displacement and urgent humanitarian needs, which affect all regions of the country. The creation of protection of civilians (PoC) sites, which host hundreds of thousands of displaced people and are unique to South Sudan, changed the peacekeeping mandate of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to emphasize the protection of civilians. Today, there are six PoC sites across the country in or adjacent to UNMISS bases, which host 10 per cent of the country's displaced population. Since 2013, continued conflict across the country has led to PoC sites becoming long-term fixtures of the communities that host them, changing the urban landscape and leading to responsive strategies for the implementation of services and programmes funded by international aid.

This paper examines how displacement interacts with urbanization dynamics in a South Sudanese context. Specifically, it utilizes the country's largest PoC site - Bentiu PoC site located in Unity State - as a case study. To guide this research project, we ask the following questions:

1) Has the introduction of the PoC site, and the ongoing conflict, impacted urbanization for the towns of Rubkona and Bentiu? If yes, how? Which other factors have impacted urbanization and how is it understood in a South Sudanese context?

2) How are the perceptions of the host communities in the town impacted by the presence of the PoC site as well as the introduction of humanitarian agencies and services?

With the signing of the peace agreement in 2018, these themes acquire a greater significance as the country moves to a transition phase. To explore the research questions presented, two tools were implemented in Bentiu and Rubkona towns: a quantitative household survey to document the perceptions of residents of the towns and qualitative interviews, which explored the trajectory of urbanization in the area. Prior to independence in 2011, studies on Sudan tended to focus on Juba as a case study of urbanization, leaving a significant knowledge gap on other towns across the country (Pantuliano et al., 2011). The findings of this study reveal that the trajectory of urbanization in Bentiu and Rubkona are impacted by broader national events than just the introduction of the PoC site, primarily the withdrawal of oil revenues, which supported the state budget and funding of public services and infrastructure.

DISPLACEMENT IN A SOUTH SUDANESE CONTEXT

Displacement as a result of conflict is not new to South Sudan; since 1955, civil war has pushed people to seek safety both within the country and across international borders. Africa's longest civil war led to multiple generations of South Sudanese people becoming internally displaced from their ancestral homes, being born and raised in refugee camps and even resettled abroad. In 2011, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) began facilitating the return of refugees to their areas of origin so that they could then vote in the referendum for independence and start to help build a new country. The increased population in some areas led to tension over resources but it also allowed professionals, who had been able to access educational opportunities by traveling abroad, to contribute skills and knowledge that were direly needed in the post-conflict phase of construction and state-building.

Today, the UNMISS PoC sites host a total of 193,929 internally displaced persons (IDPs) across six locations. Of these, Bentiu PoC site hosts the largest number of IDPs, some 113,707 people (IOM DTM, October 2018), which is more than all the other PoC sites combined. This concentration of IDPs in such an area has elicited a humanitarian response that goes beyond providing food, health care and non-food items - interventions with regard to infrastructure and services are now part of the assistance package. Long-term planning of humanitarian responses is necessitated by the continuation of clashes in Unity State, which make certain areas of the state uninhabitable, despite a developing peace process.

Five years after the initial outbreak of conflict, the longevity of displacement in South Sudan and its unique displacement context, including the establishment of PoC sites, has created a new discourse that acknowledges the complexity of how people respond to the insecurity they encounter. While people are being displaced from one area of a state, others may be returning to a different area. Furthermore, cyclical movements are becoming more common in South Sudan where IDPs continue to reside in PoC sites and other displacement sites, while maintaining familial ties in villages and pursuing livelihood opportunities in town centres. These dynamics have significant implications for how urban landscapes are being shaped and inform how programmes and services funded by international aid are having to be responsive to unique patterns of migration, which evolve over time.

BENTIU AND RUBKONA, UNITY STATE

Unity State has historically been a contested site during conflict – both the struggle for independence and the civil war. The presence of oil fields near the border with Sudan made the situation in the area volatile for citizens and migrants alike (James, 2015; Johnson, 2012). In the post-independence era, however, the implementation of an agreement to share oil profits between Sudan and South Sudan allowed for revenues to be distributed more systematically. This access to oil revenues allowed the state government to support development and infrastructure initiatives. It permitted a certain degree of autonomy compared to other states, which relied on national and international funds to support development projects. Bentiu town, in particular, is a key illustration of this, as the remnants of institutions and infrastructure are still evident, although services have stagnated since the conflict.

A power plant was built on the outskirts of Bentiu town, now defunct, and access to power outside of the PoC site continues to be scarce. Other facilities, such as petrol stations, have also been abandoned during the ongoing conflict.

Figure 1 An abandoned petrol station in Bentiu Town

Street lamps and electrical wires that line the main road leading to Bentiu town no longer function but are still visible. Oil revenues also funded the building of a hospital, which served as a regional hub for those seeking medical care beyond basic services often provided by local clinics.

*Figure 2 Electrical wires line the main road but no longer function*

The area around the town has been an established trade route for merchants, who import goods to South Sudan. This type of migration has been critical in a country that has limited commercial manufacturing capacity, and is highly dependent on imports for basic goods, including food.

In recent years, particularly with the proliferation of employment opportunities with international aid and institutions in the area, a growing middle class has emerged in South Sudan including Bentiu/Rubkona. These youth, particularly those in their twenties and thirties, often have had the opportunity to be educated in neighbouring countries and outside of East Africa, with the financial assistance of extensive family networks. These individuals possess the skills and language competencies desired by international organizations, particularly in navigating the chasm between the local communities and international staff.

At the same time, for most residents of the area, the outbreak and long continuation of conflict has resulted in economic hardship and reduced opportunities for development. It is in this context and acknowledging that the PoC site cannot be a long-term solution to meet the basic needs of affected populations that the Beyond Bentiu Strategy was drafted and began to be implemented in 2016.

BEYOND BENTIU STRATEGY

Since IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) began consistently collecting flow monitoring data on entries and exits from Bentiu PoC site in January of 2016, the trends illustrate significant fluctuation, which parallels the history of conflict in the area during this period.
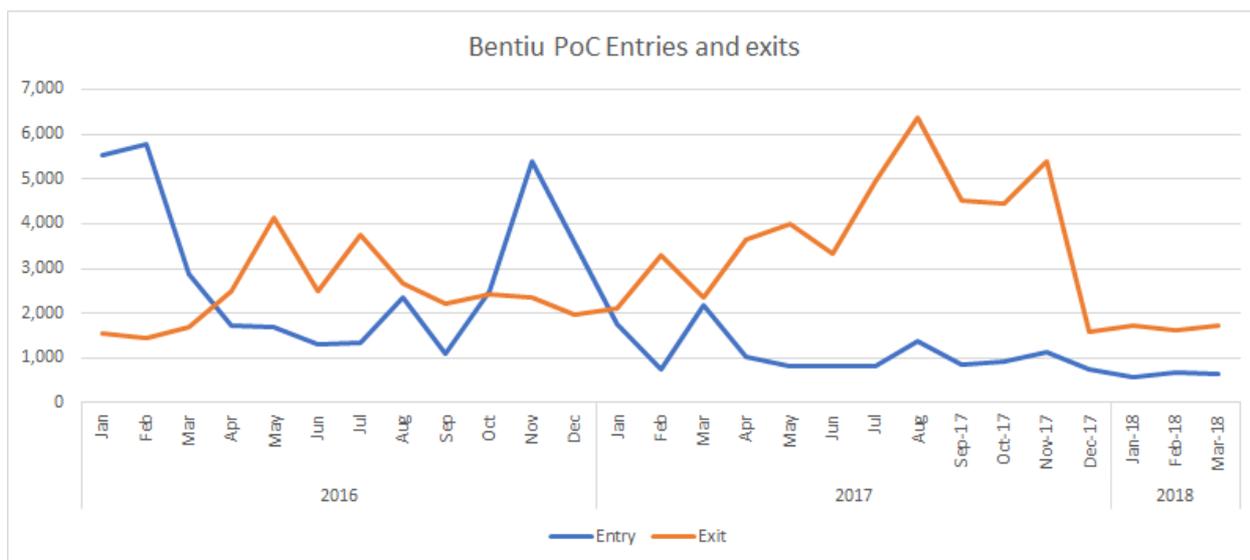
Since PoC sites were created in the aftermath of displacement and protection needs resulting from the 2013 outbreak of conflict, a discourse has emerged on the future of such sites, and whether they are sustainable. Humanitarian and development agencies developed the Beyond Bentiu Strategy in 2016 to address the needs of basic services outside of the PoC site. The strategy aims to address factors that are not directly related to insecurity, such as lack of access to food or health care in areas of origin.

This study follows from a 2017 Youth Intentions Survey, which was conducted by IOM DTM in Bentiu PoC site. The findings of this study revealed that 96 per cent of young people in the PoC site depended on humanitarian support to sustain themselves, due to a lack of access to assets such as land, cattle and equipment needed to engage in livelihood generation (DTM South Sudan, 2017a, p.3). Furthermore, 62 per cent had not completed any form of formal education and many were living apart from their immediate family members. Security was determined to be the primary reason for youth staying in the PoC site and their foremost condition for returning to their homes (p.4). While access to services may be a feasible reason for moving to the PoC site, due to infrastructure being destroyed or inaccessible during conflict, security and protection continued to be a driving factor in the choice of IDPs to remain in the Bentiu PoC site. Similarly, a Village Assessment Survey conducted by the DTM team in the same year documented the impact that conflict had on the infrastructure of Rubkona County (which hosts both Bentiu and Rubkona towns) (DTM South Sudan, 2017b). In Bentiu town, one third of health facilities were not functioning at the time as well as two-thirds of schools and 47 per cent of boreholes (p.6). In Rubkona town, two-thirds of health facilities were not functioning at the time, as well as one third of schools and 65 per cent of boreholes.

METHODOLOGY

This study relied on two main data collection tools. In the first, a community perception household survey was conducted in Bentiu and Rubkona towns. In the second, a total of 12 qualitative interviews were

conducted with key humanitarian partners operating in the area, as well as with local leadership and community members in both towns.

Community Perception Survey

In August 2018, IOM South Sudan's DTM and transition and recovery teams implemented a community perception survey jointly. In a context of decongestion strategies being implemented, the survey attempted to capture the perceptions of host communities, who are impacted by returnees and IDPs. This allows humanitarian and development agencies to identify where tensions existed at the time of the survey, and where they may potentially arise in the future, particularly in relation to resources such as land, water and access to basic services, whilst also acknowledging the positive relationship between the different communities already visible in many instances and which can be further built upon.

Separate samples were calculated for each town, based on population numbers obtained from the 2008 population census, the last census conducted in South Sudan. Updated figures for each town are currently unavailable, and while the 2008 census figures do not accommodate for the displacement that has occurred since then, they provide the most recent verified population count available. A total of 266 household surveys were conducted Bentiu Town (population of 13,367 households and 30,386 individuals), and a total of 280 household surveys in Rubkona Town (population of 5,121 households and 10,314 individuals). Using the last available population statistics from 2008, the households surveyed met the minimum sample size to ascertain 90% confidence level with 5% margin of error.

Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative interviews attempted to document a more nuanced understanding of the histories of displacement and urbanization in Bentiu and Rubkona towns. A total of 12 interviews were conducted across both towns, inclusive of humanitarian and development stakeholders working from the humanitarian hub next to Bentiu PoC site. The themes covered in the interviews established how urbanization manifests in a local context, the histories of migration patterns in the area, perceptions on how the infrastructure, economy, livelihoods and environment have changed over time, and the impact of the presence of humanitarian organizations in the country.

For qualitative interviews, a sample of convenience strategy was used due to the small number of organizations operating in the area. A total of 12 interview were conducted with representatives of international organizations and community members. In particular, a concerted effort was made to include organizations that had been present in the area prior to the 2013 conflict. However, due to high turnover in international organizations, not all of the staff members interviewed were present during this time. Staff representatives included both international, regional and national staff. Furthermore, a concerted effort was made to distribute interviews with community members across Bentiu and Rubkona towns, and to capture the viewpoints of different strata of society such as women, youth, local leaders and older people.

FINDINGS

Prior to data collection in Rubkona and Bentiu towns, informal conversations with key stakeholders in Juba suggested that the presence of international organizations, particularly those serving the PoC site, was creating a concentration of typically urban services and facilities to serve IDPs and leading to tensions with the community living in towns around the PoC site. However, this perception was not supported by the research results. Instead, community members, in particular, tended to perceive the needs of those in the PoC site as different than their own and did not expect the humanitarian organizations in the area to provide the same services in their localities. Rather, the interviews conducted indicated that instead, community members hoped that if the conflict were to cease, oil revenues would once again support the state government budget, traders would resume the importation and sale of goods, and people would be able to make long-term investments in their livelihoods - all important components in urbanization.

The demographic profile of survey respondents indicated that women were the head of a significant majority of households (90%). Migration patterns related to conflict in South Sudan often reflect the impact

that war has had on family structures and the increased burdens of women as head of households. Leading up to independence in 2011, it was estimated that women were the head of 59 per cent of returnee households ("IOM Tracking of Spontaneous Returns", 2009). Today, Unity State continues to be a site of conflict, which has affected the ability of men to remain a part of their households, as they provide human capital as armed actors. Recent security reports indicate that forced recruitment campaigns across the country, including the southern areas of Unity State, have increased following the signing of the peace agreement to increase the leverage of each faction in the new government. Furthermore, this context has made it increasingly difficult for men to access livelihood opportunities, which require mobility to access land, graze cattle, and engage in small business enterprises.

Infrastructure and access to services

During data collection, it was visible that there are significant differences between the infrastructure and access to services between Bentiu and Rubkona towns. Bentiu is estimated to have a significantly larger population, and also hosts key Government institutions for the state. However, given the short distance between the two towns, residents are still able to access services that may not be readily available in their locality. This is particularly true for those residing in Rubkona, where institutions, including Government offices, have not been rehabilitated since the start of the conflict. Furthermore, as Rubkona is situated between Bentiu town and the PoC site, residents must walk through this area on the main road to reach Bentiu. While transportation options are scare, and many residents rely on walking to reach different locations, private pick-up trucks run between the PoC site and towns to provide an easier transportation means for those who can afford it. However, a greater proportion of Rubkona households (40%) reported that infrastructure and services were not adequate for them than those of Bentiu (13%). Additionally, in terms of the availability of educational services, 50 per cent of households in Rubkona deemed it not adequate, in contrast to 35 per cent in Bentiu. A similar discrepancy is observed in access to healthcare services where 35 per cent and 52 percent of residents of Bentiu and Rubkona towns respectively reported them to be not adequate. Water, a critical basic need, reflected the same discrepancy of inadequate services (43% for Rubkona and 33% for Bentiu). This discrepancy may be exacerbated by the fact that a new water treatment and distribution plant, installed by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), is located in Bentiu town. However, the project has also laid pipes to transport water to select outlying villages where residents may not be able to travel easily to access water directly at the treatment plant.

Figure 3 A water distribution center in the town provided by humanitarian organizations

Observations of each of the two towns suggests that the discrepancy in institutions and services between them has not necessarily meant that citizens cannot access the services they need, particularly given the close proximity of the towns to each other. As a result, the findings for the survey may not reflect the true extent of the lack of the availability of infrastructure. Further research is needed, but it is perhaps indicative that residents of Rubkona town do not have to permanently migrate either to Bentiu town or the PoC site in order to access infrastructure as it still remains in close proximity.

Perceptions of IDPs and returnees

As noted earlier, anecdotal information obtained before the start of data collection suggested that the introduction of the PoC site and returnees to the towns may be leading to tension over access to resources and services. The perception survey indicated that a significant majority of the residents of both towns expected more returnees (Bentiu 91%, Rubkona 96%) and IDPs (Bentiu 84%, Rubkona 94%) to settle in the towns in the future. For those that had already settled in the towns/host communities, the majority of households reported a "very friendly" (Bentiu 61%, Rubkona 53%) or "friendly" (Bentiu 33%, Rubkona 26%) perception towards IDPs, and "very friendly" (Bentiu 67%, Rubkona 56%) or "friendly" (Bentiu 27%, Rubkona 29%) for returnees. This was also supported in the towns' perceptions of the relationship with the PoC site, which was reported to be predominantly very friendly for both Bentiu (63%) and Rubkona (82%).

When asked directly, "Does the host community actively support IDPs?" an overwhelming majority of households indicated that they do (Bentiu 72%, Rubkona 86%). Subsequent questions in the survey asked respondents about which specific types of support are provided to IDPs. Sharing food obtained through distribution was cited most frequently, followed by sharing of tools and sharing of bought or homegrown food items. Respondents also indicated that within the host communities of the towns, the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), Mayor's office, and the host community themselves were the key stakeholders responsible for organizing support for both the IDPs and returnees.

Interventions by international humanitarian organizations

The perception of international organizations was primarily captured through qualitative interviews conducted with different stakeholders. While humanitarian stakeholders indicated that they perceived a growing inequity between those in the PoC site and the towns, due to access to humanitarian services as well as employment opportunities to PoC site residents, the results from the survey with residents in the towns did not support this. Community members interviewed repeatedly stated that they perceived needs of IDPs in the PoC site to be different than their own and that IPDs had a greater degree of dependency for services to meet their basic needs, due to their forced displacement. For those residing in the towns, access to services, as minimal as they might be, is still possible. Additionally, some livelihood opportunities continue to exist in the towns – such as small business enterprises, civil service, subsistence agriculture and positions with community-based organizations and civil society organizations. Furthermore, the Beyond Bentiu Strategy, which guides programmes outside of the PoC site, has made donor supported services to address basic services available to a larger population. The one exception to this was the distribution of certain non-food items, such as lights, plastic sheeting and mosquito nets, which a small number of residents of the town indicated to be exclusive to the PoC site.

Urbanization in a South Sudanese context

The qualitative interviews conducted with key informants showed how respondents defined and understood urbanization to manifest in a South Sudanese context. Responses varied, however key themes emerged: services and infrastructure (ex. electricity, water, roads, markets, banking, education, fuel stations and advanced healthcare) are present functioning and accessible; government structures are in place; security, rule of law and peace are evident; development is taking place; livelihoods are available beyond subsistence agriculture and livestock; a variety of food is available; and a large population is concentrated in a specific area.

Respondents conveyed different opinions on whether Bentiu and Rubkona towns, as well as the PoC site, constituted urban areas. For some, the towns were urban areas prior to the outbreak of conflict in 2013.

However, the destruction of facilities and services since then brought this designation into question. At the same time, there were clear distinctions between the markets, services and infrastructure in Bentiu and Rubkona towns, and what is currently available in the rural areas across the rest of Unity State. For the PoC site, the fact that it was perceived to be a manufactured site that was intended to be temporary in nature, designed specifically for those that had been displaced, made it questionable to interviewees as to whether it could be considered an urban area despite the concentration of the population and services there.

Figure 4 Market in Bentiu Town

The discourse of urbanization in South Sudan, particularly in the areas targeted in this study, is closely tied to security. The ability of people to engage in the local economy, access employment and contribute to development was noted by respondents as being highly dependent on there being a safe and secure environment. The ongoing conflict in the area has severely debilitated the ability of people to contribute to development and urbanization, and the perceived ability to change this was dependent on peace coming to the area. This was highlighted in the frequently shared narrative of Bentiu prior to the outbreak of conflict in 2013, when the area was rapidly developing and seen as a regional model for stability and growth.

CONCLUSION

The longevity of the conflict in South Sudan, and the displacement that has resulted from it, has influenced the urban landscape of Bentiu and Rubkona, including through the emergence of a densely populated, urban-like area in the PoC site. However, neither Bentiu and Rubkona towns nor the PoC site fully match general definitions and understanding of urbanization in a South Sudanese context, with infrastructure and basic services including water and education still deemed insufficient for significant amounts of the resident population in both towns and dependent on humanitarian service provision in the PoC site. Bentiu and Rubkona towns continue to constitute critical hubs in the area due to their role as urban centres in Unity State and important locations in the oil industry. The introduction of the PoC site in the towns' vicinity has not seemed to significantly affect urbanization in Bentiu and Rubkona, with other conflict-related factors being more important variables. The maintenance and reconstruction of services and infrastructure in these towns are critical for the well-being of the state as a whole, considering the importance of urban centres in catering to the needs of those located in rural areas, who travel to towns to access services, utilize infrastructure and engage with the economy (Sarzin & Mehta, 2011). In creating a path forward, a better understanding of how urbanization manifests and evolves at the local level, and how the presence of international actors' interplays with the path of development during a transition phase, are themes to be further explored. Due to the importance of security to both IDPs in the PoC site and those residing in

the towns, a conflict-sensitive approach is imperative as South Sudan enters a transitional phase with the signing of the peace agreement in September. Furthermore, the capacity that host communities possess in providing services, habitation and immediate humanitarian assistance to IDPs and returnees should also be considered in long-term development plans for the area, to build upon the currently positive reception of IDPs and returnees by the host community. Humanitarians, as well as transition, recovery and development actors, should be cognizant of these dynamics, in order to enable further growth and enhanced stability by facilitating and strengthening urban infrastructure and service availability in a manner that is accessible to and inclusive for all population groups.

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