

CSRF Case Study # 3 – Navigating Complex Dilemmas

Conflict Sensitivity at the Sector Level

CSRF's outcomes at the sector level are aimed at motivating and supporting multiple organisations working on the same issues to develop joint analysis and approaches to conflict sensitivity. This work tends to be issue-specific, focusing on important challenges and dilemmas that the aid sector is currently struggling to navigate. The CSRF seeks to build networks, convene actors, facilitate conversations, provide analysis, and strengthen capacity through improved tools and systems.

Background

The displacement and subsequent movement of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are long-running dynamics of South Sudan's conflict history, and both have serious political and conflict implications. Forced displacements over many years have repeatedly sought to reshape South Sudan's ethnic map, with tremendous implications for control of natural resources and political representation. Likewise, returns of IDPs are similarly fraught, as different displaced groups will have different political, conflict, and security factors that enable or constrain their ability to return to move home and regain their assets and livelihoods, or settle where they wish without interference. These dynamics are often missed by humanitarian actors, who – even if they do have sufficient analysis – tend not to have appropriate analytical tools or decision-making and accountability systems to help them balance the competing humanitarian principles of humanity (responding to need wherever it is found) and neutrality (avoiding becoming politicised). Aid support to population movements and returns that is not equipped to handle this dilemma runs the risk of feeding into political tensions and contributing to long-term grievances that will drive future conflicts.

This paper is one of four case studies commissioned by the CSRF in February 2022 to better understand where and how contributions to conflict sensitivity have been made, and to draw out lessons for future engagement by the CSRF or other similar facilities. The case studies examine and compare outcomes at the activity, programme, sector, and paradigm level.

For more information about the CSRF, visit www.csrf-southsudan.org

Since 2020, the CSRF has helped South Sudan's humanitarian actors working on returns better understand the political and conflict dynamics, and to develop more conflict-sensitive approaches. The formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity in 2020 initiated a new era of these dilemmas for the aid sector in South Sudan, over a backdrop of contested politics and a volatile conflict context. The aid sector found itself tensely divided, with some United Nations actors tending to support a government-led approach to facilitating and enabling returns over an ambitious timeline, and other UN and NGO groups largely advocating for a slower process that was more informed by conflict analysis and seeking to avoid the politicisation of returns.

CSRF Engagement

The CSRF identified the return of IDPs as one its core areas of research and engagement in 2019, in recognition of the issues' political and conflict implications and the tensions around the topic within the aid sector. The facility internally produced analysis in 2019, and commissioned additional analysis in 2020 which contributed to the dialogue around returns and established the CSRF as a credible voice in the ongoing discussion. This opened the door for the CSRF to become more deeply involved after support to a particularly controversial return process was initiated without sufficient due diligence and where there were high risks of reshaping the ethnic composition of the area in favour of

certain interest groups. The facility was able to support analysis, dialogue, and action in multiple ways:

Raising conflict sensitivity issues to a wider audience. The CSRF helped to identify, frame, and communicate important dynamics around the issue of returns to a wider audience of donors and humanitarian leadership. This happened at cluster meetings, in bilateral meetings with donors and other aid actors, and with coordination mechanisms. **An especially important set of partnerships was with the donor community in South Sudan, as donors play an enormously important accountability role, yet many donors offices have small teams responsible for overseeing large portfolios.**

Producing analysis that helped to inform and shape the ideas of what constitutes a conflict sensitive, technically-sound approach that strives to avoid being politically manipulated. The CSRF's initial analysis of 2019 around Rubkona and its commissioned analysis in 2020 (on the Protection of Civilians sites) helped to raise awareness and contributed to roundtable discussions where findings were debated. A subsequent blog on returns was shared for inputs from other returns actors, helping to advance understanding of the political and conflict dynamics of returns. **A range of United Nations, NGO, and donor actors said that this analysis helped them to formulate their own positions and questions.** The analysis was deemed to be more credible than analysis that came from other involved actors who had funding at stake: "Competition between agencies is intense. We need that critical, independent voice."¹

Convening actors and facilitating discussions. The CSRF was uniquely able to bring a range of actors working on returns together to move toward a joint understanding of the issues and develop strategies for how to apply analysis. The space remains deeply divided, but as one U.N. agency staff member involved says, **"We don't agree on everything, but there are healthy debates, and talks and discussion that lead to consensus on different perspectives.** This is really important."² A former WFP conflict analyst agrees, "Where CSRF excels is in networking, connecting people, repeated engagements and convening. Facilitating the knowledge eco-system, making connections, and bringing people together formally and informally around issues."³

Providing technical inputs to strategies and tools. CSRF was also able to help translate analysis and ideas into practical conflict sensitivity guidance and actions that organisations could take forward through joint strategies, including through revisions made to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) guidance on returns. The team was recognised for being strong at 'processes' – helping to take forward ideas into actionable steps and helping to bring others along with.

Outcomes

According to other actors from both sides of the humanitarian debate on returns, CSRF has helped to contribute to the following outcomes:

- **A 'safe space' where actors can talk openly, share analysis, and build strategies** for dealing with the complex topics they must navigate. This informal working group was able to generate much greater changes than any actor (including the CSRF) would be able to do on their own.
- Greater and more nuanced awareness and accountability over the conflict sensitivity issues around returns, with a higher bar to be met for both analysis and mitigation measures for potential harm – **leading to fewer unprincipled returns.**⁴
- **Improved consensus between aid actors** on different sides of the issues on the most important issues and how to address them.
- Greater donor engagement and **more critical oversight and accountability measures.**

¹ Interview with former Protection Cluster Staff. January 2022.

² Interview with the U.N. Agency staff member. February 2022.

³ Interview with former WFP conflict and food security analyst. January 2022.

⁴ Interview with NGO staff member with responsibility for coordinating solutions. February 2022.

The space remains highly contested with ongoing challenges. But in many ways, this is a sign of a healthy aid sector. Debate and disagreement are natural results of multiple, competing mandates and sets of principles at work, and is better than no debate and quiet acceptance of a politically driven returns process.

The CSRF has the potential of deepening the integrity of the returns sector's approach by ensuring the work done on strategy and analysis makes it to the state and field levels. The work done thus far has focused largely on the most senior arenas of leadership within the humanitarian work on returns, but many day-to-day decisions on returns are made, and potentially should be led, at the field level. This could be further developed by working with Juba-based coordination mechanisms to provide contextualised trainings and support for field-based staff, who are often at the 'sharp end' of decision-making around humanitarian support to population movements. This would contribute to greater understanding of the issues and response options at the field level and build an increased evidence base for policy-level discussions.

Key Findings and Lessons

- The CSRF's neutrality and independence from others' agendas and budgets was mentioned in nearly every interview as an enabling factor for facilitating difficult discussions and convening a range of actors. **If the CSRF were able to be hired by aid actors such as UN Agencies or NGOs it would lose its ability to act as a neutral convener for the aid sector.**
- The CSRF's credibility was also perceived as very important to the role that it plays – **it is a highly respected voice within the South Sudan aid sector and its 'stamp of approval' carries a great deal of weight.** This can motivate agencies to adapt their practices, and so must be wielded and bestowed carefully.
- Facilitation skills were felt to be an important contribution from the CSRF, along with their ability to **'meet people where they are' – understanding what incentives and structures shape organisational positions,** and helping to navigate not just the context, but also organisational realities.
- CSRF's contributions to sector-level strategies and approaches can operate on multiple levels and **have the potential to go deeper in terms of strengthening the capacity of field level actors working on returns to understand the issues and do better analysis.** This supports better decision making at the field level as well as a greater evidence base for policy decisions.