

Note from the South Sudan National Advisory Group on Solutions on COVID-19

27 March 2020

ENDORSED BY AD-HOC HCT PLUS ON 30 MARCH 2020

The Advisory Group on Solutions (AGS) has been tasked to provide guidance and recommendations on how to deal with requests from individuals within PoC or other displacement sites who come forward requesting support to return as a result of COVID-19. The AGS therefore convened on 27 March 2020 and recommends the following for decision by the HCT.

It should be noted that the AGS remains an advisory body and decisions on the way forward remains with the HC/HCT.

The AGS recognizes that the current situation of COVID-19 is critical and preparedness and planning measures are necessary, including supporting IDPs who want to leave POC or displacement sites. It calls for the recognition that conditions for return and relocation may not be conducive in some areas of return / relocation, with insecurity in some areas, combined with lack of services (especially health), and a fragmented social safety net.

It also calls for the recognition that IDPs have the freedom to choose their place of residence in South Sudan, which includes either returning to their areas of origin or relocating elsewhere.

The AGS notes that provisions within the *August 2019 HCT Guidance on Return, Relocations and Local Integration* may not be comprehensively followed during this critical time, and the HC/HCT should be cognisant of this fact (e.g. ensuring access to health services, livelihoods, etc may not be feasible). However, the main principles of the 2019 August HCT Guidance Note will be taken into consideration (i.e: movements are done voluntarily, that they are safe and with dignity and safety and security in areas of return and relocation are the primary concern), with efforts made to ensure due diligence as far as feasible and practical, and noting that the exceptional situation presented does not eliminate the need for compliance with the August 2019 Guidance on Return, Relocations and Local Integration in future assisted movement actions.

The AGS therefore recognizes that Durable Solutions in such circumstances are rarely possible, and recommend considering the below advice as an exceptional **short-term measure** in response to the critical context of COVID-19, subject to the endorsement of the HC / HCT:

1. **Information sharing and informed decision** – IDPs wishing to move out of sites must receive clear information on the risks involved/expected when returning or relocating, including on what services are available in areas of relocation / return. Based on that, IDPs should be able to make informed and therefore voluntarily decisions on staying, returning or relocating. The information shared with IDPs should include the safety and security situation in their areas of return and relocation, and availability of services in areas of return/relocation, noting the likelihood of a decrease in services provided by humanitarian partners in these areas if there is a COVID-19 outbreak due to likely restrictions in movement of agencies. IDPs should

be informed of the prevailing safety and security situation, food insecurity that has emerged or may emerge in the areas of their preferred choice for return / relocation, including the recent flooding crisis and recovery efforts. Any communication should avoid creating heightened expectations, including informing individuals wishing to return/relocate that planned movements may also be cancelled, dependant on government restrictions / rules vis a vis the COVID-19 measures. Sharing of messages and information on COVID-19 and possible support for returns / relocations should be through existing mechanisms in POCs and displacement sites including the CCCM Cluster information sharing mechanisms together with CCE TWG and protection partners during interviews with IDPs.

2. **Resource mobilization** – The HCT should ensure adequate resource mobilisation to support return / relocation activities during this exceptional critical situation of COVID-19.
3. **Assistance package** – Assistance package needs to be agreed upon by the HCT. Such may include the provision of Shelter/NFIs, food or cash and voucher assistance / multi-purpose cash grants where feasible. Any provision of cash has to be balanced carefully against potential push factors and the protection risks that may arise. HLP considerations must also be taken into account with the provision of assistance, particularly S/NFI as it is likely many individuals returning or relocating will face HLP issues that need to be supported. Food-ration distribution should also be considered to avoid food insecurity in areas of return/relocation and must take into account conflict sensitivity principles.
4. **Logistics** – Every movement should be voluntarily, safe and dignified. Assistance will be needed for movements of some individuals and transportation options needs to be decided upon by HCT – notably whether UNMISS or UNHAS air assets. Road and river transport may be considered should security and safety measures be in place.
5. **Expectation management/Prioritisation of assistance** – The AGS recommends that information sharing and assistance for movements should be targeted to those individuals who already registered their intention to return or relocate through the protection desks in PoC and displacement sites. Dependant on staffing and resource capacities, evolving Government restrictions / updates on movement of individuals, and absorption capacity in areas of return or relocation, other individuals may be identified to receive assistance as well.

Advisory Group on Solutions

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