



Refugees returning to Malakal call for education and better service delivery.

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Creating a secure environment for those displaced during South Sudan's civil war

"As peacekeepers, let us never lose sight of the reason why we choose to navigate these complex and traumatic spaces in the first place, each statistic representing an individual human life." My name is Abigail Skotnes, from South Africa, and I serve as international UN Volunteer Recovery, Return and Reintegration Officer with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

Over the past five months, I have had the privilege to serve with UNMISS as a volunteer. I support a diverse and passionate team of peacekeepers who create a secure environment for the voluntary and dignified return and reintegration of internally displaced persons and refugees displaced during South Sudan's civil war, or more recently due to climate-induced disasters and inter-communal clashes.

Positioned within the mission's Protection, Transition and Reintegration Section, I am responsible for reporting and analysis at headquarter level, capturing and disseminating information for early warning and on emerging protection concerns, displacement trends, challenges impacting recovery efforts and opportunities for durable solutions and peacebuilding.

Based in Juba, I am afforded an interactive and stimulating volunteer experience where I engage with other mission components, development and humanitarian partners to share in diverse perspectives and critical thought.

This experience has expanded my research and practical engagement with issues of protracted displacement, grappling with the complexity of navigating returns and recovery in a highly volatile and transitional context.

I find it rewarding to contribute tangible informational products, which can inform and support the mission's contingency and response planning to address challenges identified by our teams in the field. Beyond reporting and analysis, I find value in contributing to the section's programmatic activities, designed to enhance community resilience and support income-generating opportunities (with a strong focus on women's empowerment) in areas of return.

“ Abigail provides a skillset fit for information analysis and dissemination of the Protection, Transition and Reintegration Section's contribution to the UNMISS mandate. This includes strengthening information management systems and building capacity of staff crucial to the mission's institutional memory. Having Abigail as part of the team is pivotal to the section's success. –Ronald Mayanja, Recovery, Return and Reintegration Officer and Abigail's supervisor at UNMISS

Throughout my professional journey, I have learnt the immense value of immersing myself in the local context, learning local histories and stories, and engaging with people out in the field, away from the confines of our compound – and compound life is certainly my greatest challenge!

Visiting displacement sites across Darfur, along the Sudan-Ethiopia border and, more recently, outside the UN premises in Juba, has given me a glimpse into the undignified reality of some of the world's 84 million forcibly displaced people living without access to basic service provisions, housing, or land – but also shown me their immense resilience. I believe it is essential to get close to the realities of your work if you are going to do justice to the needs and lived experiences of those portrayed in your writings and reports.

“ It is one thing to talk about 84 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, and another to contemplate the meaning behind this figure. Let us remain mindful of the human and individual cost for all those displaced from conflict or natural disasters. As peacekeepers, let us never lose sight of the reason why we choose to navigate these complex and traumatic spaces in the first place, each statistic representing an individual human

life. --Abigail Skotnes, Recovery, Return and Reintegration Officer,
UNMISS

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I am proud to work alongside colleagues who inspire me every day with their dedication and commitment (albeit with immense personal sacrifice) to provide lifesaving assistance, physical protection and capacity building to improve the lives of displaced and conflict-affected populations across South Sudan.

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To me, volunteering means sharing in diversity, experience and knowledge, to both learn from and be humbled by others. Through volunteerism, I have met and interacted with some of the strongest and most resilient people I know, whether it be through supporting clean-up efforts so that families displaced by the 2011 Fukushima earthquake, tsunami and nuclear disaster can return home, or working alongside both friends and colleagues from all corners of the globe, exchanging our histories, cultures and unique perspectives. --Abigail Skotnes



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