



Escalation of violence drives mass displacement from Nagero County

December 2025 | South Sudan

Key Messages

- A volatile security situation in Nagero County since the end of 2024 escalated into extreme violence in September 2025, triggering mass displacement to Bazia and Wau Town.** Displacement journeys were extremely challenging, caused family separation, and likely left the most vulnerable individuals behind in Nagero County.
- Severe hardships persisted after arrival in Wau County, particularly in Bazia,** where IDPs far outnumbered host community members and conditions related to food, shelter, WASH, and health were critical. These conditions, along with the depletion of host community food stocks, raised serious concerns for the upcoming dry season (November – March), including heightened risks of food insecurity, malnutrition, and disease outbreaks.
- Considerable protection and mental health risks were identified in Bazia,** driven by overcrowded living conditions, inadequate shelter, and economic hardship – with concerns including GBV, exploitation risks, and widespread trauma among displaced populations.
- Short-term return to Nagero County appeared unlikely due to insecurity, trauma, and repeated displacement experiences, indicating IDPs were likely to remain in Wau County.** This situation created urgent needs for long-term livelihood support, while current assistance remained focused on short-term interventions and access challenges were expected to continue to hinder sustained humanitarian response in Wau County.

Context & Rationale

Similar to trends across Western Equatoria State and South Sudan at large, Nagero County has experienced a marked escalation in violence in 2025 – with the number of violent incidents in 2025 far exceeding the combined total from the previous three years. From the end of September, several armed clashes – which included exchanges of heavy gunfire – caused panic among civilians and resulted in significant displacement. The 2025 Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring Survey (FSNMS) further underscored the impact of insecurity, affecting 57% of households in Nagero County.¹

Following the escalation of violence in Nagero County at the end of September 2025, large-scale displacement occurred from Nagero County to Wau County (Western Bahr el Ghazal State). While some Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from Nagero moved to Wau Town, the majority relocated to Bazia (Kpaile Payam), an area in the south of Wau County, approximately 90 kilometres from Nagero Town. By early November, local authorities estimated that over 16,000 IDPs were residing on the premises of the St. Peter's Clever Parish church in Bazia.²

REACH conducted primary data collection to inform humanitarian actors on the Nagero–Wau displacement situation. Qualitative data was collected in Wau County from 9–17 November 2025, including twenty Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with IDPs and host community members; two Scoping FGDs with IDP community leaders and elders; eleven Individual Interviews (IIs) with IDPs; and nine Key Informant Interviews (KIs) with humanitarian organisations, local authorities and conflict experts. Given the qualitative approach, findings are indicative of the situation at the time of data collection and are not statistically representative. Quotes are anonymised for safety reasons, a common practice among human rights and protection partners. All quotes referenced in this brief are from interviews with IDPs from Nagero County, unless stated otherwise.

¹ WFP, & FAO. (2025). Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring System (FSNMS) [Dataset]. On file with REACH
2 Head counts conducted by humanitarian organisations later that month found similar population estimates.

Escalation of violence in Nagero County in late September 2025 triggered mass displacement to neighbouring Wau County

Participants consistently described waking to the sound of heavy gunfire in the early hours of 28 September, prompting them to flee into nearby bush areas. Most participants originated from four bomas in Nagero Payam along the Wau – Tambura road. According to IDP leaders and elders, the entire population of the eight bomas of Nagero Payam was displaced following the outbreak of violence on September 28th. Participants reported remaining in the surrounding bush for one or several nights, waiting for gunfire to subside, before deciding to move onwards to Wau County.

Following displacement, populations sought refuge in Bazia due to perceived safety and cultural ties. Participants reported moving to Wau County, specifically Bazia, which they considered a safe location. In contrast, Tambura County – southwards from Nagero County – was widely perceived as unsafe due to continued violence. Beyond security considerations, several interviewees also highlighted cultural and linguistic similarities between Bazia's host community and Nagero's population as an additional pull factor. However, relocation to Bazia was not always a deliberate choice. Participants explained that, while moving through the bush, many were uncertain of the direction they were going in.

"We did not know the direction we were going; we just went into the bush. We thought we might reach Bagare, Namatina, or maybe Wau Town. But we found ourselves here in Bazia."

Displacement journeys exacerbated vulnerabilities and caused family separation

Extreme hardships were endured during displacement, including walking for days through thick bushes without shelter, food, or clean water. All participants reported having walked from their homes in Nagero County to Bazia in Wau County, a journey of more than 90 kilometres, many

having done so barefoot. All participants avoided the main road, which was perceived as unsafe.

Displacement occurred at the beginning of the first harvest period, depriving affected communities – who rely heavily on subsistence agriculture – of their primary food source. While some participants managed to carry a few possessions, most fled with only the clothes they were wearing, leaving behind food supplies, livestock, and money. Along the route, access to food was extremely limited and many participants drank swamp or groundwater. Participants linked these conditions to widespread illness, particularly malaria and diarrhoea among children, and reported that some deaths occurred en route due to the severity of the journey. A Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment (MSNA) from November 2025 reported five deaths to have occurred on the way from Nagero to Wau.¹

Family separation was common, with many participants reporting to have been separated from relatives because of their displacement. In various interviews, participants explained that the sudden onset of the gunfire caused relatives – often aunts, uncles, parents or grandparents and, in some cases, children – to flee in different directions. At the time of data collection, several participants remained unaware of their relatives' whereabouts, citing a lack of means to communicate. Furthermore, participants in multiple focus group discussions reported that vulnerable individuals, including the elderly and persons with disabilities, had stayed behind in Nagero County because the journey through the bush was too difficult.

"The elders told us: you are still young, you can go with the children, I can stay here and die."

Hardships persisted after arrival; the number of IDPs far surpassed the number of host community members in Bazia, severely straining available resources

Insufficient shelter conditions and shortages of non-food items (NFIs) severely impacted living conditions in Bazia, where approximately 16,000 IDPs

were residing on the premises of the St. Peter's Clever Parish church. Participants reported widespread challenges related to shelter, citing congested living conditions and most IDPs residing in the open or in makeshift structures made from sticks and grasses. Few had access to plastic sheets to cover their shelters. As a result, participants mentioned some IDPs were residing in the church and schools on the premises – which was confirmed by observations from the research team. Participants also reported a lack of essential NFIs such as blankets, sleeping mats, and mosquito nets, with several describing sleeping on the ground.

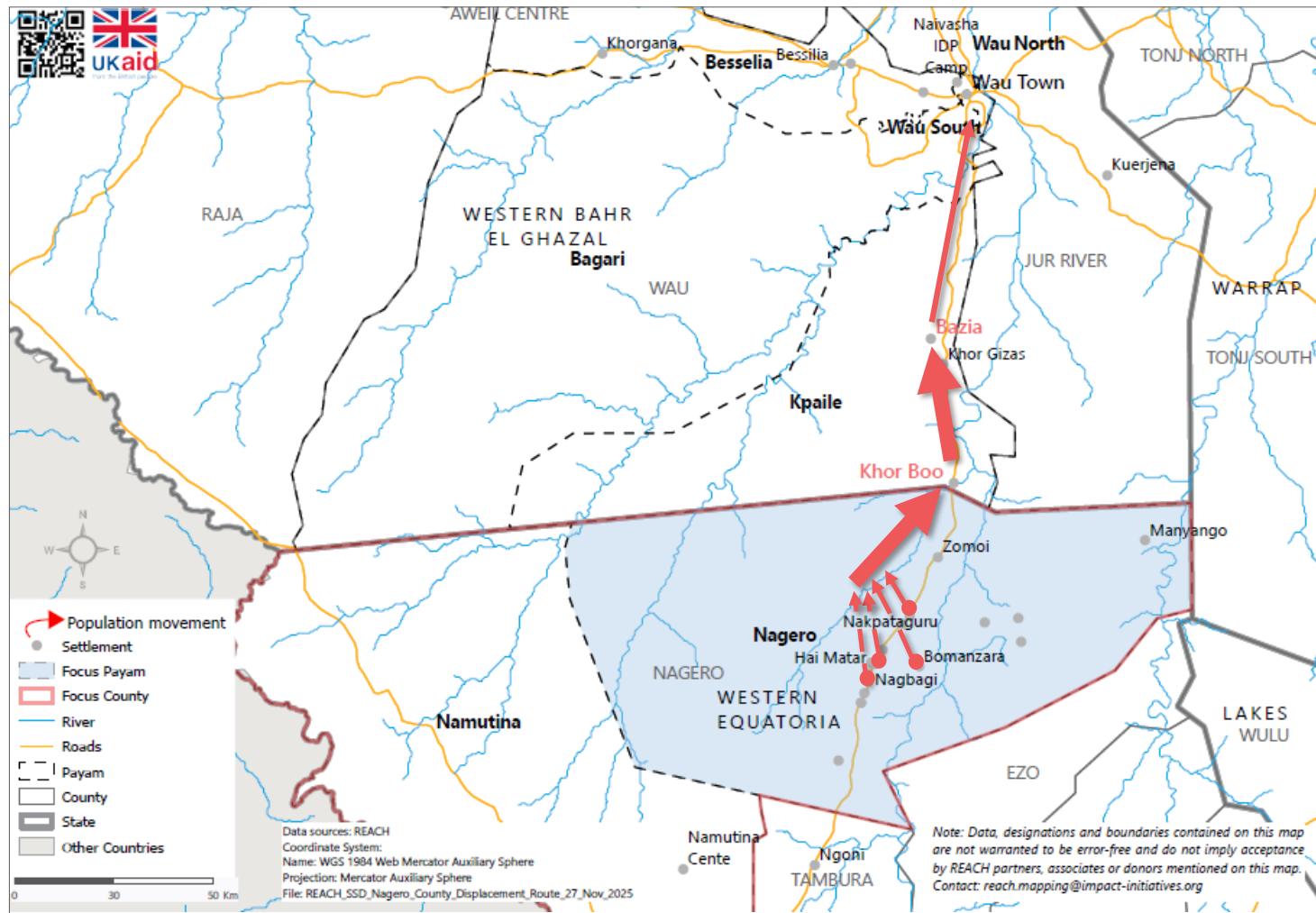
"I have a damaged plastic sheet I collected from the road when I came to Bazia, so now I have nothing to put on the roof of the shelter."

Food insecurity and lack of livelihoods exacerbated vulnerabilities among displaced populations. Participants who had carried small amounts of food from Nagero reported that these supplies were exhausted by the time of data collection.

While some food items were available at a small market in the settlement, participants emphasised their inability to purchase food due to lack of money or income sources. Few had brought money from Nagero, and those who did had already spent it. Opportunities for income generation were reportedly extremely limited in Bazia. Some participants noted that casual labour on host community farms was available only to the first arrivals from Nagero, who arrived during the harvest season, and that later arrivals found no such opportunities. Furthermore, food aid was scarce. Key informants reported that a national faith-based organisation distributed beans, flour, vegetable oil, and salt to 600 households – out of an estimated total of 2,720 IDP households in Bazia.² Participants who received this assistance said these supplies lasted only a few days. Others reported arriving in Bazia after food distribution had taken place, explaining that only the first batch of IDPs who arrived between 14–16 October had received food assistance. Wild foods, while available in the area,

² According to estimates from local authorities, as well as headcounts conducted by humanitarian organisations in November 2025.

Map 1: Displacement routes from Nagero County to Wau County



were reportedly difficult to access – with participants citing their unfamiliarity with the area, and concerns around the safety of collection, particularly related to the presence of snakes in the area.

"To get money here is difficult. Since I came here, I did not even see 500 SSP with the eyes."

Consequently, many interviewees reported having little to no access to food and to strongly rely on food shared by the host community. Both IDPs and host community members expressed concern that host community food stocks – normally sufficient for the entire dry season (November to March) – had already been depleted due to the large number of IDPs in Bazia, surpassing the number of host community members. Food shortages drove IDPs to adopt negative coping strategies, including skipping meals to manage limited food availability.³

"Usually, I use my agricultural stocks during the dry season. But now, everything I had has already finished and the dry season is still coming. And there is no way here to look for a job, so no way for us to find food."⁴

WASH conditions were inadequate, creating severe health risks. Participants highlighted the absence of latrines on the church premises, resulting in widespread open defecation. High grasses surrounding the site reportedly encouraged defecation close to shelters, increasing the risk of faecal-oral disease outbreaks.⁵ Access to water was another major concern, with one solar-powered tap stand and one borehole serving a population of over 16,000 as of mid-October 2025. Participants reported that the borehole functioned poorly and the tap stand operated only for a few hours daily. While another borehole existed further away, it was perceived as too distant as it was at a 30-40 minutes walking distance from the church premises. As a result, IDPs were reportedly relying on harvested rainwater as an alternative source, which was consumed without treatment.⁶ Challenges around access to safe water were compounded by a lack of water containers: many participants did not own jerrycans or had only small containers requiring multiple trips per day. Tensions over water access were reported at the time of data collection, and host communities acknowledged challenges arising from

the need to share water sources with IDPs, which in some cases resulted in host community members being unable to access water at all. Although the borehole was repaired after data collection for this assessment was completed, water points remained insufficient to meet demand and access to WASH NFIs remained severely limited – sustaining the risk of disease outbreaks.

Access to health services was critically limited in Bazia. Participants reported that no drugs were available at the Primary Health Care Centre (PHCC) in Bazia, the only health facility in the area, located approximately 1 to 1.5 kilometres from the church premises. Host community members explained that shortages of medication and qualified doctors were already challenges prior to the influx of IDPs from Nagero, noting that these limited resources are now further strained by increased demand. Common illnesses reported included malaria, diarrhoea and pneumonia, alongside a high risk of snake bites in the surrounding bush areas. Several participants noted that cases of snake bites, along with other critical cases, were referred to Wau State Hospital, which is difficult – if not impossible – to access due to financial constraints, particularly for IDPs. IDP elders and leaders highlighted particular risks for pregnant women, with several accounts of women giving birth on the way or in makeshift shelters without basic delivery materials or skilled attendants, instead relying on traditional birth attendants.

Access to education in Bazia was non-existent, leaving children without learning opportunities. Participants from focus group discussions with host communities explained that, prior to the influx of IDPs from Nagero, Bazia already lacked functioning schools, resulting in host community members to send their children to schools in Nagero. Since the outbreak of violence in Nagero, this option was no longer viable. Although St Peter's Primary School had designated learning spaces on the church premises, these were occupied by IDPs during data collection. Interviewees not only reported the absence of functional education facilities in the area but also highlighted the lack of school materials. According to participants in one focus group discussion, the displaced population from Nagero included teachers who could

³ ERM. (2025). Bazia Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment Report. Emergency Rapid Response Mechanism (ERRM) Consortium.
⁴ FGD with host community members
⁵ ERM. (2025). Bazia Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment Report. Emergency Rapid Response Mechanism (ERRM) Consortium.
⁶ Ibid.

provide instruction if space and materials were available.

"School here is not enough, because the pupils are too many. We have teachers with us, but no classroom and no school items."

Across interviews, persons with disabilities and elderly people were reported to face additional challenges, both during flight and in their current locations. Key informants highlighted mobility constraints, lack of assistive devices and difficulties reaching distributions, water points and health services.

While the situation may be comparatively better in Wau Town, considerable challenges for IDPs remained

Although living conditions for IDPs were found to be comparatively slightly better in Wau Town, participants commonly reported challenges, particularly related to shelter and income opportunities. According to one key informant, IDPs who reached Wau Town generally had more financial resources or an established support network compared to those remaining in Bazia. Nonetheless, most participants in Wau Town reported having walked the full 70 kilometres from Bazia to Wau Town. While some stayed with relatives, many lived in overcrowded rental houses. Similar to Bazia, participants reported lacking blankets, mats, and other essential NFIs.

While the higher likelihood of finding work as a casual labourer was the most reported pull factor to Wau Town, findings suggest several barriers to livelihood opportunities existed – including competition with host communities for available opportunities, and a lack of knowledge of the area. Participants in one focus group discussion noted that casual labour was relatively easy to find in the months prior to data collection but expressed concern about the dry season, when farm-related work would no longer be available.

"I have been looking for one month [for casual labour] and did not find any. Nowadays, schools are closed so it is difficult, as most young adults are in the market to look for a job."

Unlike Bazia, participants in Wau Town generally did not report challenges around the availability of services such as water, healthcare, education and food – factors that were commonly cited as pull factors to Wau Town. However, findings suggest that financial accessibility remained a significant constraint, with participants commonly expressing concerns about the costs of these services. Combined with anticipated difficulties in securing casual labour during the dry season, this was noted as an area of particular concern by participants in Wau Town.

"The living conditions here are bad. In Wau Town, all requires money. If you want water, you buy; if you want fire, you buy; if you want food, you buy. Back in Nagero, we depended on agriculture. We could sell our crops at the market and use that money to buy anything."

Severe conditions, especially in Bazia, raised several concerns for the situation from December 2025 onwards, particularly related to food availability and nutritional status, disease outbreaks, protection risks, and mental health conditions

Findings indicated a critical nutritional situation among IDPs in Bazia at the time of data collection, likely to deteriorate further throughout the dry season. In Bazia, a mass MUAC screening conducted by a humanitarian organisation in the first week of November 2025 revealed an alarming prevalence of acute malnutrition among children under the age of five.⁷ Key informants expressed worries that the already critical GAM rates may deteriorate during the dry season due to reduced casual labour opportunities, limited wild food availability, and depleted host community food stocks. These challenges were likely to be more acute for IDPs unfamiliar with the area. Several IDPs were aware of fish being a key food source for host communities in the area but reported lacking fishing skills and equipment. Furthermore, while the Bazia PHCC was receiving weekly nutrition stock resupplies from a humanitarian organisation, it was

⁷ Republic of South Sudan Western Bahr El-Ghazal State Wau. (2025). Situation Report on IDPs from Nagero County, Western Equatoria State to Bazia Payam, 3rd & 4th November 2025.

uncertain whether this support would continue in the new year.

Although no active disease outbreaks or unusual illnesses were reported among IDPs or host communities in the first week of November, several key informants highlighted significant concerns about potential outbreaks in the coming months, citing widespread open defecation, poor access to clean water, and overcrowded living conditions. With the water supply already insufficient at the time of data collection, one humanitarian key informant stressed it is likely the one tap stand available will dry up during the dry season. Furthermore, another humanitarian informant warned that cholera could emerge within three months if WASH, health, food, and shelter conditions remain unimproved.

Mental health concerns among displaced populations were severe, with widespread reports of trauma and a need for psychosocial support. Findings indicated that many participants experienced highly distressing events, including losing children, witnessing killings, looting of property, and encountering dead bodies. In focus group discussions, participants frequently reported feeling traumatised, describing persistent fear, sleep disturbances, and intrusive memories linked to violence and displacement. A strong demand for psychosocial support services was expressed across multiple interviews.

[Talking about the journey from Nagero to Wau] We saw when we passed, there were more than 10 bodies. Because from Nagero to the border is far, so the people died after they passed the border [into Wau County]."

Protection risks in Bazia's IDP site were severe, driven by congested living conditions, inadequate shelter and economic hardship – with women, girls and unaccompanied children likely to be most affected. The lack of privacy associated with congested living conditions, insufficient shelter and no artificial light sources at night heighten vulnerability. At the time of data collection, one GBV case was reported.⁸ Economic hardship further increased protection risks, including early and forced marriage – particularly for adolescent girls out of school and without livelihoods. Protection partners reported cases of unaccompanied children and raised

concerns around potential exploitation risks. In a MSNA conducted in the beginning of November, seven cases of unaccompanied children were identified. Key informants identified unaccompanied children to be particularly vulnerable, along with female-headed households. One humanitarian informant noted that inadequate shelter also increases petty theft and crime, a growing concern given the hardship faced by both IDPs and host communities.

"You can see through observations, there are many girls. People who lost livelihood are easily tempted. Also, because there is no education, these teenagers will be exposed to a lot of danger."⁹

While emergency assistance has been provided, concerns persisted regarding the long-term situation of IDPs, as findings suggested that short-term return movements to Nagero County were unlikely

Findings indicated return movements to Nagero County were unlikely in the near term due to insecurity, traumatisation and repeated displacement experiences. No evidence of returns since September 2025 was found at the time of data collection. Many participants expressed that they did not expect returns to occur soon, if at all, citing persistent insecurity. Furthermore, personal accounts revealed reluctance to return due to trauma and fatigue from multiple displacement cycles in previous years – describing to have "ran from war" four times since 2017.

"I don't want to return. All my properties are looted. When I come back, I won't be happy to be in that place and remember what happened."

Given the low likelihood of short-term return, IDPs were likely to remain in Bazia for the longer term, creating urgent needs for livelihood support. Participants in several interviews reported expectations of remaining in Bazia, citing the availability of wild foods and the potential to start cultivation during the 2026 rainy season. Land allocation, both for settlement and cultivation, was a commonly reported need for IDPs – with participants

⁸ ERM. (2025). Bazia Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment Report. Emergency Rapid Response Mechanism (ERRM) Consortium.
⁹ KII with humanitarian key informant

noting access to land alone would not be sufficient without seeds and agricultural tools. According to two humanitarian key informants, and aligning with November MSNA findings¹⁰, the host community in Bazia expressed willingness to allocate land to IDPs. Findings indicated an overall positive relationship between both groups. Across interviews, only two incidents of tensions were reported, both related to service access. At the time of writing, however, no practical steps toward land allocation for IDPs had been taken.

Despite these long-term needs, assistance delivered in Bazia has focused on short-term emergency interventions, leaving critical gaps unaddressed and raising concerns for the dry season.

At the time of writing, support consisted mainly of short-term measures, including hygiene kit distribution and medical support. In addition to the distribution of food to 600 households, a national faith-based organisation – in collaboration with the Ministry of Education – facilitated the relocation of 41 students of Primary 8 grade to Wau Town for exams. In the weeks following data collection, several partners provided emergency assistance to IDPs in Bazia, including cash transfers, shelter NFIs and WASH, health and protection services. While key informants acknowledged the

importance of emergency interventions, they considered them insufficient to sustain IDPs and host communities throughout the dry season – underscoring the need for sustained, long-term support to address vulnerabilities. Humanitarian key informants also raised concerns about emergency programming targeting only the most vulnerable households, which, in a context of inadequate shelter, congestion, and economic hardship, could fuel theft and petty crime. One key informant stressed the need to include host communities in future response planning, given the considerable impact of the IDP influx on their livelihoods.

Addressing these gaps was further complicated by persistent access challenges for humanitarian actors in Bazia. Key informants highlighted difficulties in obtaining permissions from authorities to access Bazia, noting that these challenges have existed for years but intensified in 2025, with some requirements contradicting core humanitarian principles. While some access constraints to Bazia had been resolved by the time of data collection, several key informants anticipated access constraints would continue to hinder humanitarian service delivery in Bazia and other remote areas of Wau County throughout 2026.

Methodology Overview

Primary data was collected between November 9th and 17th, 2025 in Wau Town and Bazia (Kpaile Payam), Western Bahr el Ghazal State.

Primary data collection consisted of four qualitative components.

Eleven IIs with displaced persons from Nagero County covered a variety of themes including displacement experiences, perceptions of the situation in Nagero County and challenges upon arrival in Wau County.

Twenty FGDs were conducted: two with members of the host community and eighteen with IDPs. FGDs with IDPs were split into two different themes: displacement and needs. FGDs with host community members explored perceived impacts of the IDP influx on the host community.

Two 'scoping' FGDs (sFGDs) were conducted with IDP community leaders and elders. These sFGDs, conducted on the first day of data collection, served to provide a stronger understanding of the context of the assessment area.

Nine KIIs were conducted with humanitarian organisations, local authorities and conflict experts. KIIs served to provide an in-depth understanding of recent displacement dynamics and needs of affected populations.

A Data Saturation and Analysis Grid was used to identify and analyse patterns within the data, by deductively coding transcripts into discussion points – which served as the starting point of the narrative analysis. For more details on the methodological approach, please see the [Terms of Reference](#).



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