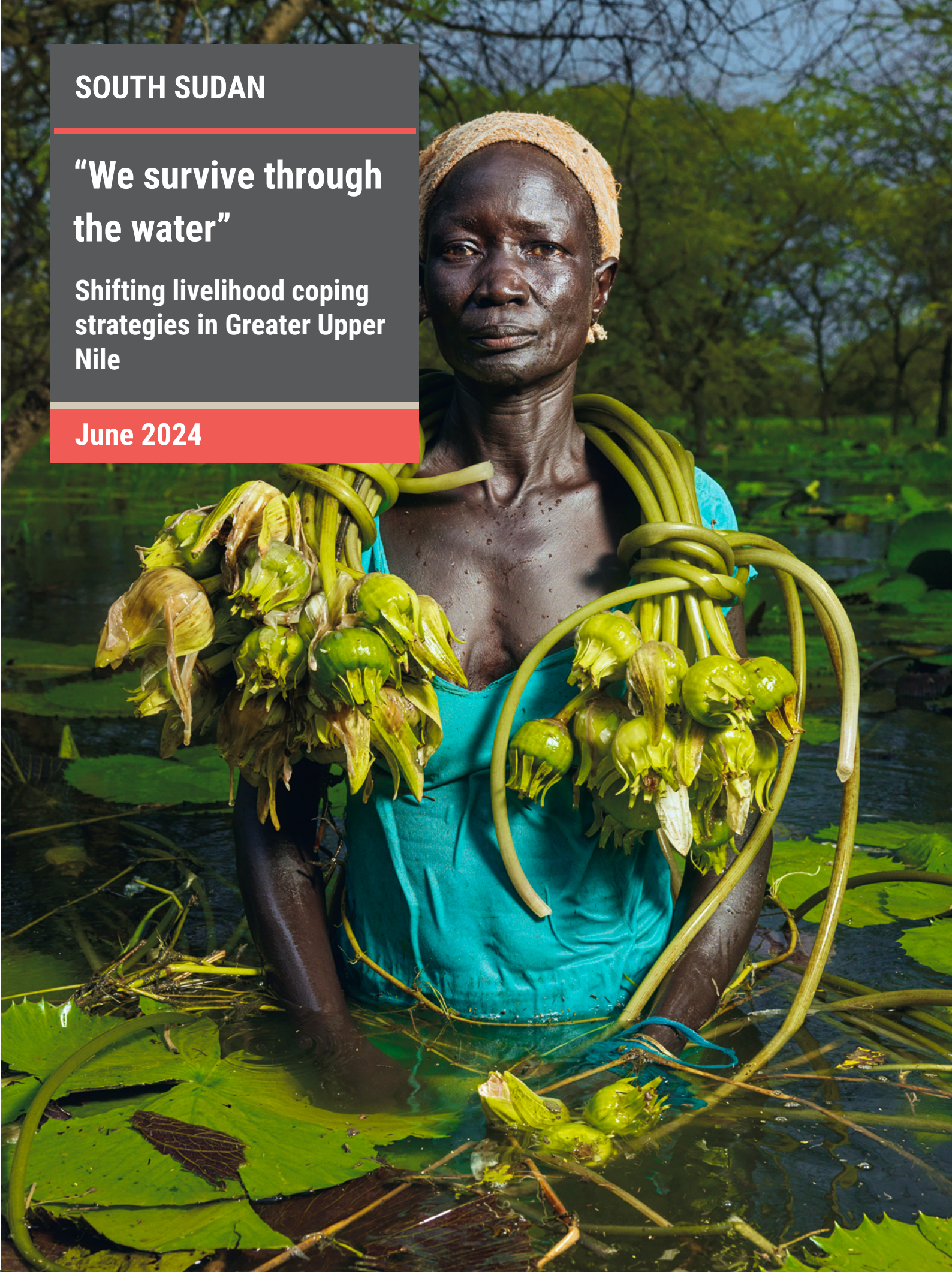


**SOUTH SUDAN**

**“We survive through  
the water”**

**Shifting livelihood coping  
strategies in Greater Upper  
Nile**

**June 2024**





Cover photo: Fangak County, Jonglei State. Households collect and grind water lilies to create an edible paste (South Sudan). © Peter Caton/Action Against Hunger

### **About REACH**

REACH facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT). For more information please visit [our website](#). You can contact us directly at: [geneva@reach-initiative.org](mailto:geneva@reach-initiative.org) and follow us on Twitter @REACH\_info.

## SUMMARY

South Sudan's independence in 2011 launched a wave of optimism among South Sudanese and international observers alike. In the intervening years, however, many South Sudanese have known only hardship, as the gains of independence have failed to materialize. Political instability frequently turns violent, despite continuous efforts to broker peace. Recurrent setbacks have eroded trust among the population while raising concerns of state collapse among international partners.<sup>1</sup> Thirteen years on, **the population in South Sudan faces an unbridled humanitarian crisis**. Prevailing trends suggest the outlook is dismal, and signs of relief are few.

This research focuses on the behaviours – otherwise known as "coping strategies" – that households in various parts of South Sudan use when they do not have enough food or money to buy food. In contexts of acute food insecurity, these strategies are a backstop that hunger-stricken households can use to bridge consumption gaps, small and large. Amid protracted and recurrent food crises in South Sudan, **coping strategies are often a final buffer against catastrophic food shortages**.

In some parts of the country, erratic weather patterns, economic crises and simmering political tension have combined to systematically disrupt households' livelihoods and, hence, their access to food. Activities that people once depended on for food – mainly, cultivation and cattle rearing – have become dangerous, difficult and otherwise impossible.<sup>2</sup> In parallel, **the coping strategies that sustained households through historic food shortages have all but collapsed**. These changes amount to a fundamental transformation in local livelihood systems.

The title of this report, "*We survive through the water*", was voiced several times during data collection. It reflects the impact of catastrophic flooding on people's livelihoods and access to food in recent years. It also underlines the relentless pressure that residual flood waters – present for multiple years in some areas – have placed on households, who are forced to eke out a living at considerable risk to their physical wellbeing. Ultimately, then, it foregrounds **the continuous precarity of life in areas affected by immense and sustained crises**.

This precarity cannot be understated. Humanitarian assistance in South Sudan – on which many people depend for food – is declining rapidly. At the time of writing, the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan is 11% funded.<sup>3</sup> The impacts are likely to be widespread. Most critically, **funding cuts will force people to depend increasingly on their own means to access food, at a time when their ability to do so is at its lowest**. In a new funding landscape characterised by dwindling resources, humanitarians must make informed decisions that prioritise the most vulnerable households. Updated information on coping strategies can support this process. So too can it assist humanitarian agencies to facilitate and reinforce positive coping mechanisms, when appropriate.

Despite their importance to food security analysis and humanitarian prioritisation, recent data on coping strategies in South Sudan is limited. Following discussions with multiple partners, including the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), and a review of the literature on coping strategies in South Sudan, REACH aimed to understand the coping strategies used by acutely food insecure households in three diverse livelihood systems, so as to provide updated information that supports livelihood coping analysis in-country. **REACH visited three locations in the Greater Upper Nile region (Fangak, Leer and Rubkona counties) between December 2023 and March 2024**. In each location, data collection followed a qualitative approach involving Focus Group Discussions and Households Interviews. Findings are indicative and specific only to those counties that the team visited.

## Key Findings

- **Coping mechanisms reliant on productive assets and traditional livelihoods have all but collapsed.** In the past, food insecure households relied heavily on cattle to bridge consumption gaps. Blood and dairy products sustained households through less severe food shortages, while liquidating an animal – by sale or slaughter – could mitigate more severe food insecurity. In recent years, however, access to cattle has declined substantially as a result of various compounding shocks, reducing the viability of these typical coping mechanisms. Alternate coping strategies related to agriculture have similarly diminished as standing flood water has inundated vast swathes of farm land. Non-productive assets that can be converted to food are also scarce, owing to many households’ reduced economic capacity and limited resource base. Overall, then, household resilience in assessed areas has fallen considerably.
  - **The prominence of wild foods and other previously subsidiary coping mechanisms has increased.** Household diets in assessed locations were comprised mainly – if not entirely – of water lilies at the time of data collection. The collection of water lilies was widely described as a severe coping strategy, and, for many households, one of last resort. As well as wild foods, once-alternate livelihood sources have taken on a greater role, especially fishing and the collection of firewood. Far from an adequate replacement, though, these activities were commonly regarded as difficult and unproductive. Their limited benefit to household consumption is underlined by persistent emergency-level food insecurity in assessed areas, as demonstrated by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).
  - **Traditionally robust communal mechanisms are under strain.** Reciprocal support is a cornerstone of Nuer society that sustains the poorest households through periods of severe food insecurity. However, compounding and recurrent shocks have levelled destitution, leaving very few households with the resources necessary to support themselves or their dependents on a regular basis. This points to a decline in vital coping mechanisms that the worst-off rely upon. In some areas, food insecurity could combine with overcrowding and the relative absence of basic services to disrupt otherwise strong communal relationships.
  - **Livelihood coping analysis in South Sudan does not necessarily account for these fundamental changes in local livelihood systems.** The decline in traditional livelihood activities means that many households cannot access the typical coping mechanisms which provided them access to food or income to buy food during historic food shortages. For some households, in fact, these strategies have exhausted, especially following the onset of catastrophic and recurrent flooding since 2020. However, coping strategies analysis in South Sudan continues to focus on these behaviours. At the same time, alternate strategies with an increasing prevalence and role in household resilience are lesser considered. Therefore, essential factors that could indicate a deterioration in household food security do not contribute to outcome data at the IPC. This may present a critical information gap that can conceal the severity of livelihood coping and food insecurity.
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## List of Acronyms

<b>AFI:</b>	Acute Food Insecurity
<b>FEWS NET:</b>	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
<b>FGD:</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>FSNMS:</b>	Food Security & Nutrition Monitoring System
<b>HFA:</b>	Humanitarian Food Assistance
<b>HHI:</b>	Household Interview
<b>IPC:</b>	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
<b>LCS-FS:</b>	Livelihood Coping Strategies for Food Security
<b>RRC:</b>	Relief & Rehabilitation Commission
<b>WFP:</b>	World Food Programme

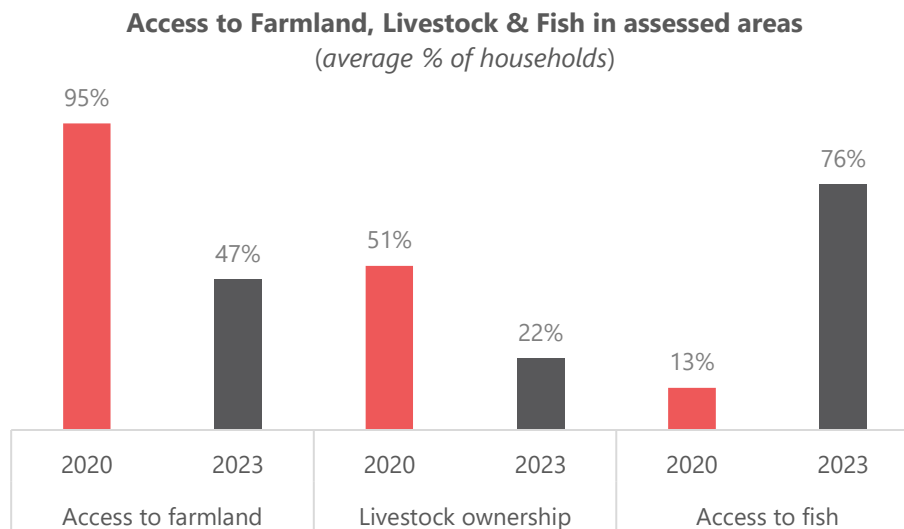
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## INTRODUCTION

The population in southern Sudan suffered long and recurring conflicts during the twentieth-century.<sup>4</sup> Secession from the north in 2011 – though widely-celebrated – brought little respite. Since independence, **a series of compounding shocks have placed immense and sustained pressure on communities in South Sudan.** In parts of the Greater Upper Nile region, and especially those on the Nile floodplain, extensive and protracted flooding, economic crises, and violent conflict have combined over a period of several years to systematically disrupt households' access to food.<sup>1</sup> In result, **many communities are 'locked in' to severe food insecurity with little recourse but to depend on humanitarian food assistance and strenuous food-gathering activities.**

As a result of these events, **communities have experienced substantial livelihood changes over the past decade in general, and since the end of the civil war in particular.** This research focuses on three counties in the Greater Upper Nile region, where access to traditional livelihood activities has declined sharply in recent years. Historically, livelihoods in Fangak, Leer and Rubkona counties were agropastoral – a combination of farming and cattle rearing – while fishing and gathering played a supplementary role.<sup>5</sup> Between 2013 and 2018, however, the civil war caused mass displacement and profound disruption to livelihoods. More recently, catastrophic flooding beginning in 2020 has inundated farmland and drowned cattle. In turn, cultivation and pastoralism have become difficult, unsafe and otherwise impossible, while previously supplementary activities, especially fishing, have become more prominent (see Figure 1). This situation is unlikely to improve amid simmering political tension and increasingly erratic weather patterns. As such, **full livelihood recovery seems a distant if not unrealistic prospect.**



**Figure 1 - Average % of households in Fangak, Leer and Rubkona counties that had access to Farmland, Livestock and Fish. Source: FSNMS Rounds 25 and 29.**

**The near collapse of traditional livelihood activities in some areas has altered the coping mechanisms that households employ in response to food shortages.** However, recent data on coping strategies in South Sudan is limited. This poses a critical information gap, especially in assessed areas – and other locations with similar characteristics – where access to typical coping mechanisms has changed dramatically, and some common assumptions around livelihood coping therefore are less

<sup>1</sup> Annex 1 provides an overview of the main conflict and flood events in assessed locations since 2011.

applicable. **Understanding these changes and, more broadly, the behaviours that households employ when they do not have enough food (or money to buy food), is a central component of food security analysis.** As per the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) Acute Food Insecurity (AFI) Analytical Framework,<sup>6</sup> livelihood change is one of two first-level outcomes for measuring acute food insecurity. Furthermore, livelihood coping features in the definition of every IPC Phase, making it important in defining and *distinguishing between* classifications.

While IPC analysts in South Sudan can combine several outcome indicators (including the Food Consumption Score, the Household Hunger Scale and the Reduced Coping Strategies Index) to determine food consumption outcomes, **the Livelihood Coping Strategies for Food Security (LCS-FS) is the only indicator in the IPC AFI Reference Table that measures livelihood change.** LCS-FS measures households’ medium- and longer-term coping capacity in response to a lack of food or money to buy food, as well as their ability to withstand future shocks and stressors. It derives from a series of questions regarding a household’s experience with livelihood stress and asset depletion in response to food shortages.<sup>7</sup>

**Based on discussions with partners and a review of the literature on coping strategies in South Sudan, REACH identified some opportunities to support LCS-FS and build on the evidence base.** This research explores the coping strategies that acutely food insecure households use in three livelihood systems in South Sudan. After years of compounding shocks and substantial livelihood changes, the report traces a breakdown in typical coping mechanisms and the intensification of once-supplementary strategies. It reveals some of the factors that households consider in choosing between strategies, and it investigates how people perceive the “severity” of the strategies available to them.



## METHODOLOGY

This research explores the coping strategies that acutely food insecure households use in three diverse livelihood systems in South Sudan. It aimed to answer **the following questions**:

- Which seasonal and atypical events have impacted households' access to food?
- How did/ do households respond once their access to food began/ begins to decrease?
- What factors did/ do households consider when engaging in one coping strategy over another?
- How did/ do households perceive the "severity" of the coping strategies they use(d), and what factors influence(d) households' perceptions of "severity"?

Primary data collection followed **a qualitative approach involving Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Household Interviews (HHIs)** with people living in acutely food insecure communities. In total, REACH conducted **46 FGDs** and **20 HHIs**. Data collection took place in Fangak, Leer and Rubkona counties, in the Greater Upper Nile region of South Sudan. **Research sites were sampled purposively**, following close consultation with humanitarian partners operating in each county. **Research participants were sampled purposively** in collaboration with local authorities, mainly the county-level Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) office. The research team targeted heads of households or, failing that, adults with a strong understanding of household- and community-level decision-making. **Interviews were conducted separately with men and women.**

REACH visited **Fangak, Leer and Rubkona counties** between December 2023 and March 2024.

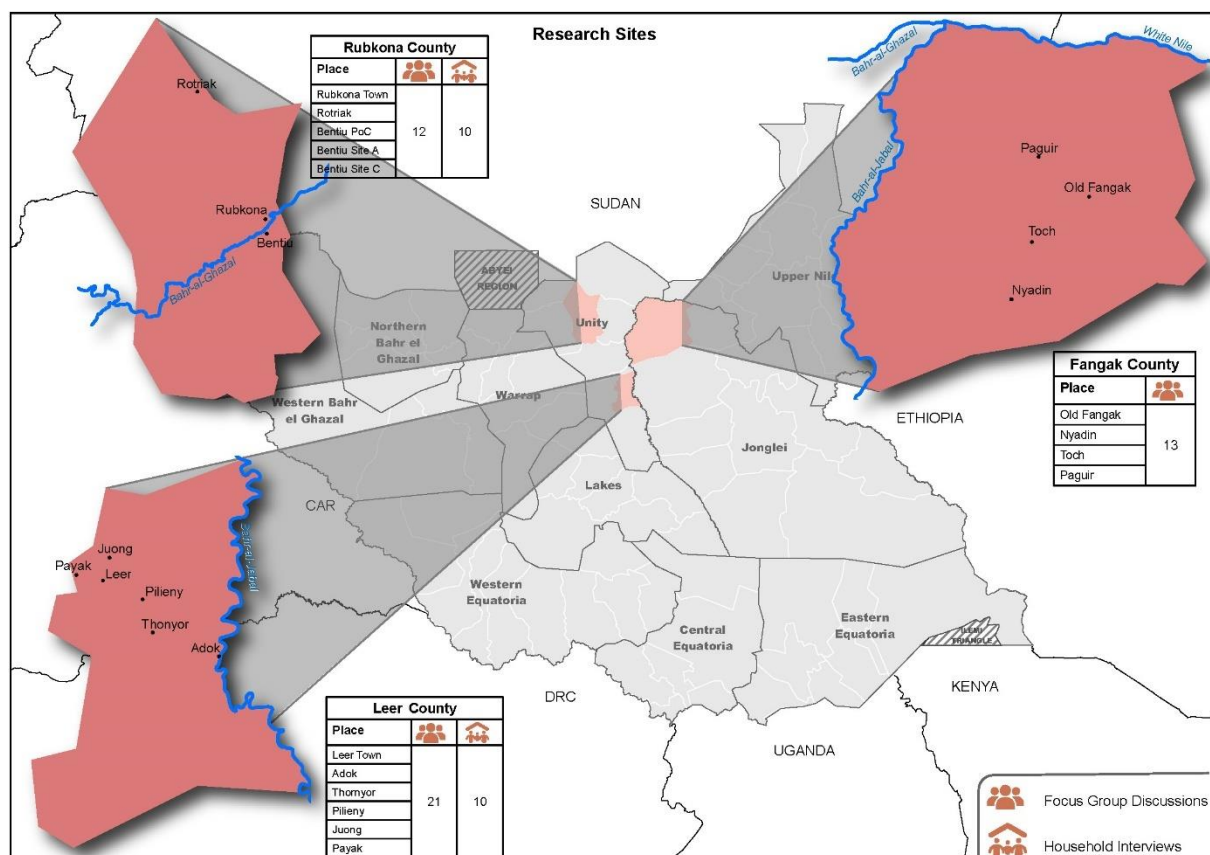


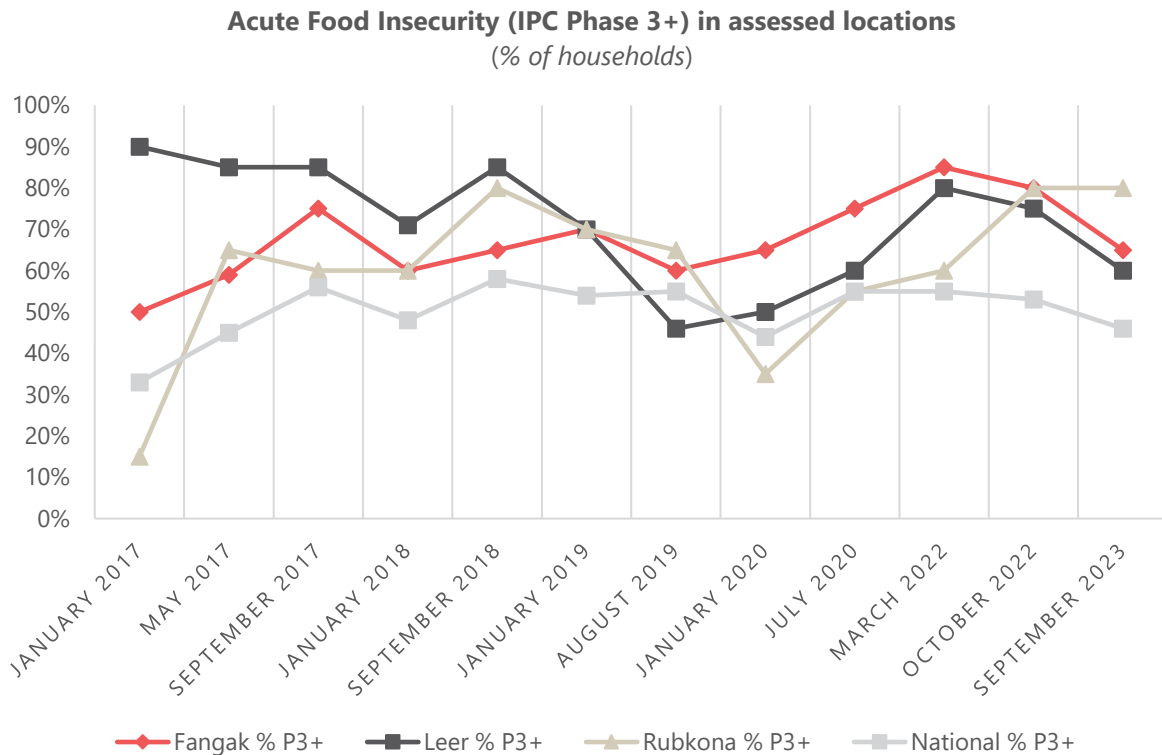
Figure 2 - Data collection sites

The team used three main criteria to select these locations:

First, **each location is in a different livelihood zone of South Sudan, as defined by the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) in 2018.**<sup>8</sup> In fact, Fangak and Leer counties each straddle two different livelihood zones. The coping strategies that households employ reflect the shocks they experience and the various forms of capital they have. Each livelihood zone in South Sudan has a different combination of income sources, productive assets, and shock profiles. REACH collected data in different zones in order to identify how these factors shape households' coping capacity, and what this means for coping strategies analysis between diverse locations.

Second, in each location, **households have experienced acute food insecurity over a period of several years** (see Figure 3, below):

- According to the September 2023 Integrated Phase Classification (IPC),<sup>9</sup> **a minimum 65% of the population in Fangak County will experience acute food insecurity between September 2023 and July 2024.** Households in Fangak have long experienced high rates of acute food insecurity. The IPC has classified Fangak in area-level Phase-3 (Crisis) *or worse* since December 2016; and **since 2020, the county has been classified in area-level Phase-4 (Emergency).** This includes pockets of catastrophic food insecurity through all of 2022 and the first half of 2023.
- The IPC estimates that **80% of the population in Rubkona County will experience acute food insecurity between September 2023 and July 2024.** Between September and November 2023, an estimated 15,400 people (5% of the population) faced catastrophic food insecurity. **A Risk of Famine (RoF) analysis determined there was a "reasonable probability" of famine between December 2023 and July 2024 in the worst case scenario.**<sup>10</sup> While this conclusion was overturned following a resumption in humanitarian food assistance, the population in Rubkona remain extremely vulnerable and the food security situation is precarious. The RoF was the culmination of consistently severe food insecurity in Rubkona over several years; the IPC has classified Rubkona in area-level Phase-3 (Crisis) *or worse* since January 2017.
- IPC estimates suggest **a minimum 60% of the population in Leer County will experience acute food insecurity between September 2023 and July 2024.**<sup>11</sup> Communities in Leer have long faced severe food insecurity. The IPC has classified Leer in area-level Phase-3 (Crisis) *or worse* since at least April 2016. During this period, the county has experienced several pockets of Phase-5 (Catastrophic) food insecurity; **and in the first half of 2017, Leer County experienced area-level famine** as a result of sustained military offensives. While the situation has improved somewhat, more than half of the population have been acutely food insecure since the beginning of 2020.



**Figure 3 - % of households experiencing Acute Food Insecurity (IPC Phase-3 or worse) in assessed locations. Source: Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC).**

Third, **LCS-FS scores in each location, recorded during FSNMS data collection in July 2023,<sup>2</sup> were atypically low/ high.** In particular, REACH sought to explore the following:

- In **Rubkona and Fangak** counties, multiple compounding shocks have driven severe food security outcomes characteristic of IPC AFI Phase-4 and, in the case of Rubkona, a risk of famine. However, LCS-FS data reveals that **just 28% and 49% of households in Rubkona and Fangak, respectively, employed emergency coping strategies** in the month prior to FSNMS data collection in 2023.<sup>12</sup> In Rubkona, this marked a decrease of one-third since the previous round, despite deteriorating food security over the same period. These findings challenge the idea – enshrined in the IPC AFI Reference Table – that emergency-level or worse food insecurity is characterised by *reliance on or full employment of* emergency coping strategies.
- In **Leer** County, flooding and successive rounds of violent conflict have contributed to severe food insecurity and, in 2017, famine. Decreased – albeit persistently high – rates of acute food insecurity at the latest IPC were driven by small consumption gaps and a lower proportion of households experiencing emergency-level food insecurity. However, LCS-FS data show that **82% of households employed emergency coping strategies** in the months prior to data collection. This is of interest because it presents a trend opposite to that observed in Rubkona and Fangak.

<sup>2</sup> The Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring System (FSNMS) is a representative household survey administered by the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. REACH accessed FSNMS data during previous IPC analyses in South Sudan.

## FINDINGS

This section considers the following behaviours that households in assessed locations use to deal with food shortages:

- Productive assets-based coping mechanisms
- Non-productive assets-based coping mechanisms
- Movement-based coping mechanisms
- Natural resource-based coping mechanisms
- Communal coping mechanisms

Following the near collapse of traditional livelihood activities – cultivation and pastoralism – the first half of **this section traces a breakdown in typical coping mechanisms that centre on productive and non-productive assets**. In doing so, it explores how households used these strategies to cope with food shortages *in the past*. Amid simmering political tension and a deteriorating regional food security situation, this half of the section also argues that movement-based coping strategies, once an important pressure release for food insecure households, were heavily restricted at the time of data collection.

The second half of **this section explores once supplementary coping behaviours – fishing, collection of forest products, and consumption of wild foods – that have increased in significance in recent years**, following the erosion of typical coping mechanisms and amid worsening food insecurity. It reveals the challenges that households face in engaging in these strategies, and, in turn, the factors that shape their perceived “severity”. Lastly, this half of the section considers communal coping mechanisms – mainly, reciprocal sharing between households – including the decisions and norms behind them.

### Productive assets-based coping mechanisms

#### Livestock-based coping strategies

In South Sudan, livestock are a mainstay of resilience and an increasingly important food source once harvested stocks exhaust. **In some parts of the country, however, access to livestock has declined considerably in recent years**. In Fangak and Rubkona counties, for instance, cattle ownership has fallen sharply as a result of catastrophic flooding and widespread residual flood water since 2020. And while FSNMS data shows an *increase* in livestock ownership in Leer County over this period, it is unlikely that many households have rebuilt their herds amid widespread flooding<sup>13</sup> and continual outbreaks of violent conflict.<sup>14</sup> In all assessed locations, participants explained that coping strategies reliant on livestock were no longer possible as a result of widespread cattle mortality. In turn, many households’ access to typical coping mechanisms was restricted.

Participants in all locations explained that, in the past, **livestock – especially cattle – were a primary coping mechanism that served three distinct but interrelated functions**. First, cows provided renewable products (milk and blood) that sustained households during less severe food shortages. Second, if food security were to deteriorate, households sold one or multiple cows. This was described as a reliable but sometimes irreversible means of generating income for food. Various factors, including the severity of the food situation at home and the extent of food insecurity in the community, weighed on households’ decision-making, including how many cows to sell and where. Third, if selling an animal were difficult or impossible, households usually slaughtered it and consumed



the meat over a period of several days. However, this was widely regarded as a severe and short-term solution that reduced a household's ability to fulfil its basic needs. Ultimately, then, **these three functions represented a sequence of increasingly irreversible and low-return behaviours.**

"If you consumed the blood, the cow would stay alive and there would be no need to kill it"

Whereas in some parts of South Sudan, the consumption of cattle blood is an extreme coping strategy indicative of severe hunger,<sup>15</sup> in others it is an important and nutritional protein source.<sup>16</sup> Before the crisis, **households in Fangak and Leer consumed cattle blood during the lean season.** In this period, blood was a supplementary food source that helped to mitigate less severe food insecurity. In Fangak, for instance, some households would mix blood with milk and *waur* – a garden weed typically consumed during lean periods – and male participants in one FGD described its consumption as a "normal" activity that people used "even if there [was] no hunger".

Nonetheless, findings from Fangak and Leer suggest that **consumption of cattle blood increased with the severity of the food security situation.** In both locations, for example, participants recalled drinking blood during *Nyakojuok*, a period of extreme hunger during 1987 that affected much of modern-day Unity state. During more severe food shortages, **cattle blood served as a buffer against depleting or exhausting a household's livestock.** For households that were reluctant or unable to sell and slaughter their animals, blood was a renewable product that preserved a cow. In some cases, households in Leer exhausted an animal's blood entirely before they considered selling or slaughtering it.

Findings indicate that **the number of cows a household owned determined the continuity of this strategy.** Households with numerous cows would have rotated them one by one ("you were cycling the cows") and, in turn, they could apply this strategy more-or-less continuously. Whereas those households with fewer animals exhausted this strategy faster because they were forced to re-use a small number of cows ("if there was only one cow, we would next cut the other side of the neck"). The health of a household's animals also mattered, as participants in several interviews believed that **overutilisation of cattle blood could harm an animal to the point of infirmity.** In this regard, the severity of consuming cattle blood appeared to increase with its regularity, suggesting that the *frequency* of this strategy was equally important to its *prevalence* in determining the severity of the food security situation.

Moreover, while consuming cattle blood preserved the animal as compared with selling or slaughtering it, some participants regarded this as a severe coping strategy because **cattle whose blood was withdrawn multiple times depreciated irreversibly in value.** This was especially likely in the dry season when areas for grazing were reduced ("in the dry season there is no good grass for the cow, so the cow would not recover the blood that it lost"). In turn, the animal was less useful were household food security to deteriorate. If, for example, the household needed to sell the cow despite having consumed its blood, the asking price would be lower on account of its poor health, according to male participants in Leer Town: "if you took a malnourished cow, you would not get enough money or maize".

"We continued selling cows until the situation was okay"

Households began to sell their animals once the blood had exhausted, or it was no longer sufficient. **The severity of the food security situation and the size of the household weighed heavily on a household's deciding how many cows to sell.** In particular, household heads considered the duration of the food shortage and the size of the consumption gaps they faced ("depending on the length of shortage and how much food you needed, you would decide"). While households typically would have sold their animals in the nearest town ("you took it to town and sold it"), in more severe

periods when much of the community faced a similar situation – and selling animals locally was not possible – households travelled further afield, mainly to areas unaffected by hunger where harvested cereals were expectedly available ("*a lack of maize does not come to an entire area...you would sell your cow in those areas that weren't affected*"). Before the crisis, then, **longer or atypical journeys to sell cattle would have indicated a more severe food security situation at the community level.**

**Challenges to selling cattle before the crisis included unfavourable terms of trade.** During calmer periods when food insecurity was minimal and the security situation stable, selling a cow was more difficult and prolonged, according to participants in a small number of interviews ("*it might take days because there was no-one with problems sufficient to need a cow*"). In this case, more vulnerable households in urgent need of income were forced to accept a lower price that likely fell short of their full consumption needs ("*if you are in a hurry, you will receive less*"). Similarly, participants in Fangak and Leer explained that when the situation reversed and food security deteriorated such that *most* of the community were affected, the market was saturated with cows and prices fell ("*if the hunger was severe and many people were affected, the number of cows being sold was high so you wouldn't get much money from the cow*").

**The wider social repercussions to selling cows influenced the perceived severity of this strategy.** In South Sudan, cattle are the main currency of dowry payments: financial transactions that precede marriage, symbolise social approval and unite families across generations.<sup>17</sup> These transactions usually involve considerable head of cattle, especially in the Greater Upper Nile region. It follows that households with larger herds have improved marriage prospects. In this regard, **participants in several interviews – mainly in Fangak – perceived cattle sales before the crisis as a severe coping strategy because they reduced a household's ability to address other non-food needs**, of which marriage was the main example ("*if you sell your cows, it will make marriage difficult*"). This suggests that livelihood considerations were secondary to a household's social obligations in determining the severity of cattle sales as a coping mechanism before the crisis. It also raises interesting questions about contemporary familial relations and marriage prospects, especially in those assessed locations where cattle ownership has neared collapse.

**"If no-one wanted to buy, you may have killed it instead"**

According to participants in most FGDs, **if selling an animal were difficult or impossible, households usually resorted to slaughtering it.** Before the crisis, a household might have failed to sell its animals for various reasons, including a lack of buyers ("*if no-one wanted to buy, you may have killed it instead*"), a scarcity of viable locations to sell the cow in ("*people killed an animal because they didn't know where to sell it*"), and dangerous routes to those locations ("*if there was insecurity on the way, you would have come back and killed the cow*"). Unable to sell a cow, households usually selected the least productive animal – a bull – for slaughter. **Killing a female cow was undesirable and regarded as more severe because it depleted the household's ability to rear cattle** ("*if you killed a female cow, you lost the resource*"). Indeed, those households without a bull used other strategies to avoid killing a female cow ("*if you didn't have a bull, you didn't kill a cow; you exchanged it instead*").

**Slaughtering the animal was regularly described as a short-term and irreversible solution.** The meat sustained a household for a matter of days only, according to participants in Fangak and Leer ("*killing was not good because you finished the meat in a few days*"); social obligations to share the meat likely contributed to its early exhaustion. Whereas a household that *sold* an animal could spend the profits on meeting its basic food and non-food needs, households that *slaughtered* an animal were expected sometimes to share the meat among their neighbours and relatives. The **limited returns from slaughtering an animal were compounded by its perceived irreversibility.** In several interviews, participants described this as a severe coping strategy because it exhausted the resource altogether. People commonly referred to "*finishing*" the cow, which was akin to losing a "*main asset*"

and "disgracing" the household, according to female participants in Fangak. It also reduced the household's ability to address other issues and needs, similar to selling the animal.

"Now we don't have cattle, no-one can use these strategies"

**The sharp decline in cattle ownership in assessed locations has deprived many households of these typical coping mechanisms** that sustained them through historic food shortages. Whereas in the past, food insecure households could balance and deploy multiple coping strategies – consuming animal blood, selling and slaughtering their animals – according to the severity of their situation and the productive assets available to them, participants in most interviews explained that **coping strategies reliant on livestock were no longer possible as a result of widespread cattle mortality**. Furthermore, households that still owned cattle at the time of data collection were largely unable to use them to access food. In Rubkona, for instance, those few remaining animals were described as undernourished and sick owing to a lack of pasture and clean water. In multiple interviews, then, people said the animals offered "only bones, no meat", and that slaughtering them was an inadequate strategy, despite the severity of the food security situation. Similarly, households were reluctant to sell their remaining animals to generate income because the asking price was too low.

### Agriculture-based coping strategies

Like those involving livestock, agriculture-related coping strategies that households relied on before the crisis had declined with the near collapse of cultivation. **Participants unanimously reported that harvesting immature crops and consuming or selling seeds meant for planting were no longer possible**, largely as a result of standing flood water that reduced households' access to farm land. This corroborates LCS-FS data from 2023, which reveals that on average, 74% and 68% of households in assessed areas were *unable* to harvest immature crops and sell or eat seeds intended for planting, respectively.<sup>18</sup> However, these strategies were widely practised before the crisis in some assessed locations, and factors including the availability of livestock and traditional beliefs were reported to have weighed on households' decision-making. In Leer, for instance, households with livestock were less likely to rely on these agriculture-based strategies. While in Old Fangak Town, male participants perceived that harvesting crops before they were ready stimulated others to grow quicker ("*once you break a part of the unready one, the crop starts to get ready*").

"This is not good because you will not cultivate in the next season"

**The perceived severity of these agriculture-related strategies was shaped by their impact on households' longer-term access to food**, with households using them incrementally and rarely exhausting them. Participants often recalled harvesting immature crops within one month of the harvest, and in some cases, for example in Fangak, this was regarded as an irreversible behaviour that reduced household production ("*the hunger will follow you*"). Similarly, when households resorted to consuming their seeds, they rarely consumed the full stock, even during periods of severe hunger ("*we always left a small quantity, even when the hunger was severe*"). Those who consumed seeds were described as "lazy", "impatient" and unwilling to "struggle", as doing so forced some households to rely on more severe strategies in the future, including those regarded as shameful ("*it leads you to beg when the rainy season or cultivation time come*").

### Financial assets-based coping strategies

Many households' low resource base meant that **few could borrow money at the time of data collection**. Notably, this contrasts with FSNMS data from 2023, which showed that, on average, 57% of households in assessed locations borrowed money or purchased food on credit at the peak of the lean season.<sup>19</sup> However, by the time of data collection in early 2024, qualitative findings suggest that cash

exchange was exclusive to a small number of households with a viable income-source, connections to businesspeople, or the collateral necessary to take and subsequently repay loans. Those households without a viable income source or productive social relations, by comparison, were unable to borrow money, or they faced a considerable level of risk in doing so. In Fangak, for instance, **participants in most interviews perceived this as a severe coping strategy because failing to repay a loan could ignite tension or invite shame on the borrower.** Households that failed to repay loans reportedly risked being abused (“*if the lender is impatient, you will be abused*”), stigmatised (“*if you fail to pay, people stigmatise and talk about you*”) or embroiled in communal disputes (“*some people will defend you, others will defend the lender*”).

## Non-productive assets-based coping mechanisms

Currently, assessment findings also suggest that **very few households were able to liquidate non-productive assets to access food.** This corroborates FSNMS data from 2023, which showed that approximately two-thirds of households in assessed locations were *unable* to sell household goods in order to access food.<sup>20</sup> Households’ limited resource base and their reduced purchasing power were the main reasons cited during this study. In all assessed locations, **participants reported that they had no assets to sell.** Those few households that *did* own assets struggled to generate significant income as a result of low asking prices (“*you can sell your shoes but this only brings one person enough food for one day*”) and a limited number of buyers (“*if you have something to sell, no-one can buy it*”). **Considerations around dignity and shame further reduced the use of asset sales as a coping mechanism.** A female head of household in Bentiu Site A, for instance, explained she would not sell her furniture, in part, because her visitors would have nothing to sit on. A similar finding was reported in Leer, where participants in a small number of interviews described people who sold assets as “*impatient*”, and regarded asset sales as a severe coping strategy because they exposed the extent of food insecurity in a household.

## Movement-based coping mechanisms

**Migration is a feature of South Sudanese society in general, and of agropastoral communities in particular.** Food-related migration happens along a continuum that ranges in the severity of the food security situation and the level of distress that households are under.<sup>21</sup> Whereas seasonal movements are a fundamental part of transhumant and nomadic pastoral livelihood systems, larger-scale distress migration is usually triggered by acute and atypical shocks that restrain households’ access to food. In Fangak and Leer, however, participants suggested that in this case food shortages alone seldom caused households to move. Instead, the interaction of multiple compounding shocks – for example, flooding and violent conflict – was more significant in driving migration.

### “People went to the river bank or other places where they could find fish”

Before the crisis, households in assessed locations used both types of migration to access food. The first involved **localised and transient movements to access seasonal food sources;** these movements were fundamental and regular behaviours as part of the broader livelihood system. For instance, during the dry season in Leer, some households moved towards bodies of water to catch fish and collect water lilies. Similarly, households in Fangak and Rubkona travelled to cattle camps to graze their animals and consume livestock products (“*if you didn’t have enough food, you sent your children where there was cattle*”).

### “We went to another area where we could survive”



The second type of food-related movements that households followed were **distant and longer-term journeys under more severe circumstances**. In particular, two periods of extreme hunger – *Nyakojuok* in 1987 and *Ruon Buath Thoarah* in 1989 – were characterised by large population movements, including as far as Ethiopia. Participants in several interviews described distressing and risk-laden journeys, during which some people were reported to have perished. Findings indicate that in these conditions, people weighed various factors in deciding to leave their home. Such factors included the person’s attachment to home (“*some would never leave home even if they were going to die*”), their economic capacity (“*only the poorest with nowhere to run would stay in the area*”), and the presence of relatives whose situation was less severe (“*we went to the next area with relatives who were not also facing food shortages*”).

**“We stay in our home not because of happiness, it’s because we cannot leave”**

At the time of data collection, however, **residual flood water and perceived insecurity had made food-related movements of any kind increasingly difficult**. During FSNMS data collection in 2023, 58% of households in assessed areas were *unable* to travel to another village or cattle camp in search of food because they were not physically able or because there were no nearby locations to travel to.<sup>22</sup> This percentage was highest in Rubkona, where migration in search of food was considered difficult, unsafe and otherwise impossible at the time of data collection. Whereas before the crisis, hunger-stricken households in Rubkona reportedly travelled as far as Sudan and Uganda, and to more proximal locations in Jonglei and Unity States, flood water and insecurity restricted such movements now (“*now there is fighting and water, you cannot run to different locations*”).

As of September 2023, **more than half of Rubkona County was inundated with residual flood water**.<sup>23</sup> UN officials estimate the water will remain for at least fifteen years,<sup>24</sup> raising the likelihood of long-term disruption to livelihoods and households’ mobility. Residual flood water has displaced tens of thousands of people into increasingly congested displacement sites. Movement between and outside of these sites is arduous and unsafe, especially in light of simmering political tension following renewed clashes between government and opposition forces in February 2024.<sup>25</sup> At the time of data collection, flooding similarly restricted household mobility in Fangak and Leer, where standing flood water continues to inundate large expanses of land. And particularly in Leer County, which saw appalling violence during the civil war,<sup>26</sup> and as recently as November 2023,<sup>27</sup> **there remain latent fears of insecurity that weigh heavily on households’ movement intentions**. This was most apparent during one interview in Adok Town, when participants explained that “*migration is not possible because Kiir and Machar disagreed*”.

Even if households *were* able to migrate, **fears of mistreatment in areas of arrival led some participants, mainly those in Fangak, to perceive it as a severe coping strategy**. Participants in most FGDs in Fangak described food-related movement as a severe coping mechanism because it exposed people to abuse in areas of settlement. For example, male participants in Toch feared that migrating could reignite inter-communal disputes, including revenge killings. Beyond immediate physical threats, additional factors that were perceived to complicate migrants’ integration were language barriers, a lack of relatives, and limited understanding of the foods available in areas of arrival (“*staying is better than going to another place where you don’t know what grass to eat*”).

Though some participants feared their reception in areas of arrival, findings suggest that the number of viable locations to displace to had declined significantly by the time of data collection. **Pervasive food insecurity was widely reported to have limited the movement options for acutely food-insecure households**. The Greater Upper Nile region has experienced widespread emergency-level food insecurity for several years,<sup>28</sup> and still, **participants in all locations described the scale of food insecurity over the past years as unprecedented**. Whereas before the flooding in Rubkona, “*food shortages did not cover the whole of the state*” and, therefore, hunger-stricken households could move

to relatively better-off areas, this was no longer possible because *"all locations are the same with the same problems"*. A similar finding was reported by women in Fangak (*"if I decide to leave this area the same scenario here is the scenario there"*) and Leer (*"we cannot go to other locations because the situation there is the same"*). **This levelling of acute food insecurity at the time of data collection had deprived households in some areas of a pressure release**, raising the risk of increasingly severe outcomes. In Rubkona, for instance, a male interviewee remarked: *"all of us are stuck and this is why people are dying"*.

## Natural resource-based coping mechanisms

### Fish

Fishing was a supplementary livelihood activity in the Nile flood plain *before* the flood events that began in 2020. It also served as an important coping strategy, according to a female interviewee in Leer: *"fishing was a livelihood and a strategy for getting food when there was none."* However, households' access to fish has increased in recent years as a result of widespread residual flooding, which means **a growing proportion of households in assessed locations now live adjacent or close to bodies of water**. Furthermore, recurrent and catastrophic flooding has caused major river channels to overflow, carrying fish into newly flooded areas. In turn, both availability of and access to fish have increased significantly, but mainly in the deepest flood waters. In parallel, **the near collapse of traditional livelihood activities and increased food insecurity have forced households to rely on alternate food sources, of which fishing is one of the more accessible** (*"now most people are fishing because there are no cows and no goats for people to depend on"*). Participants in a few interviews in Fangak regarded fishing as preferable because it reduced a household's reliance on roots of the water lily, and it demonstrated a household's independence (*"someone who fishes is independent, someone who relies on himself"*).

Despite many households' increased access to fish, findings suggest fishing remained a subsistence activity that was restricted by rudimentary techniques. Furthermore, **fishing and its contribution to household food security was limited by inadequate fishing equipment**; 80% of households surveyed in assessed locations during the rainy season in 2023 identified a lack of equipment as the main obstacle to fishing.<sup>29</sup> This corroborates qualitative findings, which point to sizeable gaps in the availability of canoes and fishing nets (*"the entire community are struggling with this"*). In Leer, for instance, one canoe was shared among twenty people. While in parts of Fangak, private canoes were stolen amid considerable demand. A lack of canoes was reported to impact fisherman in two main ways. First, it reduced their catch. In Fangak, for instance, those fisherman without a canoe struggled to deploy their nets in the deepest water where availability of fish was highest (*"the water is at our chests and we cannot deploy the net"*). Second, it increased the risks associated with fishing. Without a canoe, some fishermen were forced to stand in chest-high water for several hours, exposing them to attacks by wild animals.

### Firewood

Similar to fishing, **once-alternate activities that involve exploiting natural resources have grown in significance in recent years**. FSNMS data shows that the proportion of households whose main livelihood source involved collecting and selling forest products increased gradually between 2020 and 2023. This was most pronounced in Rubkona where the proportion increased by 43%.<sup>30</sup> In parallel, these activities have been reoriented towards food-related purposes. Whereas before the crisis, firewood was used primarily to support domestic chores, mainly cooking, participants in Bentiu explained that its trade became an important source of income after the flooding in 2020. A similar finding was reported by male interviewees in Juong, Leer County: *"before people used firewood for household purposes only, but now people are selling firewood in the market"*. While the collection of

firewood has long featured in local livelihood systems in Greater Upper Nile,<sup>31</sup> then, **flooding has driven both an intensification and a repurposing of natural resource use.**

Despite its growing prevalence in some areas, the income that households could generate from selling firewood was widely regarded as negligible, especially as compared with the challenges that households faced in collecting it. Participants in all locations described lengthy and tiresome journeys between population centres and areas of collection. Compounding this, collectors faced numerous safety threats, including wild animals and physical injury caused by stepping on fallen trees beneath the flood water. Ultimately, findings suggest that **the challenges to collecting firewood far surpassed its return.** This was clearest in Fangak, where participants in three interviews reported delayed or limited returns from selling firewood. While male participants in Old Fangak described a "long process" between collecting and selling the wood, female participants in Nyadin bemoaned the lack of customers. On selling the wood, women in Old Fangak reportedly earned a mere 100SSP per day, the adequacy of which was summarised by one interviewee: "you don't get enough money to justify the effort".

Overall, **collecting firewood was widely perceived as an undesirable activity** that some households resorted to because they had no other option. Female participants in Old Fangak, for instance, explained that people collected firewood when water lilies were unavailable; whilst in Leer, households that collected firewood did not own livestock or fishing equipment, according to male participants in Adok town. **Others appeared to collect firewood because the risks associated with alternate strategies were considered too severe.** In Fangak, for example, the meagre returns from selling firewood prevented some households from begging, a reportedly shameful act in Nuer society. So too could collecting firewood conceal the food security situation at home and, in turn, preserve a household's dignity, according to participants in Leer: "if you are engaged in this, people don't realise you are hungry." Ultimately, then, for some households this was a last resort that served as a buffer against more severe strategies, such as begging, or plugged the gap when other, more preferable strategies were unavailable.

## Water lilies

Wild foods have long sustained communities in South Sudan, functioning as both a staple food item during the lean season<sup>32</sup> and a critical food source during periods of extreme hunger.<sup>33</sup> In Leer, participants recalled consuming water lilies as a standalone response when alternate food sources were exhausted *and* as a supplementary response that supported typical coping mechanisms centering on livestock. At the time of data collection, however, **household diets in assessed locations were comprised mainly – if not entirely – of water lilies and their roots.** Participants recalled consuming water lilies continually since *at least* the flood events that began in 2020, a timeline approaching four years. It was widely perceived that the scale of consumption was unprecedented. Interviewees in Rubkona, for instance, could recall only one twelve month period, the year 1987, when water lilies were as widely consumed. The same was reported by male participants in Nyadin, Fangak: "there was a year when the flood came and people consumed lilies to a similar degree, but it wasn't like this".

**Overreliance on lilies is concerning because they have limited nutritional value and their consumption can cause sickness.** Lilies were widely regarded as a low-quality food source, and consuming their roots was likened to eating mud. In this regard, both foods served only to sustain people for short periods of time, albeit to a very limited extent as described by a female interviewee in Rubkona: "even if you're getting the water lilies, you're still dying". Compounding this, regular consumption of water lilies caused stomach issues and obstructed defecation, mainly among children. This was increasingly likely for households that struggled to access supplementary foods to mix or rotate with lilies. Participants in Fangak and Leer, for instance, explained that a dwindling supply of fish and milk increased households' reliance on lilies and, in turn, their exposure to sickness ("in the past we mixed them with milk, which was nutritional...but currently some households are eating only water

*lilies*"). These challenges indicate that **consumption needs were so severe as to be prioritised over bodily health**.

The collection of lilies also entailed several challenges, including **arduous journeys through cold and dirty flood water**. Participants in all counties described day-long and multi-day journeys to collect lilies. Women in Rubkona, for example, spent anywhere from twelve hours to multiple days on the water (*"I collect water lilies and the roots in a very far area, I can stay there for two days without coming home"*). Extended stays on the water were frequently associated with negative health impacts, including pneumonia and, according to participants in a few interviews in Rubkona, an increased likelihood of stillbirths (*"those who are pregnant and collecting water lilies, they have abortions because the water affects the child in the stomach"*). Generally, **people who collected water lilies faced a considerable level of risk, especially to their physical safety**. The threat of wild animals was of particular concern.<sup>34</sup> Participants in all locations described encountering snakes, including those that wrapped themselves around the stalk of the lily. In some cases, people were forced to abandon the lilies and flee, or to avoid areas of collection altogether (*"in some places where there are big lilies, you will find a snake and you will fear that place"*). Compounding the threat of snakes and other wild animals was the risk of drowning, which was reported widely in Fangak and Rubkona. At-risk households included those without the necessary equipment, those headed by older persons, and those reliant on children for collecting wild foods (*"children are dying in the floodwater because they cannot manage to swim very well"*).

In light of these challenges, participants commonly described the consumption of water lilies as a severe coping strategy. When asked about the severity of this strategy, people frequently referenced its *immediate* consequences, especially for their physical safety. In fact, **the risks to collecting and consuming lilies even made this a strategy of last resort for many households**. Households in all locations collected water lilies because they had no other choice. Among several factors, participants cited having insufficient resources to engage in alternate strategies (*"if you don't have a child who can push a wheelbarrow, you go into a deep place in a far village to get water lilies"*), the limited viability of those strategies (*"if we do not collect enough money from trading, we must go to the river to collect water lilies"*), and a general decline in primary food sources (*"once the water dried I stopped fishing and my wife started collecting lilies"*) as reasons for collecting water lilies and their roots.

Households who consumed water lilies as a last resort are in a precarious position, as findings suggest that **overuse and receding flood waters had reduced the availability of water lilies by the time of data collection**. In Rubkona, a dwindling supply of lilies was attributed to overutilization following the pause in HFA in August (*"consumption of water lilies increased after WFP stopped distributions, then the water lilies ran out"*). This was severe enough that in early 2024, local authorities applied restrictions on their collection in order to mitigate disputes and ensure a roughly equal distribution.<sup>35</sup> By comparison, reduced availability of lilies in Fangak and Leer was attributed to decreasing water levels in which lilies could not grow (*"when there is no water, kaye and lilies are no longer available"*). This is a critical indicator of food insecurity that is obscured by standard food security analysis, which assumes that the lean season coincides with the most severe consumption outcomes. As the availability of lilies depends heavily on the presence of residual flood water, **the same shock that eroded traditional livelihood activities and typical coping mechanisms has become a lifeline and a means of survival**. Therefore, a decreased availability of lilies, coupled with a lack of alternate food sources, suggests that some households were on the verge of sizeable consumption gaps with few means of bridging them.

## Communal coping mechanisms

**Reciprocal sharing between households is a robust and continual feature of Nuer society, the predominant ethnic group in assessed locations**. Households share various forms of material and intangible support with one another.<sup>36</sup> In all locations, sharing was described as a *"lifestyle"* and an



obligation that was instilled in people from a young age (*"we were trained by our elders and fathers that this is what you do"*). Sharing therefore continued in various forms despite the severity of the food security situation. In particular, relatively better-off households were expected to support their more vulnerable neighbours and relatives (*"you cannot have food alone while others are suffering"*); similar expectations applied to those who received humanitarian assistance. Sharing between households also served a unifying purpose by cementing relationships and providing a reciprocal safety net. Ultimately, then, **social relations were and remain an important communal mechanism for dealing with acute food insecurity.**

However, **sharing at the time of data collection followed informal rules that determined both how and between whom it occurred.** Households in Greater Upper Nile form support networks on the basis of blood relation, ethnicity, and livelihood source, among other factors.<sup>37</sup> Sharing in assessed locations was most common among relatives and neighbours (*"it's commonly between relatives only...neighbours are considered as relatives, so you also share food with them"*). Participants described close-knit relationships by which every household knew one another's situation. Therefore, support was usually unsolicited (*"my brother or my neighbour will know that I have run out of food without me telling him...he would see the condition because we stay together, and he would bring food to me"*). When households did request support, this was strictly from those other households in their immediate social network.

This is because **soliciting help from outside a household's main network was widely regarded as an unacceptable, severe and shameful act akin to begging.** Households that solicited help from relative strangers incurred a heavy social cost; they suffered reputational damage characterised by discrimination (*"you can be discriminated; people will say, 'the beggar has come'"*) and reduced social standing (*"it makes you someone who is not valued by the community"*). In Leer, findings suggest that begging had negative and lasting effects on a household. A female interviewee in Adok said it could impact a person's marriage prospects (*"if your future wife's father finds out, he will discredit you"*); and begging was reported by male participants in Juong to tarnish a household's reputation for generations (*"your generation will not be valued by people...they will say your ancestors were begging"*). These findings support pre-existing discussions that characterize "begging" as an emergency-level coping strategy in South Sudan.

**Inter-household sharing was also shaped by strong norms of reciprocity that could expose some households to more severe conditions.** Households that received support were expected to respond in kind should their relative or neighbour experience a similar situation. Failure to do so risked discrediting the household and, potentially, excluding it from the support network.<sup>38</sup> Reciprocating support was important to avoid other negative social repercussions, too. In Fangak, for instance, receiving food on a continual basis *without* reciprocating – regardless of the food security situation – was considered shameful (*"both households should take turns contributing the food for sharing, but if we eat only your food every day this is shameful"*). This might put certain households, especially the most vulnerable or those with insufficient resources to share, in a difficult situation. Because refusing the support of others was considered an affront to the system of sharing (*"you cannot refuse [because] you cancel the sharing system"*), **households that required support but had no means of repaying it could become 'trapped' in a cycle of dependence and non-reciprocation.**

**Compounding this, protracted and severe food insecurity had reduced the ability of households to share food and resources with one another.** Participants in all locations described a levelling of destitution whereby few households had the resources necessary to support themselves or their dependents on a regular basis (*"what makes our lives difficult now is that hunger has affected everyone, including the strongest people who we depended on before"*). This impacted sharing in two main ways. First, the conditions for sharing were scaled back. While households in Rubkona continued sharing food, for instance, findings suggest this was limited to more severe cases, such as to support

malnourished children. Second, the frequency of sharing was reduced. In Fangak and Leer, **sharing had declined because many households' sharing capacity was exhausted** (*"the reason we don't share now is because everyone is empty"*). While sharing was widely regarded in every location as a customary practice, a male interviewee in Leer described a growing sense of isolation and a prevailing self-interest among hunger-stricken households (*"now this is not happening because people have changed, everyone is fighting for their own interests"*). Even a moderate breakdown in the communal spirit so engrained in Nuer culture would point to increasingly severe food insecurity, as indeed it has in other contexts.<sup>39</sup> These findings outline **the gradual erosion of critical communal mechanisms on which households, particularly the worst-off, depend heavily.**

## CONCLUSION

**Compounding shocks have eroded typical coping mechanisms while intensifying once-subsidary activities.** Most recently, catastrophic flooding has combined with oversaturated soils and major rivers' limited absorptive capacity to inundate farm land and drown livestock, reducing the viability of cultivation while pushing cattle ownership to the brink of collapse. In turn, typical coping strategies reliant on productive assets were increasingly difficult to access at the time of data collection. Households relied instead on a meagre pool of previously supplementary behaviours. In particular, residual flood water facilitated fishing and the collection of water lilies, which comprised the most important – if not the only – food source for most households. Far from an adequate replacement, these activities were described as difficult, dangerous and otherwise severe coping strategies. Their limited benefits are reflected in alarmingly persistent rates of emergency-level food insecurity, including pockets of IPC AFI Phase-5 (Catastrophe) conditions.

**In assessed locations, livelihood coping analysis does not necessarily account for these fundamental changes in local livelihood systems.** As per the IPC AFI Reference table, the Livelihood Coping Strategies for Food Security (LCS-FS) is the only indicator that measures livelihood change, making it an essential contributor to livelihood analysis and the measurement of acute food insecurity. Currently, however, LCS-FS in South Sudan leans heavily on cattle- and agriculture-based coping strategies, and other behaviours that were largely invariable at the time of data collection. In assessed areas since at least 2020, findings challenge the importance of these strategies to determining the severity of livelihood change in response to food consumption gaps. Therefore, **the lower prevalence of these traditional strategies can misleadingly indicate a less severe situation.** In parallel, barriers to other livelihood strategies with a *greater* influence on households' access to food, such as fishing and the collection of wild foods, *could* indicate a deterioration in household food security. It is plausible that these findings also apply in other locations with similar characteristics to those in Fangak, Leer and Rubkona. However, further research is required to determine the likelihood that households can or will recover their pre-crisis livelihood strategies.

Findings suggest that some households have exhausted the typical coping mechanisms they relied on in the past. **This long-term exhaustion of traditional coping strategies is an important factor that should be considered in livelihood coping analysis.** LCS-FS analysis focuses on a twelve-month recall period in order to measure *current* conditions. However, this can obscure the proportion of households that have exhausted certain strategies over a longer period, as indeed many have done in Fangak, Leer and Rubkona. This may present an information gap that conceals the severity of livelihood coping and food insecurity. Persistent challenges in accessing cattle, for example, deprive vulnerable households of a pressure release while forcing them to rely on less preferred alternatives that, though regarded as less severe in coping strategies analysis, can pose immediate and severe threats to people's wellbeing.

Therefore, **standard measures of coping "severity" may be less applicable in assessed locations.** The severity of a coping strategy is determined, in part, by its impact on households' productivity and resilience to shocks. In the Livelihood Coping Strategies manual, for instance, Stress and Emergency coping strategies "*indicate a reduced ability to deal with future shocks*" and "*affect future productivity*", respectively.<sup>40</sup> Recalling the coping strategies that households *used* to employ, participants regularly described their severity in these terms. Asked about the severity of those strategies that people use *now*, however, **people frequently referenced their immediate consequences, particularly for people's physical wellbeing, as indicators of severity.** Collecting wild foods, for instance, was widely regarded as severe because it exposed people to snake bites, while consuming only these foods for several days caused sickness.

**So too are traditional understandings of “seasonality” less applicable in assessed areas**, as a result of catastrophic flooding and the associated challenges that many households face to recovering their livelihood assets. The viability of agriculture has declined significantly as a result of standing flood water and persistent security threats. Participants in all locations therefore described the post-harvest period – a time of relative plenty – as the *most difficult* point when households’ access to food deteriorated following the seasonal pause in HFA, and therefore when households were forced to rely on dangerous, shameful, and otherwise severe coping strategies. Furthermore, as most households now rely on water-based activities – mainly fishing and the collection of water lilies – to access food, declining water levels through the dry season will also contribute to more severe food insecurity. If households in assessed locations do face a lean season, then, findings suggest it begins with the pause in humanitarian food assistance and is sustained through the dry season until HFA resumes. This challenges current assumptions that more severe food insecurity – and utilization of more severe coping strategies – coincides with the rainy season.

**Conditions in assessed areas complicate the distinction between regular “livelihood activities or strategies” and “livelihood-based coping strategies”.** By the time of data collection (and increasingly over the past years), what were once coping strategies had evolved into the *main* – and, sometimes, only – livelihood activity that households used to access food. This is because many households now face major and protracted food consumption gaps, as well as widespread depletion of significant productive assets. These fundamental changes in the way that households access food suggest that traditional livelihood *coping strategies* are becoming livelihood *strategies*. Nevertheless, it is important to determine if these strategies amount to long-term (positive or negative) adaptation, or whether they shall be replaced by pre-crisis livelihood activities or new activities altogether.



## ANNEXES

### Annex 1

#### Timeline of main shocks in assessed locations since South Sudan's independence

##### 2011

###### Rubkona

- **November:** Within months of South Sudan's secession from the north, clashes between youths from Koch and Rubkona counties kill fourteen. A diminished security presence is blamed,<sup>41</sup> and a multi-stakeholder workshop convened to promote stabilization.<sup>42</sup>

###### Fangak

- **August-October:** Lt. General George Athor – who rebelled against the government after the 2010 election – violates a ceasefire negotiated before the independence referendum. Fighting between Athor's forces and the SPLA kills 111 in Fangak.<sup>43</sup> Alleged recruitment by rebel militias further contributes to a "volatile" security situation.<sup>44</sup>
- **December:** A large caseload of food insecure IDPs arrive in Fangak, having fled violence in neighbouring Pigi County. Commissioner Malith requests immediate assistance for IDPs and 20,000 returnees recently arrived from Khartoum.<sup>45</sup>

###### Leer

- **August:** Unpredictable rainfall delays the harvest, raising concerns of a food shortage in the post-harvest period.<sup>46</sup>

##### 2012

###### Rubkona

- **April-May:** Aerial bombardments on Bentiu and Rubkona Towns kill civilians following a spillover of hostilities between the governments in Juba and Khartoum.<sup>47</sup> Humanitarian agencies evacuate<sup>48</sup> and civilians flee home in search of food as prices skyrocket.<sup>49</sup>
- **June:** Heavy rain and winds destroy shelters used by returnees, compounding hunger and sickness. Rubkona RRC unable to facilitate onward transportation, citing insufficient funds.<sup>50</sup>
- **September:** An estimated 30,000 households in Bentiu Town are at risk of flooding, according to the Unity State director for the RRC.<sup>51</sup> Thousands are displaced from villages surrounding Bentiu between June and September.<sup>52</sup>

###### Fangak

- **March:** Flooding and attacks by rebel leader, George Athor, continually disrupt households' access to food.<sup>53</sup> South Sudan Democratic Movement (SSDM) renounce peace agreement with Juba. SSDM officials declare *Operation Ending Corruption*, aimed at deposing President Kiir, and advise civilians in Fangak to evacuate major towns.<sup>54</sup>
- **April:** Civilian disarmament process ongoing in Fangak, as the national scheme enters its second month.<sup>55</sup> Disarmament campaigns "rife with controversy" and fail to address root causes, despite success in reducing violence.<sup>56</sup> Long-awaited peace initiative aimed at reconciling rival communities in Jonglei state launched by Vice-President, Riek Machar.<sup>57</sup>
- **May-June:** Kala-azar outbreak reportedly kills fifty people in Ayod and Fangak counties.<sup>58</sup>

###### Leer

- **June:** Heavy rains and flooding disrupt the harvest. However UN-OCHA report describes flooding as "predictable and localized", and thus not requiring a scale-up in humanitarian operations.<sup>59</sup>
- **August:** "Disastrous and worsening" situation in Leer as thousands are displaced by flooding.<sup>60</sup>
- **November:** Unity State excluded from IFRC emergency appeal owing to a "tense security situation" and a blockade on the border corridor, despite Leer and Rubkona receiving the largest number of returnees from Sudan.<sup>61</sup>

## 2013

### Rubkona

- **September:** Unity State RRC unable to deliver essential water and sanitation supplies to flood victims in Rubkona, citing impassable roads.<sup>62</sup>
- **December:** Unity State Governor dismisses County Commissioner for failing to resolve inter-clan fighting between Leer and Jikany communities from Guit and Rubkona counties, respectively.<sup>63</sup>

### Fangak

- **April:** Suspected measles outbreak kills eleven people in Mareang payam.<sup>64</sup>
- **October:** Flood victims in Fangak receive 250 metric tons of food aid via Malakal.<sup>65</sup>

### Leer

- **December:** NGO evacuates fourteen international staff from Leer Hospital, citing insecurity.<sup>66</sup>

## 2014

### Rubkona

- **January-April:** Fighting engulfs Unity State soon after December 15. Government and opposition forces wrest control of Rubkona. Fighting is characterised by looting<sup>67</sup>, destruction,<sup>68</sup> ethnically-motivated violence<sup>69</sup> and egregious human rights abuses.<sup>70</sup> Civilian deaths<sup>71</sup> and displacement are widely reported.<sup>72</sup>
- **June-September:** Heavy military presence raises tension,<sup>73</sup> obstructs humanitarian assistance,<sup>74</sup> and drives severe food security outcomes.<sup>75</sup>
- **October:** Renewed hostilities between government and opposition forces violate Cessation of Hostilities Agreement.<sup>76</sup> Civilian deaths and further human rights abuses reported.<sup>77</sup> IDPs meet with "deplorable flooding conditions" in the Bentiu PoC.<sup>78</sup>

### Fangak

- **November:** Thousands displaced *within* and *into* Fangak County by heavy fighting,<sup>79</sup> described by UN officials as "the most sustained fighting to have taken place since May".<sup>80</sup> Fighting persists through December, displacing tens of thousands<sup>81</sup> and obstructing humanitarian assistance.<sup>82</sup>

### Leer

- **January-March:** Government forces launch attack on Leer County, in violation of a ceasefire signed one week earlier.<sup>83</sup> Militants destroy thousands of shelters<sup>84</sup> whilst damaging and looting humanitarian facilities.<sup>85</sup> Fighting is marked by appalling rights abuses, including murder and rape.<sup>86</sup> Civilians flee to swamps, where disease and malnutrition spread.<sup>87</sup>

## 2015

### Rubkona

- **January:** Skirmishes continue south of Bentiu and around the Unity oil fields.<sup>88</sup> Aid workers cannot access Bentiu Town and the PoC; flights in and out of Rubkona County are suspended.<sup>89</sup>
- **April-June:** Government forces launch a full-scale military offensive in Unity State.<sup>90</sup> In Rubkona County, generals deploy militias from particular ethnic sub-groups, ostensibly to exploit and deepen rifts between sections. Soldiers form "defence rings" around Bentiu and Rubkona to obstruct civilians' access to the PoC.<sup>91</sup> The offensive is rife with human rights abuses and vigorous in its targeting of civilians.<sup>92</sup>
- **October:** Clashes restart amid severe food insecurity<sup>93</sup> and a growing displacement crisis.<sup>94</sup>

### Fangak

- **January-April:** New Fangak adjacent to frontlines along the Jonglei-Upper Nile border. The town is largely destroyed; shelters are burned and schools flattened. The hospital, one of the main health facilities in northern Jonglei, is damaged beyond repair.<sup>95</sup> Compounding this, standing flood water has submerged homes, drowned crops, and killed livestock. In turn, many households rely on wild foods.<sup>96</sup> Fighting in Unity drives a large population influx to Fangak, tripling the population in some areas.<sup>97</sup>

### Leer

- **May:** Government-aligned militias from Lakes State launch offensive in Unity. Resumption of hostilities forces humanitarians to evacuate and civilians to flee.<sup>98</sup> Militants commit human rights abuses; murder, abduction and sexual violence are widespread.<sup>99</sup>
- **October:** Ceasefire signed in September falters amid renewed fighting.<sup>100</sup> Civilians are cut off from humanitarian assistance<sup>101</sup> as GAM rates exceed 30%<sup>102</sup> and the IPC raises a famine alert.<sup>103</sup> Fighting continues through October, killing hundreds of civilians.<sup>104</sup> International rights groups deplore the alleged suffocating of civilians inside a shipping container.<sup>105</sup>

## 2016

### Rubkona

- **March-May:** Apparent calm in Unity State, however, political problems arising in 2015 remain unaddressed.<sup>106</sup> Rocket-propelled attack on Bentiu PoC points to simmering tension.<sup>107</sup> SPLA controls Bentiu, IO forces in nearby Rubkona. Population in the Bentiu PoC decreases by 15%<sup>108</sup> amid relative calm and upsurge in malaria.<sup>109</sup>
- **July:** Fighting kills civilians in Bentiu; widely condemned by international observers.<sup>110</sup>
- **November:** Population in the Bentiu PoC spikes once again.<sup>111</sup> Cholera outbreak<sup>112</sup> and reports of sexual violence outside the PoC<sup>113</sup> underline the severe conditions facing IDPs.

### Leer

- **February-March:** Clashes between warring parties and intercommunal violence increase in mid-February. Fighting is concentrated in Leer, where in December humanitarian agencies finally returned after eight months without access.<sup>114</sup>
- **May:** Return of humanitarian agencies and establishment of UNMISS Temporary Operating Base improve security.<sup>115</sup> Main threat is cattle raiding, as opposed to armed conflict.
- **July-December:** Renewed hostilities force humanitarian agencies to evacuate,<sup>116</sup> risk of famine looms.<sup>117</sup> Displacement,<sup>118</sup> sexual violence<sup>119</sup> and destruction of productive assets widely reported.<sup>120</sup>

## 2017

### Fangak

- **April:** Humanitarian agencies evacuate New Fangak town amid fears of a government offensive via Tonga.<sup>121</sup>

#### Leer

- **February:** Famine declared in Leer and Mayendit counties amid worsening food insecurity, acute malnutrition and continual insecurity that hinders relief operations.<sup>122</sup> UN Special Representative to the Secretary General unequivocal that the famine is "manmade".<sup>123</sup>
- **May-July:** Large-scale, multi-sectoral humanitarian response eases the famine,<sup>124</sup> but severe food insecurity persists as low-intensity battles continue.<sup>125</sup>

## 2018

#### Rubkona

- **July:** SPLA and associated forces launch attacks in Rubkona.<sup>126</sup>
- **November:** Mass rape of at least 125 women on their way to a food distribution point draws international condemnation;<sup>127</sup> endemic of "systematic" pattern of sexual violence that escalated dramatically in 2018.<sup>128</sup>

#### Leer

- **April-May:** Clashes between SPLA and opposition forces evolve into a significant military operation. Hundreds of civilians killed and displaced, humanitarian agencies cannot access affected communities.<sup>129</sup> Violence marked by "staggering brutality" akin to war crimes.<sup>130</sup>

## 2019

#### Rubkona

- **May:** Measles outbreak declared in the Bentiu PoC.<sup>131</sup>
- **December:** Rubkona one of several counties affected by unprecedented rainfall and flash flooding; thousands displaced, shelters submerged, and livelihoods verge on collapse.<sup>132</sup>

#### Fangak

- **March:** Suspected outbreak of diarrheal diseases in remote payams.<sup>133</sup>
- **October:** Days of torrential rainfall inundate vast swathes of Greater Jonglei; major areas in Fangak are affected.<sup>134</sup>

## 2020

#### Fangak

- **July-October:** Flooding in July and steadily increasing water levels drown crops, submerge homes and drive displacement into towns.<sup>135</sup>

## 2021

#### Rubkona

- **February:** Extreme and unprecedented flooding drives displacement, erodes livelihood activities and submerges homes.<sup>136</sup>
- **August:** Flooding and "deplorable" sanitary conditions in Bentiu PoC contribute to rise in watery diarrhoea and hepatitis E.<sup>137</sup>
- **November:** Flood waters in Bentiu remain "dangerously high" despite ongoing levee repair and maintenance work. Fears that heavy rain and flooding will submerge the airstrip, an

essential delivery hub for humanitarians.<sup>138</sup> Standing flood water will not evaporate for fifteen years, according to UN officials.<sup>139</sup>

### Fangak

- **January:** Residual flood water following heavy rainfall in 2020 submerges entire villages,<sup>140</sup> damages crop land, kills livestock, disrupts trade and isolates affected persons from humanitarian assistance.<sup>141</sup>
- **August-September:** Renewed flooding compounds an already severe situation<sup>142</sup> by destroying health facilities<sup>143</sup> and restricting humanitarian access.<sup>144</sup> Livelihoods collapse, coping mechanisms are eroded.<sup>145</sup> Disease burden climbs as Fangak declared "one of the most flood-affected locations in 2021".<sup>146</sup>

## 2022

### Rubkona

- **May:** Cholera outbreak declared in Rubkona county.<sup>147</sup> Large numbers of acutely-malnourished children are vulnerable, especially those living in IDP sites.
- **June:** Atypically high flood extent in Rubkona, Leer and Fangak continually restricts households' access to food and income, while driving poor health and sanitary conditions.<sup>148</sup>
- **October:** Water levels increase to highest level experienced in 2021, breaching dykes around the Bentiu PoC.<sup>149</sup> An estimated 140,000 people in Rubkona County have been forced to leave their homes.<sup>150</sup>

### Fangak

- **March:** Standing and rising flood waters submerge crops.<sup>151</sup> SMART survey results point to severe food insecurity and acute malnutrition; subset of households facing extreme consumption gaps indicative of Catastrophic food insecurity.<sup>152</sup>
- **August:** Fighting in Tonga spills into Fangak after Agwelek forces attack SLPA-IO strongholds.<sup>153</sup> Nutrition facilities in New Fangak are looted, schools are burned down, and humanitarian organisations are forced to relocate to Old Fangak.<sup>154</sup> Clashes in Pigi County<sup>155</sup> and Unity State<sup>156</sup> trigger further displacement *within* and *into* Fangak.
- **September:** Heavy rainfall floods at least eight villages in Old Fangak payam, re-displacing some of those who fled the violence in August. Food distributions suspended due a lack of aircraft;<sup>157</sup> river convoys turned around and supplies looted amid escalation in fighting.<sup>158</sup>
- **December:** Risk of Famine raised in Fangak as hostilities continue<sup>159</sup> and recurrent flooding disrupts households' access to food.<sup>160</sup>

### Leer

- **February-May:** Government forces clash with SLPA-IO in southern Unity. Armed youths from Koch and Mayendit counties are also implicated.<sup>161</sup> Once again fighting is scarred by appalling rights abuses, and civilians bear the brunt; thousands are displaced<sup>162</sup> and hundreds are killed, raped and abducted.<sup>163</sup> Reports of severe acute malnutrition, diarrhoea and pneumonia among affected communities,<sup>164</sup> who were already reeling from the effects of standing flood water left over from flooding in 2021.<sup>165</sup>
- **September:** Local authorities report that 90% of Leer County is flooded; an estimated 66,000 people are affected.<sup>166</sup>

## 2023

### Rubkona

- **October:** Inundation of much of the county, the associated collapse of traditional livelihood activities and coping mechanisms, the arrival of tens of thousands of people fleeing the



conflict in Sudan, and an atypically early pause in humanitarian food assistance culminate in a Risk of Famine analysis at the IPC.<sup>167</sup>

#### Leer

- **November:** Government forces clash once again with SPLA-IO.<sup>168</sup> Fighting displaces thousands of civilians, many of whom seek refuge in Leer Town.<sup>169</sup>

## Endnotes

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