

Situation Overview: Unity State, South Sudan

January - March 2020

REACH An initiative of
IMPACT Initiatives
ACTED and UNOSAT

Introduction

In the first quarter of 2020, the population of Unity State experienced a slight improvement in access to food despite increased levels of localised forms of conflict and the start of the COVID-19 emergency response. Specific information about humanitarian needs in remote areas of the state remained scarce and difficult to obtain, creating barriers for humanitarian programming and targeting of assistance.

To inform humanitarian actors working outside formal settlement sites, REACH has conducted assessments of hard-to-reach areas in South Sudan since December 2015. Data is collected every month through interviews with key informants (KIs) with knowledge of a settlement and triangulated with focus group discussions (FGDs). This Situation Overview uses this data and secondary sources to analyse changes in observed humanitarian needs across Unity State in the first quarter of 2020.

Key Findings

- There was a decrease in the proportion of assessed settlements reporting the presence of **internally displaced people (IDPs)** from 31% in December to 18% in March 2020. Findings indicate that inter-communal violence was the main driver of recent internal displacement in Unity state, with the majority of cases being reported in northern Unity.³

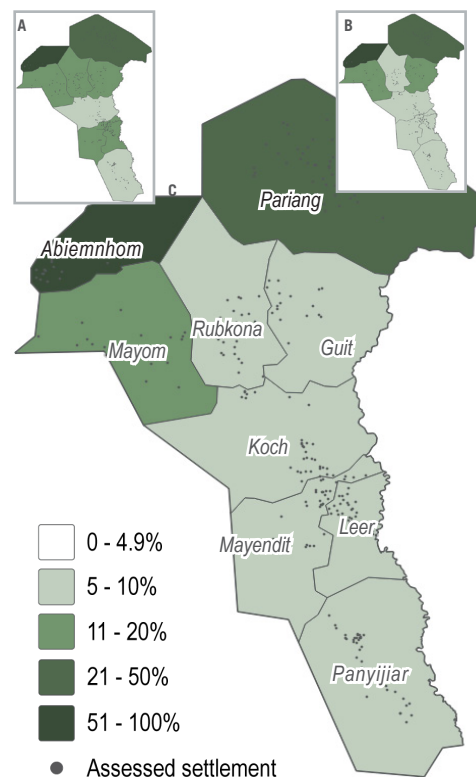
- Reported adequate **access to food** improved in March, from 59% of assessed settlements in December 2019 to 79% in March 2020, likely due to better access to wild foods and fishing, and improved access to markets as well as sustained humanitarian food assistance.

- Reflective of continued **protection** concerns, 24% of assessed settlements in March reported most people felt unsafe. Findings suggest that the main contributing factors to persistent feelings of insecurity were cattle raiding and incidents related to intercommunal tensions, which reportedly increased in early 2020, particularly in Mayom, Rubkona, Guit and Koch counties.

- **Shelter** conditions for IDP returnees seemed to have remained inadequate this quarter. In March, 19% of assessed settlements with presence of IDP returnees in Leer County and 18% in Mayendit County reported that the majority of IDP returnees were using improvised shelter.⁴ Shelter conditions in Mayom County seemingly remained poor with 48% of assessed settlements in March reporting some people slept in the open.

- Poor **Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)** conditions seem to have persisted across the state. In March, 18% of assessed settlements reported no access to functional boreholes, and only 26% reported that people were using latrines, while handwashing with

Map 1: REACH assessment coverage of Unity State, January (A), February (B) and March (C) 2020.



of key informant interviews conducted: 848

of assessed settlements: 501

of counties covered: 9 (of 9)

of focus group discussions conducted: 11

METHODOLOGY

To provide an indicative overview of the situation in hard-to-reach areas of Unity State, REACH uses primary data from key informants (KIs) who have recently arrived from, recently visited, or receive regular information from a settlement or "Area of Knowledge" (AoK). Information for this report was collected from KIs in Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site, Nyal Town and Jamjang Town in Unity State in January, February and March 2020.

In-depth interviews on humanitarian needs were conducted on a monthly basis using a structured survey tool. After data collection was completed, all data was aggregated at settlement level, and settlements were assigned the modal or most credible response. When no consensus could be found for a settlement, that settlement was not included in reporting.

Only counties with interview coverage of at least 5% of all settlements¹ in a given month were included in analysis. Due to access and operational constraints, the specific settlements assessed within each county each month vary. In order to reduce the likelihood that variations in data are attributable to coverage differences, over time analyses were only conducted for counties with at least 70% consistent payam² coverage over the period. Quantitative findings were triangulated with focus group discussions (FGDs) with people displaced from hard-to-reach areas and secondary sources.

More details of the methodology can be found in the [AoK ToR](#)

1. To calculate the percentage of AoK coverage, the total number of settlements per county is based on OCHA settlement lists in addition to new settlements mapped by KIs reached each month.

2. A payam is a South Sudanese administrative sub-division below the county level

3. Mayom, Rubkona, Guit and Koch counties.

4. Temporary emergency accommodation structure built with waste materials.



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soap was reportedly practised in 13% of assessed settlements.

- The proportion of assessed settlements reporting waterborne diseases as the main perceived **health** problem increased in Mayom County from 38% in December 2019 to 67% in March 2020.

- Findings suggest that **education** services remained insufficient to meet demand in March 2020. In assessed settlements with reported access to education, only 8% were offering secondary school education services.

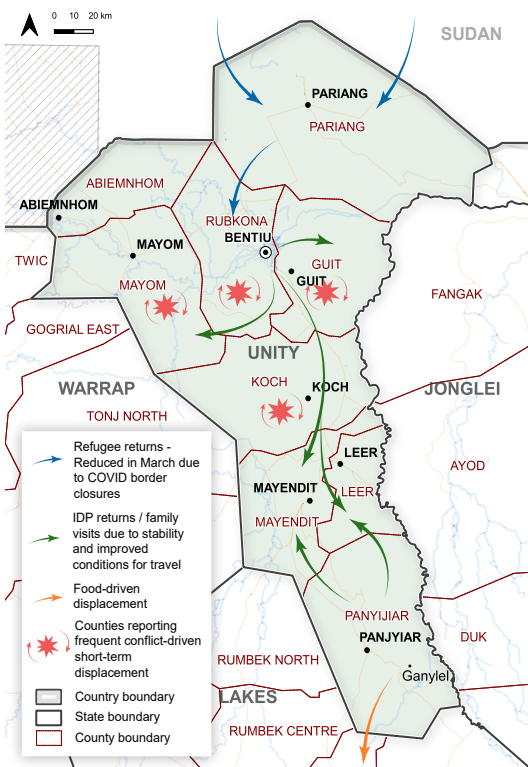
Population Movement and Displacement

In the first quarter of 2020, most of the population movement was related to seasonal migration to cattle camps, visits to relatives in other parts of the state and attempted returns. Continuing the positive trend of last quarter, incidents of large-scale internal displacement observed in mid-2018 do not seem to have reoccurred. Instead, findings indicate that internal displacement was mainly driven by localised conflict and food insecurity in limited counties. Developments in the peace process in February and the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions on cross-border and internal movement likely respectively increased and then decreased the rate of IDP and refugee returns throughout the quarter.

Seasonal Movements

Improved conditions for transportation due to the onset of the dry season allowed typical intra-county population movement. In this

Map 2: Population movement and displacement trends in Unity State, January - March 2020



quarter, pastoralists started moving to cattle camps where water and pastures were more readily available, and cows could survive the harsh environmental conditions of the dry season. Meanwhile, communities, pressured by the diminishing stocks of the last harvest, also travelled more regularly and longer distances to access wild food, fish, markets or distribution points for humanitarian food assistance.⁵

There were also frequent population movements for family visits and reunification in the first quarter of 2020. Families that were separated because of previous years' insecurity, damaged

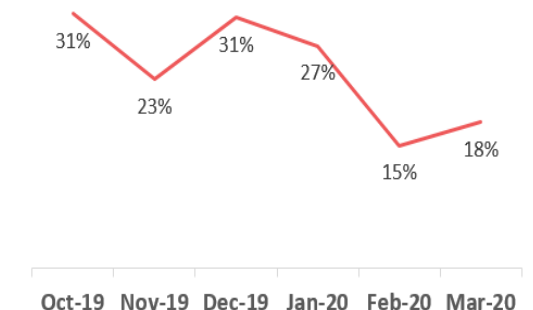
roads and flooding in the second half of 2019, reportedly travelled to other parts of the state to visit areas of origin and family; in the first quarter IOM flow monitoring reported visiting family and friends as the most common reason (28% of departing households) for temporary travel outside of the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site.⁶ Similarly, movement due to family reasons was observed in the central and southern areas of Unity State through REACH Port and Road monitoring. In March, 68% of households leaving Nyal and 25% inbound households reported family visits as the main reason for travel between Nyal and central Unity, with some movements occasionally as far as the Bentiu PoC.⁷

Internal displacement

In the first quarter, there was a reduction in the proportion of assessed settlements reporting recent large-scale displacement, from 31% in December 2019 to 18% in March 2020 (see Figure 1). This decrease might be attributable to the continuation of relative stability compared to previous years (until 2018), when military offensives caused multiple large scale internal displacements in Unity State.

Nevertheless, some level of conflict-driven displacement seemingly remained in quarter one, likely related to the intensified localised conflict observed during the current dry season. In March, 44% of assessed settlements that reported large-scale displacement in the month prior to data collection reported conflict as the main reason people left the settlement. During this period, there was an increase in reports of cattle raiding, revenge killings

Figure 1: Proportion of assessed settlements reporting recent large-scale displacement, October 2019 - March 2020



and intercommunal violence.⁸ Generally, this type of conflict led to short-term and localised displacement, with populations gradually returning to their homes once the security situation stabilised. Areas demonstrating this type of displacement in quarter one of 2020 were Rukbona, Guit, Koch and Mayom counties.

In addition to conflict, heightened food insecurity also seemingly caused internal displacement, particularly in southern Unity. In Panyijiar County, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting a recent large-scale displacement increased from 17% of assessed settlements in December 2019 to 47% in January 2020, and then decreased to just 3% at the end of the quarter. FGD participants from Panyijiar reported that families in Ganyiel and the surrounding villages coped with the severe food insecurity by moving with cattle towards Amongpini in Lakes State.⁹ Serious flooding in the second half of 2019 caused the destruction of crops and livestock in these communities,

5. FGD Nyal town. Food Security and Livelihoods/Population Movement. April 2020

6. International Organization for Migration (IOM). "Displacement Site Flow Monitoring Q1 2020".

7. REACH. "Nyal Ports and Roads Monitoring Factsheet". March 2020

8. International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO). "Greater Upper Nile Security snapshot". March 2020

9. FGD Nyal town. Food Security and Livelihoods/Population Movement. April 2020

while Humanitarian Food Assistance (HFA) distributions were reportedly inconsistent in January 2020. These food distributions increased later in the quarter, prompting the return of many of those displaced (see FSL section for more information).

IDP and Refugee returns

Reported IDP returns remained relatively frequent throughout the reporting period, and increased considerably towards the end of the quarter. State-wide, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting any IDP returnees arriving within the three months prior to data collection increased from 9% in December 2019 to 22% in March 2020, with a ten percentage points increase between February and March 2020. The increase in reports of IDP returnees was possibly due to increased confidence in the peace process, following the announcement of the return to the ten states structure and the formation of South Sudan's Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity in late February.¹⁰ Reflective of this trend, in assessed settlements with IDP returns, 33% reported that improved security and stability was the main pull factor for those returning to the settlement.

Meanwhile, reported refugee returns slightly increased between January and February, then slightly reduced in March 2020. The proportion of assessed settlements reporting refugee returnees in the three months prior to data collection increased from 34% in January to 51% in February and decreased to 45% by March 2020. This reduction is likely to continue in the next reporting period due to COVID-19 border

closures imposed towards the end of March, which have restricted population movement from Sudan,¹¹ and are likely to prevent the new arrival of large convoys of refugee returnees coming from Sudan into Pariang and the Bentiu PoC.

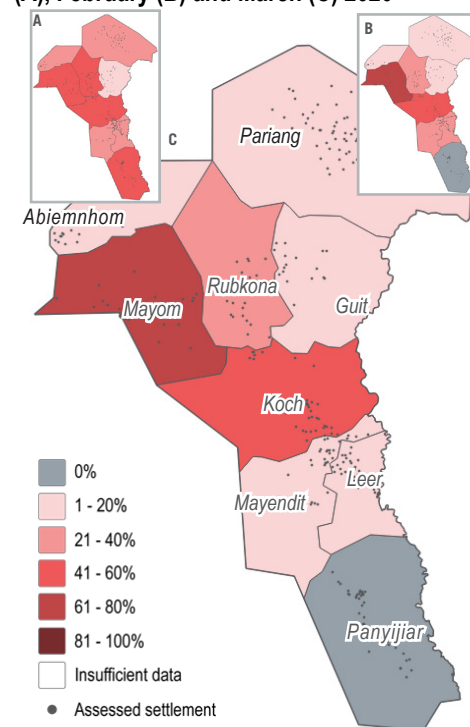
Situation in Assessed Settlements

Food security and livelihoods (FSL)

During the first quarter of 2020, there was an increase in the proportion of assessed settlements reporting most people had access to adequate amounts of food, from 59% in December 2019 to 79% in March 2020 (see Map 3). This reported improvement was consistent with the most recent IPC analysis according to which the food security situation significantly improved compared to the same time last year, with 46.2% of the state's population in January facing Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse food insecurity as compared to 62.3% in 2019. In addition, despite a seasonally driven deterioration, the January IPC update reported that crisis level food insecurity would be maintained in the period February - April 2020.¹² This reduction in the proportion of the population in crisis levels of food insecurity was likely due to comparatively better security and road conditions, which allowed the population to access wild food and fish, visit markets and travel to distribution points to obtain HFA.

Despite generally improved access to alternative sources of food and HFA, 21% of assessed settlements still reported that most people were unable to access enough food in the last month.

Map 3: Proportion of assessed settlements reporting inadequate access to food, January (A), February (B) and March (C) 2020



This reported inadequate access to food might be due to crops and livestock losses that occurred in the second half of 2019, localised insecurity, which restricted livelihoods, as well as the COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, food prices slightly increased towards the end of quarter one, which might further strain access in the second quarter of 2020.¹³ As part of preparedness for the arrival of COVID-19, some areas also received double distributions of food during the first quarter, suggesting reported improvements in access to food were fragile and dependent on HFA.¹⁴

Northern Unity (Abiemnom, Pariang, Mayom, Rubkona, Guit, Koch counties)

During the first quarter of 2020, reported access to food slightly improved in northern Unity. By March, all counties except for Mayom and Koch had over 50% or more of their assessed settlements reporting adequate access to food. Despite some reports of localised insecurity potentially driving food insecurity, receding water levels and dryer trails allowed more people to access sources of wild foods and fishing, whilst roads also reopened due to dry weather conditions.¹⁵ Improvements in reported access to food were also likely linked to double distributions of HFA to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19.¹⁶ In assessed settlements that did not experience shocks in 2019 and had stocks from the last harvest, sources of wild food and humanitarian assistance supplemented the population's food intake.

Compared to other counties in northern Unity, the comparatively worse food security situation in Mayom County was a likely a consequence of last year's flooding. FGD participants from Mayom currently displaced in the Bentiu PoC reported that flooding destroyed crops and killed livestock, leaving the population unable to produce food locally.¹⁷ However, food security was reportedly slowly improving, with reported adequate access to food increasing from 19% of assessed settlements in December to 33% in March. However, Mayom was still far from the level of adequate access to food reported before last year's flooding (88% as of August 2019) and seemingly remained reliant on HFA, which was increasingly the

10. Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC). "On the status of implementation of the revitalised agreement on the resolution of the conflict in the Republic of South Sudan". January - March 2020

11. International Organization for Migration (IOM). "COVID-19 Situation Report: Update #01". April 2020

12. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). "Acute Food Security and Acute Malnutrition Analysis Jan -Jul 2020". February 2020

13. Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET). "South Sudan Food Security Outlook Update" April 2020.

14. World Food Programme (WFP). "WFP South Sudan: Situation Reports # 267". April 2020

15. Logistics Cluster. "South Sudan Access Constraints map". January 2020

16. World Food Programme (WFP). "WFP South Sudan: Situation Reports # 266". April 2020

17. FGD Bentiu. "Long-term impact of flooding in Mayom County". February 2020

primary source of food reported by assessed settlements, at 47% in March 2020, up from 0% in August 2019. Similarly, despite a slight reported improvement in access to food since December, Koch County had the second highest proportion of assessed settlements reporting inadequate access to food in March at 52%. FGD participants from Koch reported lack of seeds and tools caused reduced planting in the previous cultivation season, whilst persistent local insecurity disrupted cultivation, livestock rearing and other livelihood activities.¹⁸

Meanwhile, reported access to food in Abiemnom and Pariang counties was comparatively better than in other parts of the state. Between December 2019 and March 2020, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting most people had adequate access to food increased from 56% to 94% in Abiemnom and 75% to 90% in Pariang. This positive trend was likely driven by improved road conditions, allowing traders to supply local markets and targeted HFA. The border closure introduced in March 2020 to contain the spread of COVID-19 did not restrict commercial transportation, and traders coming from Sudan reportedly continued to enter South Sudan through Unity State. However, the real impact of these and other preventative measures will be most likely felt in the second quarter of the year.

Central and Southern Unity (Leer, Mayendit, Panyijiar counties)

In central and southern Unity State, reported access to food increased during the reporting period. Between December and March 2020, the proportion of assessed settlements

reporting most people had adequate access to food increased from 68% in December to 85% in Leer, and 75% to 91% in Mayendit. The improvement in both counties was likely due to sustained humanitarian food assistance, combined with better access to markets and resumption of livelihood activities due to improved security and stability in central Unity since late 2018. FGD participants reported that improved security in Leer and Mayendit counties allowed communities to engage in cultivation in 2019 and grow some crops for sustenance.¹⁹

Despite these improvements, high levels of returnees due to increased stability reportedly had a negative impact on food security for settlements across central Unity. In line with this concern, between January and March 2020, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting new arrivals as the main reason some people could not access adequate food increased from 14% in December to 34% in March in Leer County, and from 11% to 30% in Mayendit County. FGD participants reported that some returnees in this part of Unity State were not registered to access humanitarian food assistance.²⁰ These returnees were reported to put a strain on local resources by sharing food with relatives and the wider community, and accessing the limited sources of wild food and markets.

Meanwhile, in Panyijiar County, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting adequate access to food increased from 47% in January to 100% in March 2020. The 2019 floods in this part of Unity decimated crops and caused

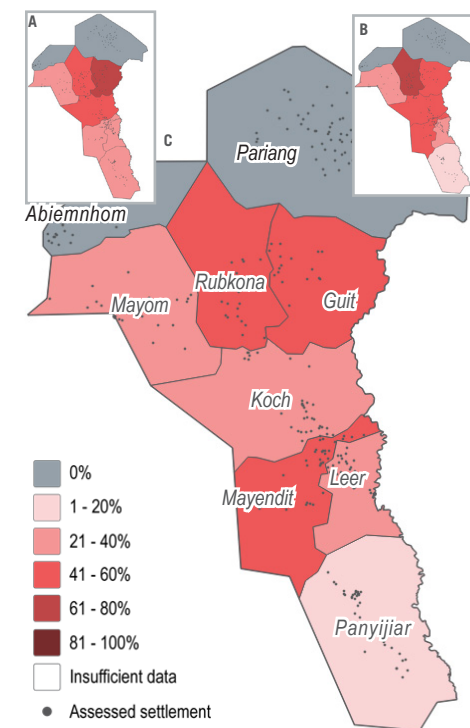
livestock disease among communities that were already food insecure and vulnerable due to the cumulative effects of conflict and displacement.²¹ As a consequence, between December 2019 and January 2020, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting inadequate access to food increased by 19 percentage points. In January 2020, the dire food insecurity coupled with gaps in the arrivals of HFA in Ganyiel, southern Panyijiar and surrounding areas, forced communities to employ various coping strategies, including group displacement with their remaining livestock towards Amongpini in Lakes State.²² In the next two months, the distribution of double food assistance rations in Panyijiar County acted as a pull factor that gradually attracted the displaced population back to Panyijiar and drove the reports of adequate access to food to the high levels reported at the end of the quarter.

Moving forward, preventing a drastic deterioration in access to food during the lean season will depend on the ability to avert disruptions in planned HFA and ensure that gaps between distributions remain minimal. The continued arrival of humanitarian assistance to this part of Unity will be essential to prevent new instances of food-driven displacement.

Protection

During the reporting period, assessed settlements in Unity State reported insecurity and multiple protection concerns, with the majority of incidents in northern regions compared to more stable conditions in central and southern counties. In March, nearly a quarter of assessed settlements (24%) reported

Map 4: Proportion of assessed settlements reporting most people felt unsafe most of the time January (A), February (B) and March 2019



most people felt unsafe most of the time (see Map 4), while 21% reported incidents of looting in which property was stolen from one or more households. Furthermore, 7% of assessed settlements reported incidents of conflict in which at least one civilian was killed, with the majority of reports as in Guit County (29%) and Rubkona County (20%).

Overall, this was reflective of persistent insecurity and protection issues in most of the state. The majority of these incidents were reported to be related to cattle raiding between communities with historical grievances,

18. FGD Bentiu. "Food Security and Livelihoods/Population Movement". April 2020

19. FGD Nyal town. Food Security and Livelihoods/Population Movement. April 2020

20. FGD Bentiu. "Food Security and Livelihoods/Population Movement". April 2020

21. REACH. "Q3 July - September 2019 Situation Overview Unity State". November 2019

22. FGD Nyal town. Food Security and Livelihoods/Population Movement. April 2020

revenge killings and clashes between armed groups of youth and other armed actors. Reported insecurity during quarter one of 2020 involved youth from Mayom, Koch, Rubkona and Guit counties, demonstrating how widespread and persistent intercommunal violence remains in this part of Unity State.²³

Historically, intercommunal violence and cattle raiding incidents peak during this time of the year, when better weather conditions and dry terrain allows for rapid mobilisation of people and raided livestock. However, the increased frequency and intensity of localised violence observed during the current period suggests that other factors may be causing the spike in these type of events. This trend might be partially driven by changes in the administrative division after the return to the ten states structure in February 2020, and delays in appointing a governor and permanent commissioners, may have produced a power vacuum that was being capitalised by criminal actors.

Shelter and Non-food Items (NFIs)

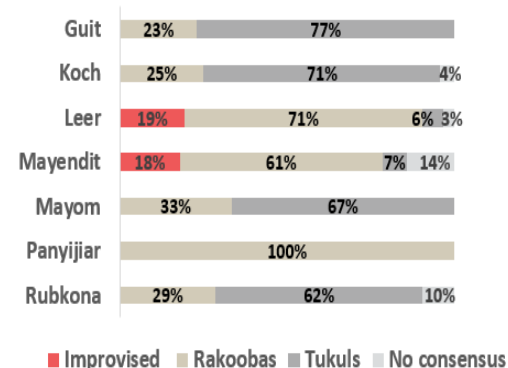
In the first quarter, shelter conditions for host communities seemingly remained relatively unchanged compared to the previous reporting period. In March, 86% of assessed settlements reported the main shelter type for the host community was tukuls,²⁴ while 11% reported rakoobas.²⁵ The high proportion of host communities living in tukuls was likely due to the low reports of recent large-scale displacement and the reduction in conflict-related shelter damage, which was reported by less than 5% of assessed settlements in the twelve months

prior to data collection. In March, Leer and Mayendit counties had the highest proportion of assessed settlements reporting that host communities lived in rakoobas at 42% and 44% respectively. Likely due to persistent uncertainty about long-term peace and stability in central Unity, host communities in both counties have seemingly not yet fully rebuild tukuls that were lost during the military offensives in mid-2018.

Meanwhile, in a positive trend, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting most IDPs lived in rakoobas increased from 57% in December 2019 to 69% in March 2020, suggesting that a higher proportion of IDPs transitioned from open spaces to a semi-permanent shelter that offers protection against the rain and other environmental factors. This transition is likely due to the reduction in large-scale displacement and increased stability in some areas of Unity, which allowed IDPs to remain in one place and gradually collect construction materials in preparation for the upcoming rainy season. The fact that all assessed settlements in March reported the majority of IDPs were staying with host communities and not in the open might indicate increased access to plastic sheeting and other construction materials through local networks, markets, or NFI distributions.

Reported shelter conditions for IDP returnees slightly improved, except in central Unity, where some IDP returnees reportedly used improvised shelter. In Leer and Mayendit counties, 19% and 18% of assessed settlements respectively reported that most IDP returnees were living in improvised shelter in March 2020 (see Figure 2). The higher proportion of IDP returnees

Figure 2: Proportion of assessed settlements reporting IDP returnees shelter type, March 2020



reportedly living in improvised shelter in both counties compared to other parts of Unity is a likely consequence of the large conflict-related shelter destruction in Leer and Mayendit counties at the peak of the 2018 crisis²⁶ combined with frequent influx of IDP returnees travelling from the Bentiu PoC to central parts of the state (see Population Movement and Displacement section for more information).

Shelter conditions in Mayom County remained extremely poor following flooding in late 2019, with 58% of assessed settlements in January 2020 reporting people slept in the open as a result of recent flooding. However, that percentage decreased to 48% by March 2020, following receding water levels and shelter interventions. FGD participants interviewed in February reported that some families were awaiting support to repair their shelter damaged by the water in last year's flooding, especially plastic sheeting and roofing materials.²⁷

In terms of NFIs, of assessed settlements that reported IDP presence, 31% reported the main

NFI needed was plastic sheeting. Meanwhile, the proportion of assessed settlements with IDP presence reporting mosquito nets as the main NFI need increased from 8% in December 2019 to 28% in March 2020. The high demand for mosquito nets was possibly due to preparations for the start of the rainy season when mosquito-borne diseases become more prevalent. In addition, many people use mosquito nets for fishing in the rainy season across Unity State.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Water

During the reporting period, assessed settlements in Unity State reported barriers to accessing safe drinking water connected to inadequate infrastructure. In March 2020, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting no access to any borehole was 18%. This proportion has remained relatively low and stable over the last 12 months, suggesting that improved humanitarian access since September 2018 has not translated into expansion of improved water services to remote communities.

Lack of sources of safe drinking water reportedly forced some communities to mainly rely on surface water sources; 15% of assessed settlements reported that surface water was the main source of drinking water in March 2020. The consumption of this type of water has a higher likelihood of making people sick, especially in the context of Unity State, where 61% of assessed settlements reported that animals use or are kept near the settlements' preferred water sources. As a likely consequence, in March, 14% of assessed

23. International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO). "Greater Upper Nile Security snapshot". March 2020

24. Shelter built with mud, grass, wooden poles and a conical roof, which is more durable and provides better protection against environmental factors.

25. Makeshift housing built using plastic sheeting, wood poles and elephant grass

26. UNMISS/UNHRC. "Indiscriminate Attacks Against Civilians in Southern Unity". April - May 2018

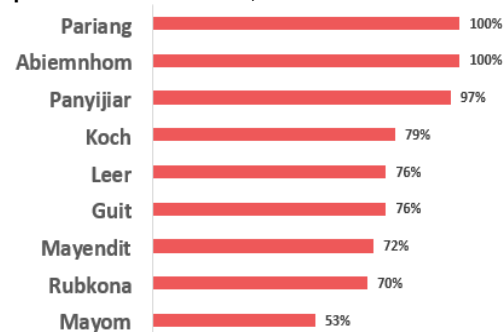
27. FGD Bentiu. "Long-term impact of flooding in Mayom County". February 2020

settlements with access to water reported that the primary water source perceivably made people sick.

Another consequence of the poor water infrastructure is that people have to embark on long journeys to fetch water (see Figure 3). In March, only 13% of assessed settlements reported most people were able to fetch water in under 30 minutes. For the remaining assessed settlements, accessing their preferred water sources generally involved long journeys which can lead to increased protection concerns and take away time that households could spend in productive livelihood activities.

Furthermore, FGD participants reported that low access to clean water sources and lack of soap limited people's ability to follow COVID-19 preventative advice on handwashing.²⁸ In March, two counties with low proportion of assessed settlements reporting most people used soap for handwashing were Koch (7%) and Panyijiar (8%). State-wide, the median price of 200 grams of soap is 100 South Sudanese pounds, which is unaffordable for

Figure 3: Proportion of assessed settlements reporting more than 30 minutes to access preferred water source, March 2020



most of the local populations. Furthermore, in deprived communities, priority is given to the purchase of food and medication over soap and other non-essential NFIs.

Sanitation

In quarter one of 2020, open defecation seemingly remained a common practice. In March, only 26% of assessed settlements reported that any people used latrines, and of these, the vast majority (97%) reported that half or less of the population used them. This is consistent with World Bank estimates for South Sudan,²⁹ and may suggest that despite positive political developments and the relative stabilisation of the state, more interventions are needed to extend safe sanitation services across Unity.

Low latrine usage is reportedly related to large gaps in sanitation infrastructure in Unity State, and nationwide. In March, 87% of assessed settlements reported the main reason people were not using latrines was that there were none available. Lack of latrines was particularly evident in rural settings, where communities were unable to access tools, materials or technical advice for the construction and maintenance of latrines.

Of assessed settlements which reported no or low usage of latrines, 10% reported cultural reasons as the main reason people were not using latrines. WASH projects aimed at transforming the culture of open defecation and encouraging the widespread use of latrines came to a halt with the start of the crisis in 2013.³⁰ Since late 2018, these initiatives have

gradually restarted, although their impact remains limited due to access constraints and limited awareness about the health risks associated with open defecation.

Hygiene

During the reporting period, hand-washing practices seemingly remained relatively low across Unity State. In March, 10% of assessed settlements reported most people did not wash their hands and 64% that people used water only for hand-washing. Meanwhile, reports of the use of soap for hand-washing remained low and stable throughout the first quarter, despite multiple awareness campaigns in February and March following the declaration of the COVID-19 emergency. Between January and March, there was no increase in the proportion of assessed settlements reporting most people used soap for hand-washing, and remained at 13% at the end of the quarter.

The reported low use of soap for handwashing is concerning as it suggests that key messaging on COVID preventative practices may not be reaching some of the communities, particularly those in hard-to-reach areas. Poor economic and market conditions may be limiting the relevance and applicability of this and other COVID-19 advice, in a context where communities may perceive access to food or health services as more relevant and urgent priorities for their personal needs and vulnerabilities.

Health

In the first quarter of 2020, malaria remained the most commonly reported health problem

across all assessed settlements in Unity State. In March, 49% of assessed settlements reported malaria as the main health problem, followed by waterborne diseases (12%) and lung-related conditions (11%). Likely due to last year's large-scale flooding, the proportion of assessed settlements in Mayom County reporting waterborne diseases as the main health problem increased considerably from 28% in December to 67% in March 2020 (see Map 5). FGD participants reported that flooding in Mayom County, destroyed or restricted access to boreholes, which led some people to drink river water.³¹ Reported usage of rivers as main source of water increased from 23% in September 2019, prior to flooding, to 43% in December, which has gradually decreased to 26% in March 2020 possibly due to emergency WASH interventions.³²

Despite overall improvements in humanitarian access and road conditions in the dry season,³³ a large proportion of assessed settlements reportedly remained unable to access some essential health services. Sixty-six percent (66%) of assessed settlements in January reportedly had access to NGO clinics, 55% to primary health care centres (PHCCs) and only 24% to a hospital. Furthermore, 25% of assessed settlements reported having access to pharmacies, and only 11% to maternity centres; this indicates that a large proportion of the population may not have access to health facilities where more specialised services and medication are provided.

Towards the end of the quarter, local authorities, health agencies and the wider humanitarian

28. FGD Nyal Town. "COVID-19 Health Seeking Behaviours". March 2020

29. World Bank "People practising open defecation, % of population 2000-2017" [online] Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.ODFC.ZS>

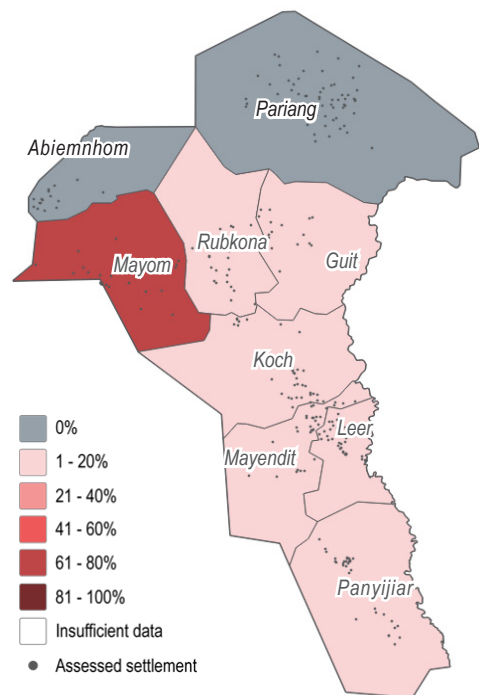
30. UNICEF. "WASH briefing note" December 2019

31. FGD Bentiu. "Long-term impact of flooding in Mayom County". February 2020

32. OCHA. "South Sudan: Seasonal Flooding Update #5". January 2020

33. OCHA. "South Sudan Quarterly Humanitarian Access Snapshot" January - March 2020

Map 5: Proportion of assessed settlements in Unity State reporting waterborne disease as main health problem, March 2020.



community in Unity introduced contingency for the spread of COVID-19.³⁴ NGOs launched awareness campaigns to promote handwashing and social distancing. At the same time, local authorities introduced curfews and closure of international borders following national government directives with mixed levels of compliance and success (see Population Movement and Displacement section for more information). Moving forward, the likely expansion of COVID-19 in South Sudan has the potential to overwhelm the country's precarious health system. Currently, health services in Unity are seemingly scarce, and

lack resources to detect and treat suspected cases. A rapid increase in the number of patients requiring medical attention could take resources away from people in need of health assistance due to preventable or seasonal diseases. The response of the health sector to COVID-19 is also likely to be affected by the seasonal increase in malaria incidence, as limited resources including medication and health personnel will have to be shared to fight both diseases.

Education

In March 2020, more than a quarter of assessed settlements (28%) in Unity State reported lack of education services. This percentage has remained relatively stable over the past twelve months, despite some of the previously reported improvements in the security situation and seasonal changes in road and travel conditions.

The majority of assessed settlements reporting access to education services reported these were in early grades of primary schooling, with 96% reporting P1-P5 and considerably lower proportions (39%) reporting P6-P8.³⁵ Meanwhile, reported access to secondary education levels one to two was only 6% and 2% for secondary levels three to four. Reasons for this large gap in secondary education services seem connected to limited infrastructure and lack of teachers, combined with cultural and economic pressures that force children to prioritise work in or outside of home over completing their secondary studies. In March 2020, the proportion of assessed settlements with education services reporting that some children did not attend school due to work

outside the home was 13% for boys and 5% for girls. Furthermore, 15% reported that girls were not attending school due to the need to work at home and another 15% because there was the belief that girls are not supposed to attend school. With the seasonal rains in the second quarter of 2020 and the start of land preparation and planting season, more children will likely be concentrating in work outside home instead of attending school.

In assessed settlements without access to education, the main reasons were lack of facilities (84% of assessed settlements), followed by lack of teachers in 12% of assessed settlements. Meanwhile, in Mayom County, the destruction of facilities due to flooding was the most commonly reported factor for not having education services as reported by 38% of assessed settlements without access to education. FGD participants from Ruat Nyzbah, Chotjok, Pup and Tam in Mayom County reported that last year's flooding damaged some education facilities, and school-aged children either fled the most severely affected settlements or were unable to reach schools due to high water levels.³⁶

Conclusion

In the first quarter of 2020, assessed settlements in Unity State reported improved access to food due to seasonal changes and humanitarian food assistance. Improvements in access to food were slower in areas affected by recent shocks or localised incidents of conflict, which seemed to spike in northern Unity. Positive developments in the national political

process in February might have contributed to a growing confidence among populations displaced from counties in Unity State, leading to slightly increased amount of returns, but COVID-19 containment measures introduced at the end of the quarter are likely to halt this trend. Access to health and WASH services remained inadequate and may affect the ability to effectively prevent and respond to the spread of COVID-19 in Unity State.

About REACH Initiative

REACH Initiative 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).

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34. There were no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in South Sudan during the period covered in this report

35. The education system in South Sudan consists of eight grades of primary school (grades P1 to P8) and four grades of secondary education.

36. FGD Bentiu. "Long-term impact of flooding in Mayom County". February 2020