



# Western Pibor Rapid Assessment

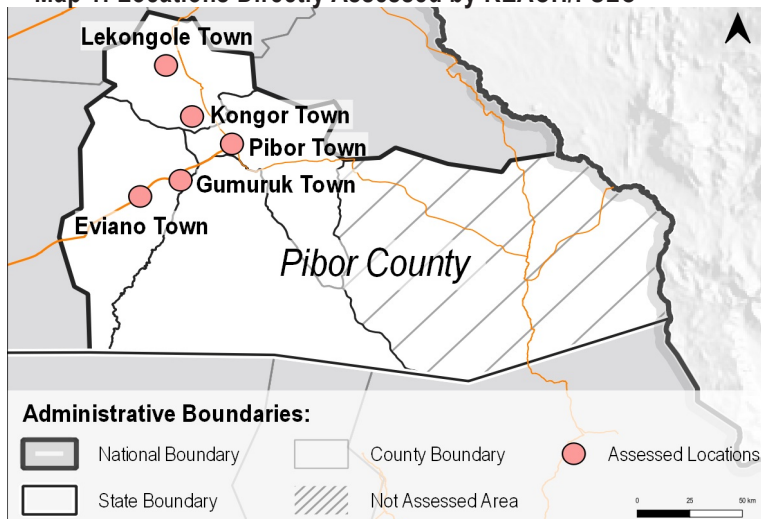
Pibor County, Jonglei State, South Sudan, February 2021

## Rationale

In December 2020, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification's (IPC) [Famine Review Committee \(FRC\) released a report on Pibor County, South Sudan](#). It concluded that western Pibor (comprising of Gumuruk, Lekongole, Pibor and Verteth payams) was experiencing 'Famine Likely' conditions, — characterised by households that have an extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs even after the full employment of coping strategies and evident starvation, death (likely exceeding the famine threshold), destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels. According to the FRC report, these critical conditions are likely to persist until at least July 2021, regardless of the presence of potential mitigating factors such as a de-escalation in conflict and a scaled-up humanitarian response.<sup>1</sup>

Given the continued severity of the situation, REACH, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster (FSLC) conducted a follow-up assessment in February 2021. The assessment team visited Pibor town, and areas outside the town including Lekongole centre, Gumuruk centre, Eviano and Kongor. The objective of the assessment was to gather further information on the drivers, assumptions and mitigating factors laid out in the FRC report, most notably indications of extreme food consumption gaps, livelihood collapse, exhaustion of coping capacity, critical malnutrition and excess mortality.

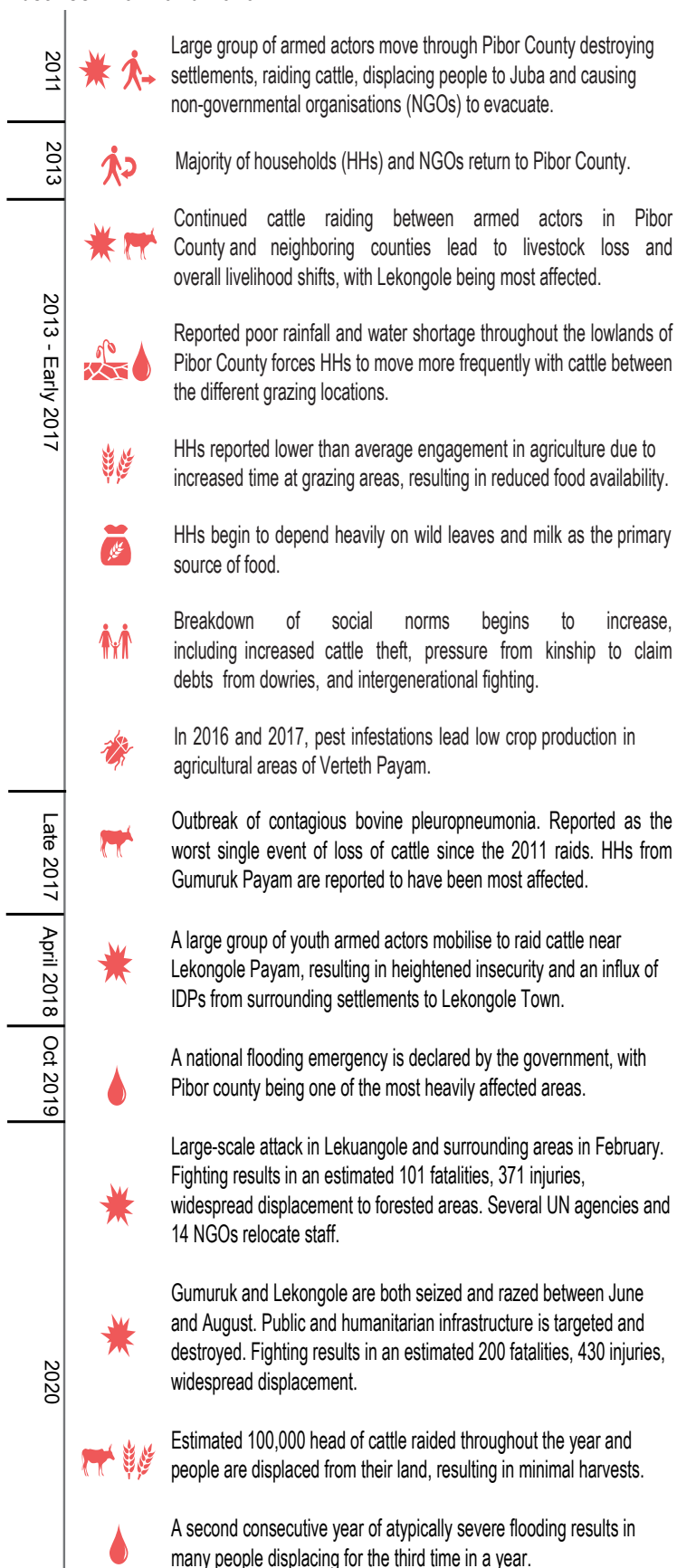
Map 1: Locations Directly Assessed by REACH/FSLC



## Introduction

Atypically severe flooding in both 2019 and 2020 exacerbated the worst year of violence recorded since the 2013 civil war (see figure 1).<sup>4</sup> The lean season, which typically runs from January until April,<sup>5</sup> is a period in which access to food is usually low, as cattle migrate from the settlement, harvested food stocks are exhausted and seasonal rivers dry up, limiting access to fish, bush meat and wild foods. In 2020, the lean season was compounded by flooding, which limited access to, and the availability of crops, livestock and

Figure 1: Timeline of compounding shocks in western Pibor between 2011 and 2020<sup>2,3</sup>



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livelihood assets, while simultaneously disrupting humanitarian service provision for much of the population.<sup>6</sup> In February 2020, armed clashes broke out in Lekongole and the surrounding areas, resulting in mass casualties, widespread displacement and the further disruption of lifesaving humanitarian service provision, right at the height of the lean season.<sup>7</sup> Insecurity persisted and culminated in renewed clashes in Gumuruk and Lekongole between June and August. An estimated 100,000 heads of cattle were raided throughout the year and crops were destroyed,<sup>8</sup> limiting access to the main sources of food in the eastern semi-arid pastoralist livelihood zone, resulting in large-scale displacement (estimated to have affected more than 60,000 people).<sup>9</sup> Civilian infrastructure was destroyed, including boreholes (often the only source of clean water), schools, markets, and shelters.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, humanitarian infrastructure, such as non-governmental organisation (NGO) hospitals and warehouses were damaged. Humanitarian staff were targeted, and as a result of these obstructions, humanitarian organisations delivering aid faced significant operational challenges.<sup>11</sup> Combined with macroeconomic trends such as rising prices and the depreciation of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP), these events also led to a significant increase in prices.<sup>12</sup> After the attacks, a second flood affected the area. This instance of flooding was the most severe in the history of greater Pibor, and resulted in widespread shelter damage and livestock disease.<sup>13</sup> The households who had managed to plant after the attacks reportedly lost most of their harvest.

This series of compounding shocks has resulted in a severe, widespread and multi-sectoral deterioration in humanitarian conditions. In December 2020, the IPC Famine Review Committee classified western Pibor as 'Famine Likely', concluding that these 'Famine Likely' conditions would likely persist until July 2021 (see figure 3), even with the presence of mitigating factors such as a de-escalation in conflict and a scaled up humanitarian response.<sup>14</sup> The combination of shocks in western Pibor have resulted in a near collapse in pastoralist livelihoods, led to extreme and persistent food consumption gaps, exhausted coping capacity, and have likely exacerbated morbidity, malnutrition and mortality rates across western Pibor. Recent, consecutive, shocks are reflected in how local communities across western Pibor have named the years of 2019, 2020, and 2021; a practice that is typically shaped by extreme events. Indicative of the severity of the situation, focus group discussion (FGD) participants reported that the year 2021, already in its second month, is referred to as "the year of starvation" (see table 1).

## Methodology

This assessment comprises of two main methodological components: qualitative interviews (FGD and key informant interviews), and quantitative Area of Knowledge-Neighbourhoods (AoK-N) surveys conducted with key informants (KIs). The assessment focused on the payams of Gumuruk, Lekongole, Pibor and Verteth, in western Pibor.

**Table 1: Names given to recent years, according to FGD participants from across western Pibor**

2021	Irkitchi Magizo – 'The year of hunger'/ Irkitchi Karanonto – 'The year of starvation'
2020	Irkitchi Akenet Modo – 'The year the enemies came and killed many people'
2019	Irkitchi Tawano – 'The year of the flood'
2011	Irkitchi Nyapurjok – 'The year of Nuer' (attacks in Kengen)
1983	Irkitchi Dorkowo – 'The year many livestock died'

Data collection took place between the 10th and 18th of February, during which 44 FGDs were conducted with host community members, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and market traders from across western Pibor. The FGD component consisted of six thematic tools: i) food security and livelihoods/shocks, ii) humanitarian food assistance, iii) susceptibility to famine conditions, iv) water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), v) supply route mapping, and vi) accountability to affected populations (AAP). In addition to the FGDs, 5 health and nutrition service focal point KIs were interviewed to map facility presence and understand service disruptions. Direct informal observation exercises were conducted by the assessment team in each of the physically accessible locations.

Qualitative findings were triangulated by quantitative AoK-N findings. AoK-N has been designed as the most reliable and methodologically rigorous approach to obtain payam-wide multi-sectoral data in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit with the noted limitations compared to a direct household assessment. AoK-N findings are not representative and are based on the assumption that KIs have some knowledge about the situation of other people in their immediate surroundings. Cluster targets were distributed evenly across bomas and did not account for differences in the population distribution across bomas.

Within each payam, two clusters were targeted per boma, a sub-payam level administrative unit that is made up of multiple settlements, with each cluster being defined as a settlement or urban neighbourhood. The sampling frame consisted of these settlements and, in the case of denser urban areas, individual neighbourhoods. Within each boma, settlements were randomly sampled. Up to 10 locations were selected through simple random sampling for each boma and were numbered 1 to 10, allowing enumerators to move down the list until they could find up to two settlements from which they could access key informants. For each settlement/cluster, at least one KI interview was conducted. KIs were selected based on their knowledge of up to four close neighbours and having been established in the location they were reporting on within the past month. Each KI was asked to list up to their own (neighbours), and was then interviewed about the situation of their own household as well as each of the listed

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**Table 2: Key Conclusions from the FRC on the Pibor Country IPC Classifications (November 2020)<sup>15</sup>**

Area	Period	Classification by the IPC Technical Working Group	Classification by the Famine Review Committee
Pibor County, Jonglei State	October 2020 – November 2020	IPC Phase 4 (Emergency)	Gumuruk, Pibor, Lekongole, Verteth payams: IPC Phase 5 (Famine Likely)
	December 2020 – July 2021	IPC Phase 4 (Emergency)	Gumuruk, Pibor, Lekongole, Verteth payams: IPC Phase 5 (Famine Likely)

neighbours. Since more than one interview was conducted in some settlements, findings were aggregated at the settlement level. In total, 189 KIs were interviewed, reporting on 771 households.

## Key Findings: Extreme outcomes

### Critical malnutrition

According to the FRC, available evidence on nutrition indicated extremely critical levels of acute malnutrition in Gumuruk, Verteth, Lekongole and Pibor payams, surpassing the IPC Phase 5 (Famine) thresholds.<sup>16</sup>

Findings from the assessment suggest that malnutrition rates have remained high with visible malnutrition among both children and adults across all physically assessed locations in western Pibor.

- Nutrition staff who have worked in Lekongole for several years reported that malnutrition is currently more widespread and severe than at any previous point during their employment.
- In past years, admissions to nutrition programmes would sharply increase in April, in line with limited access to, and utilisation of, food during the lean season. As a result, malnutrition may continue to increase in the coming months.
- Data provided by one of two key nutrition service providers operating in western Pibor demonstrated a sharp increase in Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) admissions between November and January. This could be related to improved service provision or the severity of the situation, or a combination of both factors.
- Lalup fruits are widely known to cause sickness. However, in Pibor they are commonly consumed in order to cope with a lack of food. According to FGD participants from across western Pibor, lalup fruits have reportedly been introduced into children's diets much earlier than usual, and in much larger quantities relative to other types of food. As there is a correlation between consumption of lalup and sickness, it is likely this is contributing to poor nutritional outcomes among children.
- When the consumption of nutritionally poor foods is combined

with poor WASH conditions, the body is less able to utilise the available food. As a result, many residents appear to be stuck in a cycle of under-nutrition and disease.<sup>17</sup>

- According to AoK-N data, in 58% of assessed households, at least one member reportedly went a whole day without eating in the week preceding data collection. In all assessed locations, FGD participants reported instances of children not eating for full days. According to FGD participants, this is normally extremely rare, as children and older persons typically eat first in lowland Pibor. These findings may represent a shift in consumption patterns, prioritising 'productive' household members, who are needed to collect food, over relatively 'unproductive' and potentially more vulnerable household members.

### Excess mortality

The FRC found that only very little and circumstantial evidence was available on mortality to confirm or refute a classification of IPC Phase 5 Famine. When combining food insecurity, nutrition, malaria, and limited access to water services, it is plausible that the death rate for children under five was above the IPC Phase 5 (Famine) threshold.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the assessment there were consistent anecdotal reports of widespread hunger related deaths, both in 2020 and into February 2021. Findings from the assessment suggest that the capacity of communities to cope with shocks has deteriorated since the IPC classifications as a result of consecutive shocks and a long period of low access to food and livelihoods.

- In 2020, flooding and conflict resulted in very severe humanitarian needs<sup>19</sup> and there were widespread reports of hunger-related deaths by FGD participants displaced from Lekongole, Gumuruk, Pibor and Verteth throughout the year. Despite the assessment taking place in February, 2021 was reportedly already being referred to as 'the year of starvation' locally, suggesting an unprecedented level of need. This suggests a continuation of the severe situation since 2020, which was referred to as 'the year the enemies came and killed many people' (see figure 2).



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- According to FGD participants, some of the worst-off households and individuals included those who were displaced due to conflict and are unable to return to their home communities due to exhaustion and sickness, particularly older persons and persons with disabilities, female-headed households and children. FGD participants across lowland Pibor frequently reported instances where they had to leave such individuals behind in the settlements and/or during displacement journeys.

### Box 1: Displacement and extreme coping in western Pibor

In an FGD with IDPs from Nanam in northern Lekongole, participants talked about their displacement journey. Participants reported that the main push factor was a lack of food, and that they had to leave vulnerable family members, such as parents and elderly, who were too exhausted or sick to walk, in the settlement. Along the way, they reportedly ate lalup fruits, due to the lack of alternative sources of food, which disturbed their stomachs due to the acidity. In order to calm their stomachs, they started consuming mud, which they continued to consume for the duration of their 10-day displacement journey. As a result, two children became too sick to continue the journey. Their mother had to leave them behind and continue with only her third child.

## Service Provision

According to the FRC, health and nutrition services were severely affected by the conflict. More than half of the health and nutrition centres were looted and/or damaged, and across western Pibor, a total of 36 health and nutrition centres were unable to operate between July-September and 16 sites were still closed as of October 2020.<sup>20</sup>

Access to, and the provision of, lifesaving health and nutrition services has remained limited since the FRC report, which could be linked to the widespread and continued KI reports of excess mortality and critical malnutrition.

### Nutrition

- A KI providing Outpatient Therapeutic Programmes (OTP), and Targeted Supplementary Feeding Programmes (TSFP) across western Pibor, reported widespread service disruption throughout 2020 (see table 3). 'Disruptions', meaning that the facilities were either not functional, or operating below full capacity, reportedly persisted until November.
- Nutrition centres have been largely functional since November, and 49% of assessed households with malnourished children (24%) reportedly accessed nutrition services in the three months prior to data collection. However, substantial access barriers reportedly remain, particularly outside of larger towns.

**Table 3: Reported nutrition center disruption across western Pibor throughout 2020, as reported by one key service provider KI**

Settlement	Payam	Status	From	To	Reason
Pibor	Pibor	Operational	NA	NA	NA
Kulugur	Pibor	Disrupted	June	Oct	Violence/ Flood
Manydekel	Pibor	Disrupted	June	Oct	Violence/ Flood
Thangajon	Pibor	Disrupted	Aug	Nov	Flood
Lekongole	Lekongole	Disrupted	Feb	Mar	Violence
Lekongole	Lekongole	Disrupted	May	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Gei	Lekongole	Disrupted	May	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Bebuzen	Lekongole	Disrupted	Sept	Nov	Flood
Kongor	Lekongole	Disrupted	July	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Verteth	Verteth	Disrupted	July	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Durein	Verteth	Disrupted	July	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Murlil	Verteth	Disrupted	July	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Kireka	Verteth	Disrupted	July	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Gumuruk	Gumuruk	Disrupted	June	Nov	Violence
Lawol	Gumuruk	Disrupted	June	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Lothila	Gumuruk	Disrupted	June	Nov	Violence/ Flood
Vuveth	Gumuruk	Disrupted	June	Nov	Violence/ Flood

### Health

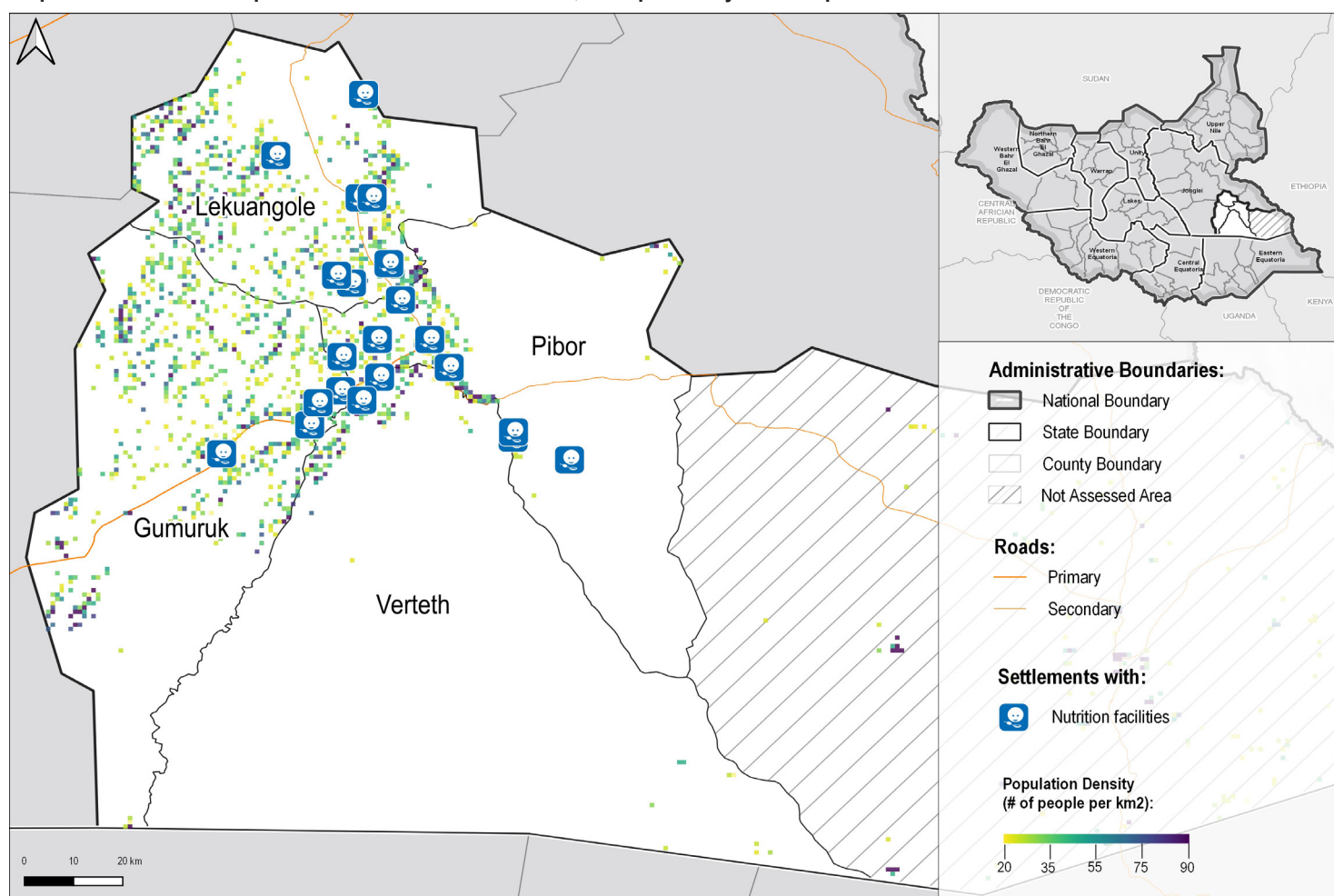
State level child food consumption indicators show very poor status, with only about 17% children meeting minimum dietary diversity requirements. There are also concerns that outbreaks of diarrhoeal diseases, including cholera, may occur, as the flood waters recede and contaminated water sources such as wells start to be used again. The incidence of malaria is also high, as a result of the accumulation of stagnant water.<sup>21</sup>

- Widespread sickness across population groups, particularly among children, was reported by FGD participants in all assessed areas. The most commonly observed symptoms

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Map 2: Nutrition center presence across western Pibor, as reported by service provider KIs



were chesty coughs, mucus from the nose and mouth, and diarrhoea. This is noteworthy as disease can exacerbate inadequate dietary intake and undernutrition. In western Pibor, there are reportedly few health and nutrition services to combat these dietary issues.

- According to AoK-N data, in the 3 months prior to data collection, 53% of assessed households were reportedly not able to access health facilities when needed. The most commonly reported barriers amongst households that were unable to access health facilities, were distance (44% of households), cost (21%), and facilities not always being open (14%).
- During the attacks of 2020, healthcare facilities were destroyed and healthcare professionals were killed,<sup>22</sup> severely limiting access to healthcare services outside of Pibor Town from February onwards in Lekongole, and from June 2020 onwards in Gumuruk and Verteth.
- According to a service provider KI, services in Lekongole and Gumuruk have some capacity to treat children under 5 for malaria, pneumonia and diarrhoea, to treat patients of all ages for malaria, and to give intermittent preventative treatment (IPV) for malaria to pregnant women.<sup>23</sup> However, Assessment

findings suggest that there have been large-scale gaps since healthcare services were reduced since December 2020 and these provision gaps remain, especially outside of the payam centers.

## Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

According to the FRC, WASH conditions in western Pibor were the worst in South Sudan. Rivers and streams were found to be the main source of drinking water for almost all households, and almost no households had access to any shared or community latrines. Internal communal conflict and flooding overstretched the few available WASH services, increasing the risk of contracting waterborne diseases/illnesses, and likely compounding malnutrition, particularly for children and older persons.<sup>24</sup>

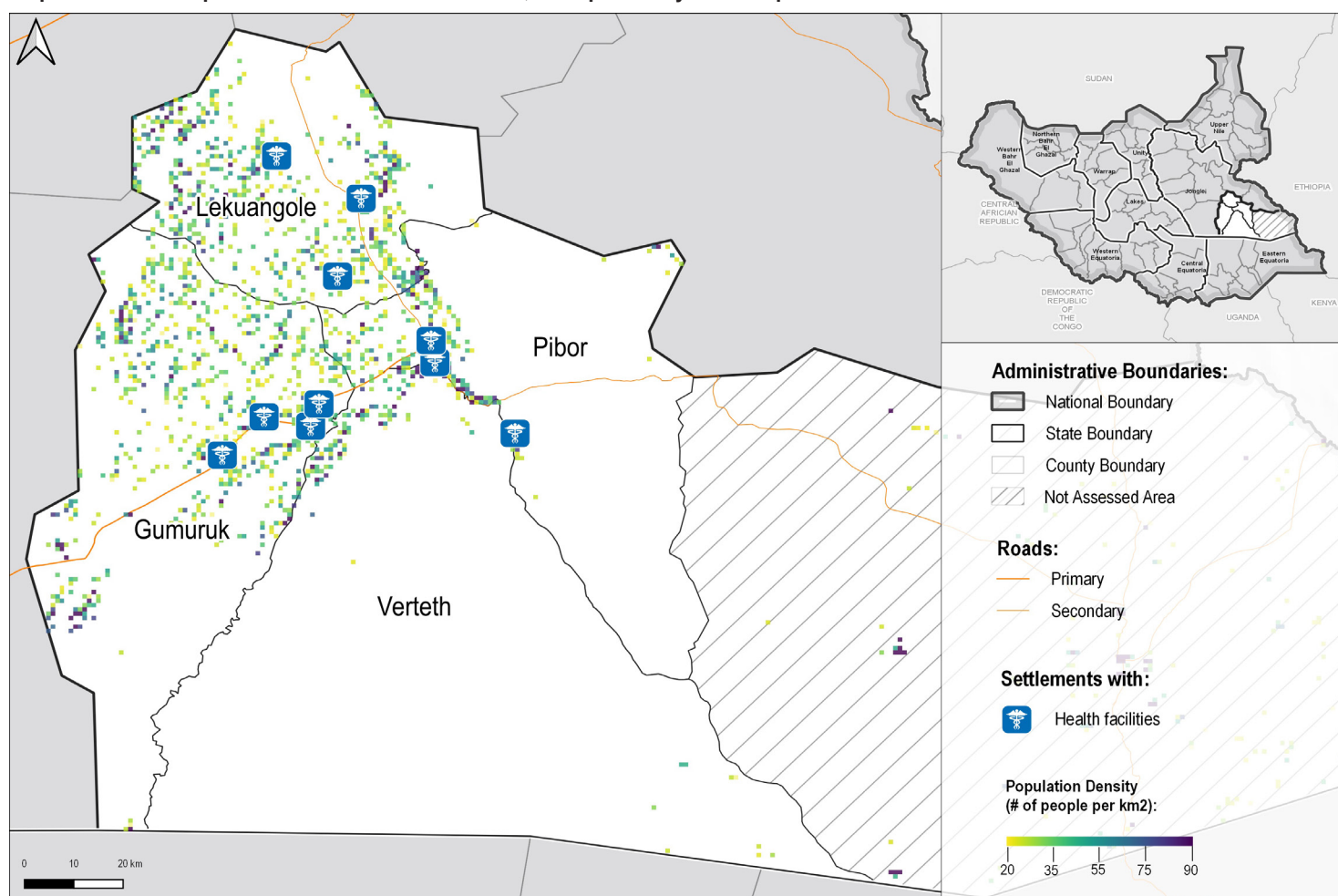
According to FGD reports and observation, access to clean water appeared to have worsened since FCR findings in December as seasonal rivers have dried, meaning that many people have to travel even further to access unclean water.

- Water points were destroyed during bouts of violence throughout 2020 (boreholes servicing 15,000 households

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Map 3: Healthcare presence across western Pibor, as reported by service provider KIs



were destroyed in Gumuruk in June alone), and many of the remaining boreholes sunk during the flooding.<sup>24</sup>

- Most people are reportedly consuming untreated and often visibly dirty river water. There was a limited number of functional boreholes in each of the assessed locations (around five in Pibor town, and two around in both Gumuruk and Lekongole).<sup>26</sup> This may explain why 42% of households reportedly had no access to boreholes, and why 27% were reportedly using rivers as their main source of water.
- According to FGD participants, access to water purification treatment, which was previously distributed by a key healthcare provider, has remained limited throughout the year due to service disruption.
- According to FGD participants, in Pibor Town, overcrowding of water points is compounded by financial access barriers, as maintenance of the local boreholes has been passed from a healthcare provider to community members, who reportedly charge for access.
- Across western Pibor, just 18% of households reportedly had access to a latrine, and FGD participants consistently reported widespread presence of diarrhoea among both children and adults.

- Until the rainy season, which usually begins in May, households will likely have to travel further and further to access unclean river water, as seasonal rivers will continue to dry up, possibly resulting in increasing trade-offs between collecting water, food and childcare duties.

## Mitigating Factors

### Humanitarian Food Assistance (HFA)

According to the FRC, humanitarian assistance, while a key mitigating factor, will be very hard to deliver due to logistical constraints. WFP, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other international NGO warehouses were destroyed in the attacks, meaning that prepositioning of food stocks is unlikely. Access and communication barriers were limiting access to HFA with people walking up to two days to reach distribution sites, and intended recipients were only contactable by word of mouth.<sup>27</sup>

Humanitarian Food Assistance (HFA) has been scaled up since the FRC report, however, assessment findings suggest that the increase is likely not of the scale or frequency necessary to mitigate



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against the 'Famine Likely' classification for Western Pibor, as outlined by the FRC.

- HFA was scaled up and air drops began in October 2020. However, FGD participants, particularly from Gumuruk and Verteth, reported that they were unable to access the distribution points in October due to flooding.
- Food was reportedly the most pressing need for 54% of households across western Pibor. According to FGD participants, there are substantial populations who were not previously registered for food assistance, particularly pastoralists, who are now in need of HFA due to the collapse of the pastoralist production system and the unavailability of alternative sources of food.
- Sixty-four percent (64%) of households had reportedly received humanitarian assistance in the 3 months prior to data collection. The most frequently reported barriers to accessing humanitarian food assistance were that distributions had stopped (31% of households), that there were no humanitarian organisations (22%), and that distribution points were too far (20%).
- FGD participants reported that large numbers of residents had lost their distribution cards during the clashes and flooding of 2020, and have since been unable to access HFA, in some cases for a whole year.
- Of the households who had received HFA, only 25% were reportedly satisfied with the service provision. FGD participants reported a lack of any feedback mechanisms and that no adequate consultation has taken place with humanitarian actors.
- FGD findings indicate that the main information gaps in the communities were (a) who receives HFA, and (b) why. Humanitarian organisations commonly disseminate information about assistance to community leaders. FGDs participants in Gumuruk expressed a desire for direct dissemination on information regarding assistance from humanitarian agencies, particularly in relation to targeting and related criteria.
- Infrastructure used for prepositioning food stocks was targeted and destroyed in February and between June and August, and has not been repaired or replaced, compounding the existing logistical challenges associated with outreach beyond Pibor Town.<sup>28</sup> This means that beneficiaries located far from payam headquarters often have to travel for days to reach distribution points.
- FGD participants reported that populations are forced to travel increasingly far from the settlements to collect food and water. Those who do are often missed by registration teams.
- FGD participants reported that those households that did access food assistance shared with those who did not. This led to quicker exhaustion of the rations. However, in Gumuruk,

FGD participants indicated that households receiving HFA were unable to share rations, reportedly negatively affecting community relations.

### Conflict

- KIs reported that conflict has been, and continues to be, one of the main factors contributing to food insecurity in Pibor. According to AoK-N data, 32% of households had reportedly been subject to a safety related concern in the month prior to data collection.
- The majority of households (75%) were reportedly facing protection concerns at the time of data collection. The most commonly reported protection concerns were cattle raids (24% of households), abduction (23%), killing or injury (21%) and violence between neighbours (19%).
- In Gumuruk, FGD participants reported that humanitarian assistance has created tensions between those who did and those who did not receive aid. FGD participants reported that sharing of resources between relatives and neighbours normally brings people together, but that they were unable to continue sharing due to the current level of food insecurity. Following this, they reported that an increase in the amount of assistance could positively impact community relations.

### Market Access

According to the FRC, market access has been limited, both physically and financially, due to flooding and insecurity, which has also affected access to income-generating activities. In the rainy season, movement around Pibor county is very limited due to poor road conditions, and Pibor Town typically receives imported goods via plane from Juba.<sup>29</sup>

At the time of the assessment, limited diversity and availability of goods remained across all assessed locations (Pibor, Gumuruk and Lekongole). The goods that were available were expensive.

- Prices are usually high in Pibor county compared to other areas in South Sudan, and according to market traders, have been negatively affected by flooding, conflict, and poor road conditions, which limit access to the main supply market in Juba.
- According to Aok-N data, of households with physical access to markets (46%), 71% faced additional access challenges at the markets. Common challenges at markets included the high cost of items (38% of households), and markets being damaged or closed (18%).
- Traders reported being hesitant to use roads to transport goods due to the risk of conflict, especially between Bor Town and Pibor Town. Insecurity also limited market access

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**Table 4: Availability of Items in Pibor Marketplaces\***

	Pibor	Gumuruk	Lekongole
Urban / rural	urban	rural	rural
Number of traders	100	50	7
Staple cereals	(✓)	✗	✗
Pulses	(✓)	✗	✗
Sugar	✓	(✓)	✓
Cooking oil	✓	✗	(✓)
Vegetables	✓	(✓)	✗
Fruit	✓	✗	✗
Meat	✓	✗	✗
Fish	✓	(✓)	✓
Milk	✗	✗	✗
Wild foods	✓	✓	(✓)
WASH items	✓	(✓)	(✓)
Cooking equipment	(✓)	✗	✗
Firewood	✓	(✓)	(✓)
Agricultural tools	✗	✗	✗
Seeds	✗	✗	✗
Livestock	(✓)	✗	✗
Building materials	(✓)	(✓)	✗
Clothing	✓	(✓)	(✓)
Fuel	✗	✗	✗
Medicine	(✓)	(✓)	✗
Phone credit	✓	✗	✗

✓ : available (✓) : limited ✗ : unavailable

\* The data was obtained through FGDs with traders in the respective locations as well as direct observation.

for consumers. AoK-N data suggests that, in the month prior to data collection, 37% of households were unable to access their preferred marketplace due to fear for their safety.

- Sorghum had arrived in the marketplace by the end of the assessment. However, traders were reportedly not selling this sorghum due to low demand as a result of food distributions and were instead considering storing these goods for the wet season. Stockpiling further limits the ability of households who are not registered to receive HFA, to access key staples during the lean season.
- FGD participants reported that few households have cash to purchase market goods. The households that do are primarily those who earn an income through employment with NGOs.
- Financial access is reportedly a greater constraint to the use of markets than physical access, with FGD participants reporting that the main income generating activities before 2019, such as the sale of livestock and livestock products, are largely no longer available, greatly limiting access to cash.
- To generate income, FGD participants reported that some

### Box 2: Conflict inhibiting trade in Pibor county

Findings suggest that trade in Pibor county continues to be negatively affected by insecurity, especially in Gumuruk. Traders in Gumuruk reported that many had either been killed or fled the settlement since the onset of the fighting. One trader who had just returned from Juba was reportedly too afraid for their safety to make the return trip in a vehicle. After renting a tractor in Juba to carry the goods to Gumuruk, the trader reportedly exited the vehicle near Mangalla and travelled the rest of the way by foot, leaving the driver to ferry the goods onwards to Pibor. It took the trader 8 days to navigate their way through the bush to Gumuruk.

households sell wild foods, charcoal, firewood, fish and shelter materials but, because access to traditional income generating activities is reportedly so low, access to cash is very limited, meaning that few households employ these activities due to their inability to generate sufficient income.

- According to FGD participants, most households do not engage in any income generating activities as they reportedly do not have the energy to do so alongside their other daily tasks, such as collecting wild foods and water.

### Livelihood Collapse and Coping Exhaustion

According to the FRC, households in Lekongole and Gumuruk lost the vast majority of their **livestock** throughout 2020. Trend analysis of Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring System (FSNMS) data shows that, while only 23% of the surveyed households in Pibor did not possess any livestock in August 2019, 80% held no livestock in October 2020. Most of the remaining cattle were taken away from the settlement, limiting access. Body conditions and milk production of cattle were poor due to the destruction of pastures by flooding and resulted in higher disease incidence. In terms of **cultivation**, many crop fields were destroyed during the clashes in June and people were displaced from their land. Only small stocks were harvested after the attacks, and most of these were reportedly washed away by the floods.<sup>30</sup>

Findings suggest that the population's capacity to rely upon traditional livelihood sources has not recovered since the FRC findings in 2020, resulting in limited access to staple sources of food throughout the 2021 lean season. As such, populations are being forced engage in dangerous coping strategies.

- According to AoK-N data, 62% of households did not have adequate access to food in the month prior to data collection. Among households with inadequate access to food, the primary reasons were inability to harvest (36%), had not planted (21%), cessation of food distributions (14%) and crops having been destroyed (14%).



Picture 1: Lalup seeds for sale in Pibor Town market



- Cattle provide the primary source of protein, dairy and cash throughout the year. However, the livestock population has been decimated by a combination of cattle raiding and disease. Since the FRC report, assessment findings suggest that the remaining cattle have migrated from the settlements, along with young men and women, further limiting access.
- According to AoK-N data, livestock was a core livelihood activity for just 17% of households. Among those households, 79% reportedly had to sell their last livestock in the month prior to data collection, or were no longer able to so because they already had.
- Subsistence farming is the second most important production system in lowland Pibor.<sup>31</sup> However, conflict and flooding displaced people from their land during the preparation and harvest period, resulting in poor harvests. Consequently, according to FGD participants, most people have been unable to rely on cultivated food stocks throughout the early stages of the 2021 lean season.
- According to AoK-N data, 49% of households had reportedly not been able to plant or harvest, while just 7% of households had been able to both plant and harvest. Among households who had reportedly experienced barriers to agriculture (21%), the most commonly reported barrier was insecurity (59%).
- Livelihood collapse may result in a longer-term livelihood shift. Communities widely view cattle as a root cause of the clashes that took place in 2020, and many FGD participants reported that people are planning to engage in subsistence farming more in the coming year, in order to fill the gap left by the loss of livestock.

### Box 3: Exhaustion of coping strategies

In an FGD with host community members in Gumuruk, participants reported that, when the town was attacked and taken in June, most people fled to the forested areas on the banks of the Kengen river. Participants reportedly survived almost solely on wild foods until August, when armed groups retreated and the IDPs could return to Gumuruk. Those who were too exhausted to make a displacement journey stayed behind in the forest. Relatives and community members returned to Kengen forest in December, bringing food for the those who were left behind. When they returned, they found around forty people who had deceased, seemingly from hunger-related causes.

- The capacity to engage in this shift may be limited given that the land is poorly irrigated and largely unsuitable for large plots.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, crops planted in the upcoming agricultural season will not be available for harvest until September and October,<sup>33</sup> raising questions of how people will access food in the near term. Finally, subsistence farming is relatively labour intensive. Given the widespread and visible exhaustion in western Pibor, uptake may be limited.

### Extreme food consumption gaps

The main mitigating factors (coping strategies) to reduce extreme food gaps are traditionally fishing, hunting, and wild food collection. According to the FRC, access to food through fishing and hunting was limited by a lack of fishing gear, and the delayed seasonal migration of gazelles and antelope. Reliance on wild foods was found to be comparatively high.<sup>34</sup>

Assessment findings suggest that extreme food consumption gaps have widened, and may continue to do so in the near term as western Pibor moves into the height of the lean season. Since the FRC report, seasonal rivers have dried, wild animals have mostly migrated and access to wild foods has decreased, resulting in people having to travel increasingly long distances to access them.

- In the three months prior to data collection, the most commonly reported livelihood activities included wild food collection (52% of households) and fishing (45%). For only 17% of households, livestock was reported as a livelihood activity, while just 4% reportedly grew crops for consumption.
- Cattle have historically been the key source of food and income in the lean season in western Pibor.<sup>35</sup> With the drastic decrease in cattle ownership, FGD participants consistently reported that many households have shifted towards the few unsustainable income generating opportunities that remain available, including the collection and sale of firewood, charcoal, poles and grasses. However, few people in the community reportedly have the financial means to purchase

these goods and the market for them has become saturated. As a result, prices have dropped, and it has largely become impossible to gain an income using these strategies.

- Consequently, many households have shifted their activities towards directly collecting food, primarily wild foods. For example, 71% of assessed households reportedly collected more wild foods than normal, while, for 10% of households this option had already become exhausted. Considering that these foods have limited nutritional value, combined with the circumstances faced by households, such as displacement and prolonged food consumption gaps, there is widespread exhaustion in western Pibor. As a result, people's ability to travel to collect these foods has decreased.
- Assessment findings suggest that coping strategies that 'have never been employed before', account for almost all food consumed. FGD participants across assessed locations in western Pibor reported grinding lalup shells into flour in the absence of sorghum and maize, as well as boiling the fruit and mixing it with a powdered mango juice mixture, when they have access to cash, to reduce the bitterness.
- FGD participants from Gumuruk reported skinning diseased cattle, often found dead by the roadside, and consuming the hide. Consumption of, and reliance on, these alternative sources of food likely exacerbates health concerns and, by extension, the impact of limited health and nutrition facilities.

## Zero-sum coping

The exhaustion of coping capacity has become so severe that people are widely reported to make choices between tasks that are equally important to survival, also known as zero-sum coping.

- Almost all (99%) of assessed households reportedly used consumption-based strategies to cope with a lack of food, in the month prior to data collection. In the month prior to data collection, 72% of households reportedly either had to beg for food or were no longer able to do so because this option had become exhausted.

Commonly reported zero-sum trade-offs amongst FGD participants include:

- The choice between taking malnourished children to receive treatment and going to collect food; if a woman takes her child to the clinic, she is unable to collect food and support an increasing network of dependents, as many young men have migrated to cattle grazing areas.
- Parents either feeding their children and introducing wild foods which are known to make them sick, or letting children go hungry due to the lack of alternative sources of food.

- Bringing vulnerable members of the household, who may be too exhausted or sick to travel, on displacement journeys or leaving them behind.

## Conclusion

The conditions and findings encountered during the REACH/FSLC assessment in western Pibor suggest that 'Famine Likely' conditions will likely persist in the near to medium term. An extreme lack of food and/or other basic needs even after the full employment of coping strategies, and evident starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical acute malnutrition levels<sup>38</sup> seem likely to persist despite a de-escalation in conflict and a scale up in humanitarian response. In the near term, access to key sources of food is likely to further decrease, while, in the longer term, livelihood activities may be negatively impacted by a third year of heavy rainfall, as well as a possible intensification of conflict. While there has been a significant scale up in humanitarian action in western Pibor, it remains imperative to monitor the level of food insecurity of local populations to measure the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions.

## Forecast: March to May

Based on the findings of the FRC report and the REACH/FSLC follow-up assessment, outcomes between March to May could include the following:

- Increased food consumption gaps are expected in the next 1-3 months, leaving humanitarian food assistance as the main source of food.
- Access to common livelihoods and livelihood coping strategies, such as collecting wild foods, fishing, and collecting materials for sale at markets, is expected to remain unprecedentedly low.
- The availability wild foods that have become staples in the diets of most people in western Pibor, such as lalup and tamarind, will seasonally decrease with the end of the rains, which brings to an end growing period for wild foods.
- FGD participants expected that productive household members will have to care for increasingly large networks of vulnerable dependents, further stretching the few available resources.
- The distribution of food within the household will likely be skewed away from vulnerable groups towards 'productive' members, compounding the vulnerability of 'unproductive' members.

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- People will travel further to access unclean water in the absence of boreholes and as natural water sources continue to dry up, limiting the amount of time available for other tasks such as collecting food and caring for children.
- General exhaustion will likely increase, limiting coping capacity in the near term, and the ability to engage in other livelihood activities such as cultivation in the medium term.
- Financial access to markets is likely to remain minimal due to high prices and the limited ability of typical strategies to generate income.
- Access to healthcare will likely also remain minimal in the near-term, especially outside of Pibor Town, until a healthcare partner is able to establish a permanent presence.
- Should there be a flare-up in sub-national violence, this would likely result in essential, lifesaving humanitarian activities being disrupted for a second consecutive year, further compounding existing vulnerabilities.
- The start of the rainy season is likely to see a gradual increase in water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea, as well as illnesses such as malaria that are spread with the increase of mosquitoes during the wet season.<sup>36</sup>
- The rainy season is expected to start at the beginning of May in northern South Sudan, between one and two weeks earlier than usual. According to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), [the rainy season is expected to be wetter than usual over eastern South Sudan](#). Early, severe rains are likely to limit the ability of farmers to both prepare and plant their land, and also to harvest, for a third consecutive year.<sup>37</sup>
- Depending on the way humanitarian assistance is delivered, targeting, information sharing as well as consultation with communities may cause conflict within the community.

## Endnotes

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23. Findings are as reported by a key nutrition service operating in western Pibor.
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