

South Sudan cross-border displacement: Rapid food security assessment in areas of return - Malakal County.

September 2023 | Malakal County | Upper Nile State | South Sudan



KEY MESSAGES

- The continued influx of returnees from Sudan was reported by Key Informants (KIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) participants as the main shock experienced in the last six months in Malakal County. An increase in prices of essential food commodities as a result of disruptions in the supply chain from Sudan and the devaluation of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP) were also reported as factors that have highly influenced the critical situation in the area.
- At the time of data collection, internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing in the Malakal Protection of Civilians (PoC) site as well as in Malakal town were receiving monthly food assistance. However, returnees who arrived to Malakal via humanitarian-facilitated boats received only a one-off food assistance at the time of arrival, and those who organized transportation on their own had not received any kind of food assistance.
- Findings suggest that food availability is very limited among both host communities (HC) and returnees, with the latter being more affected. At the time of data collection, returnees reported that they were entirely dependent on the market and social (mostly familial) connections to access food, which incurs reduced food consumption among the HC.
- Limitations in food availability and accessibility resulted in the population adopting food-based coping strategies such as skipping meals, which was reported in all FGDs across all population groups (HC and returnees). Among the returnee population, selling of belongings (typically clothes) to purchase food at markets was also often reported.
- Returnee participants reported poor conditions in the transit centre (TC), including congested communal shelters and people resorting to sleeping in the open or in temporary shelters made of bed sheets, which left them exposed to the weather effects of the rainy season. Such conditions, together with the challenges to accessing food, have further aggravated the situation of returnees, further debilitating an already vulnerable population which, in many instances, is still waiting for onward movement to their final destinations.
- According to FGD participants, the food security situation was likely to further deteriorate in the six months following data collection due to poor planting seasons and delayed rain, as well as the anticipation of a continuous influx of returnees from Sudan. In addition, participants reported that income-generating opportunities in Malakal were very scarce, especially for returnees.

CONTEXT & RATIONALE

Since the onset of the armed conflict in Sudan on April 15, humanitarian agencies have recorded 262,298 individuals crossing the Sudan-South Sudan border at 22 points of entry (PoEs)¹. The large majority (91.4%) of those recorded crossing were South Sudanese nationals who had been residing in Khartoum State as refugees. Of these, 32,885 have been recorded entering Malakal, mainly through Joda/Wunthow PoE in Renk County and subsequent onward riverine movement to Malakal.

Moreover, and since the beginning of the conflict in Sudan, Malakal has become not only one of the main areas of return but also a transit hub for returnees entering through Joda/Wunthow PoE and traveling to other parts of the country. Long waiting times at the transit centre in this location have aggravated the situation and further debilitated an already vulnerable population.

This assessment sought to provide a better understanding of how the fighting in Sudan and resultant displacement to South Sudan has impacted food security in areas that have since April received a substantial number of returnees.

Underlying vulnerability of populations in Malakal County

Malakal County has experienced multiple shocks in the past years, including the most recent ones in 2022. And in order to better understand the current situation in the areas assessed, it is critical to understand what were the implications of each of these shocks and the consequent implications these events had on the food security situation of the population residing there.

Displacements and group conflicts: Prior to the onset of the Sudan crisis, a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) were already residing both in Malakal town as well as in the Malakal Protection of Civilians (PoC) site. Some of them had been displaced between August and December 2022 following the outbreak of fighting and group tensions in Panyikang and Fashoda counties due to unresolved grievances leftover from the 2013-2018 crisis. As of December 2022, at least 22,000 people had arrived to the Malakal PoC site². That same month, conflict and distress migration from the Lou areas of Akobo, Uror, and Nyirol counties displaced at least 4,000 people from these areas into Malakal town³.

The repeated group tensions and fighting happening in the Malakal corridor has continued to restrict communities from movement and access to livelihood areas. The most recent incident in the Malakal PoC site was recorded on June 8th and resulted in at least twenty deaths, the destruction of hundreds of shelters, and the displacement of many of the site’s residents who moved in its majority to Malakal town⁴.

Increase in prices of essential food commodities: The effects of the Sudan crisis have been particularly felt in the disruption of the supply chain from Sudan to South Sudan, decreased activity of Sudanese importers, and the continued devaluation of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP)⁵. Participants in the host community FGD groups reported that the prices of essential food commodities had considerably increased when compared to the previous 3 to 6 months.

According to the [Joint Market Monitoring Initiative \(JMMI\)](#) conducted by the Cash Working Group and REACH, the MSSMEB, an indicator representing the cost of the minimum culturally adjusted group of items required to support a six-person household for one month, experienced a significant increase in April and May (73% and 18%) in the Malakal PoC and Malakal town markets respectively⁶. Between June and July, the JMMI still recorded an increase of 3% and 15% at the Malakal PoC and Malakal town markets respectively⁷.

This information becomes more worrying when looking at the projections done in the last Integrated Phase Classification (IPC), when it was projected that between April and July 2023 Malakal County would be classified in Phase 4, with 80% of the population being acutely food insecure (P3+)⁸. This classification indicates that the majority of the population would be unable to meet their food consumption needs without resorting to erosive consumption and reliance on emergency coping strategies.

Therefore, it is only fair to assume that the compounding effect of the shocks that took place over the last year have only further exacerbated food insecurity in Malakal County.

Figure 1: Cost of Food Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) at Malakal PoC and Malakal Town markets between October 2022 and August 2023

Source: Joint-Market Monitoring Initiative Dashboard

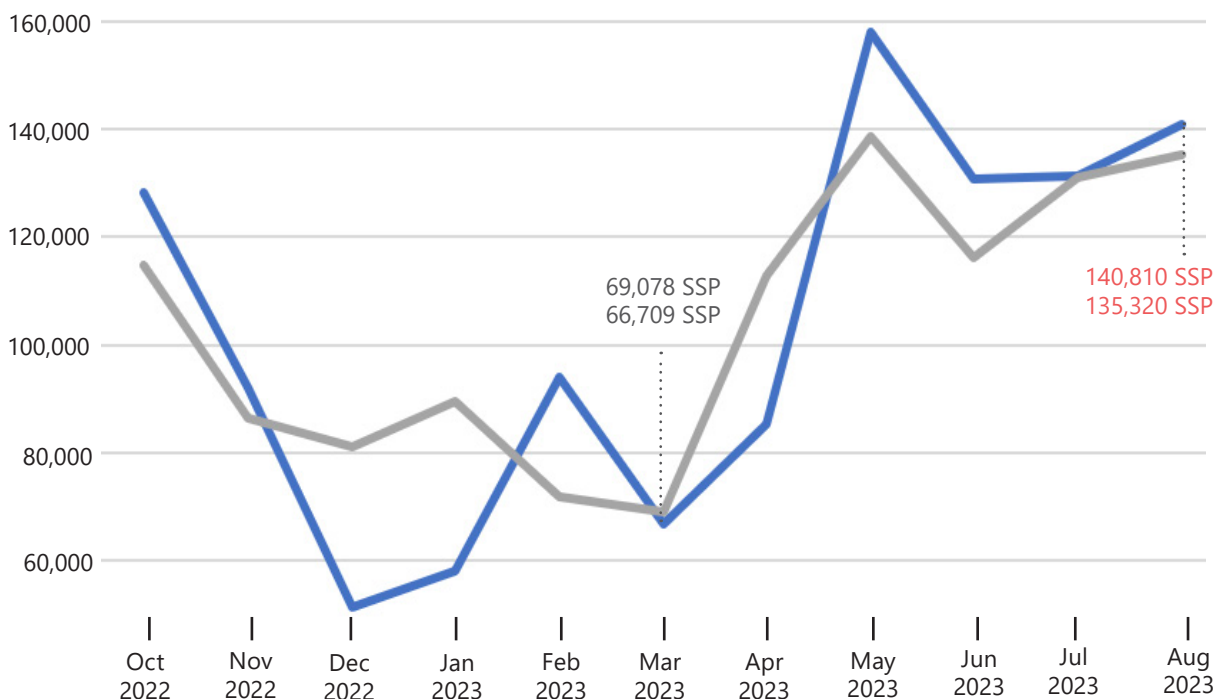
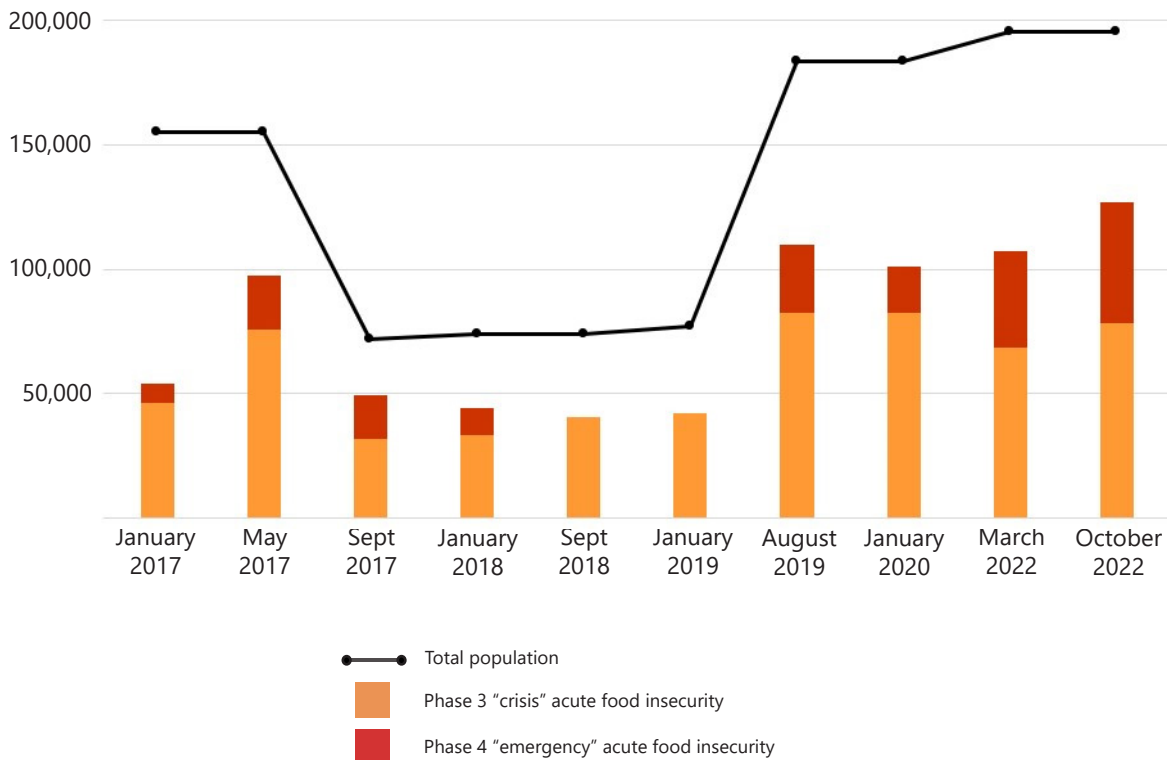


Figure 2: Total population of Malakal County vs number of acutely food insecure people between January 2017 and October 2022

Source: IPC. "South Sudan - IPC Analysis 2017-2023." Dataset.



Impact on food access and availability

Food availability: Since the onset of the Sudanese armed conflict, prices of essential food commodities in Malakal town and the PoC have reportedly increased drastically as reported in the previous section. Participants from the HC FGDs attributed the increase to the increased demand of good due to the influx of returnees from Sudan as well as to the disruption of the supply chain between Sudan and Upper Nile State, which used to be one of the main routes for imports into Malakal County and other part of the state given the close proximity to the border. At the time of data collection, KIs reported that now the majority of goods were coming from Juba, which incurs higher costs due to the logistical constraints this route poses, making the final price of products more expensive to the general public and often limiting food availability, as well as access.

Interviewed returnees reported that the majority of them were not receiving any kind of food assistance, especially those who facilitated their own transportation from Renk to Malakal. Those who arrived by humanitarian-facilitated boats have only received one-time food assistance upon arrival. Returnees also highlighted that due to the lack of food assistance, they were entirely relying on the market and social and familial connections for accessing food. This information was corroborated by host community participants in FGDs who mentioned that most of them were hosting returnees in their homes and sharing the little resources to which they have access with them. HC FGD participants who reported to receive HFA mentioned that such food assistance currently did not last for more than a week because of the increase

in household members. Because of the scarce availability to food commodities, HC participants claimed that they had to implement different coping strategies to mitigate the effects of food and resource sharing, including skipping meals and restricting consumption for adults so children can eat.

Moreover, in two of the FGDs conducted with HC, participants reported that despite anticipating that the majority of the host community population would cultivate crops this year due to the improved security context in Malakal County's eastern bank, they have not been able to do so, mostly due to the delay of the rainy season, which did not start until July, altering the cultivation period and posing further constraints on food availability in the region. A few households (HHs) reported to have planted small scale gardens around the homestead, but the crops did not perform well, reducing their access to subsistence food. Besides, HHs who were expecting to harvest their crops in September and October 2023, expected harvests to be exhausted early, with projections of food availability from such harvests to last less than a month as a result of the increase in HH members that would share access to these resources.

Participants in KIs and FGDs reported that returnees did not cultivate, as most of them arrived in the middle of the lean season. In Malakal PoC, participants mentioned that another factor impeding cultivation for PoC residents was related to the tension between population groups, especially after the escalation in June 2023, which had significant consequences including further population movement restrictions. The few HHs that have been able to cultivate have largely done so in close proximity to the PoC, and according to the participants, harvests are likely to be exhausted as early as October 2023.

Food Access: The most reported problem related to food access by FGD participants was the high prices of essential food commodities, which have hiked in both Malakal Town and Malakal PoC markets as a result of the disruption of supply chain across the border with Sudan, as well as the increase in the demand due to the high influx of returnees in the area. At the time of data collection, the majority of participants reported that 3.5 kg (Malwa) of sorghum was about 3500–4000 SSP. For reference, the price of this product in March 2023 was around 1400 SSP both in Malakal Town and PoC markets⁹.

According to the participants in the host community, financial access to markets has decreased for most people since the Sudan crisis, and one of the main aggravating factors for this situation is that the shock coupled with the lean season. Participants reported that during the lean season, most people find access to cash very difficult, especially among the poor HHs, since their main source of income is selling agricultural produce like greens and maize, along with selling fish and operating small businesses.

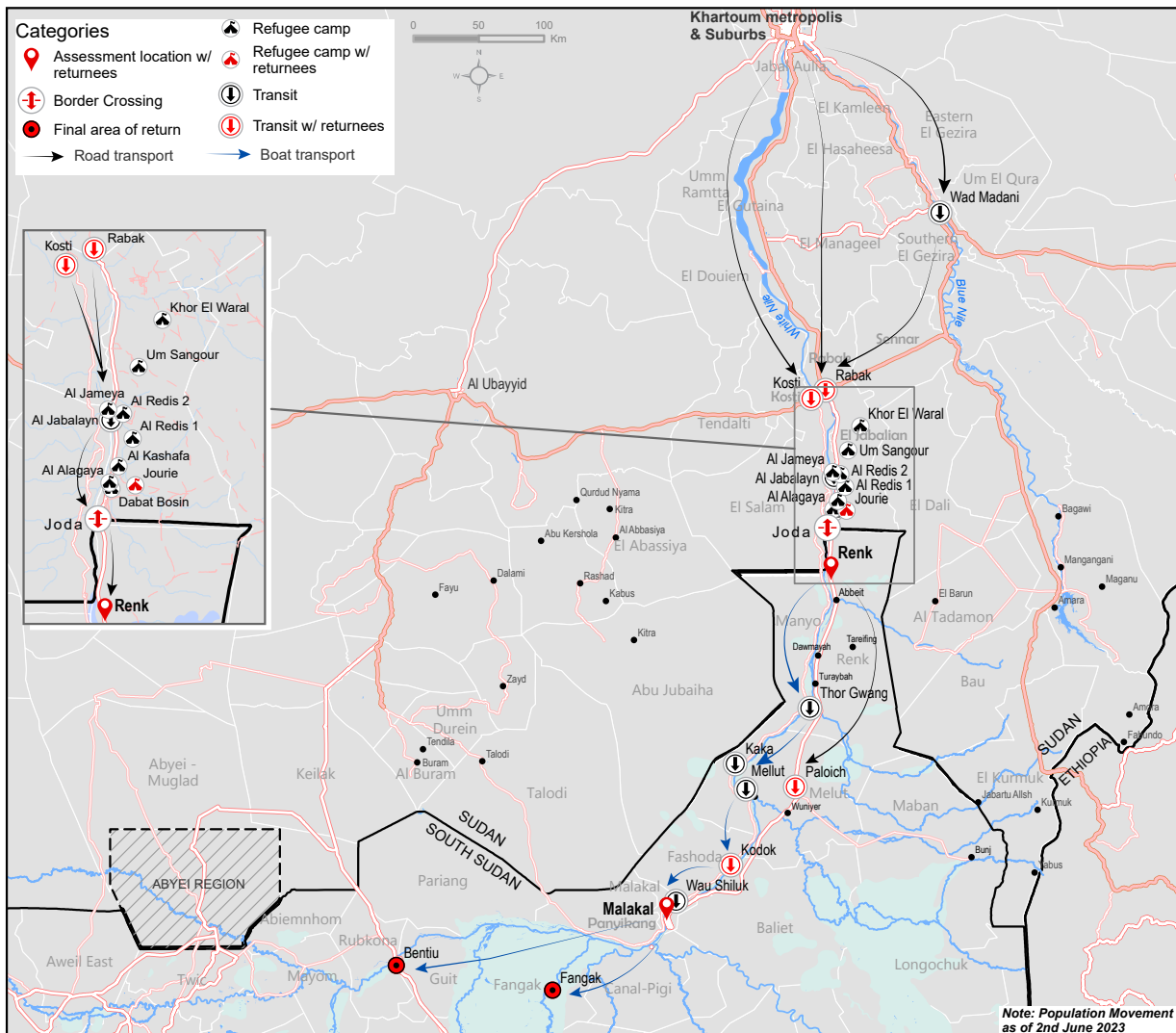
However, when looking at what are now the main sources of income for the poor HHs in Malakal County, these are currently reduced to collecting firewood and burning charcoal, activities which are now very limited due to the mobility barriers experienced. FGD participants in Malakal

PoC reported that protection mitigation measures aiming to reduce tension between population groups have resulted in an increased limitation to access food, both physically and financially. Findings suggest that restrictions to leave the PoC prevent its residents from accessing livelihood activities such as fishing, collecting firewood, making charcoal, and enrolling in casual labour. The most recent clashes in the PoC compounded the situation, with specific groups fearing access to certain livelihood areas.

When comparing access to income-generating activities among the HC and the returnee population, the latter seems to have greater limitations, with the majority of returnees reporting not having access to any kind of income-generating activities, and a few of them concentrating on casual labor in Malakal markets.

Traditionally, the wet season is associated with an increase in availability and access to green harvests, including wild foods and fish, which are traditionally used to mitigate large food consumption gaps among communities. However, participants emphasised this year there has been a lack of engagement in this kind of seasonal activities due to the delay of the rainy season as well as the heightened perceived insecurity. As a result, the anticipated seasonal increase in access to food and the consumption of seasonal wild foods are reportedly limited.

Map 1: Population movement from Khartoum to area of final return, via Renk and Malakal, as of June 2, 2023



Impact on coping strategies

The combination of previously mentioned factors has created a situation in which both HC and returnee populations were heavily relying on markets as their main source to access food. However, both Malakal Town and PoC markets were experiencing a lack of food availability due to the disruption in the supply chain of goods from Sudan. This situation, combined with the increase in prices of food items due to the higher costs incurred in the supply chain through alternative routes (mainly Juba), as well as the higher demand for goods due to the increase in population numbers attributed to the influx of returnees in the area, has greatly inflated the prices of essential goods and food commodities. In such circumstances, all population groups have reached a point in which they need to access cash in order to buy food. FGD HC participants reported that such a situation had led to competition among themselves and returnees to enrol in income-generating opportunities, given how limited these were in the area, which raises concerns over the possibility of further tensions arising among different groups. On the other hand, returnee participants mentioned during the FGDs that, upon their arrival in Malakal, their access to income-generating opportunities was reduced to close to none, with very few accessing jobs in the markets, restaurants or fetching water. One of the main challenges returnees reported is that to access these kinds of jobs they needed to provide an identity card (ID), which can only be issued by the South Sudanese government, and which most of them have not received yet.

To cope with these challenges, participants reported adopting different coping strategies. Across all population groups (HC and returnees), participants reported consumption-based coping strategies that included: consuming smaller meals, having fewer meals per day, and often going full days without eating or prioritising younger children to eat. Moreover, it was also commonly reported for HHs to activate kinship support networks and ask to borrow food. Nevertheless, returnee participants reported that for those without social or familial connections, such type of help from the host community was not accessible, which left them in especially vulnerable situations. Additionally, in three of the returnee FGDs, participants reported that increasingly severe food insecurity among populations at the Bulukat transit center had reportedly led returnees in the center to sell their belongings, most commonly clothes, to purchase food at markets. This coping strategy was reportedly starting to reach exhaustion since most returnees had already sold the majority of their belongings.

Among the HC FGDs, participants reported that the increasing food shortages meant that even those HHs that had access to more resources were starting to deplete their food stocks, as most of them were sharing what was available to them with the returnee population. Additionally, FGD participants residing in the PoC reported that despite increasing fear of group tensions among the community, and the mobility barriers in place, people were still moving to other livelihood areas, such as faraway locations where fishing is possible, or

collecting firewood and/or charcoal. This information shed light on the severity of the situation, since in order to meet their daily needs people are willing to take risks that can potentially endanger their lives.

With the harvest approaching, the HC have reportedly already learned that most of the HHs who cultivated will not harvest much because of crops failure, mostly due to the delayed rainy season, and those that will harvest expect edstocks to exhaust in less than a month. In one of the FGDs of the host community, participants mentioned that they have already started adopting livelihood coping strategies such as borrowing and selling livestock, consuming wild foods, and resorting to collecting firewood or burning charcoal, which is very difficult to do at this time of year.

Projections (September to December)

Results of this assessment supported by secondary literature on seasonality, livelihoods and HFA suggest that the factors mitigating or aggravating the situation might include:

Population flows from Renk: The flow of returnees from Renk to Malakal and onward to other areas of return might change drastically in the coming months. If funding for onward transportation movement (OTA) is not secured, congestion in transit areas could pose tremendous challenges for the humanitarian response.

Household food security impacted by poor harvest and lack of food assistance: HC participants reported that the crops failure due to the delayed rainy season will likely worsen the food security situation as it will imply a lack of food availability. Assessment findings suggest that without an increase in the HFA quantities to both returnees and HC, which currently is far from enough to sustain the needs of the population, the reliance on food markets will continue, and due to the high prices that food commodities are reaching, more emergency coping strategies will be adopted by the population. With Malakal projected to be in IPC Phase 4 between April and July 2023, and recently collected data showcasing that such projections have done nothing but worsened, the expected 80% of the population experiencing acute food insecurity (P3+) could easily be much higher in reality. Moreover, the returnee population, especially those without immediate social networks in these areas of return, appear to be extremely at risk of facing high food consumption gaps.

Heightened tensions among population groups: The high volatility of the situation in the area, which is coming from a year in which multiple shocks took place, could increase the chances of further incidents among groups. Participants already mentioned resorting to coping strategies that implied high protection risks (especially in terms of movement). Furthermore, the heavy reliance on income-generating opportunities and the scarcity of those, has the potential to ignite new tensions among population groups, which can bring heightened protection risk for returnees with no social networks in the area.

METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

Primary data was collected via two qualitative components: **11 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a total of 49 individuals**, 23 who had returned from Sudan since April 15, and 26 persons residing in the assessment area prior to April 15, including internally displaced people (IDPs) residing in the assessment area for a protracted period of time, such as those in the Malakal PoC; **and 6 Key Informant Interviews (KII) with humanitarian service providers or humanitarian response coordinators, members of local government, community leaders, and traders.** For each of these two components a separate semi-structured tool was used, with key informant tools including or omitting certain questions based on the key informant's profile. FGDs explored the impacts of the Sudan crisis on food security, livelihoods, and other basic needs, while KIIs sought to outline the extent of

humanitarian service provision and identify broad trends in humanitarian conditions and population movement since April 15.

Data collection took place between the 14th and 22nd of August in the Malakal Protection of Civilians (PoC) site, Malakal Town and the "Bulukat" Transit Center (TC).

This brief also draws on secondary sources including data from the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI), FEWS NET Livelihood Zone Profiles, county profiles developed by REACH and the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF), the IOM-UNHCR population movement dashboard, ad-hoc updates from humanitarian coordination bodies on the Sudan crisis, and needs assessments conducted by humanitarian agencies between May and July 2023 in the areas assessed.

ENDNOTES

PAGE 1

¹ UN-IOM and UNHCR. "[Population Movement from Sudan to South Sudan.](#)" Dashboard.

PAGE 2

² South Sudan: [Upper Nile Flash Update No. 1, as of 10 December 2022 - South Sudan](#) | ReliefWeb

³ Protection Cluster: [Upper Nile/South Sudan - Internal displacement in Malakal town \(March 2023\) - South Sudan](#) | ReliefWeb

⁴ UNMISS calls for immediate halt to deadly fighting in Malakal UN Protection Site - South Sudan | ReliefWeb

⁵ REACH. "[Emergency Situation Overview: Sudan-South Sudan Cross Border Displacement. Malakal County.](#)" June 2023.

⁶ SSD-JMMI_Factsheet_May_2023.pdf (impact-initiatives.org)

⁷ SSD-JMMI_Factsheet_July_2023.pdf (impact-initiatives.org)

⁸ South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October - November 2022 and Projections for December 2022 - March 2023 and April - July 2023 | IPC - Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (ipcinfo.org)

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⁹ REACH. [JMMI South Sudan dashboard](#). Accessed 11 September, 2023.

ABOUT REACH

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).