

# Rapid Drought Impact Assessment in Lafon County, Eastern Equatoria

September 2026 | South Sudan

This situation overview provides an update on conditions in Lafon County in August 2026, following [reports of extreme health outcomes](#). Data collection involved key informant interviews and focus group discussions in three of the worst-affected payams between August 17-24.

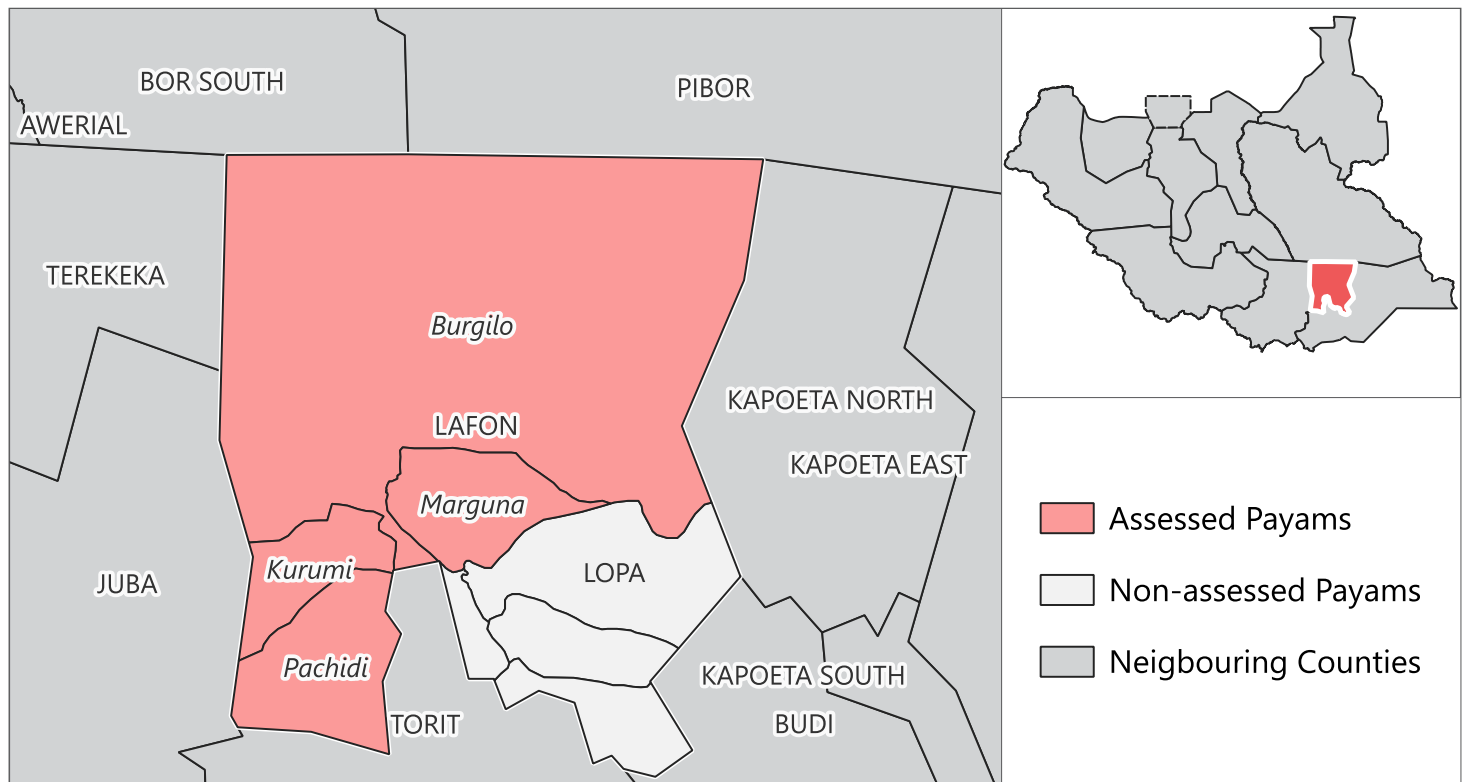
## Key messages

- A large-deficit harvest in 2025 and a prolonged dry spell from May 2026 precipitated an exceptionally severe lean season in Lafon County in 2026. It is possible a combination of food shortages, limited functionality of WASH infrastructure, and stockouts of health and nutrition supplies were driving extreme health outcomes.
- Following a poor harvest in 2025, participants described selling household assets and livestock as well as widespread reliance on toxic wild foods since at least May 2026 as primary coping mechanisms, in addition to many households and individuals having left the county.
- Increased demand, rising prices and physical access challenges are likely to have contributed to staple foods such as sorghum being out of stock or unaffordable not only in Lafon, but also in some neighboring communities.
- Local health authorities and FGD participants both highlighted a nearly complete absence of any medicines across the county since at least May 2026. In one of the assessed payams, health services have reportedly been restricted to health education and referrals to Lafon Center or Juba for well over three years.

## Context & Rationale

South Sudan's 2026 rainy season, usually from March/April to October/November, has not developed as anticipated. Despite [initial expectations](#) of a wetter-than-normal season, [meteorological signals in May](#) pointed to drought as the dominant risk for South Sudan this year, with a [national preparedness strategy](#) planning for an estimated 1.7 million people across Eastern and Central Equatoria, Jonglei and Greater Pibor to be affected by drought. The expected severity of the drought further prompted the government and WFP to activate its first ever [drought anticipatory action plan](#) for Budi and Kapoeta North Counties in Eastern Equatoria, a state that has seen recurring droughts for multiple decades. While more recent reports suggest that not only Lafon but multiple counties classified as [experiencing Emergency levels of food insecurity](#) (IPC Phase 4) in Eastern Equatoria are affected by [failing harvests](#) and [drought-induced displacement](#), in early August, conditions appeared most concerning in Lafon, where a humanitarian [fact-finding mission](#) reported several unverified hunger-related deaths.

To better understand the impact of the current drought conditions on households, REACH conducted a rapid qualitative assessment in Lafon County, Eastern Equatoria. Data Collection was conducted from 17 to 24 August in Burgilo, Kurumi and Marguna Payams and included focus group discussions with subsistence farmers, as well as Key Informant Interviews (KII) with county officials on agriculture and health, as well as with nutrition center staff and market vendors. An additional FGD was conducted with community leaders from Pacidi that were present in Lafon Center during the data collection period. Given the qualitative approach, findings are indicative of the situation at the time of data collection and are not statistically representative. All quotes referenced in this brief are from FGDs with subsistence farmers in Lafon County unless stated otherwise.



Map 1: Assessed Areas and Location of Lafon in Eastern Equatoria State

## Food Security and Livelihoods

Like many other areas of South Sudan, Lafon experiences a single, long rainy season per year, which generally only allows for a single annual harvest. Food security in Lafon is further characterized by reliance on livestock and market purchases, especially during the June-August lean season. While many other parts of Eastern Equatoria are prone to drought, Lafon sits downstream of the Kenyoti watershed and has experienced recurring floods over the past years, which is likely to have contributed to a harvest deficit in 2025.<sup>1</sup>

*“Outside of sorghum, people cannot survive.” - Male FGD, Lafon Center*

During the assessment, participants consistently described sorghum and other crops such as okra, beans and peas as having wilted due to a prolonged dry spell during this year’s planting season, with a lack of seeds preventing them from replanting. While participants in half of all focus groups reported a small number of plants survived, most explained they expected no harvest this year as remaining plants were unlikely to mature at all. At the same time, participants in nearly all groups indicated they had not received any prior information about weather forecasts and instead relied on traditional planting cycles.

It is likely most households had exhausted their seed stores before the start of the planting season in May 2026. Following floods during the planting season in 2025, many participants described having to eat seeds

and consequently being completely out of food stocks following the start of the planting season in May. Coupled with the exceptional length of the dry season, which had effectively not ended by the time of the assessment, the 2026 lean season appears as particularly severe.

*“If you have no cow, you can just depend on wild foods and wait for your day” - Female FGD, Kurumi*

All groups described the sale or exchange of household assets and livestock as a primary coping strategy to buy food since at least May. Asset sales this year furthermore seemed to be broader in scope and less effective than in other years, with many participants reporting this was the first year they began selling household items and even jewelry. However, some participants explained this was largely insufficient to purchase enough food, noting that stealing had become a common occurrence.

In addition to failing crops, most groups described livestock deaths due to widespread animal disease and dry pastures, with the latter also causing a marked loss in livestock value. Participants also pointed out reduced and sometimes completely suspended milk production, as well as a lack of medicine for animals. Livestock prices this year reached as little as half compared to previous years, according to FGD participants. Some herders were unable to sell animals at all because they were in such poor condition.

*“We eat harmful herbs on purpose because we don’t know where we can go” - Male FGD, Lafon Center*

**Participants in all focus groups reported relying almost exclusively on wild foods since the beginning of the drought in May.** While wild foods were noted to form part of local diets in years with good harvests, the scale and scope of the foods gathered this year was considered nearly unprecedented. In previous years, wild food gathering was usually restricted to wild fruits considered to be enjoyable, but these did not constitute a major part of food intake.<sup>2</sup>

**By contrast, foods collected this year largely included unappetizing and inedible foods, with participants commonly pointing out health complications such as dizziness, diarrhea, dry skin and even death as a result of consuming them.**<sup>3</sup> Foraging such foods, commonly through hours-long trips into the wooded areas around settlements, was described as requiring good physical condition as well as knowledge of the natural environment, with elderly people and returnees likely unable to gather sufficient quantities of food by themselves. In the absence of other foods and insufficient breast milk, such wild foods were reported to also be given to children, including children under five, which key informants considered a serious risk to their health.

**Both hunting and fishing were extremely limited as a result of drought conditions.** Bordering the Boma Badingilo Migratory Landscape (BBML), Lafon County is host to an exceptional diversity of wildlife that may provide an important source of food especially during the lean season, but animals were described as nearly absent from Lafon due to the lack of seasonal rainfall.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Lafon's seasonal rivers offer the potential for fishing, but were dry at the time of the assessment and as such did not allow fishing. Despite this, participants expressed hopes for the return of the seasonal rivers, requesting fishing kits as part of any humanitarian intervention.

**Participants in most focus groups considered 2026 an exceptionally difficult year and expressed a deep sense of worry about the future.** In one case, food insecurity this year was described as worse than during the civil war.<sup>5</sup> On several occasions, participants further pointed out that the failed harvest this year is likely to contribute to even worse outcomes next year given their inability to restock seeds for the next planting season, with some participants indicating they did not expect to survive the year.

## Markets

**All groups confirmed the only market across Lafon was located in Lafon Center, with no traders visiting other payams.** While key informants reported no issues of discrimination preventing market access, some participants noted occasional security incidents on the way to market. Visiting the market, however, was described as taking around 2h on foot from every payam except from Pacidi, from where locals were more likely to visit other markets due to the great distance to Lafon Center.

**Both FGD participants and key informants were concerned with affordability as an access challenge, however.** FGD participants described elevated prices for all items, while key informants pointed to increases in staples such as sorghum and flour during the lean season. One key informant described having suspended the restocking of sorghum entirely due to clients no longer being able to afford it.

**To avoid locally elevated prices, stockouts of sorghum, and reduced livestock prices, FGD participants reported traveling long distances, including up to week-long trips to Juba, Torit or even Magwi.** They further pointed to local markets having run out of locally grown staples, with key informants agreeing that such staples are now likely to be imported, which may affect both restocking times and prices due to high transport costs.

## WASH

**Participants in all but two focus groups described reduced water supply as a result of dry weather.** During a typical rainy season, seasonal rivers commonly allow digging of shallow wells for domestic water consumption and livestock. However, this was described as impossible this year due to seasonal rivers having run dry. As a result of this, most groups pointed out they relied on boreholes for drinking water, water for domestic use, and even for livestock. Participants in at least one interview said "many" boreholes had broken down since the beginning of the drought. And in all but two interviews, participants explained some boreholes in their communities were non-functional. These challenges reportedly led to overreliance on a smaller number of boreholes, resulting in longer queues and increased difficulties in pumping water. Some participants were also concerned about access to water in more remote villages.

## Health and Nutrition

**Health concerns were widespread, with most groups pointing to children and elderly people being affected by disease during this period, in some cases more so than usual.** Many groups also pointed out the lack of food as a particular risk for nursing mothers and children, who often relied on wild foods as well, resulting in poor diets, malnutrition and weight loss.

**Participants in most focus groups reported a lack of medicine in health facilities.** In some cases, participants described defaulting to herbal medicines for treatment instead. One health worker stated that medicines had been completely unavailable in a local health facility for well over three years, resulting in health services being restricted to health education and referrals. Patients from the catchment area of the health facility were reported to have stopped visiting the facility altogether. Local health authorities also pointed to recurring medicine supply issues across the county due to a lack of medicine deliveries.

**Despite reported increases in malnutrition caseloads since the start of the dry spell in May 2026, nutrition centers were faced with a nearly complete stockout of nutrition supplies across the county, with local authorities estimating not a single facility was functional at the time of data collection.** Key informants consistently described the supply of nutrition stocks as an issue that predated the current drought that began in May 2026. Nutrition programmes were also described as restricted to Outpatient Therapeutic Programmes only. A nutritionist in Lafon Center reported stabilization services there were suspended in 2023. In result, more severe cases of malnutrition required treatment outside the county.

## Displacement

*"Some houses are just empty" - Male FGD, Lafon Center*

**Despite no estimates on the scale of displacement being available at the time of the assessment, all groups stated that community members had left their settlements due to the impact of the drought.** Most groups described those who had left as young men and women with sufficient energy for the movement as well as entire households. On one occasion, participants reported instances of household separation, with only some household members able to leave their settlements. It was not possible to infer whether household members who left intended to reunify with those who remained in the future.

*"You can just stay here and die" - Female FGD, Kurumi*

**Common routes, which required multiple days of traveling on foot, were considered so dangerous that leaving was regarded as a serious risk to life.**

## Methodology Overview

**Primary data was collected between August 17th and 24th, 2026, across Burgilo, Kurumi, Pacidi and Marguna Payams in Lafon County, Eastern Equatoria State. Primary data collection consisted of two qualitative components:**

7 Key Informant Interviews with market vendors (2), nutrition center staff (2), and county officials (3), Interview topics respectively covered market functionality, public health service delivery, humanitarian service delivery and agriculture in Lafon, respectively.

11 Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with subsistence farmers and livestock owners were conducted, spread across three payams: 5 in Burgilo Payam, 4 in Kurumi Payam and 2 in Marguna Payam. In addition, one FGD was conducted with community leaders from Pacidi Payam.

Both murder and kidnapping were described as a common occurrence on the routes. Among the most mentioned destinations were Juba, Torit and Uganda, but also Kenya and Kapoeta. While only a small number of groups explicitly mentioned hopelessness as a core driver, it is likely that a perceived lack of alternatives has contributed to most drought-driven displacement in Lafon.

## Endnotes

- 1 Flood modelling suggests Lafon was affected by flooding between 2020 and 2024, with FGD participants also describing floods in 2025. See: *IMPACT Initiatives. "Lafon County Profile." 2024. [Link](#)*  
The Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM) recorded a significant harvest deficit in Lafon in 2025. [Link](#)
- 2 Such wild foods may include *balanites aegyptiaca*, as well as other unidentified wild fruits.
- 3 The use of local names for such hunger foods makes it difficult to ascertain the exact plants consumed in Lafon. Though foods considered toxic in Lafon were described as stemming from a tree rather than from tubers. See: *Oxfam. "Indigenous Solutions to Food Insecurity: Wild food plants of South Sudan". 2020. [Link](#)*
- 4 Mammal migration in the BBML commonly sees southward migration towards Lafon during the rainy season, and is likely delayed due to this year's rainfall patterns. See: *UNESCO. "Boma Badingilo Migratory Landscape: Nomination 1808. Annexes." 2026. [Link](#)*
- 5 Lafon was affected by fighting during multiple periods. In the early 1990s, the county experienced a failed harvest followed by considerable insecurity. See: *Human Rights Watch. "Civilian Devastation: Abuses by All Parties in the War in Southern Sudan." 1993. [Link](#)*  
During South Sudan's civil war (2013-2018), much of Lafon town's population was displaced following armed clashes. See: *CSRF South Sudan. "Lafon County Profile". Accessed 2026. [Link](#)*

## 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).