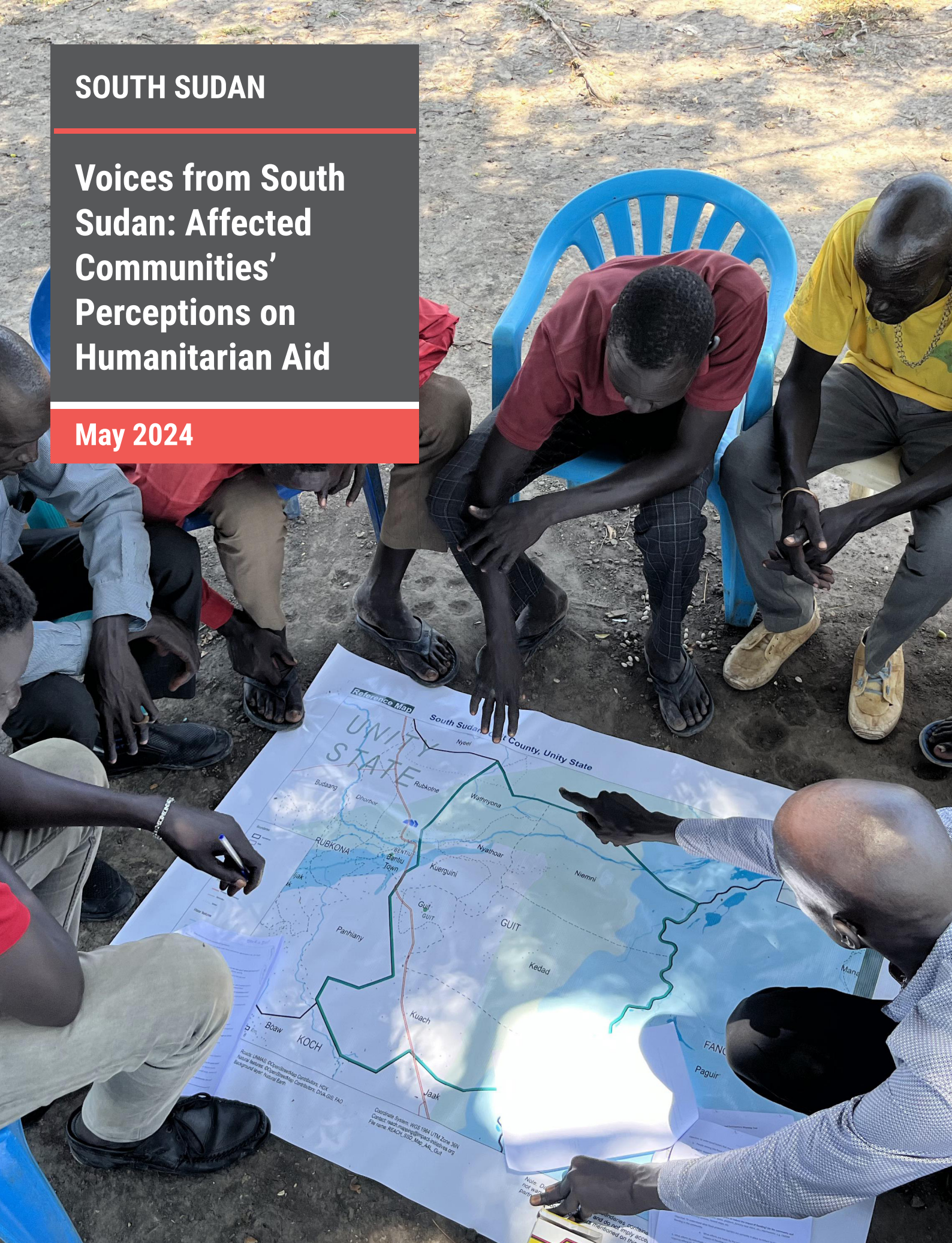


# SOUTH SUDAN

## Voices from South Sudan: Affected Communities' Perceptions on Humanitarian Aid

May 2024



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## CONTEXT & RATIONALE

In 2023, South Sudan faced a severe humanitarian crisis driven by ongoing conflicts, recurring climate shocks, and pervasive economic instability. The country's humanitarian landscape varied significantly, encompassing regions mired in protracted crises as well as areas facing cyclical and acute emergencies.<sup>1</sup> These factors undermined food security, with projections indicating that over half of the nation's population will face high levels of acute food insecurity by the 2024 lean season.<sup>2</sup> The country also grappled with a significant internally displaced population of over two million, with many having been displaced multiple times. Major sites such as the Malakal Protection of Civilians (PoC) site and the Bentiu IDP camp alone shelter over 142,000 IDPs combined (IOM). According to the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, a total of 9 million people require urgent assistance in 2024 amidst reduced funding.<sup>3</sup>

The regional repercussions of the outbreak of conflict in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in neighbouring Sudan have exacerbated the already dire humanitarian conditions in South Sudan. Prior to the conflict, approximately 800,000 South Sudanese nationals had sought refuge in Sudan as refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>4</sup> The recent conflict has triggered mass displacement of approximately 134,684 refugees and asylum seekers, and 515,516 South Sudanese returnees into South Sudan, severely straining the scant existing resources and infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of transit centres in Renk and Malakal, to receive arrivals from Sudan and to facilitate onward transportation assistance (OTA) to their final destinations, has been instrumental in alleviating congestion at border areas and reducing pressure on limited facilities. However, this response to the Sudan crisis faces significant challenges due to the sensitive regional context and the complex operational demands of the crisis.<sup>6</sup>

Amidst these challenges, adherence to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations is essential to ensuring humanitarian action across crisis contexts is community-centred, adheres to established standards and effectively responds to the complex needs of the affected communities.<sup>7</sup>

The IASC definition of AAP used in this report is: “[a]ccountability to affected populations is an active commitment to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people humanitarian organisations seek to assist”. This definition recognises the importance of understanding and identifying the diverse experiences of populations groups across South Sudan, particularly with respect to age, gender, and ability.<sup>8</sup>

### Accountability to Affected Populations in South Sudan

In South Sudan, the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) framework is a strategic imperative of the humanitarian response, essential for ensuring a rights-based and accountable approach to aid. This commitment is demonstrated by the Humanitarian Country Team's AAP Strategy, initially developed in 2021 and revised in 2023, which aims to operationalise the IASC commitments on AAP and the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse.<sup>9,10</sup> The strategy aligns with the Sphere Core Humanitarian Standards and integrates the Grand Bargain's principles, which require the systematic inclusion of affected populations in

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<sup>1</sup> [South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 \(Issued November 2023\) - South Sudan | ReliefWeb](#)

<sup>2</sup> [IPC South Sudan Acute Food Insecurity Malnutrition Sept2023July2024 Snapshot.pdf \(ipcinfo.org\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 \(Issued November 2023\) - South Sudan | ReliefWeb](#)

<sup>4</sup> [South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 \(Issued November 2023\) - South Sudan | ReliefWeb](#)

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, IOM (South Sudan). Sudan inflows, intentions and movements tracking. [Microsoft Power BI](#) (accessed May 1, 2024)

<sup>6</sup> [South Sudan: Response to the Sudan Crisis Situation Report No. 27 \(As of 16 February 2024\) - South Sudan | ReliefWeb](#)

<sup>7</sup> [IASC Revised AAP Commitments endorsed November 2017.pdf \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [IASC Revised AAP Commitments endorsed November 2017.pdf \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> South Sudan [Humanitarian Country Team's \(HCT\) Strategy on AAP \(2023\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> [IASC Revised AAP Commitments endorsed November 2017.pdf \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

decision-making processes.<sup>11,12</sup> The Communication and Community Engagement Working Group (CCEWG) in South Sudan is tasked with implementing the HCT AAP strategy, and coordinates with the Inter-cluster Coordination Group to review and adapt to community priorities and preferences around humanitarian assistance.<sup>13</sup>

For the specific challenges of the Sudan crisis response, Internews and the Community Engagement Network (CEN), supported by the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), work to bridge information gaps at the Malakal Transit Centre (also known as the Bulukat Transit Centre), camps and the PoC site, and the Renk Transit Centre in Upper Nile State. These efforts are facilitated by a two-way communication platform that gathers and addresses community feedback, supporting humanitarian assistance to be timely and relevant to meet the urgent needs of affected communities arriving from Sudan.<sup>14</sup>

For the effective realisation of accountability to affected populations in South Sudan, a systematic approach to gathering, analysing, and responding to the varied perceptions of diverse groups is required. This research report represents a collaborative effort between REACH, Internews, and the CCEWG to examine the experiences of affected communities. Its purpose is to assess the alignment of current humanitarian efforts with AAP principles and commitments in South Sudan, aiming to inform and promote community-centred response planning.

The report builds on prior AAP-focused analyses by the REACH Initiative from 2023 and 2022, using data from the 2023 Intersectoral Needs Assessment (ISNA).<sup>15,16</sup> It introduces an additional perspective on the application of AAP standards within the context of the Sudan crisis response, using insights and data compiled by Internews in Renk and Malakal.<sup>17,18</sup> This approach considers the response to the Sudan crisis as a pivotal case study, examining the challenges and potential for implementing AAP standards amid the urgent logistical and operational exigencies of this acute emergency, set within the larger crisis landscape of South Sudan.

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<sup>11</sup> [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(2024\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> IASC. [A participation revolution: include people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives | IASC \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> [Communication and Community Engagement Working Group](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Information Crisis Response in Sudan and South Sudan - Information Saves Lives | Internews](#)

<sup>15</sup> REACH South Sudan (2023). [Community Perceptions of Humanitarian Assistance in South Sudan](#).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> WFP, Internews and CEN (December 2023). [Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Renk, South Sudan](#). Information Ecosystem Assessment.

<sup>18</sup> WFP, Internews and CEN (January 2024). [Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Malakal, South Sudan](#). Information Ecosystem Assessment.

## METHODOLOGY

Three sources of primary data were used for the analysis in this report, supplemented by relevant secondary sources, which are referenced in the footnotes.

### The Intersectoral Needs Assessment (2023)

The ISNA (2023) followed a mixed methods approach.<sup>19</sup> Its quantitative component comprised a structured household survey conducted in 78 counties in all 10 states, including Abyei Administrative Area, six high-priority urban areas, and current and former Protection of Civilian (POC) sites. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs), individual interviews (IIs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) in eight locations. Both components of the ISNA covered three population groups: host communities/non-displaced communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and returnees.<sup>20</sup>

The ISNA household survey had a final sample size of 17,305 households, with findings representative at a 95 percent confidence interval and 10 percent margin of error at the county level for the overall population. Findings disaggregated by population group were representative at state level at a 95 percent confidence interval and 10 percent margin of error. Findings related to subsets of the total samples are not generalisable with a known level of precision and should be considered indicative only. Where indicated, the findings relate to a subset of respondents who had received assistance in the three months prior to data collection.

The qualitative component of the ISNA used purposive sampling to identify participants from the population groups of interest, ensuring diversity in age, gender, and socio-economic status. Gender parity was closely achieved in the selection of participants. The representation of vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, older persons and youth, was also prioritised. Eight counties (Akobo, Awerial, Bor, Juba, Panyijar, Rubkona, Wau and Yambio) were selected for data collection based on high intersectoral needs, presence of target population groups and access, with a total of 111 interviews (58 FGDs, 24 IIs and 29 KIIs) conducted. Analysis was undertaken using a data saturation analysis grid.

Given the qualitative methodology used and the fact that data collection was limited to eight locations, the findings are indicative but provide insights into broad patterns and themes that are likely to be relevant across the country.

For both components, bilateral consultations with clusters, key working groups, and partners were conducted in the research design phase to identify information needs for the development of data collection tools. Data collection for household surveys took place between June and September 2023, while qualitative interviews were conducted between June and July 2023.

This assessment integrated protection principles throughout the research cycle, including the observation of do-no-harm, confidentiality and anonymity, and informed consent during data collection.

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<sup>19</sup> The ISNA (2023) was an inter-agency multi-sectoral needs assessment mandated by OCHA in-country and endorsed by the Inter Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG), which directly informed the Humanitarian Needs and Humanitarian Response Plan for South Sudan for 2024. It was conducted in 2023 by IOM, leading on the quantitative multisectoral household-level survey, and REACH, leading on the qualitative component, which focused specifically on AAP.

<sup>20</sup> The definitions of population groups used in the ISNA are as follows: Host Community/Non-displaced: For this survey, the host community are considered South Sudanese people that have never been displaced from their habitual residence since the start of the conflict in December 2013; Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): Persons who have been forced to leave their homes or places of habitual residence because of or to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised state border. There is no time limit on being an IDP, as the status ends when the person is able and willing to return to their original home or makes a free choice to settle in a new location. For this study, persons displaced since the start of the conflict in December 2013 are considered in this category; Returnees: Persons who have been displaced from their habitual residence either within South Sudan or abroad, who have since returned to their habitual residence. In this survey, this category is restricted to individuals who returned to the exact location of their habitual residence, or an adjacent area based on a free decision since 2014. South Sudanese displaced persons crossing the border into South Sudan from neighbouring countries without reaching their homes are still considered displaced.

## Complaints and feedback data from Renk and Malakal

Complaints, feedback, requests, concerns, and appeals gathered via the two-way information platform established by Internews, CEN, WFP and IOM from October 2023 to March 2024 were analysed to inform this report. The analysis encompassed 1,069 data points from Malakal, covering the PoC site, Malakal Town, and the Transit Centres, and 1,865 from Renk, specifically focusing on the Renk Transit Centre. It is important to note that these data points do not represent the full spectrum of perceptions, priorities, and concerns of the refugee and returnee populations in these areas, as they may reflect the accessibility of specific profiles at and the exclusion of others.

## Internews Information Ecosystem Assessments in Renk and Malakal

Both assessments,<sup>21</sup> conducted by Internews, used a mixed methods approach. In Malakal, the combination of a community survey reaching 201 respondents, 10 FGDs with community members, as well as 9 KIIs with government and humanitarian representatives present in Malakal were conducted. All 201 survey participants were from South Sudan except one Sudanese respondent.

In Renk, a total of 253 survey participants were reached (124 men and 129 women). Five FGDs (one each with refugees, returnees, and youth, and two with women) were also conducted with a total of 97 participants. Additionally, 9 KIIs were completed with key stakeholders from the communities such as community, camp and youth leaders, along with team leaders from the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC).

Selection criteria included diversity of gender, age, location, and tribe. Data collection for both assessments took place between October and November 2023. Findings should be considered indicative but offer perspectives on trends in both locations.

For more detail on methodology, please refer to [Annex 1](#).

## Workshop validation

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the key themes and challenges relating to the realisation of AAP commitments in South Sudan, a workshop was convened in May 2024 involving key stakeholders, including national NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies and clusters. The workshop was co-hosted by REACH, Internews, the CCEWG and OCHA, and aimed to facilitate in-depth discussions on stakeholder experiences and collaboratively develop strategic recommendations.

Insights gained from discussions around the findings been integrated into this report, ensuring that the findings reflect the perspectives of humanitarian actors alongside the experiences of affected communities. Strategic recommendations were also drafted with the aim to improve accountability and effectiveness in addressing the needs of affected populations.

At the time of publication of this report, the drafted recommendations are currently undergoing review by stakeholders across the humanitarian response in South Sudan. Following this review, the recommendations will be reviewed and endorsed by the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) before being submitted to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) for adoption and operationalisation. The finalised recommendations will be published once this process has been completed.

A detailed overview of the workshop is provided in [Annex 2](#).

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<sup>21</sup> WFP, Internews and CEN (January 2024). Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Malakal, South Sudan. Information Ecosystem Assessment. <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Internews-Malakal-IEA-Final-Report.pdf>; WFP, Internews and CEN (December 2023). Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Renk, South Sudan. Information Ecosystem Assessment. <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/RENK-Information-Eco-System-Assessment-2024.pdf>

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Findings present a complex and multifaceted humanitarian crisis in South Sudan, highlighted in acute emergencies like the response to the Sudan crisis involving extremely vulnerable transient populations. The research indicates substantial barriers to an accountable and responsive humanitarian response, while also highlighting opportunities for addressing and bridging these gaps.

### Key takeaways

Findings indicate that affected populations in South Sudan have experienced a deterioration in their needs, particularly relating to access to food, which is attributed to reduced aid and services, displacement, and increased population densities in areas with scarce resources, intensifying competition. These challenges are reflected in Renk and Malakal, affected by the Sudan crisis, where urgent survival needs of displaced individuals are compounded by broader humanitarian conditions in the country. These transient populations require targeted life-saving assistance and security to facilitate prompt and safe transitions to final destinations, highlighting both the cross-cutting and unique challenges faced by displaced individuals from Sudan and the wider population in South Sudan.

In South Sudan, **safety and security concerns reportedly restricted essential movements necessary for meeting basic needs.** This may force communities into adopting high-risk coping strategies, such as foraging wild food or reducing the number of meals, which not only expose them to further security risks but also **exacerbate their existing needs, perpetuating a cycle of escalating vulnerability.** Transient populations displaced from Sudan are, in particular, extremely vulnerable and may be compelled to undertake even greater risks to meet their needs, further intensifying their challenges in an already precarious security environment.

**Findings suggest significant and persistent gaps in communication and community feedback mechanisms with affected populations,** triangulated by the 2021 household survey finding that 60 percent of households experienced inadequate information about available services. Moderate use of complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) and an increased response rate to feedback from affected populations were reported, along with high levels of trust. However, challenges remain, including underutilisation and fear of repercussions for voicing concerns within communities. Additionally, the most reported barrier to using CFMs was the lack of direct communication channels with NGOs. In Malakal's transit context, despite established community structures, there was a reported lack of use of them due to limited awareness, accessibility and perceived discrimination. Positive examples emphasised the potential for integrated area-based, collective mechanisms to enhance community participation, build trust, and improve the responsiveness of aid efforts.

**Sensitive issues such as sexual exploitation, abuse, harassment (SEAH), and corruption within humanitarian operations may often be underreported, due to fears of retaliation or the potential loss of aid.** Such reluctance to report misconduct can lead to unresolved grievances and increase tensions within communities. These challenges are compounded by the reported inability of some communities to communicate directly with humanitarian agencies and a lack of awareness and accessibility of CFMs. There is a reported **reliance on traditional, community-based hierarchical structures,** including community leaders, for information access, community engagement and use of CFMs. However, this is reportedly compromised by **experiences of nepotism, corruption, and exclusion, leading to low trust and reduced community participation in humanitarian activities.** The erosion of trust of community leaders, usually the key intermediaries between communities and humanitarian actors, can lead to the exclusion of the most vulnerable, deepening inequalities and misdirecting aid intended for those in need. These barriers are compounded by reported lack of awareness, accessibility, and availability of mechanisms for community engagement and feedback, which is consistently highlighted across findings. Such challenges may be particularly acute in areas like Renk and Malakal, where extremely vulnerable populations across all communities may face risks of exploitation and exclusion.

Regarding the responsiveness of humanitarian assistance to the needs of affected communities, a **significant portion (63 percent) of households surveyed reported being in need but unable to access assistance** (in the three months prior to data collection, i.e. March to May 2023). Qualitative findings highlight issues with the adequacy of aid. In two-thirds of qualitative interviews, participants felt that the **aid received did not meet their needs, with others questioning the relevance and fairness of the humanitarian aid**. In Malakal and Renk, similar patterns are reflected in the concerns raised by communities there, emphasising the widespread nature of these challenges across different settings.

Findings indicate that **challenges in accessing assistance, communication, and community engagement mechanisms are particularly pronounced in rural and remote areas, attributed to inadequate infrastructure and a limited presence of humanitarian agencies compared to urban areas**. Additionally, poor telecommunications and limited access to digital devices like phones and radios exacerbate these issues in a country with one of the lowest levels of communication infrastructure. These barriers restricted inclusive participation in humanitarian programs and the responsiveness of assistance to meet needs adequately in rural areas. The challenges were also reported to be acute in specific areas Renk and Malakal transit centres, reflective of the broader national context. **These accountability gaps, in rural and transit areas, highlight the significant role development and humanitarian actors, such as the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster (ETC), may have in bridging broader infrastructural and socio-economic gaps in South Sudan and support equitable access to aid and effective communication across diverse settings**.

Across qualitative interviews, **people with disabilities, women, children, and older persons were consistently identified as the most vulnerable, with their pre-existing challenges intensifying their needs**. Women face significant safety risks and are often marginalised by structural issues in male-dominated societies<sup>22</sup>. People with disabilities have unique challenges related to mobility and social exclusion. These issues, related to gender and social exclusion, were reportedly also prevalent in areas like Renk and Malakal, where calls for better representation in community structures highlight the desire to participate more actively in humanitarian decision-making.

**The erosion of traditional information sources, such as dialogue with traditional community actors, and gaps in community engagement during acute crises, highlight the need for reliable and accessible humanitarian communication and community engagement systems**. Findings emphasise a preference for direct, face-to-face communication with aid agencies as the most effective and transparent method. The absence of such direct communication can significantly erode trust. **To improve engagement, aid agencies should maintain transparent and consistent interaction and establish community engagement and feedback mechanisms tailored to vulnerable groups**. Inclusive mechanisms are essential to bridge socio-economic and infrastructural gaps effectively, ensuring that all community members can access and benefit from aid and support services. This approach mitigates the exclusion of vulnerable groups from participation, which could lead to their needs being misunderstood and serious issues like SEAH and corruption being underreported.

These findings emphasise the **importance of Communication, Community Engagement, and Accountability (CCEA) as both a critical form of aid and essential infrastructure in effectively addressing needs and ensuring responsive aid to prevent exacerbation of vulnerabilities**, particularly in remote areas and among vulnerable groups.

**Substantial conflict sensitivity concerns were also reported by key informants. The provision or absence of humanitarian assistance can have a profound impact on social dynamics within communities**. A majority of key informants reported that insufficient aid often leads to theft and heightened community tensions. Moreover, experiences of nepotism and exclusion in aid and underreporting of these issues may risk escalation of tensions within communities. Contexts such as the Malakal transit centre are particularly vulnerable to misinformation and rumours fuelling tensions within a

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<sup>22</sup> [Gender equality in South Sudan: What we know in 2022](#)



precarious security environment. Conversely, there are opportunities to maximise positive outcomes: several key informants observed that when aid is perceived as fairly distributed, it not only reduces the impetus for theft but also helps alleviate inter-community tensions, with the potential to promote a harmonious coexistence.

During the multistakeholder AAP workshop held in May 2024, there was general concurrence among participants with the research findings. Their perspectives and feedback have been integrated into the respective sections of this report, ensuring it accurately reflects the viewpoints of the stakeholders involved. Further details of the workshop and key discussion points are provided in **Annex 2**.

## FINDINGS<sup>23</sup>

### 1. Humanitarian needs and access to assistance

In 2023, affected communities in South Sudan continued to face significant humanitarian challenges as highlighted by the ISNA household survey and qualitative interviews (FGDs and IIs)<sup>24</sup> held with host communities, IDPs and returnees. **Access to food emerged as the primary challenge for 77 percent of households, a finding reinforced in qualitative interviews where food security and livelihoods was most cited as the key challenge faced by communities, with widespread reports of insufficient access to food.** These align with the IPC findings for the period July to September 2023 (applicable at the time of data collection) which reported that approximately 5.83 million people (46 percent of the population) experienced high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC phase 3 and above).<sup>25</sup>

Following food, the need for shelter and healthcare as primary challenges of affected populations was highlighted by 56 percent and 53 percent of households, respectively. These survey findings were supported by qualitative interviews that identified health, WASH, shelter, non-food items (NFIs), education, and protection as other significant concerns. The 2024 South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan further reflects these challenges within a multifaceted crisis context of converging conflict, climate, economic, and displacement shocks with limited access to basic social services.<sup>26</sup>

In over a third of qualitative interviews, **communities associated their primary challenges with limited humanitarian aid and services across all sectors (excluding protection) and particularly regarding food assistance.** This is likely reflective of reductions in humanitarian funding and the increasing need for prioritisation in the response as a result.<sup>27</sup> Challenges such as costs, distance, and inadequate supplies or services reportedly hindered access to essential health and education services. Respondents in half of qualitative interviews reported the absence of nearby health facilities and severe shortages in medical supplies, including drugs and specialist services, such as antenatal care.

*“About four people (...) were sent to (...) town for medications but were told to proceed to Juba for medication and yet [sic] no money to facilitate their travels, so they all came back (...) and died here.” – Male host community respondent, Panyijar*

Poor infrastructure was also reported as a significant barrier to WASH facilities, education services, and shelter, as noted in several interviews. Additionally, the lack of roads or damaged, inaccessible roads, particularly in rural areas, was highlighted as a factor compounding humanitarian needs.

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<sup>23</sup> Unless specified otherwise, qualitative interviews referenced throughout the findings of this report are from the 2023 Intersectoral Needs Assessment (ISNA).

<sup>24</sup> Note that when referencing qualitative interviews from the ISNA, they refer to 58 focus group discussions and 24 individual interviews. Findings from the 29 key informant interviews are explicitly noted.

<sup>25</sup> [IPC South Sudan Acute Food Insecurity Malnutrition Sept2023July2024 Snapshot.pdf \(ipcinfo.org\)](#)

<sup>26</sup> [South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024](#) (issued November 2023)

<sup>27</sup> [South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024](#) (issued November 2023); [Humanitarian agencies in South Sudan forced to reduce aid amidst a funding crisis and aggravated humanitarian situation - South Sudan | ReliefWeb](#) (September, 2023)

Ongoing conflict and violence in South Sudan, deteriorating humanitarian conditions in neighbouring countries, compounded by vulnerability to climate shocks, further exacerbated existing challenges. Population movements due to ongoing conflicts, flooding and drought, and the effects of conflicts in Sudan and Ethiopia were reported as major drivers of increased needs. **Displacement and return movements reportedly led to increased population densities (in a fourth of qualitative interviews), intensifying competition over already scarce food resources.**

*"The food [sic] got from the (...) general distribution is not enough to sustain the population at home as some of the members who are not on the ration card have returned from Ethiopia (...) and also some returned from Sudan (...) thus making food not to be enough for the given population of the household." – Male host community respondent, Akobo*

### **Interplay of safety and security concerns and coping strategies in exacerbating humanitarian needs**

Sub-national and intercommunal violence and crimes have resulted in widespread displacement and restricted access to vital services in South Sudan.<sup>28</sup> Findings indicate that protection challenges heavily influenced daily life, with widespread reports of threats by criminals and armed groups, and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The fear of attacks reportedly restricted peoples' movements, limiting their access to food and essential services, as mentioned in over half of qualitative interviews conducted. **Due to security threats, communities in some areas were reportedly forced to limit movements to areas for cultivation and foraging of wild foods, markets, and workspaces, directly impacting food security and overall well-being.**

*"Robbers prevent people from accessing farm activities. (...) they are afraid to go to their farms because those robbers make road ambushes [sic] to rob women and rape them." - Female host community respondent, Yambio*

In several qualitative interviews, respondents reported that employing coping mechanisms was depleting their limited resources, such as through increased reliance on solidarity networks for limited resources or reducing the number of meals per day, while they continued to suffer from insufficient food. Moreover, findings indicate that in some cases, **communities resorted to extreme coping strategies which in turn exposed them to additional risks, exacerbating their needs.** These included consuming contaminated water using more distant and less safe water sources, leading to health issues like cholera and other waterborne diseases, as well as encountering increased security risks, including possible death, when pursuing alternative livelihoods or escorting vulnerable groups to insecure areas.

*"(...) The general effect is that people may lose their lives in the process of coping with the [sic] challenges such as attacks by the rivals within the clans and (...) armed youths especially during wild fruits and roots collection and during the escorting of children as well as carrying the sick to the nearby payams." - Male host community respondent, Akobo*

In some interviews, respondents shared cases of community members resorting to suicide due to overwhelming economic hardship and psychological strain, underscoring the severe consequences of unmet needs.

Respondents identified the **most vulnerable groups as people with disabilities, women, children, and older persons, highlighting how pre-existing vulnerabilities exacerbate their challenges.** Women, especially heads of households and pregnant women, reportedly faced heightened risks, due to safety concerns which reportedly impacted their mobility and ability to meet basic needs.

*"(...) women and girls, the most. Because the criminal attacker fear [sic] to attack men, they know will fight them back or even harm them, but for women and girls is [sic] easy for them to attack—" - Female returnee respondent, Panyijar*

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<sup>28</sup> [South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024](#) (issued November 2023)

## Response to the Sudan Crisis

The Renk and Malakal Transit Centres, central to the Sudan Crisis response, illustrate the convergence of broader humanitarian challenges in South Sudan with the specific adversities of transition experienced by returnees and refugees displaced from Sudan. These individuals, having endured conflict and arduous journeys to flee Sudan, often arrive in dire conditions, malnourished and in poor health, requiring immediate life-saving aid including food, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), vulnerability and health screening, shelter, vaccinations for children and psychosocial support. Their vulnerabilities are further compounded by high arrival rates, inadequate transportation infrastructure, and the overstretched resources of communities in border areas.<sup>29</sup>

Analysis of feedback, complaints and requests from the Renk Transit Centre through its two-way communication platform indicates pressing needs for onward transportation assistance in Renk and secure relocation, alongside WASH, protection and cash assistance for food. At the Malakal Transit Centre, PoC site and Malakal Town, the predominance of concerns around water, food, protection, and NFI suggests potential differences in circumstances and environments influencing priorities.

**These findings underscore the urgency of prompt and safe travel to final destinations, alongside the necessity of basic services and security**, reflecting both shared and distinct challenges between returnees and refugees from Sudan and affected population groups more broadly in South Sudan.

**Protection issues were reported as a critical concern in both transit centres.** In Malakal, ongoing cycles of violence have led to recurrent displacement and congestion in the Protection of Civilians (PoC) site. The prevalence of criminal activities, particularly those reportedly perpetrated by youth gangs, was reported to intensify the atmosphere of insecurity in the Malakal PoC and Town. In the Renk Transit Centre, the incidence of sexual violence affecting women and girls was reported multiple times.

*“Since we left the PoC site for this camp, we have witnessed youth gangs fighting each night in the camp. We request humanitarian agencies liaise with government and deploy police to do night patrols in the camp–” - Female, 33 years, Malakal Town, December 2023*

**To meet basic needs, some refugees and returnees reported having to resort to coping mechanisms that put them at further risk**, similar to broader crisis patterns in South Sudan. These included venturing into dangerous areas to gather firewood or engage in charcoal production for income, and reports of children participating in labour.

*“A refugee says her daughter was raped while in the forest collecting firewood that they would sell and get money to buy food. She no longer sends the daughter to collect firewood and now they are suffering with no way of getting food–” - Female, 38 years, Renk Transit Centre, December 2023*

Consistent with broader findings at the South Sudan level, **feedback from the centres highlighted the specific needs and vulnerability of women, girls, children, people with disabilities, older persons and persons suffering from illnesses, in both centres.** These populations typically remain the most vulnerable whether during acute emergencies or the protracted crisis in South Sudan as a whole.

## 2. Responsiveness of humanitarian assistance

**Accountability to Affected Populations requires that communities and people affected by crisis receive assistance that is appropriate and relevant to their needs**, as outlined in Sphere Core

<sup>29</sup> South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2024 (issued November 2023)

Humanitarian Standard One.<sup>30</sup> This principle highlights the importance of responsive aid to effectively address needs and save lives, promote dignity and ensure the overall impact of humanitarian interventions.

Understanding community perceptions of the responsiveness of humanitarian assistance is critical for assessing the effectiveness and impact of aid interventions. This section explores how affected populations view the adequacy, relevance, and appropriateness of the humanitarian assistance they receive.

### Affected communities' perceptions of the responsiveness of humanitarian assistance

In two-thirds of qualitative interviews, respondents conveyed that the **humanitarian aid they received did not adequately respond to their needs**. This perception was more prevalent in interviews conducted in rural areas.

#### Common grievances centred on the insufficient levels of assistance, with respondents in many interviews noting it fell short of meeting the community's needs, again, particularly in rural areas.

Some interviewees attributed these low levels of assistance to funding constraints or a deficit in humanitarian presence, suggesting an awareness of the financial and operational challenges that humanitarian actors face. Delays in receipt of assistance, sometimes of months, were also noted in several interviews.

#### Respondents in some interviews questioned the relevance of the aid provided as they felt it did not align with the actual needs of communities.

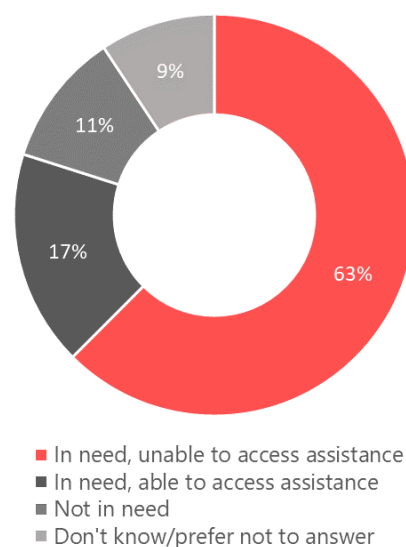
*"[Organisation] drilled some boreholes, but it was drilling on the surface. This means the water is salty and hard. Can [sic] not be used for domestic purposes as such this assistance didn't meet the needs of the people."*  
– Female host community member, Juba

In addition, **concerns about the fairness and equity of beneficiary selection and aid distribution were raised**, with several reports of alleged nepotism and discrimination. In one case, the insufficiency of assistance was reported as a result of nepotism by community leaders.

*"There's interest [sic] when identifying beneficiary, only those close to the chiefs are considered while leave [sic] out those who are not close to the chiefs. The assistance is not directly to the people by humanitarian worker, the NGO worker first meet with community leader, chiefs and local authority explained [sic] the type of assistance ....and to whom. They will be asked to go and registered [sic] the names of people who will be assist [sic] and then they registered only their relatives. That's the reason it's not enough."* – Female host community member, Panyijar

Access to aid is a fundamental aspect of its responsiveness. For humanitarian assistance to be truly effective, it must reach the people it aims to help. The ISNA household survey highlights this issue, **with a majority (63 percent) of respondents indicating they were in need but unable to access assistance in the three months prior to the survey** (March to May 2023), a trend observed across various demographic groups. This figure is consistent with the 2022 ISNA findings (June to August 2022), where 60 percent of households reported facing barriers despite needing aid, indicating systemic issues limiting access to humanitarian assistance.

Figure 1: Proportion of HHs reportedly in need and able to access humanitarian services in the three months prior to data collection [2023 ISNA]



<sup>30</sup> [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(2024\)](#)

## Response to the Sudan Crisis

The rapid response required at the Renk and Malakal Transit Centres, where refugees and returnees briefly stay before being relocated, introduces considerable challenges in rapid and effective responses to their needs. The need for scalable solutions and adequate resource allocation is compounded by the difficulty of conducting timely needs assessments in a fast-evolving environment.

While specific data on affected communities' perceptions of aid responsiveness was not collected for this report, the Internews-CEN platform provides a snapshot of community perceptions. **Over three-fourths of communications from Renk Transit Centre consisted of complaints and concerns that indicate challenges faced related to humanitarian assistance relevancy and adequacy to existing needs. In Malakal PoC and Town, a similar pattern is observed, albeit to a lesser extent.**

**Registration and logistical issues were observed as barriers impeding the provision of and access to humanitarian assistance.** In Renk Transit Centre, the distance between registration and distribution sites and living quarters was reported to disproportionately affect those with mobility issues, such as older persons and people with disabilities. Similarly, in Malakal PoC and Town, feedback suggests that congestion at distribution and registration points, delays in registration and limited accessibility hindered essential humanitarian support.

*"A returnee is concerned of the distance between registration and cash distribution site and residential places and is asking WFP to bring services closer especially elderly people who cannot walk long distances." - Male, 32 years, Renk Transit Centre, January 2024*

**Feedback also emphasised the need for specialist services for returnees and refugees who had endured significant trauma while being displaced from Sudan.** Psychological distress among some returnees and refugees reported in Renk, and the presence of SGBV survivors in Malakal Town, highlighted the urgent need for specialist care which is necessary for long-term recovery.

*"Many women and girls are victims of rape in Sudan. We request GBV cluster to raise awareness on post [sic] rape and offer psychosocial support to the victims." - Female, 39 years, Malakal Town Transit Centre, January 2024*

Despite these challenges, expressions of gratitude from both centres, though less common in Renk, reflect appreciation for the aid received under challenging conditions. **These acknowledgements highlight the crucial assistance that has been provided for survival, alongside a desire for sustained assistance.**

*"A refugee at Joda appreciates WFP for the provision of biscuits and says if they were not supplied with biscuits, he would not know how they would have survived with nothing to eat." - Male, 43 years, Renk Transit Centre, January 2024*

**These findings indicate appreciation of the aid provided alongside a clear call from communities for the continuity and enhancement of services.**

## Key outcomes from the May 2024 workshop

During the May 2024 workshop on this report's findings, participants discussed critical aspects to improve the responsiveness of humanitarian assistance from their perspectives. A primary focus was on effectively capturing the needs and feedback of affected communities across multiple sectors to facilitate an integrated approach to addressing humanitarian needs. It was noted by some that most assessments predominantly discussed priority needs, such as food, which did not provide relevant information for the response planning of other sectors. The use of intersectoral AAP indicators across assessment tools was suggested to address this issue. Additionally, the importance of dedicated efforts to collect data from marginalised groups was raised, to ensure their specific needs were understood.

A need for overall improvement of needs analysis processes was highlighted for systematically capturing the diverse needs of affected communities. Harmonising AAP analysis processes and streamlining various data collection methods were recommended for a comprehensive understanding of needs.

The necessity of better information-sharing between clusters and agencies regarding needs and other aspects of response planning was also discussed to enhance the efficacy of responses through mutual learning and adaptation, emphasising the need for strengthened partnerships.

Participants also addressed the heavy reliance of South Sudanese communities on aid, especially in the context of reduced funding. They stressed the need for clear entry and exit strategies to manage aid distribution effectively. Moreover, the discussion emphasised the significance of engaging with development partners to ensure sustainable support and development beyond immediate humanitarian needs.

**Community engagement is a cornerstone of responsive and effective humanitarian action**, ensuring that aid aligns closely with the real needs and priorities of those affected by crises. By fostering continuous interaction between organisations and communities, humanitarian efforts can better identify needs, build trust with communities, enhance their participation, and adapt programs to be more responsive, inclusive, and effective.

Accordingly, **Communication, Community Engagement, and Accountability (CCEA) is critical to empowerment of affected communities to participate in crucial decisions affecting their safety and well-being. CCEA, therefore, serves as a form of aid in itself.**

The following sections focus on community perceptions of the key components of effective community engagement to assess how well current efforts align with established standards.

### 3. Access to information about humanitarian assistance

**Accountability to Affected Populations emphasises the right of people and communities in crisis to have access to timely and relevant information, community participation in decisions, and transparent communication.** It corresponds closely to the Sphere Core Humanitarian Standard Four on the need for communities to be aware of their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them.<sup>31</sup> The IASC's AAP commitment on Transparency which highlights that clear, accessible information is vital for enabling meaningful engagement with humanitarian organisations and supports informed decision-making.<sup>32</sup>

Effective communication connects people with each other and with service providers, which is particularly crucial in contexts like South Sudan where physical access might be restricted. Conversely, ineffective communication channels can lead to the spread of rumours and misinformation, exacerbating suffering, heightening expectations, and inflaming tensions between communities.

This section examines communities' experiences in accessing information about humanitarian services in South Sudan and their preferences for communication channels.

#### **Affected communities' experiences in accessing information about humanitarian assistance**

According to qualitative interviews, access to information about humanitarian aid varied across population groups, with easy access reported in over half of interviews overall. However, higher proportions of both returnees and rural respondents reported increased challenges related to access to information, compared to other population groups. These findings are corroborated by qualitative interviews conducted in 2022,

<sup>31</sup> [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(2024\)](#)

<sup>32</sup> [IASC Revised AAP Commitments endorsed November 2017.pdf \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

where respondents emphasised the unequal access to information. Furthermore, the 2021 Food Security Nutrition Monitoring Systems Plus (FSNMS+) household survey supports these observations, revealing that 60 percent of households felt they were not adequately informed about humanitarian services, suggesting a significant and likely persistent information gap.<sup>33</sup>

Findings indicate a **divide in accessibility to information between rural and urban communities due to infrastructural barriers, distance, and inadequate communication tools, like phones and radios, in rural areas**. Communities in urban areas reportedly had easier access to information due to better infrastructure, closer proximity to humanitarian agencies, which are typically based in urban areas, and access to more means of communication.

*"People in the remote rural areas are not able to access humanitarian information easily, majority of populations have no phones for communication, no television to watch news and are not connected to media."  
– Male IDP member, Bor*

In the 2022 ISNA findings, it was reported that information often passed through multiple layers before eventually reaching community members. This issue was reinforced by some FGDs in 2023 as well.

*"Most local authorities perform their duties in the urban areas, and if the information is passed to them, they may take a day or so to deliver it either to the community members in the rural areas or to the humanitarian aid workers residing in the urban areas due to the distance." - FGD respondent, Akobo*

Additional barriers to information highlighted by respondents from the ISNA 2023 qualitative study included unreliable mobile networks and inadequate roads, often exacerbated by flooding, that further hindered access in remote areas. Individuals with disabilities or older persons reportedly faced additional barriers due to mobility and hearing impairments, potentially requiring information well in advance to arrange access to aid distribution points.

An information ecosystem assessment focusing on people with disabilities, conducted by Internews in 2023, sheds light on how **individuals with disabilities face additional, unique barriers to accessing information**. Many people with disabilities in South Sudan reportedly struggle with language barriers, as they may not understand English, which is predominantly used in media broadcasts. Findings also indicate a critical lack of accessible communication methods such as closed captioning or sign language interpretation, essential for those with visual or hearing disabilities to access vital (health) information. This lack of accessibility has a critical impact on their ability to receive appropriate (healthcare) services and participate fully in humanitarian processes.<sup>34,35</sup>

## The telecommunications context in South Sudan

These findings are further illuminated by the broader telecommunications landscape in the country. **South Sudan has one of the lowest rates of mobile access and connectivity in the world, with conflict significantly impacting mobile network operators and causing major infrastructure losses.**<sup>36</sup> High displacement causes populations to move from areas of connectivity to those without any infrastructure. The overall internet penetration stood at a critically low 8 percent (as of 2023) with rural areas particularly affected. Mobile coverage is uneven and concentrated in urban areas, leaving vast rural regions with limited to no connectivity. This severe restriction on information access and communication highlights a digital divide that underscores broader socio-economic development issues, emphasising the urgent need for

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<sup>33</sup> REACH South Sudan (2023). Community Perceptions of Humanitarian Assistance in South Sudan. [REACH-South-Sudan-Community-Perceptions-Key-Findings-February-2023.pdf \(impact-initiatives.org\)](#)

<sup>34</sup> Ndavula, J., Gbinzaramba, E., Dau, A. D., Gubay, M., Tusiime, W. T., Beremauro, R., Murumba, S. (2023). The Forgotten: An Information Ecosystem Assessment for People with Disabilities in South Sudan. Internews. [Ndavula The-Forgotten-PWDs.pdf \(mut.ac.ke\)](#)

<sup>35</sup> While the Internews assessment findings specifically address the health-related information needs of people with disabilities, these insights are broadly applicable to the wider challenges faced by this group in accessing humanitarian information.

<sup>36</sup> [GSMA | South Sudan - The challenges and opportunities of mobile for displacement-affected communities | Mobile for Development \(March 2023\)](#)

improved telecommunications infrastructure to enhance access to information, facilitate better crisis response, and promote inclusive participation in the country's development.<sup>37</sup>

### **Affected communities' preferred channels for information dissemination**

Respondents in FGDs expressed a **preference for receiving information about humanitarian assistance through local leaders** (as reported in over three-fourths of interviews) **or directly from humanitarian partners** (mentioned in half of interviews). This finding was further concurred by key informants, predominantly community leaders or area administrators. Both key informants and participants from FGDs indicate a current reliance on traditional, hierarchical communication methods, where information flows from higher administrative levels down to the local populace through community leaders. The preference for face-to-face communication is likely attributed to its ability to facilitate two-way interaction and community participation, thereby enabling communities to be more engaged and informed.

*"The best way to get information is through the community leaders such as through Boma leaders to the village leaders to the RRC and then up to the higher ranks such as the commissioner." – Male IDP member, Akobo*

Other favoured information dissemination channels reported included megaphones, radios, community mobilisers, and phones. Despite frequent connectivity challenges reported in rural areas, megaphones, radios, and phones were the most reported preferences for communication channels, likely due to their effectiveness over large distances and in regions with unreliable infrastructure. This suggests that when operational, these channels successfully deliver information in formats that meet local needs and preferences.

The choice of channels for **receiving information was reportedly largely influenced by factors such as ease of use, reliability, and coverage. Community leaders were reportedly favoured due to their integral role in bridging communication gaps between local communities and aid providers**, across the different data collection approaches (FGDs, KIIs and 2023 HHs survey)

*"The leaders live in the community hence making [sic] easy for them to communicate the information faster. Also, community [sic] task leaders to keep informing the community about any services or help available to them." – Male returnee member, Bor*

However, respondents in several FGDs had **experienced biases by local authorities related to information sharing, particularly against people with disabilities and women, that had affected trust levels. In some cases, humanitarian actors were noted as the only reliable sources of information.**

*"We don't trust the others mean we trust only direct communication with the NGO." – Male IDP member, Rubkona*

Similar findings emerged from a December 2023 REACH assessment conducted in Bentiu and Rubkona towns, and the Rotriak and Bentiu IDP camps, areas with a significant returnee population from Sudan. Outside of the Bentiu IDP camp, both host community and returnee groups noted a lack of direct communication with aid agencies, with information reported to be typically relayed through community leaders. This multilayered communication process usually starts with humanitarian partners contacting local authorities, who then inform community leaders about the available assistance and how to access it. While host communities interviewed regarded this process as fair and effective, most returnee groups criticised it, voicing concerns about potential exclusion from assistance due to the indirect communication method.<sup>38</sup>

Internews' findings (2023) on the information ecosystem for people with disabilities indicate a high trust in radio and TV among people with disabilities as they were perceived to have reliable verification processes

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<sup>37</sup> [South Sudan - Telecoms, Mobile and Broadband - Statistics \(globenewswire.com\)](#) (March 2022)

<sup>38</sup> REACH South Sudan (December 2023). Sudan-South Sudan cross-border assessment: Integration and social cohesion in areas of return. [REACH SSD Brief Rubkona-Integration-and-Social-Cohesion April24-3.pdf \(impact-initiatives.org\)](#)



and accessible features to aid information dissemination effectively, although the lack of sign language interpreters on TV was noted as a significant gap in reaching people with hearing disabilities.<sup>39</sup>

These findings indicate that **community leaders typically play a critical role fostering culturally appropriate engagement, while also highlighting the risk of exclusion of marginalised groups**, like women and people with disabilities, who often rely on second-hand information. **Expanding communication channels such as radios, phones, or direct interactions with humanitarian workers is essential to enhance access to information while also empowering communities directly and reducing reliance on community leaders, thereby promoting a more inclusive and diverse communication approach.**

### Response to the Sudan Crisis<sup>40,41,42</sup>

In the transit centres of Malakal and Renk, the dynamics of refugee and returnee movements create a complex backdrop for the delivery and receipt of humanitarian information. The Renk Transit Centre functions primarily as a transit point where refugees and returnees receive initial support and transportation to other locations, including Malakal, which serves both as a transit point and, for many, a final destination. This dual role enhances the complexity of the context in Malakal, emphasising the need for robust, dynamic communication strategies to manage the continuously evolving information needs of its transient and diverse populations.

**Information ecosystem assessments conducted by Internews in both centres shed light on the varied experiences and preferences of the communities, highlighting the critical need for informed, responsive communication practices that can keep pace with the evolving contexts on the ground.**

Radio was found to be the preferred channel for communication in Malakal, trusted and accessed regularly by 73 percent of respondents surveyed, underscoring its importance in a landscape where traditional social networks are often disrupted. **This erosion of traditional information sources makes the reliability and accessibility of formal humanitarian communication systems even more vital.**

*"Before receiving a radio, we used to sleep early and would not know what was happening locally and nationally. But after receiving the solar radios, we hear and listen to local and national news. We appreciate WFP for the radios." – Female, 41 years, Malakal Town, February 2023*

However, the temporary closure of Nile FM in Malakal, a primary source of local information, exposes the fragility of relying on a single information channel and reflects broader challenges in both transit centres, where the **infrastructure for digital communication, such as internet connectivity and the affordability of data alongside access to smart phones, remains inadequate, hindering digital access.**

**Respondents in Renk showed a strong preference for direct, face-to-face communication, particularly group meetings that allow for direct interaction and immediate clarification of queries.**

**In Malakal, communication through community leaders emerged as a strong third preference. In contrast, respondents in Renk largely preferred to receive information from aid workers directly.** This may reflect communities' inclination to receive updates via community leaders where established community structures exist, while these may not be as prominent in Renk. **However, the trust in this channel was not found to be uniform** in Malakal, with some respondents expressing reservations based on past experiences or

<sup>39</sup> Ndavula, J., Gbinzaramba, E., Dau, A. D., Gubay, M., Tusiime, W. T., Beremauro, R., Murumba, S. (2023). The Forgotten: An Information Ecosystem Assessment for People with Disabilities in South Sudan. Internews. [Ndavula The-Forgotten-PWDs.pdf \(mut.ac.ke\)](#)

<sup>40</sup> WFP, Internews and CEN (January 2024). Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Malakal, South Sudan. Information Ecosystem Assessment. <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Internews-Malakal-IEA-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> WFP, Internews and CEN (December 2023). Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Renk, South Sudan. Information Ecosystem Assessment. <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/RENK-Information-Eco-System-Assessment-2024.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> The quotes in this section are sourced from the feedback, complaints, requests, concerns, and appeals collected through the two-way information platform established by Internews and the Community Engagement Network (CEN) between October 2023 and March 2024.

perceived biases. A resident from Malakal illustrated the need for transparency and direct communication from aid organisations.

*"A refugee is saying some information needs updating or is not correct. That [sic] a meal was mentioned for refugees, but since arrival she has not received any. She is asking [agency] to verify information before airing out to avoid creating confusion among refugees and returnees." – Female, 37 years, Renk Transit Centre, December 2023*

**Language barriers reportedly further complicated communication efforts.** While Arabic is reportedly commonly used, this was not a universal finding and there were also preferences for information to be delivered in local languages such as Dinka, Nuer, Chollo, and even English, to ensure inclusivity and comprehensibility. This need is particularly acute among people with disabilities, who also face significant obstacles due to the lack of accessible communication methods like closed captioning or sign language interpretation.

Analysis across the broader South Sudan context and specific settings of the Renk and Malakal transit centres reveals important similarities and divergences. Throughout the country, infrastructural limitations significantly impact information access, a challenge also evident in these transit settings. While face-to-face communication is generally preferred for its ability to foster interactive community participation, this preference varies, with significant differences in trust levels and context-specific preferences for communication channels. **Especially in transit centres, the need for adaptable and expansive communication tools becomes crucial to address the unique challenges and dynamic needs of these settings. Furthermore, strategies must particularly focus on vulnerable individuals with mobility issues or those facing social exclusion, ensuring that communication is not only flexible but also inclusive,** to effectively bridging the socio-economic and infrastructural gaps that persist.

### Key outcomes from the May 2024 workshop

During the May 2024 workshop, participants discussed several key strategies for improving information dissemination and communication with affected communities.

Developing a robust model for information dissemination was emphasised, involving collaboration between the government, community leaders, and humanitarian coordination bodies. The development of collective key messages for communities, including different groups, was suggested by the workshop participants. A key concern was to ensure messaging helps communities understand the expected level of service delivery in their areas.

Additionally, the necessity of localised assessments of communication channels in areas of service delivery was highlighted to tailor communication strategies to the specific needs of each area and population groups, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of information dissemination.

## 4. Community participation in humanitarian decision-making

**Accountability to Affected Populations emphasises the rights of individuals and communities in crises to actively participate in actions and decisions that affect their lives.** This foundational aspect is enshrined in Sphere Core Humanitarian Standard Four and in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC)'s AAP commitment on Participation, which advocate for the meaningful engagement of diverse groups, including those marginalised by sex, age, or disability, to have a voice in decision-making processes.<sup>43,44</sup> **Effective participation enables humanitarian actors to accurately identify the needs and priorities of affected communities, thereby enhancing the responsiveness and efficacy of humanitarian aid.**

This section explores how affected communities perceive their ability to influence aid outcomes.

<sup>43</sup> [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(2024\)](#)

<sup>44</sup> [IASC Revised AAP Commitments endorsed November 2017.pdf \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

## Affected communities' experiences of engagement in humanitarian decision-making

In a quarter of all FGDs, respondents felt **humanitarians did not proactively seek their inputs to inform humanitarian assistance**. This perception was further supported by findings from nearly half of all interviews, where respondents felt that **while their concerns were acknowledged by humanitarian agencies, they were not acted upon**. Nevertheless, there were also instances of positive engagement shared in several interviews, where feedback reportedly led to tangible changes.

*"The humanitarian actors listen to our suggestions and recommendations. This year in May, we received positive news that the next food assistance will be in-kind assistance. We have been requesting this long ago, but this year our suggestions have been heard, and we are happy to receive in-kind food assistance." – Female IDP member, Awerial*

The most reported **deterrent to providing feedback was the lack of response to previous suggestions and inputs. The perceived lack of visible action can diminish community trust and engagement**. Physical and logistical barriers reportedly further complicate community engagement, especially in rural areas where distance and mobility issues prevail.

*"More people living in the villages are not able to give [sic] their challenges to RRC members because they are far as well so people within the community got tired of talking to [sic] RRC and the community chief because they are not responded [sic] back after receiving their complaint." – Female host community member, Wau*

Findings indicate that **persons with disabilities, older persons, women, and those in rural areas were less able to engage in discussions around assistance due to physical barriers and entrenched structural and cultural discrimination**, leading to their exclusion, further exacerbating their disenfranchisement. This exclusion is aggravated by the patriarchal nature of many South Sudanese communities, where men dominate decision-making across social, cultural, and political spheres, relegating women and girls primarily to domestic roles and childcare.<sup>45</sup>

*"Their (women's) views and suggestions are always ignored by the community leaders, although women representatives are in the leadership structure, this representation doesn't speak about the rights of women instead it is there as a dead wood [sic]..." – Female returnee KI, Bor*

**Distrust in community leaders to share their inputs with humanitarian actors was also reported as one of the main barriers to community participation**, especially by almost a quarter of host community members during FGDs.

*"Some of the people refuse to provide feedback as they think that the administrators don't pass the message to the humanitarian actors... and they remain with the complaint and then the response remains unattended to, and this is due to a lack of trust of the leaders by some of the people in the community." – Male IDP KI, Akobo*

These issues are mirrored in findings from a REACH assessment conducted in Rubkona county (December 2023), which indicated that affected populations often had to approach community leaders with feedback or complaints about assistance, rather than contacting humanitarian partners directly. Participants interviewed expressed concerns about the efficacy of this process, questioning whether their feedback truly reached the intended stakeholders, with a general preference for more direct communication channels. Additionally, many, particularly among the returnee population, noted the absence of direct links with humanitarian partners and criticised the inadequate monitoring and supervision of community leaders tasked with representing their needs and concerns.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> CSRF (January 2024). [Perceptions of gender and conflict sensitivity considerations in South Sudan - csrf-southsudan](#)

<sup>46</sup> REACH South Sudan (December 2023). Sudan-South Sudan cross-border assessment: Integration and social cohesion in areas of return. [REACH SSD Brief Rubkona-Integration-and-Social-Cohesion April24-3.pdf \(impact-initiatives.org\)](#)

## 5. Complaint and feedback mechanisms

**Complaints and feedback mechanisms (CFMs) are essential in humanitarian crises to uphold the principles of accountability and transparency.** Anchored in the Core Humanitarian Standards and the IASC's AAP commitments, these **mechanisms not only necessitate the proactive inclusion of community input in response planning but also require that such input is safely and effectively solicited.** Core Humanitarian Standards Five and Seven specifically mandate that affected communities can safely voice complaints and receive support that dynamically adapts based on their feedback.<sup>47</sup> Concurrently, the IASC commitment on CFMs emphasises the necessity of actively soliciting affected populations' assessment of the performance of aid and their feedback on sensitive topics such as sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH), fraud, corruption, racism and discrimination.<sup>48</sup> These standards and commitments collectively require that robust CFMs are in place to ensure humanitarian assistance is responsive to the needs of affected populations.

This section examines the effectiveness of CFMs in South Sudan using mixed-methods analysis of ISNA household survey and qualitative data. Findings reveal nuanced insights into the multifaceted nature of community interactions with CFMs and barriers to effective engagement.

### Affected communities' experiences of accessing complaint and feedback mechanisms

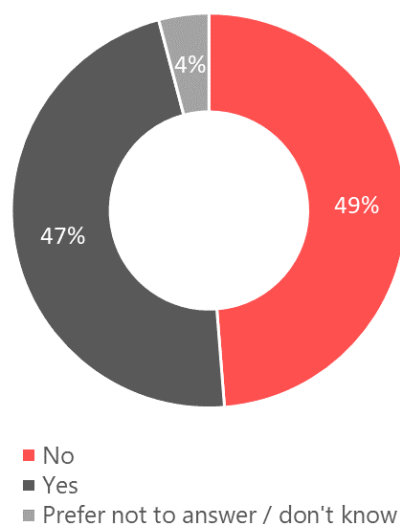
Nearly half of the households in South Sudan reported that they felt **able to provide feedback on humanitarian assistance**, reflecting a moderate level of engagement with CFMs (based on the 2023 household survey). However, an equally significant proportion felt **unable to do so, suggesting substantial barriers in accessing these mechanisms.** These findings are consistent with the 2022 ISNA household survey, which similarly found that approximately half of the households felt unable to provide feedback or make complaints, highlighting persistent challenges in complaints and feedback processes within humanitarian operations.<sup>49</sup>

Among those who did use CFMs, close to half had actively lodged complaints in the three months prior to the survey. Findings on the efficacy of these mechanisms are mixed. A majority of households (which had used the CFM) reported that organisations had closed the feedback loop and reverted back to them on actions being taken. However, around a third of these households said their complaints had not been effectively resolved, indicating potential challenges in managing feedback and translating them into operational changes, and the room for improvement.

The qualitative findings provide nuance around these dynamics, emphasising **accessibility and trust as key factors influencing individuals' decisions to provide feedback or lodge complaints.** The most reported channels were direct communications with local leaders and humanitarian agencies.

Around three fourths of households in the survey reported they **trusted the mechanisms to voice their concerns or complaints regarding aid.** Qualitative findings shed light on the possible reasons behind the

Figure 2: Proportion of households reporting feeling able to provide feedback and make complaints regarding humanitarian assistance [2023 ISNA]



<sup>47</sup> Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (2024)

<sup>48</sup> IASC Revised AAP Commitments endorsed November 2017.pdf (interagencystandingcommittee.org)

<sup>49</sup> REACH South Sudan (2023). Community Perceptions of Humanitarian Assistance in South Sudan. REACH-South-Sudan-Community-Perceptions-Key-Findings-February-2023.pdf (impact-initiatives.org)

fourth of households that said they didn't. **Local leaders were reportedly chosen due to their accessibility; however, trust was variably reported**, with some community members perceiving these leaders as trustworthy while others cited past experiences of bias and nepotism as reasons for scepticism, especially respondents from host communities.

**The reluctance to engage with CFMs due to fear of negative repercussions was mentioned in a minority of responses**, but is notable given the sensitivity of the topic.

*"Intimidation and threats from those that benefited to those that didn't benefit from any assistance. They will not allow you to make a negative comment against the NGO." – Male host community member, Juba*

**The most reported barrier to using CFMs was the lack of awareness of the mechanisms** (based on the 2023 and 2022 household surveys). Qualitative findings provide further insights, highlighting the **lack of ability to communicate directly with NGOs as the most commonly reported barrier, indicating a common preference for direct communication channels**, which may be attributed to the inefficacy or trust of other mechanisms. Another notable barrier reported was the **lack of awareness about how to engage with the current mechanisms**. This may be attributed to the general lack of an integrated approach for community engagement and CFM mechanisms across all operations in most crisis responses in South Sudan. A lack of physical access and technological limitations like inadequate phone coverage were reported to a lesser extent.

According to household surveys, the second most frequently reported barrier to using CFMs is the lack of physical access to the system, or not having a phone or adequate coverage. Qualitative interviews illustrate that these barriers, similar to those encountered in communities' access to information and participation in consultations around assistance, were reportedly more pronounced in rural settings and among vulnerable groups such as persons with disabilities, women, youth, and older persons. The lack of awareness and accessibility of a range of CFMs alongside limited direct access to NGOs, may risk the complete exclusion of these groups, preventing them from providing feedback on their specific needs.

*"Yes, youth and women are less able to provide complaints because of the leadership structure that exists. It is well known that men will provide any [sic] complaints to the leaders, even though each group has its own complaints to raise. Youth and women would love to raise their complaints directly to NGOs than to the local leaders, but the absence of a suggestion box or helpdesk is preventing them to raise or provide complaints, even if a person has a complaint, it is hard to raise it because reaching the NGO offices is not easy." – Male host community member, Bor*

**Pro-active contact from humanitarian agencies, including involvement of specific groups, was a common suggestion for increasing willingness to provide feedback**, including field visits and trainings, establishment of CFMs like suggestion boxes and help desks, as well as specific channels for vulnerable groups.

### **Challenges in reporting sensitive issues**

Interviews revealed a **hesitance among women to report SGBV due to shame, cultural taboos, and fear of societal repercussions, leading to the underreporting of such incidents**, including of sexual, exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) by aid workers.

*"Yes, in my observation most people don't like to reveal cases of GBV. For instance, cases of young girls [sic] being dated by working staff from NGOs, especially schoolgirls. People will not report such cases, even if it is known. Parents take it as a source of wealth, and nobody can speak about it because it will look like a shame to the family and the girl will later be insulted in the community or not get married." – Female host community member, Awerial*

**More male respondents raised concerns about reporting corruption due to the fear of retaliation from powerful figures in their communities**, typically those who would benefit from such activities.

*“Last January 2023, [organisation] handover [sic] latrines construction material for IDPs, and returnees to County RRC, but all these materials were diverted.” – Male returnee member, Bor*

Other key subjects, less mentioned, which respondents felt uncomfortable about reporting included quantity and type of humanitarian assistance, crimes and the activities of armed groups, and political issues.

**This reluctance to report sensitive issues poses a significant risk, particularly in missing critical reports around SEAH by aid workers. The current reliance on community leaders as primary feedback channels, who are often male authority figures, may further suppress reports of sensitive issues,** as these leaders may be implicated in the issues or hold biases that prevent impartial handling of complaints. Moreover, addressing the sensitivity of feedback on assistance itself is crucial. Communities should feel empowered to participate in the process to make aid more responsive, rather than fearing that their aid might be cut off if they provide honest feedback.

These findings highlight the **need for safe and confidential channels that ensure anonymity and safety for complainants, fostering a more open and trusting environment for discussing sensitive matters.** Enhancing community awareness about the importance of reporting misconduct and building trust in CFMs are critical steps towards ensuring that all concerns are effectively addressed and do not go unreported. This approach will help prevent further victimisation and contribute to a more accountable and responsive humanitarian response.

### **Response to the Sudan Crisis<sup>50,51</sup>**

In the dynamic environments of Renk and Malakal transit centres, where populations of refugees and returnees continuously shift, the importance of community engagement becomes even more critical, yet it faces unique challenges. The transient nature of the population, with refugees and returnees staying for only a limited period of time, restricts the time available for meaningful engagement and feedback collection. Moreover, the immediate focus of these individuals, many of whom may be facing life-threatening conditions, is often on securing basic survival needs such as food, shelter, and medical care, rather than participating in community consultations. Language and communication barriers, along with the psychological trauma suffered by many, further complicate effective communication and engagement.

Effective complaint and feedback mechanisms not only allow for the timely identification and resolution of issues, thereby enhancing the relevance and quality of humanitarian aid, but they also build trust within the community. They ensure accountability from aid providers and protect against exploitation and abuse, critical in such volatile settings. Additionally, feedback serves as a cornerstone for ongoing learning and improvement, allowing humanitarian efforts to adapt swiftly and appropriately to the changing needs and circumstances of the transient populations.

The CEN and Internews two-way communication platform stands out as a vital AAP initiative for participatory dialogue essential for humanitarian actors to stay informed about issues faced by communities and their priorities, enabling them to address them in an ongoing and responsive manner. This is complemented by transparent communication efforts, including the regular publication of information bulletins detailing responses and clarifications, which highlight the commitment among the Sudan crisis response actors to closing the feedback loop.

Both Renk and Malakal transit centres have implemented CFMs to proactively gather community feedback to refine ongoing services. Although these mechanisms are not defined as collective or area-based, they

<sup>50</sup> WFP, Internews and CEN (January 2024). Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Malakal, South Sudan. Information Ecosystem Assessment. <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Internews-Malakal-IEA-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> WFP, Internews and CEN (December 2023). Information needs, preferences and barriers for displaced communities in Renk, South Sudan. Information Ecosystem Assessment. <https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/RENK-Information-Eco-System-Assessment-2024.pdf>

represent an integrated approach for coordination among response actors, which may minimise challenges associated with engagement.

**In Renk, an important portion of the surveyed community reported barriers to engaging with these mechanisms; 22 percent did not know how to voice their concerns, and 14 percent could not find the appropriate channels to do so.** These issues highlight a critical gap in communication and the accessibility of feedback systems, exacerbated by **fears of potential repercussions that deter community members from voicing complaints.**

**In Malakal, while there are numerous established feedback mechanisms due to its dual role as both a transit and a final destination, 75 percent of community members still reported never using or wanting to use these mechanisms, also predominantly due to a lack of awareness or perceived inaccessibility.** This suggests that despite the availability of more structured feedback channels, similar issues of engagement and utilisation persist as in Renk.

**Additionally, gender disparities are apparent in Malakal, with men more likely to utilise CFMs than women. This suggests potential cultural or systemic barriers that restrict female participation, aligning with the broader trends in South Sudan where structural challenges are widespread.** This highlights the necessity for gender-sensitive approaches in community engagement and feedback collection to ensure equitable participation.

Across the various settings in South Sudan, including Renk and Malakal transit centres, **a recurring theme emerges: a significant lack of awareness on how to effectively utilise CFMs. The risk of facing severe repercussions for voicing concerns, as highlighted in the findings, also indicates the extreme vulnerability of affected populations.** This widespread issue highlights the critical need for enhanced awareness and communication strategies to ensure vulnerable populations understand and can engage with these essential tools. Such efforts are vital for improving the responsiveness and efficacy of humanitarian services, particularly for those dependent on lifesaving aid. In contexts like Renk and Malakal, **prioritising the closure of the feedback loop has signalled the opportunity to increase participative engagement by communities, thereby increasing trust and the overall impact of aid efforts.**

### Key outcomes from the May 2024 workshop

Several themes related to CFMs were raised by stakeholders participating in the May 2024 AAP workshop. There was concurrence by some participants with the findings on the lack of timely responses by partners to community feedback, noting that feedback mechanisms were perceived as a one-way process or extractive when the feedback loop was not closed. The negative impact this has on trust was highlighted, leading affected communities to disengage and limit cooperation with aid agencies.

Emphasis was placed on the accessibility of CFMs, including consideration of the resources and constraints on diverse groups within communities.

The need for training and raising awareness for affected communities on how to use CFMs was stressed. Ensuring clarity in reporting channels for communities, especially regarding SGBV, and maintaining the anonymity of CFMs were discussed.

The importance of real-time monitoring of community feedback throughout a response was also highlighted, using the Sudan crisis as an example, to enable ongoing course corrections. Timely and coordinated feedback from aid workers and affected communities was considered crucial to identify real-time challenges with humanitarian assistance and adapt accordingly.

## 6. Conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm

The Accountability to Affected People framework mandates that **humanitarian organisations manage their power responsibly by being responsive, transparent, and accountable to affected populations.**<sup>52</sup> This commitment aligns with the **"Do No Harm" principle, which obligates organisations to minimise any inadvertent harm caused by their interventions**, such as exacerbating community tensions or corruption. These unintended consequences can arise if interventions are not informed by comprehensive contextual and conflict or not designed with appropriate safeguards.<sup>53</sup> Conflict sensitivity complements this by requiring organisations to **understand the contexts in which they operate, including socio-economic, political dynamics, and structural factors, and recognise the interplay between interventions and their environments.** It requires actions to **avoid negative impacts while maximising positive outcomes.**<sup>54</sup>

These principles are integral to the Sphere Core Humanitarian Standards, particularly Standard Three, which requires that **communities affected by crisis are not negatively affected and are more prepared, resilient and less at-risk as a result of humanitarian action.** Further embedding these values, Standards Eight and Nine emphasise the **importance of respectful interaction between humanitarian staff and the affected communities and ethical management of resources.**<sup>55</sup> Collectively, these standards lay the foundation for maximising the positive impact of activities on sustaining peace and are therefore a minimum responsibility for all humanitarian agencies.

This section explores the interaction between humanitarian aid delivery and community relations within South Sudan, illustrating the profound consequences of the transparency and conflict sensitivity of aid on social dynamics.

### Community perceptions of the impact of humanitarian aid on community relations

**According to the majority of key informant interviews, insufficient aid often leads to theft and community tensions.** Perceptions of uneven distribution have reportedly been leading to mistrust towards community leaders who may be suspected of nepotism and corruption. Findings indicate that this suspicion occasionally extends to humanitarian partners as well.

*"When chiefs or RRC staff register only their relatives for assistance, other people who are left out feel [sic] bad about that and the relationship among [sic] the community get destroyed... Assistance given not [sic] enough only few people and those close to chiefs are the ones considered and that bring bad [sic] relationship among people." – Male host community key informant, Panyijar*

**A consistent theme across the study is mistrust of community leaders, suggesting critical gaps in representation and accountability within community structures.** The issues of distrust and nepotism can have significant consequences as these leaders often represent the primary bridge between their communities and humanitarian actors. These include community members' willingness to participate in consultations and to provide honest feedback on the assistance received, potentially sidelining vulnerable populations and deepening existing inequalities. Moreover, findings indicate sensitive issues such as SEAH and corruption within humanitarian operations were underreported, as mentioned in the previous section, due to fears of retaliation or the potential loss of aid. Such reluctance to report misconduct can lead to unresolved grievances and can escalate into overt tensions within communities. This may be exacerbated by the reported inability of many communities to communicate directly with humanitarian agencies as well as the lack of awareness and accessibility of CFMs.

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<sup>52</sup> [IASC Revised AAP Commitments endorsed November 2017.pdf \(interagencystandingcommittee.org\)](#)

<sup>53</sup> IFRC (2016). Applying better programming initiative – do no harm in a changing context. [2016 ApplyingBPI-DoNoHarm.pdf \(ifrc.org\)](#)

<sup>54</sup> Saferworld. Conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding. [Publications - Saferworld \(saferworld-global.org\)](#)

<sup>55</sup> [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability \(2024\)](#)



Despite these challenges, there are also reports of the potential positive impact of humanitarian assistance. **Several key informants reported that when aid is perceived as fairly distributed, it may not only reduce the impetus for theft but also alleviate inter-community tensions, fostering a more harmonious coexistence.**

*"..... absence of assistance makes the entire community so vulnerable with a lot of criminalities, theft and robberies rampant. With the presence of humanitarians' assistance, we are all happy even though it's not all we wanted because it's not enough." – Male IDP key informant, Panyijar*

**The above findings emphasise the importance of consistent and transparent communication from aid organisations about how decisions are made, particularly concerning who receives aid and why.** When disputes over aid allocation arise, the presence of humanitarian actors to clarify and mediate can reportedly be crucial in de-escalating potential conflicts.

*"Whenever there is assistance being provided and some legible [sic] members have not been included, it requires the actors' presence so that they can give a better explanation why some members of the community are missing out (...). Moreover, when these concerns are not properly addressed, there might be a shoulder brushing [sic] between the community members and the humanitarian actors. Furthermore, this can also bring hatred among the community members...." – Male returnee key informant, Akobo*

**The most frequent recommendation from key informants on how humanitarian agencies can maintain or improve relations between communities was to treat all groups equally.** Other recommendations to maintain or help improve relationships included responding to feedback quickly, registration and distributions directly through aid agencies, increasing aid amounts to reduce resources competition and clear communication with communities.

Another key aspect of conflict sensitivity highlighted was the risk of harm communities may face when accessing assistance. As mentioned in the first section, communities had to, at times, choose between their security against the need for humanitarian services. This concern is supported by findings from the 2022 and 2021 ISNA, which reported that communities were exposed to violence and looting while accessing assistance. **These findings underscore the need for humanitarian interventions to incorporate comprehensive contextual analyses to avoid exacerbating these risks.**

Overall, these findings emphasise the necessity for conflict-sensitive approaches that prioritise fairness, transparency, and proactive communication, and ensure communities can access assistance safely to foster positive community relations and enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.

### **Response to the Sudan Crisis**

In the Renk and Malakal transit centres, the implementation of the principles of do no harm and conflict sensitivity are paramount, particularly given the extreme vulnerability of returnees and refugees displaced by the conflict in Sudan. The fluid and potentially volatile context, particularly in Malakal, where the security situation can rapidly change, requires agencies to continually analyse risks to effectively mitigate, respond, and adapt their strategies. This ongoing risk management is critical to prevent exacerbating local tensions and ensuring that humanitarian interventions contribute positively to the stability and safety of these critical transit environments.

The mix of refugees and returnees in these transit centres, coupled with logistical challenges, creates situations where vulnerable groups are exposed to significant risks. **In Renk Transit Centre, feedback highlights severe issues such as overcrowding, which has led to men and women being forced to sleep in the same areas, reportedly increasing the risk of sexual violence.**

*"Refugees and returnees are complaining about men and women sharing rooms. This increases instances of sexual violence. They are requesting [organisation] to divide the room." - Female, 34 years, Renk Transit Centre, February 2024*

Such conditions not only threaten physical safety but also erode trust in the efficacy and sensitivity of the aid process.

**The information ecosystem assessment of Malakal indicates that misinformation is a potent risk factor, particularly given the complex history of security issues and misinformation in the area, which has previously fuelled community tensions within the PoC Site.** The findings emphasise the need for vigilant monitoring and community-engaged correction measures to maintain peace and trust. For example, a resident highlighted the potential consequences of misinformation. Feedback from communities in Renk Transit Centre also illustrated the potential for rumours leading to mistrust and tensions.

*"Refugees are seeking assurance from [organisation] about health, education, food, and security services in Maban. Refugees have heard rumours of targeted killing of people based on ethnicity and poor services at the refugee camp." – Female, 40 years, Renk Transit Centre, January 2024*

**Furthermore, feedback on systemic issues such as perceived nepotism and racism by community leaders and some humanitarian staff, was received in Renk Transit Centre which exacerbate vulnerabilities and could potentially lead to exploitation.** Some community members reported feeling discriminated against by those in power, which hindered their access to services and contributed to tensions. For instance, complaints about community leaders and police involve discrimination based on tribal affiliations. In Malakal, feedback reported issues of fairness and transparency in the management and distribution of aid and services was observed, affecting the community dynamics and the perception of humanitarian efforts.

However, challenges remain in ensuring that these processes are inclusive and transparent. **Complaints about registration practices in Renk, where aid workers allegedly favour relatives and friends, underscore the need for structured and impartial systems to prevent favouritism and ensure equity.** Similarly, accusations of ethnic discrimination at a complaints desk highlight the critical need for training humanitarian staff to handle aid distribution impartially and respectfully. This need extends to educating community members on coexistence and mutual respect, as indicated by calls for aid agencies to promote peaceful interactions between different ethnic and social groups within the transit centres.

*"Refugees are complaining of racism and mistreatment by community leaders and are asking [organisation] to periodically encourage the changing of leaders to avoid racism and discrimination." – Female, 30 years, Renk Transit Centre, December 2023*

In another assessment conducted in Renk town (December 2023) by REACH, dynamics between refugees, returnees, and host communities were explored, revealing emerging solidarity due to shared service access and mutual experiences relating to conflict. However, the assessment highlighted a potential risk to social cohesion: the perception that aid predominantly targeted new arrivals. This issue was seen as critical as the host community faced exacerbated vulnerabilities, compounded by rising living costs and food insecurity, with Renk County classified as phase 4 "Emergency" level by the IPC (September-November 2023). Focus group discussions emphasised the importance of including both the host community and new arrivals in humanitarian programs to maintain social cohesion and prevent perceived exclusions. Respondents also recommended that humanitarian actors adapted their programs based on comprehensive community feedback to foster inclusivity and mitigate potential tensions.<sup>56</sup>

These challenges highlighted above indicate the clear risks and potential flashpoints that are not only pervasive in general humanitarian contexts but are especially pronounced in these settings. These risks require

<sup>56</sup> REACH South Sudan (December 2023). Sudan Crisis: Social Cohesion Among Refugees, Returnees and Host Community in Renk Town. [REACH SSD2309 Renk ABA Social-cohesion Brief December 2023.pdf \(impact-initiatives.org\)](#)

vigilant, ongoing monitoring, which is essential to ensure that conflict-sensitive aid is not only delivered ethically but also accessed safely by those it aims to support.

### Key outcomes from the May 2024 workshop

During the May 2024 workshop, participants discussed several key issues related to the distribution of aid and the influence of local dynamics. Several participants agreed with the findings on nepotism and RRC influence in the distribution of aid, noting that such issues were prevalent. It was also raised that false accusations can occur alongside genuine instances of discrimination and nepotism in aid delivery.

The issue of mistrust between communities and leaders was discussed, with an emphasis on the continued importance of engaging local leaders while finding effective ways to address structural issues to rebuild trust and ensure fair aid distribution.

## Conclusion

The findings of this report highlight, some good practices that need scale-up, significant gaps and challenges related to accountability to affected populations in South Sudan, while also presenting opportunities for critical reflection and collective ownership for the humanitarian community.

These insights come at a critical juncture in South Sudan's protracted humanitarian crisis, characterised by escalating needs and complex humanitarian conditions. Concurrently, the Sudan crisis has caused significant displacement into already resource-constrained areas and triggered an economic crisis. The protracted crisis and severe needs, coupled with persistent governance and political challenges, have fostered a deep dependency on humanitarian aid among communities.

Amidst this context and with continued reductions in funding, the humanitarian response faces immense pressure to meet the growing needs of vulnerable communities in South Sudan, necessitating a strategic prioritisation of support for the most vulnerable populations. Addressing these challenges will require a collaborative and innovative approach focused on understanding the needs, capacities, and obstacles to effective aid delivery for affected communities. It is imperative for stakeholders to work closely with communities and therefore prioritise communication and engagement for their inclusive participation and empowerment, and to ensure the accountability of humanitarian stakeholders. Research activities and assessments should also consider intersectoral AAP indicators to ensure inclusive participation from the early stage of programme implementation.

Important steps have been made towards enhancing accountability in South Sudan, exemplified by the Humanitarian Country Team AAP Strategy, ongoing research capturing the perspectives of affected communities on humanitarian assistance, the South Sudan coordination structures' Flagship Initiative, and coordination-lead area-based approach.

In the face of unprecedented increases in humanitarian needs globally, in South Sudan and three other humanitarian contexts,<sup>57</sup> the Flagship Initiative aims to strengthen localisation processes, supporting and empowering local actors to respond to crises. Innovation and strengthened coordination remain key pillars of the Flagship, with an added emphasis on inclusivity and accountability. Overall, the Flagship intends to build up community resilience efforts to reduce and prevent humanitarian needs – focusing on sustainability, catalytic action, durable solutions, community engagement and accountability.

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<sup>57</sup> The Flagship Initiative was also initiated by OCHA, in the Philippines, Colombia and Niger.

Additionally, Upper Nile and Western Bahr El-Ghazal States were selected as priority areas where three different Area-based Leadership (ABL) Coordinators support and lead on, including supporting the State Governments in developing State Development Plans, and amongst other things, the operationalization of the Flagship Initiative. The presence of active leadership at State-level provides a strong opportunity in the elaboration and reinforcement of collective AAP commitments and processes in their Areas of Responsibility. Fitting towards the recommendation of decentralizing AAP processes to ensure appropriate operationalization and adequate follow-up locally, the ABL Coordinators should be empowered to support these efforts.

Another critical step was the collective examination of the report's findings by stakeholders (in the May 2024 workshop) to identify strategic areas for improving accountability, resulting in draft recommendations focusing on:

- Improving coordination and complementarity of AAP mechanisms and enhancing collaboration between partners to address inefficiencies and boost responsiveness and accountability.
- Empowering AAP mechanisms at the sub-national level for localised implementation.
- Fostering area-based coordination with clear ownership and accountability among stakeholders.
- Strengthening coordination with nexus partners.
- Implementing collective mechanisms for better resource utilisation and reducing the burden on communities from using multiple mechanisms.
- Enhancing community participation in humanitarian decision-making, particularly in remote and rural areas and among vulnerable groups.
- Harmonising AAP in analysis processes for a comprehensive understanding of community needs and adaptive response strategies.
- Addressing accountability to communities in the context of reduced funding, prioritisation, and community reliance on aid.

These recommendations underscore the recognition among stakeholders of the collective efforts and ownership. Discussions also highlighted that the realisation of AAP commitments and the operationalisation of actions require collective will and clear accountability structures, led by the Humanitarian Coordinator, HCT, and the ICCG. Equally significant are donor support and adequate resources to advance AAP at strategic levels, ensuring that initiatives are both sustainable and impactful.

At the time of publication of this report, the process of gathering additional feedback from response stakeholders is ongoing, with plans for the final recommendations to be endorsed by the ICCG and adopted by the HCT, culminating in a clearly defined and actionable plan to support the realisation of AAP commitments in South Sudan. This initiative aims to foster a more community-centred humanitarian response, where the voices of affected populations are heard and prioritised, leading to more effective humanitarian assistance.

## Annex 1: Additional details on methodology

### ISNA 2023

The 2023 ISNA uses a mixed methods approach covering three population groups: host communities/non-displaced communities, IDPs and returnees.

For both quantitative and qualitative components of the ISNA, all sensitive questions were reviewed with the Protection Cluster and enumerators were trained on how to ask sensitive questions. Respondents had the option of not replying if they did not feel comfortable answering the question.

#### Quantitative component

The household survey's methodology consisted of a two-stage stratified cluster sampling, where the primary sampling unit or cluster was selected following probability proportional to size, and the secondary sampling unit or households were randomly selected within each cluster. For the urban component, data was collected in five IDP camps: Juba IDP Camp 1, Juba IDP Camp 3, Bentiu IDP Camp, Malakal PoC, and Navaisha IDP Camp. Urban centres therefore included the following counties: Juba, Yei, Rubkona, Malakal, and Wau. Findings for Panyikang and Canal Pigi are indicative as the required samples were not collected due to access challenges.

The quantitative component of the ISNA had a final sample size of 17,305 households, with findings representative at a 95 percent confidence interval and 10 percent margin of error at the county level for the overall population. Findings disaggregated by population group were representative at state level at a 95 percent confidence interval and 10 percent margin of error. Findings related to subsets of the total samples are not generalisable with a known level of precision and should be considered indicative only. Where indicated, the findings relate to a subset of respondents who had received assistance in the three months prior to data collection.

In the absence of a household listing, the second stage sampling following stratification by population group has limitations, particularly given that the second-stage sampling cannot be verified through remote monitoring and GPS tracking. As the exact population breakdown at the community level is unknown, certain groups may be better represented in the final sample, meaning that the survey may not reach the same level of representativeness for each sub-group as for the overall population. Findings on sub-populations could, therefore, include a level of bias: more easily reachable and identifiable IDP and returnee households may have had a larger chance of being selected for an interview.

#### Qualitative component

The qualitative component for both assessments used purposive sampling to identify participants for FGDs, IIs and KIIs from the population groups of interest. The qualitative findings are not representative and should be considered indicative. Gender parity was closely achieved, and persons with disabilities were represented in both assessments. Locations for the qualitative data collection were selected based on high intersectoral needs, severe protection needs, presence of the target population groups, and access.

For the ISNA, data was collected in eight counties (Akobo, Juba, Leer, Malakal, Mayendit, Wau, and Yambio). The qualitative component of the ISNA comprised 111 interviews (58 FGDs, 24 IIs and 29 KIIs) conducted in eight counties (Akobo, Awerial, Bor, Juba, Panyijar, Rubkona, Wau and Yambio). A purposive sampling approach was used to identify participants from the population groups of interest, with representation of population groups from an age, gender, and socio-economic perspective. The representation of vulnerable groups including people with disabilities, older persons and youth, was also prioritised. Eight counties were selected for data collection based on high intersectoral needs, presence of target population groups and access.

Given the qualitative methodology used and the fact that data collection was limited to eight locations, the findings are indicative.

The qualitative methodology for the ISNA had the following limitations:

- The sensitivity of the topics discussed may have influenced underreporting among focus group discussion (FGD) participants and key informants (KIs). Some respondents mentioned that providing feedback on assistance was itself a sensitive issue. To address this, enumerators clarified at each interview's outset that responses would not affect participants' aid eligibility and that all data collection was conducted anonymously. Despite these precautions, social desirability bias may still have influenced the responses, particularly in mixed-gender settings where female participants might have been less forthcoming.
- While efforts were made to ensure all female-only interviews were conducted by female moderators, a few exceptions occurred due to challenges in hiring female moderators. This may have impacted the openness of the discussions, particularly given the sensitive nature of some of the questions.
- Moreover, since data collection was limited to accessible areas, the experiences of populations in inaccessible regions—likely facing greater barriers to assistance—were underreported. This limitation suggests a potential skew in understanding the full scope of barriers across all affected communities.

## Complaints and feedback data from Renk and Malakal

Complaints, feedback, requests, concerns, and appeals gathered via the two-way information platform<sup>58</sup> established by Internews and CEN from October 2023 to March 2024 were analysed to inform this report. The dataset comprises 1,069 data points from Malakal, including the Protection of Civilians (PoC) site, Malakal Town, and the Transit Centres, and 1,865 data points from Renk, focusing specifically on the Renk Transit Centre.

It is important to note that these data points do not fully represent the diversity of perceptions, priorities, and concerns of the refugee and returnee populations in these areas. This limitation arises due to the selective nature of the data collection process, which may exclude certain individuals while prioritising others based on their accessibility and likelihood of engaging with traditional feedback mechanisms.

Data collection was carried out by specialised teams tasked with engaging a diverse range of individuals, particularly those who typically have limited access to information and are less engaged with conventional feedback mechanisms. This approach ensures the capture of data that might not otherwise be accessible to humanitarians. Importantly, these teams are not affiliated with any specific service provider, thus avoiding the typical dynamics that can influence interactions between service providers and beneficiaries. Such dynamics often deter individuals who may be reluctant to appear ungrateful or fear repercussions for voicing their desires for changes in service provision. The teams are trained to conduct respectful and thorough conversations, gathering qualitative data that captures detailed nuances and insights crucial for local action by service providers in the region.

## Internews Information Ecosystem Assessments in Renk and Malakal

Data collection for the assessments took place between October and November 2023, utilising accessibility and snowball sampling methods, developed in consultation with NGO staff and community members. Participants for KIIs and FGDs were chosen by the Community Engagement Network based on their knowledge, community status or role, and availability. The KII and FGD guides were semi-structured, designed to meet the research criteria while allowing flexibility to delve into the unique insights offered by respondents.

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<sup>58</sup> A two-way information platform is designed to share information with a key audience, such as the affected population or beneficiaries while allowing the audience to share feedback and information through the same communication channel.

However, these assessments encountered limitations, primarily due to the rapid nature of the research. This may have restricted the diversity and number of community members involved and limited the depth of inquiry into complex issues. Repeated research over time is recommended to gain a more comprehensive understanding of evolving community needs. Additionally, the research team, being recruited locally, might share cultural perspectives and social norms that could skew interpretations and introduce biases into the findings. Furthermore, literacy rates reported in this study are based on self-declaration, without verification through comprehension tests, which could affect the reliability of some data points.

## Annex 2: Multistakeholder AAP workshop (May 2024)

On 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2024, a workshop co-hosted by REACH, Internews, the CCEWG and OCHA was convened with participants from national NGOs, INGOs, UN agencies, and clusters to discuss the findings of this report.

The workshop had two primary objectives:

**Understanding stakeholder experiences:** Participants discussed their experiences and perspectives on key themes identified in the research, highlighting challenges and opportunities. These discussions provided deeper insights into the barriers and gaps that need addressing to ensure accountability and improve the efficacy of aid.

**Building recommendations:** Discussions led to the development of (draft) strategic recommendations to support the realisation of AAP commitments.

### Research findings – discussion points

Participants were divided into four groups to discuss findings. General agreements with findings were noted across groups alongside the following specific discussion points.

#### Responsiveness

- Strengthening partnerships and enhancing information-sharing between clusters and agencies were emphasised to improve the responsiveness of humanitarian assistance.
- Participants highlighted the need to harmonise AAP analysis processes and streamline various data collection methods for a comprehensive understanding of affected communities' needs.
  - The use of intersectoral AAP indicators across assessment tools to capture affected communities' feedback across multiple sectors was recommended for informing an integrated approach to addressing humanitarian needs.
- Dedicated efforts to conduct data collection with marginalised groups was stressed to ensure their specific needs are understood and addressed effectively.

#### Access to information

- Developing a robust model for information dissemination involving government, community leaders, and humanitarian coordination was discussed.
- Ensuring collective key messaging for different community groups and helping them understand the expected level of service delivery were considered important.
- The necessity of localised assessments of communication channels in areas of service delivery was highlighted.

#### Role of community leaders

- Several participants agreed with the findings on nepotism and RRC influence in the distribution of aid, noting that such issues were prevalent.
- It was also raised false accusations can occur alongside genuine instances of discrimination and nepotism in aid delivery.

- The issue of mistrust between communities and leaders was discussed. The continued importance of engaging local leaders and finding effective ways to address structural issues was highlighted.

### Complaints and feedback

- Participants concurred with the findings on the lack of timely responses by partners to community feedback, noting that feedback mechanisms were perceived as extractive when the feedback loop was not closed.
- They highlighted the negative impact this has on trust, leading affected communities to disengage and limit cooperation with aid agencies.
- Emphasis was placed on accessibility of CFMs, including consideration of the resources and constraints on diverse groups within communities.
- The need for training and raising awareness for affected communities on how to use CFMs was stressed.
- Ensuring clarity in reporting channels for communities, especially for SGBV, and maintaining the anonymity of CFMs were discussed.
- The importance of real-time monitoring of community feedback throughout a response was highlighted, using the Sudan crisis as an example, for course-correction on an ongoing basis.
- Timely and coordinated feedback from aid workers (in addition to communities) was considered crucial to identify real-time challenges with humanitarian assistance for adaptation.

### Reliance on aid

- Participants discussed the reliance of communities in South Sudan on aid, particularly within the context of reduced funding and the need for prioritisation.
- The necessity for clear entry and exit strategies was highlighted.
- The importance of engaging with development partners was emphasised.

### Areas of strategic priority for AAP (identified by participants)

Several themes were identified by participants to prioritise in order to enhance accountability to affected communities in South Sudan. These include:

- **Coordination and complementarity.** Improve AAP mechanisms and collaboration between partners to address inefficiencies and enhance responsiveness and accountability.
- **Decentralisation.** Empower AAP mechanisms at the sub-national level for localised implementation.
- **Area-based coordination.** Foster localised coordination with clear ownership and accountability among stakeholders.
- **Nexus collaboration.** Strengthen coordination with development partners.
- **Government role.** Increase government accountability and engagement at both local and national levels.
- **Collective mechanisms.** Implement collective mechanisms for better resource utilisation and to reduce the burden on communities from using multiple mechanisms.
  - **Referral pathways.** Establish strong referral pathways to ensure timely responses to feedback.
- **Community participation.** Enhance community participation in humanitarian decision-making, especially including remote and rural areas and vulnerable groups.
- **Analysis.** Harmonise AAP in analysis processes for a comprehensive understanding of community needs and adaptive response strategies.
- **Accountability in reduced funding.** Address accountability issues in the context of reduced funding, prioritisation, and community reliance on aid.

While specific actions, requirements, and accountability holders for the final list of themes were discussed, cross-cutting requirements for operationalising the recommendations stood out:

- Clear accountability structures led by the Humanitarian Coordinator, HCT, and ICCG.
- Sufficient resource mobilisation and donor support to advance AAP at strategic levels.
- Clear protocols and SOPs, particularly for data sharing.
- Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess progress.



## Feedback on research scope

- **Geographic scope.** The limited geographic coverage of the qualitative component, encompassing eight counties, was noted. Participants highlighted that the broad context of South Sudan necessitates a more extensive scope for indicative findings.
- **Disaggregation of needs by population group.** Participants suggested disaggregating priority needs by population groups. It was clarified that the ISNA household component provides this analysis, which is disaggregated by population group, gender, and county. For the qualitative findings, this implies the need for a higher number of interviews to ensure meaningful and representative data.
- **Intersectoral focus.** Emphasis was placed on capturing communities' feedback on priority needs and gaps across sectors to inform targeted, intersectoral assistance.
- **Age and gender.** The need to enhance the age and gender dimensions of the research by including more gender-focused questions and addressing children-specific needs was emphasised.
- **Community perceptions of type of actors.** There was a desire to understand how communities differentiate between humanitarian and development actors to ensure that feedback is appropriately directed and to enhance nexus collaboration.

Participants identified other information gaps outside the scope of the ISNA that need to be addressed for response efficacy and accountability:

- **Community capacity.** Identifying and analysing the existing capacity of communities to cope in needs assessments at the outset for response planning.
- **Real-time monitoring and analysis of feedback.** Monitoring the evolution of community feedback throughout a response was seen as important to assess effectiveness and inform ongoing response adaptation to align with communities' needs. For instance, tracking community perceptions throughout the user journey in the Sudan crisis was noted as important, though challenging.
- **Feedback from aid workers.** The necessity for timely and coordinated feedback from aid workers was underscored to effectively identify and promptly address real-time challenges.
- **Pull factors.** Analysing pull factors for specific destination locations for returnees and refugees from Sudan was raised as an important information gap.
- **Government role.** Examination of the role of government in accountability mechanisms was highlighted.