



# South Sudan Mobility Barriers Assessment

June-July 2023 | South Sudan

## KEY FINDINGS

- Assessment findings and secondary data indicated that **insecurity or tensions between groups** were the main causes of movement restrictions across the country.
- **Flooding or floodwaters from previous flooding** were consistently mentioned in most of the discussions, particularly in the Greater Upper Nile Region (GUN) and some parts of the Greater Equatoria Region (GER), mainly in Eastern Equatoria State (EES).
- Some communities were reportedly partially cut off from movement in some directions at the time of data collection, particularly those communities in central and southern Unity State, as a result of the floodwaters from last year's flooding. In other areas, such as Jonglei and Warrap states, participants reported that some communities were unable to access certain areas due to insecurity or perceived insecurity.
- **Overall, the group most affected by the movement barriers was reported to be women**, usually associated with insecurity and protection risks they face when accessing certain areas. However, in Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), Jonglei, and Central Equatoria (CE) states, in most of the discussions, participants stated that **male youth and men** were equally affected with the movement barriers, primarily due to retaliatory killings or because opposing groups perceived them as a threat.
- In most assessed areas, participants mentioned that communities would continue to experience movement barriers in the next six months following data collection due to their experience with past trends. However, some participants reported that **insecurity was anticipated to peak in the dry season as access improved in most parts of the country** and competition for resources, such as grazing areas and water, would increase tensions.

## CONTEXT & RATIONALE

Since the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018,<sup>1</sup> the country has seen a decrease in episodes of large-scale conflict and displacement. However, localised conflict and climatic shocks have translated into multiple barriers that continue to restrict the mobility of the local population across the country, impacting their ability to respond to shocks,<sup>2</sup> and limiting their ability to move in search of food, water, and livelihoods as well as access to humanitarian services. In turn, households (HH) have seen a deterioration of their resilience capacities, and an increase in their vulnerabilities and exposure to threats.

The 2023 South Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) indicates that there are 9.4 million people in need, including 1.9 million IDPs and 1.4 million returnees. Moreover, out of the total number of people in need, 4.9 million are children and nearly 15% are People with Disabilities (PWD).<sup>3</sup> In a country where conflict, public health challenges and extraordinary climatic shocks are very present, access constraints have been and continue to be one of the major challenges for the effective implementation of humanitarian interventions. With this in mind, the objective of this assessment was to map the complex mobility barriers that the affected population faces, to better inform a more effective humanitarian response.

## METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

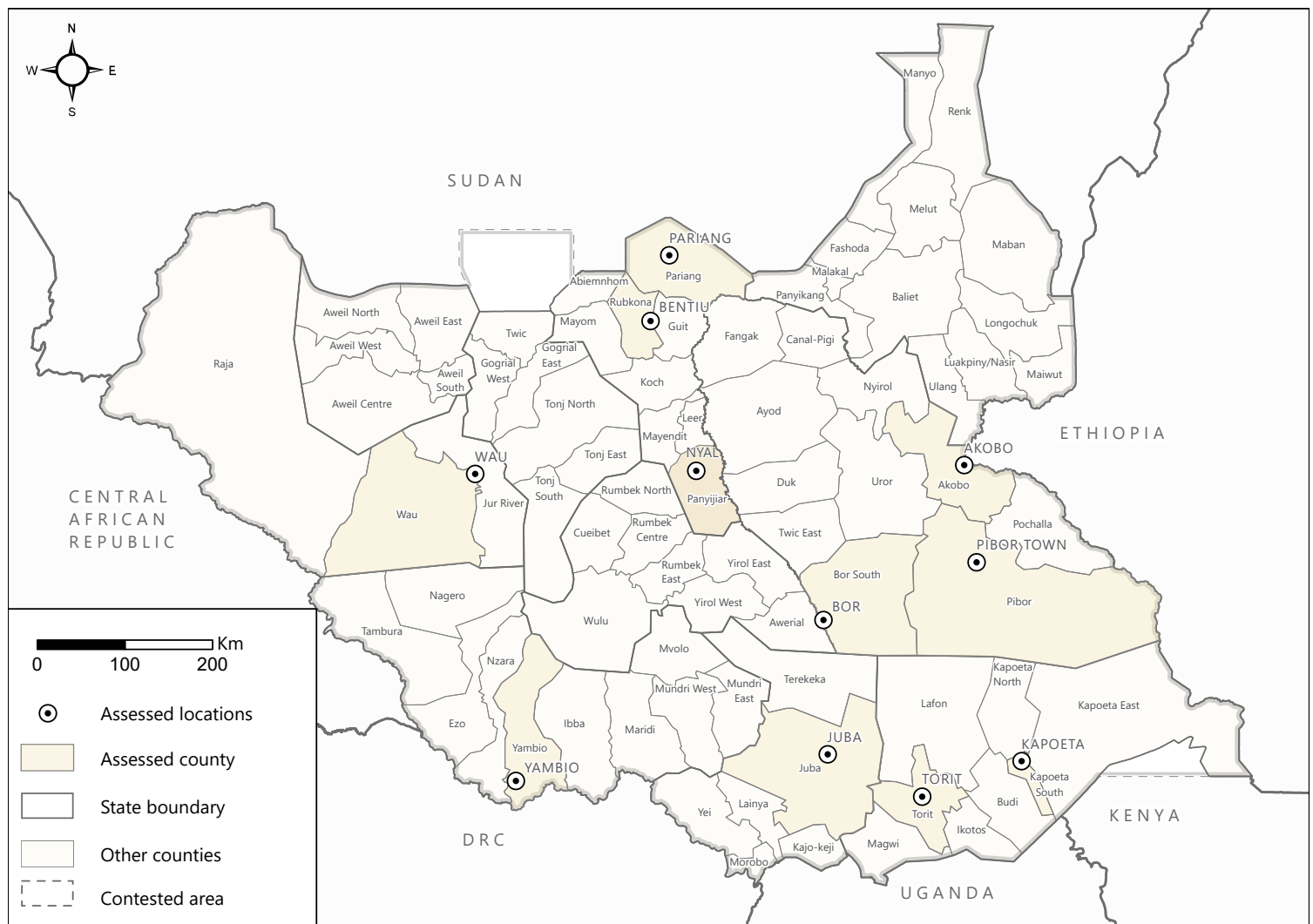
This assessment consisted of a secondary data review (SDR) as well as primary qualitative data collection. The primary data collection took place between June and July 2023. REACH conducted 33 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 25 key informant interviews (KIIs) with host community and internal displaced people (IDP) populations across 12 REACH field bases (Kapoeta South, Torit, Juba, Yambio, Rumbek, Mingkaman, Akobo, Bor South, Bentiu, Pariang, Nyal, and Wau).

Furthermore, an assessment team from Juba went and conducted data collection in Pibor town in Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). The research aims to provide a better understanding of external mobility barriers across South Sudan, and which population groups were the most affected by them. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) examined both existing and anticipated mobility barriers, assessing their

impact on communities at the county level. Concurrently, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted to gather information from 2-4 counties within the same geographical area, supplementing the FGDs' data for more comprehensive coverage.

Additionally, data was drawn from secondary data sources, including the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI), ACLED data on conflict incidents, and South Sudan logistics data on access. Information from assessment reports and ad hoc updates from humanitarian coordination bodies on the South Sudan crisis, as well as needs assessments conducted by humanitarian agencies in South Sudan between January and July 2023 were also considered in the final output elaboration. This assessment used a qualitative methodology that did not assess all potentially relevant locations, and as such, findings would be indicative in any case, due to the chosen data collection methodology.

**Map 1: Assessment coverage**

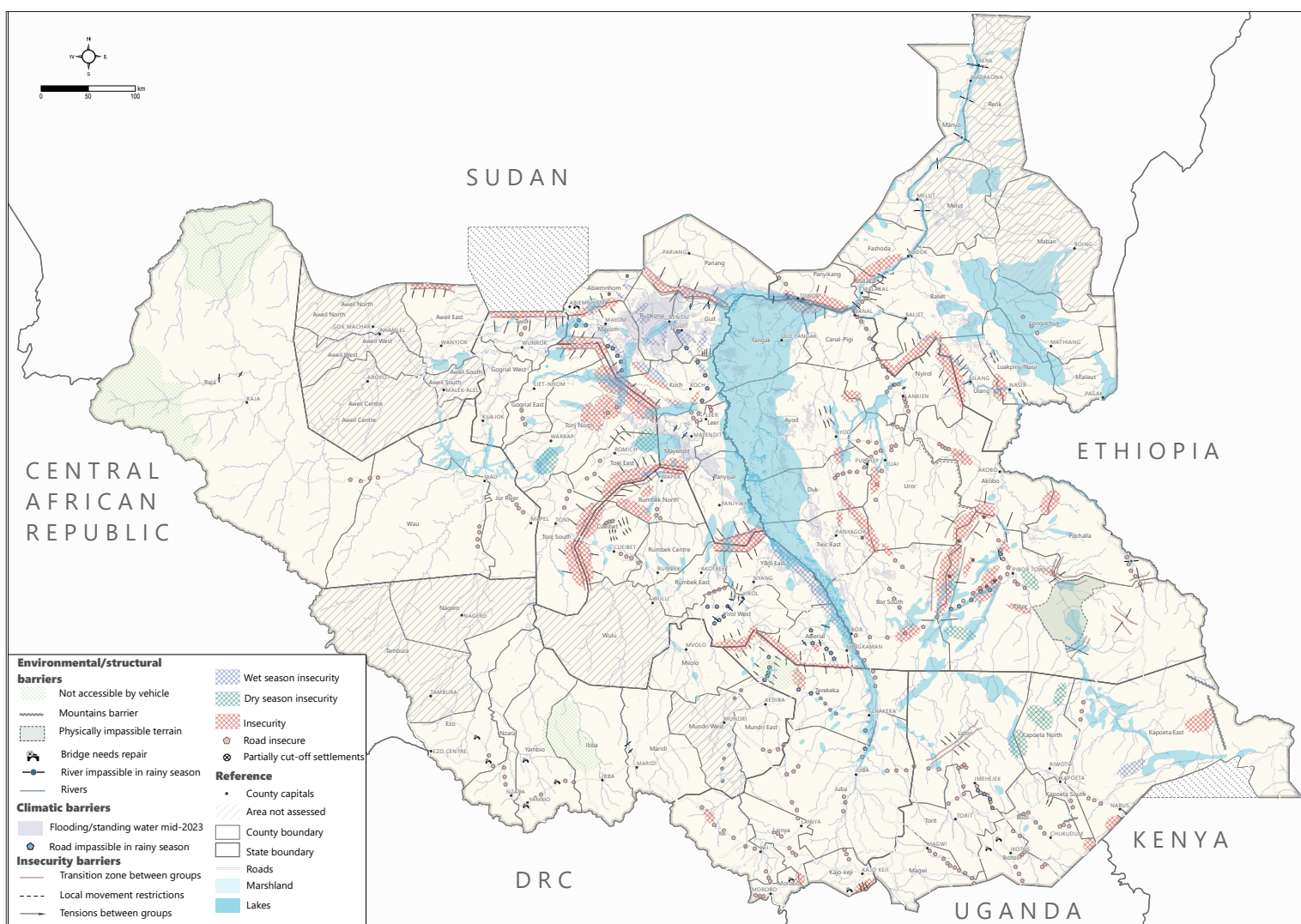




## Key definitions:

- **Insecurity:** For this assessment it is defined as any human driven factor which includes year-round, short- and long-term, and sporadic insecurities such as cattle raiding and fighting between different groups, among others.
- **Wet-season insecurity:** Is any insecurity that happened between May to October and the extension of that insecurity can be mapped (can be both a short and long-term barrier).
- **Dry season insecurity:** Is any insecurity which happened between November to April (can be both a short and long-term barrier).
- **Transition zone between groups:** A boundary line where two or more opposing communities cross. For instance, during the dry season, grazing grounds that are used by numerous groups.
- **Tensions between groups:** For this assessment is defined as a restriction where two or more opposing communities avoid each other's territories due to the associated risks. For instance, when a member of one community kills someone from another community, the affected community may seek revenge. This will lead the community to avoid the other community's territory.

Map 2: Mobility barriers



## Overview of mobility barriers across the country

Across all assessed areas, the most frequently reported movement barriers during the focus group discussions were insecurity or tensions between groups, flooding or standing water from past flooding, rivers or seasonal rivers blocking movement and broken bridges making roads impassable for cars. In addition, findings also suggest that fear due to past insecurity continues to influence population's movements.

In most discussions, participants overwhelmingly stressed that insecurity or tensions between groups were the major barriers to movement, which deterred members of opposing groups from moving into the others' areas. Moreover, in GPAA, Jonglei, Warrap and Lakes States, participants reported that such insecurities happen throughout the year as a result of intercommunal revenge killings, cyclical cattle raiding, and competition over resources. In some FGDs, mainly in Pibor town, Kapoeta North, Kapoeta South, Laniya, Akobo, and Rumbek North, participants reported that insecurity was commonly present in the dry season. Equally reported that insecurity is common during the wet season in Ezo, Morobo, Wau, Yambio counties. In some of the FGDs, particularly in Jonglei and Western Equatoria (WES) States, as well as the GPAA, participants reported that there was no ongoing insecurity, but the past insecurity continued to influence some people's movements.

Another prominent movement barrier reported in most of the groups was flooding or standing floodwaters from previous years causing movement restrictions among communities. This was particularly commonly reported in Unity<sup>4</sup> and Jonglei<sup>5</sup> states, which was somewhat unusual given the data collection's occurrence in June and July 2023 but nevertheless understandable due to the long-standing effects of catastrophic flooding with water levels not receding, partly due to the inability of the soil to absorb the excess water. In Yambio, Ezo, Morobo, Budi counties and other areas, participants reported that with the onset of the rainy season some routes came impassable for people and cars. In addition, broken bridges making roads impassable for cars were mentioned in some discussions across four (4) states: Western Equatoria (mentioned in all discussions), Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria, and Bhar El Ghazal State.

### **Greater Upper Nile region:**

Results of this assessment suggest that insecurity and tensions between groups were the main causes of movement restrictions in the GUN. These findings are further complemented by secondary data. These barriers were commonly reported among participants in GPAA, Greater Akobo, southern eastern Upper Nile, and Unity State, where some specific groups were reportedly unable to access certain settlements. In most of the assessed areas in GPAA and Jonglei states, participants stressed that insecurity or tensions between groups occur year-round,

while in Unity state most participants reported that insecurity commonly happens during the wet season. In GPAA, participants reported that they could not access certain roads, such as the main highway from Pibor to Bor, due to fear of potential road ambushes.<sup>6</sup> On other major roads like Pibor-Lekuangle and Pibor-Gumuruk, it was reported that people feared to use these roads due to insecurity unless they move in a group of ten or more people, sometimes escorted by armed youth, otherwise, people would not be able to access Pibor town for services including humanitarian food assistance (HFA).

In Upper Nile State, primary data collection didn't happen due to insecurity at the time of the assessment. However, secondary data review was undertaken to bridge the gap. In August 2022, when conflict erupted between different factions,<sup>7</sup> the majority of the locals, including humanitarian actors, reportedly suspended movement via the White Nile River due to insecurity; the impact of the conflict extended up to 2023. Based on recent REACH assessment reports from September 2023, within Malakal town and Malakal PoC, findings indicated that people were still facing movement impediments, mainly due to fear of insecurity, especially after the escalation in June 2023.<sup>8</sup> Residents from both Malakal PoC and Malakal Town fear accessing far livelihood areas such as fishing grounds, firewood collection and wild food gathering areas.<sup>9</sup> Participants in FGDs in Akobo County, Southeastern Upper Nile, reported that the main mobility barrier was insecurity related to tensions between groups, such as revenge killing, where specific groups could not access certain areas.

Flooding or standing water from the previous year was the second most reported mobility barrier cited in discussions in GUN. In Unity State, in all discussions, participants reported floodwater from last year still exists<sup>10</sup> and continues to restrict population movement, particularly in those counties located in Central and Southern parts of the state. This was also mentioned in more than half of the discussions in Jonglei State and GPAA. Environmental and structural barriers were less reported among the participants; only in GPAA in some FGDs, participants mentioned that during the rainy season it was very difficult to access the eastern part of Pibor because of the lack of formal roads and the fact that the area is covered by forest or vegetation. Only during the dry season, when grasses are burnt movement becomes easier. In one of the discussions in Jonglei, female participants mentioned that in some areas the bad conditions of roads make them inaccessible by car, but travelling by foot is possible, although the distance is long.

### **Greater Bhar El Ghazal region:**

Overall, in all discussions in the Greater Bhar el Ghazal Region (GBeG), participants reported that insecurity and tensions between groups were the major movement barriers, mainly associated with cattle raiding and revenge killing cycles both within and across states.

Participants emphasized that inter-state tensions remain a major barrier to movement, especially for counties situated at the borders, for example, the communities of Rumbek North County of Lakes State against Tonj East of Warrap State. Secondary data clearly shows that movements between Twic County and Abyei Administrative Area (AAA) were more restricted as a result of the ongoing tensions during the data review period<sup>11,12</sup>

In most of the discussions in Warrap and Lakes states participants reported that insecurity occurs throughout the year. On the other hand, in Wau County, Western Bhar el Ghazal state, participants reported that insecurity is present in the wet season, usually when grasses are tall, criminals use it as a hiding ground to launch road ambushes against local travelers. In Wau County, participants also reported that criminal activities restricted some locals from accessing far-away cultivation areas.

Lastly, floods or standing water from past flooding was reported as a mobility barrier among the participants in Warrap and Lakes states, making some routes impassable at the time of data collection, although it was not consistently reported like in GUN

### ***Greater Equatoria region:***

Assessment findings suggest that in the Greater Equatoria Region (GER), one of the leading causes for movement restrictions was insecurity associated with road ambushes, cattle raiding, and tensions between groups. In Central Equatoria State (CES), participants reported that insecurity is usually common in the wet or rainy season, when grasses are tall, facilitating hiding spots for attackers. In Eastern Equatoria State (EES) and Western Equatoria (WES) states, most participants reported that insecurity usually happens throughout the year.

Flooding or standing water from past flooding was still affecting some routes, mainly in EES, which made mobility very difficult at the time of data collection. Furthermore, in EES and CES participants reported that some roads had become impassable by cars, and sometimes even by foot, due to the onset of the rain. And broken bridges were also reported to be a major movement restriction in all three states. Other seasonal barriers reported in all three states pertained to the existence of rivers or formation of seasonal rivers that block movements. Moreover, in EES, most participants reported that topographical features such as mountains and plateaus have been restricting movement for a long-time, forcing communities to use a longer route to access certain settlements, particularly in Lafon, Budi, and Ikotos counities. Also, in Greater Kapoeta, in less than half of the discussions, participants reported that the desert nature of the area does restrict movement, especially during the dry season when it is extremely hot.

### ***Affected groups as a result of mobility barriers.***

In most FGDs across all assessed areas participants reported that the most affected population group as a result of

movement barriers were women. This was particularly highlighted in GPAA, Jonglei, and EE states. In Pibor town, FGDs participants reported that women were mainly restricted from accessing Pibor town or rural areas on their own to access health care, humanitarian assistance, markets, or forests to gather wild food due to fear of criminal armed youth along the routes. This was also the case in Lakes State, where participants reported that women could not access Cueibet main market when coming from rural areas for the same reason. In some FGDs in GPAA and Lakes and Jonglei States participants reported that youth and men were also among the most affected by mobility barriers, which was especially associated with revenge killings, and fear to be seen as a threat to the opposing groups.

### ***Coping strategies in response to movement barriers:***

Given the multiple barriers to movements reported across the assessed areas, participants in Pibor town, Greater Akobo, Greater Bor, and Greater Tonj reported that in order to access certain settlements or areas where livelihood activities are possible, people have to travel in groups composed of at least 10–15 people, and in most cases escorted by armed youths. This coping strategy is especially employed during periods of reported insecurity or when people perceive insecurity. In Pibor, participants also reported that some people were travelling at night to avoid road ambushes when trying to access Pibor town or when seeking healthcare services, particularly if they have to travel along the Gumuruk-Pibor and Lekuangle-Pibor roads. At the time of data collection, participants mentioned that, since last year, and due to insecurity along major roads like Pibor to Bor, people have resorted to using informal routes to access Juba, and those with enough monetary resources resorted to using planes.

Additionally, participants in Pibor reported that if people wanted to travel to certain settlements, they tried to cross the territories of those they consider friends. Furthermore, in most of the FGDs and KIIs where flooding was mentioned as a barrier to movement (including Central and Southern Unity State and Greater Fangak of Jonglei State), participants reported that people were using big saucepans, plastic sheeting, or canoes to move, while those without the access to use such coping strategies were reportedly not moving at all

## **Cut off communities**

Overall, in most FGDs, participants reported that some communities were partially cut off from movement, mainly due to insecurity, and especially notable in GPAA, Lake, and EE states, In the case of Unity State (central and southern parts) the main reason for communities to be cut-off is the presence of flood waters that have not receded since catastrophic flooding occurred in 2021, with levels increasing and receding seasonally due to the



presence of rain. Some participants mentioned that there were communities completely cut off from movement in almost all directions in Unity, Jonglei<sup>13</sup>, and Warrap<sup>14</sup> states. According to secondary data, in Unity State, five out of its seven counties had been cut off from Bentiu Town because roads were made unusable due to flood water.<sup>15</sup> Some participants also reported that some specific groups within the settlements were restricted from moving in some directions; for instance, clans with tensions would not cross each other's territories.

Among those communities reported to be partially or completely cut off, most participants reported that they were still able to access basic needs such as humanitarian food assistance (HFA), healthcare, education, and markets among others, although with a lot of challenges, especially in GPAA, Jonglei, and Lakes states. Nonetheless, some participants mainly from GPAA reported that people have no access to services. Nonetheless, some participants, mainly from GPAA reported that people have no access to services. Participants emphasized that moving from the rural areas to semi-urban centres to access services was very difficult as a result of insecurity and bad roads during the rainy season, just as it was challenging for humanitarian organizations to access rural areas.

## Anticipated mobility barriers

On top of the presented barriers in the map, the assessment also asked about anticipated mobility barriers in the next 6 months from the time of data collection. Participants in most discussions reported that insecurity would be the main barrier to movement based on past experience. Participants in the GPAA, Jonglei, EE, and Lakes states have stressed that with the onset of the dry season, there is typically an increase in insecurity. This is largely due to seasonal cattle raiding and conflicts over resources like pastures and water sources, which intensify as road conditions become better. These assumptions were corroborated as of December of 2023, with secondary data confirming that escalation in cattle raid incidents was reported in Tonj North and Tonj East counties of Warrap State, Rumbek Centre in Lakes State, Malakal in Upper Nile State, Duk in Jonglei State, Pariang in Unity State, and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) in Pibor County, disrupting timely humanitarian response by causing unrest in large area.<sup>16</sup>

In more than half of the discussions across all assessed areas participants mentioned that flooding would continue to be a key barrier to movement based on previous patterns. This was particularly highlighted in most of the discussions in GPAA, Unity, Lakes, Eastern Equatoria, and Jonglei states. Based on secondary data as of November 2023, in Bor South County, dykes broke due to the rapid overflow of the River Nile, severely flooding the residential areas in the western part of Bor town. Some residential areas and villages had been completely submerged, and many homes collapsed. Residents have left their homes and moved to higher ground within Bor town. Also, in Juba County, flood displaced people from the Mangalla Islands, following heavy rainfall that forced people to move from the islands of the Nile to the mainland.<sup>17, 18</sup>

Participants stressed that the expected impact of the anticipated mobility barriers on the community would mainly

comprise restrictions on movement for people accessing livelihood areas as a result of expected insecurity. As of December 2023 and January 2024, in Jonglei State, insecurity increased as a result of seasonal cattle raids in several counties, raising concerns among residents.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>20</sup> In Greater Akobo, participants reported that households would be leaving their villages and moving to areas with high population concentrations, such as County Headquarters (HQs) or Payam HQs, where they would get protection due to the presence of armed youth, and access to traditional livelihood areas would reduce. In some discussions, participants reported that humanitarian assistance and other basic needs would be disrupted in the event of flooding and insecurity. In GPAA and Jonglei State, participants in less than half of the discussions reported that seasonal cultivation would be interrupted as a result of flooding and insecurity.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Overall, consecutive years of flooding and increased localised conflict in many parts of the country have caused multiple movement restrictions for the local population, which were anticipated to continue in the next 6 months at the time of data collection. Many South Sudanese have experienced increased access restrictions, which impacts their ability to respond to shocks, among others by limiting their ability to move in search of food, water, and livelihood activities. Lastly, the combined effects of years of violence, flooding, successive disruptions of livelihood activities, and increasing movement restrictions have contributed to the erosion of resilience for many households. As humanitarians attempt to anticipate where movement barriers will persist in response to growing humanitarian needs, including the influx of returnees, it is essential to first understand where these populations with high levels of needs are located as well as the complex mobility barriers associated with accessing them.

## ENDNOTES

### PAGE 1

<sup>1</sup> Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan

<sup>2</sup> South Sudan - Flood Frequency 2019-2022 (28 October 2022)

<sup>3</sup> South Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2023 (November 2022)

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF: [Bentiu Town: A drowning village, The forgotten Paradise](#)

<sup>5</sup> The Guardian: [South Sudan flooding hampers efforts to contain hepatitis E outbreak](#)

<sup>6</sup> Eye Radio: [Pibor decries costly air transport, urges Jonglei to end blockage](#)

<sup>7</sup> Tonga clashes: [Flash Update No. 2 \(As of 22 August 2022\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> Eye Radio: [Death toll in Malakal camp violence rise to 20](#)

<sup>9</sup>REACH: South Sudan cross-border displacement: [Rapid food security assessment in areas of return - Malakal County](#).

<sup>10</sup> UNOSAT

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<sup>11</sup> South Sudan: [Humanitarian Access Snapshot \(October 2022\)](#)

<sup>12</sup> HSBA: Small arms survey: [Manhiem's Mission: Power and Violence in Warrap State](#)

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<sup>13</sup> MSF: [Unshattered hope in the face of adversity in South Sudan](#)

<sup>14</sup> REACH SSD: [Conflict shocks and underlying vulnerability: Regulation of mobility and disruption of livelihoods in Tonj East, 2018-2022](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Flood Assessment Report in South Sudan](#) | United Nations Development Programme (undp.org)

<sup>16</sup> SOUTH SUDAN [Humanitarian Snapshot](#)

<sup>17</sup> Humanitarian Updates Note 18 November 2023 on with file REACH

<sup>18</sup> [Floods displace over 3,000 people in Bor Town | Radio Tamazuj](#)

<sup>19</sup> [Jonglei urges deployment of Unified Forces to enhance security | Radio Tamazuj](#)

<sup>20</sup> [UNMISS calls for restraint and peace in Jonglei State and Greater Pibor Administrative Area - South Sudan | ReliefWeb](#)

<sup>21</sup> South Sudan: [Humanitarian Access Snapshot \(December 2023\) - South Sudan | ReliefWeb](#)

## ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).