



Leer County Rapid Assessment

Unity State, South Sudan, August 2022

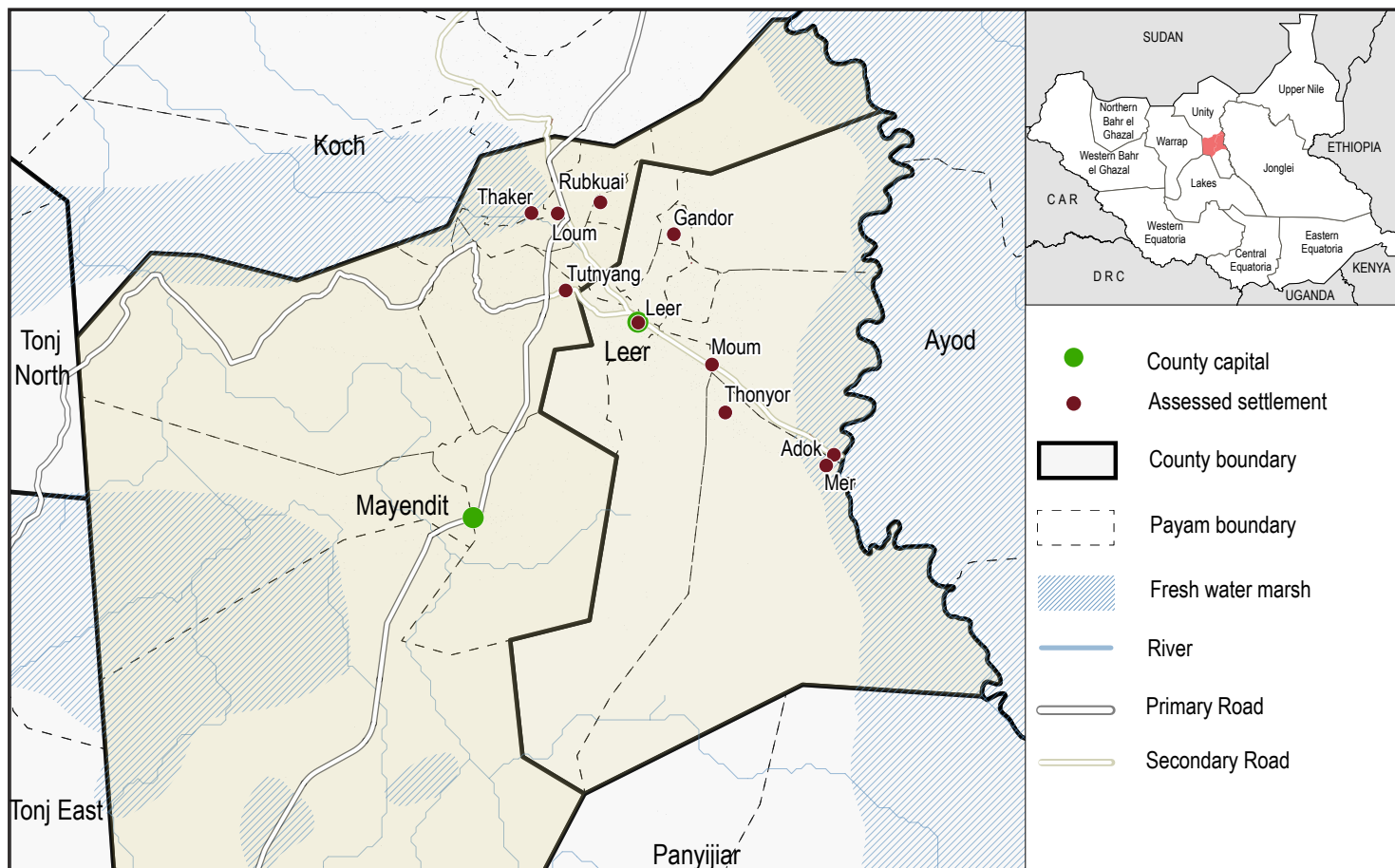
KEY FINDINGS

- Beginning in late 2021 and culminating in April 2022, attacks in Leer, Koch, and Mayendit Counties drove large-scale displacement to and within Leer County.¹ **The United Nations (UN) reported that at least 40,000 out of the estimated 75,000 people residing in the county were displaced due to fighting in April**, and that an indeterminate number were also displaced from areas in northern Leer County, and Koch and Mayendit Counties between February and March 2022.² Focus Group Discussion (FGD) participants from local communities, interviewed by REACH, reported that their communities had experienced cascading displacement, with many having been forced to flee multiple times between December 2021 and April 2022. **REACH assessment findings and secondary reporting suggest that the attacks between December 2021 and April 2022, which occurred at a time when the majority of the local population was already experiencing severe food insecurity, likely further exacerbated their vulnerability and susceptibility to shocks.**
- Indeed, prior to the large-scale violence in April, the March 2022 Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) estimated that 80% of Leer's population was facing acute (P3+) food insecurity, with 5% facing catastrophic (P5) food insecurity, suggesting serious underlying vulnerability for most people in the county.³ Looking ahead at the April-July

period, IPC analysts projected that the food security situation in Leer would deteriorate, with 85% of the population expected to face acute food insecurity, along with continued pockets (5%) of catastrophic food insecurity (P5). **These projections were made prior to the escalation of violence in April, under the assumption that large-scale conflict would be absent in Leer.**⁴

- Findings from FGD participants interviewed about population movement and severe hunger risks suggested that **the attacks in December-April disrupted livelihoods and coping capacity. This likely exacerbated humanitarian needs amongst populations already experiencing high levels of food insecurity.** Findings suggest that the attacks may have disrupted the preparatory phase of the cultivation cycle, which could decrease harvest yields. Findings also indicate that the attacks limited communities' access to resources depended upon for traditional coping strategies, including cattle, increasing the likelihood of reliance on harmful or unsustainable coping mechanisms such as meal skipping or asset-of-last-resort liquidation.⁵
- Finally, service provider key informants (KIs) reported that, **between December 2021 and April 2022, insecurity and attacks had (at least temporarily) disrupted most humanitarian health and nutrition centres, as well as the distribution of humanitarian food assistance (HFA).**

Map 1: Assessment coverage map



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ASSESSMENT RATIONALE

Since the outbreak of the civil war in 2013, Leer County has faced multiple conflict-related shocks, which have substantially increased community vulnerability.⁶ In 2014 and 2015, Leer was one of the sites of successive large-scale clashes in southern Unity State, which resulted in the displacement of more than 100,000 people, and a declaration of famine in the county in 2017.⁷ Leer experienced similar attacks in 2018, likely further exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and communities' susceptibility to future shocks.

Additionally, atypically severe flooding – which has affected Leer since 2019 – has driven large-scale displacement within and outside of the county.⁸

Since IPC reporting in March 2022, which classified Leer's population as experiencing Phase 4 (emergency) food insecurity, attacks on population centres throughout Leer County, which culminated in April, have driven the displacement of at least 40,000 people within the county and likely further exacerbated existing levels of food insecurity through the disruption of livelihoods and service provision.⁹ In light of this, REACH conducted a rapid assessment on the situation in Leer County, interviewing people displaced within Leer and to Leer from neighbouring Mayendit, with the objective of gaining an indicative snapshot of humanitarian needs and experienced gaps following the recent shocks and to provide a qualitative analysis of the potential impact of the recent attacks and displacement on food security in Leer County. The assessment comprised two main qualitative methodological components: focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs).

POPULATION MOVEMENT

- Assessment findings suggest that conflict-driven displacement from northern Leer County, Koch, and Mayendit largely began in December 2021. FGD participants from communities in northern Leer, who were displaced, or in central and southern Leer, who acted as host communities for those who were displaced, commonly reported that attacks on villages in Koch, Mayendit, and northern Leer drove people from these locations to central and southern Leer, away from the border with Mayendit from December 2021 to March 2022. Findings from FGDs, along with secondary sources indicate that the displacement peaked in April 2022, when large-scale attacks in Leer County reportedly displaced the majority of the county's estimated population.¹⁰
- Findings indicate repeated cycles of displacement. FGD participants from one community in northern Leer reported returning after the December attacks, only to displace again in February following further attacks. Participants in another FGD, made up of NGO worker KIIs with knowledge of county-wide population movement dynamics, reported that such repeated

METHODOLOGY

Data collection took place between the **22nd of July and the 5th of August 2022**. During this period, the assessment team conducted a total of 7 FGDs focused on population movement (6 with male IDPs, 1 with female IDPs), 1 general FGD with NGO KIIs with knowledge of county-wide population movement, coping and service provision dynamics following the attacks, and 5 FGDs focused on severe hunger risk (all with older women whose perceptions may not reflect the food security situation of the larger community) in Leer County. Participants spoke both to their own experiences and to their perception of events which occurred on the community level. In addition, KIIs were conducted with 6 different health and nutrition, and HFA service providers in the county. Additionally, the team conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with local authority officials and community representatives to gain a better understanding of the situation in the area. Qualitative FGD and KII assessment tools were triangulated with interactive proportional piling exercises, used in all FGDs conducted, which involved piling 100 beans in front of the respondent, who was then asked to divide them into piles, attributing indicative values to questions on population movement, social stratification, and challenges facing the communities, based on the respondents' perceptions.

The assessment findings are not statistically generalisable and should be considered **indicative** of the situation at the time of data collection.

conflict-driven displacement was common in communities in northern Leer during the December 2021 to April 2022 period, a finding corroborated by a UN assessment.¹¹ Many participants with knowledge of displacement from northern Leer reported that the attacks in December-April resulted in two or three rounds of conflict-driven displacement during the December 2021-April 2022 period.

- Findings suggest that conflict drove displacement southeast through the county, with participants in all 7 population movement FGDs reporting displacing to islands on the Nile or in the Sudd, either directly, or after initially having been displaced toward Adok Port along the Leer Town-Adok peninsula. Secondary sources suggest that islands were consistently used by local communities as displacement locations during periods of large-scale conflict during the civil war.¹² Participants in 4 of 7 population movement FGDs reported not having fled to the islands since large-scale attacks on Leer during the civil war, which may indicate the magnitude of the shock during the period assessed.¹³
- Assessment findings also suggest that the rapid nature of the attacks and subsequent displacement throughout the December 2021-April 2022 period, but particularly in April, may have led to vulnerable groups being left behind.¹⁴ Participants

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Photo 1: Sitting floodwater, Leer County, August 2022. Photo: REACH South Sudan



in 5 of 7 population movement FGDs as well as in the NGO KI FGD reported that people with reduced mobility (people with disabilities, children and older persons) were often unable to displace during attacks along with their communities, and were left behind as a result.

- Participants speaking broadly about settlement-wide return dynamics reported a range of perceptions depending on the settlement they described, from “most” people having returned to “some” people having returned to no returns at all. However, reporting from participants in 6 of 7 population movement FGDs as well as the NGO KI FGD suggested that protection concerns and limited resources may have still been limiting returns at the time of assessment. For instance, participants in 3 of 8 FGDs reported that populations were returning during the day to areas of origin to cultivate or collect food assistance, but returning to displacement locations to sleep in safety, reflecting persisting concerns about continued insecurity risks at the time of data collection. In 4 of 8 FGDs, participants reported that even temporary or partial returns such as those described above were being prevented by fear of further insecurity or concerns about it being too late

in the season to cultivate. In one FGD with participants who remained displaced to an island on the Nile at the time of data collection, participants a belief that it was better to remain displaced than to return and have to displace again.

DISPLACEMENT AND IMPACT ON LIVELIHOODS

- The timing of large-scale displacement largely coincided with the time of year when people in Leer County typically prepare their land for cultivation.¹⁵ Participants in 3 of 7 population movement FGDs and 3 of 5 FGDs focused on severe hunger risk – for which older, food-insecure women were sampled – reported that displacement at this time of the year resulted in disruptions to their cultivation cycle. Participants in one FGD in northern Leer explained that this disruption occurred at a critical juncture for them: the building of dykes to protect newly planted crops against early rains. Although disruption to the dyke building process was only explicitly mentioned in this focus group, the timing of their cultivation preparatory period is common throughout Leer County.¹⁶ For such populations, the reported serious disruption to cultivation may have reduced harvest yields.

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- Data from the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) 2022 Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM), collected between October 2021 and January 2022, indicates that poor harvest outcomes were likely in Leer County even prior to the attacks. In June, the CFSAM projected that Leer would face a 9,046-tonne cereal deficit out of the 10,218 tonnes required in 2022, if relying on cultivation alone.¹⁷
- The reportedly rapid nature of populations' displacement may have impacted livelihoods for displaced populations, given that many IDPs were likely to have struggled to bring productive assets with them when they displaced. This, in combination with the reported destruction of homesteads and assets during the attacks (refer to section on coping mechanisms), potentially impacted displaced populations' ability to engage in self-sufficient livelihoods activities both during displacement and after any possible return.

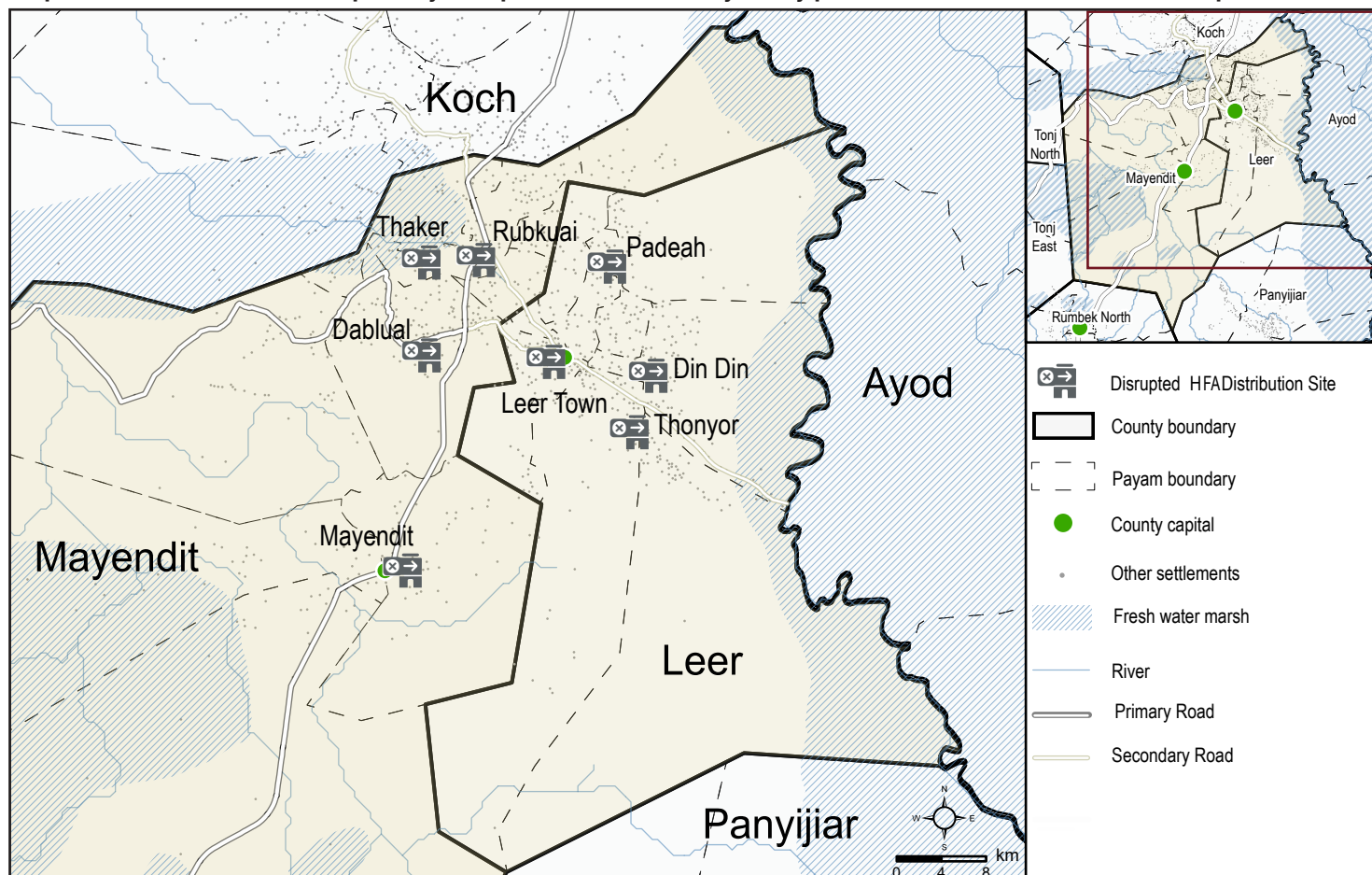
ACCESS TO COPING MECHANISMS

- Looting, destruction (including of homesteads), and loss of productive assets during attacks in December 2021 through April 2022, which was reported in 10 out of all 13 FGDs combined, likely limited both cultivation and affected populations' ability to cope through asset liquidation.¹⁸ Participants in 9 of 13

FGDs reported the looting or destruction of assets, including livestock, non-food items (NFIs), and harvested food stock, potentially impacting affected populations' ability to liquidate assets to buy food, rely on previously harvested food, or use tools to cultivate.

- Cattle raiding, which reportedly accompanied the attacks in December 2021-April 2022, likely further limited the ability of communities in Leer County to rely on cattle for consumption coping.¹⁹ Cattle provide milk for use as food for the general population during the lean season (July-October), and for populations living in cattle camps year-round.²⁰ Cattle also serve as an asset of last resort which can be liquidated in times of serious need.²¹ Raiding during December 2021-April 2022's attacks seems to reflect a continuing trend of diminishing access to cattle seen in the county since 2013.²² In 2018, FEWS NET reported that the number of households with access to a milking cow in Leer had decreased from almost 90% in 2014 to 6% in 2018.²³ Findings suggest that it is unlikely access to cattle has improved significantly since 2018. Participants in all 5 severe hunger risk FGDs and 3 of 8 population movement FGDs reported a lack of access to cattle prior to April's attacks. In those population movement FGDs in which participants reported having cattle themselves

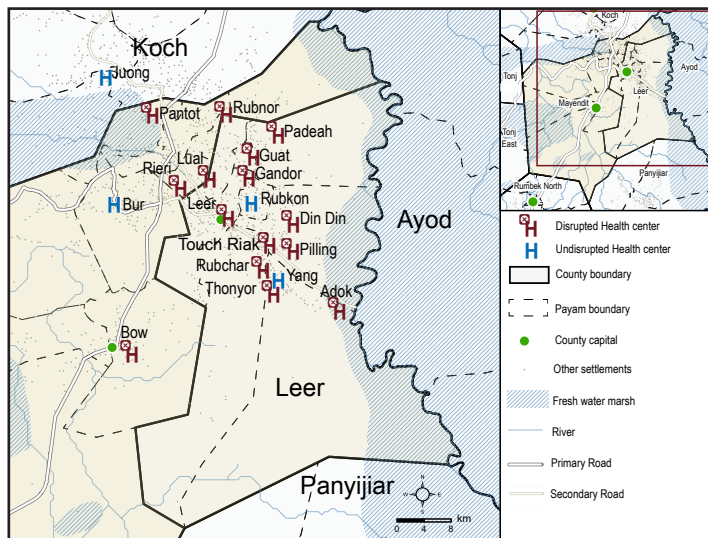
Map 2: HFA distribution sites reportedly disrupted due to insecurity at any point between December 2021 and April 2022



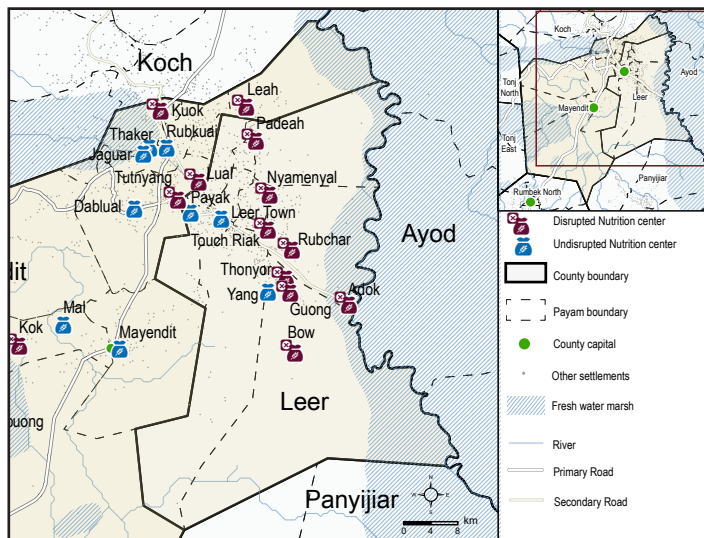
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Map 3: Health centres reportedly disrupted due to insecurity at any point between December 2021 and April 2022



Map 4: Nutrition centres reportedly disrupted due to insecurity at any point between December 2021 and April 2022



or having had cattle in their communities at the time of the attacks (3 of 7), participants reported that cattle had been raided in large numbers during the attacks in December 2021-April 2022. This was also reported by a service provider KI working with livestock in Leer County and was further reflected by a recent UN report which indicated that over 7,000 cattle had been raided from the county between February and May 2022.²⁴ With limited or no access to cattle to rely on, it is likely that communities experienced increased difficulties sustaining themselves through their usual livelihood activities, which could leave them to further engage in unsustainable or harmful coping mechanisms such as meal skipping.

IMPACT ON SERVICE PROVISION

- In addition to the reported impacts of December 2021-April 2022's attacks on livelihoods and coping mechanisms in Leer County, assessment findings indicate that the conflict also disrupted humanitarian service provision in the county. According to the 6 KIs interviewed from health and nutrition providers operating in Leer, services at 18 out of 21 humanitarian health facilities and 12 out of 15 humanitarian nutrition facilities in the county had been disrupted by violence between December and April. KIs reported that the looting of supplies was widespread. All but one provider in the county reported that nutrition assets had been seized, and health supplies and facility infrastructure had been destroyed during this time, which they explained made sites inoperable. The HFA provider in the county reported that widespread looting from storage facilities in April and that disrupted distributions in March resulted in beneficiaries in Leer County not receiving food assistance for a four-month period between February and May.

CONCLUSION

Leer County has experienced several large-scale conflicts and climatic shocks since 2013, likely compounding households' vulnerability by disrupting livelihoods and reducing coping capacity. Secondary sources and findings from the FGDs and KIs suggested the 2022 conflict in Leer County was an additional shock to already-vulnerable communities. The violence reportedly displaced the majority of the population of Leer County, and in some cases reportedly forced multiple rounds of displacement. This displacement may have resulted in a disruption of an already low-yield cultivation cycle for some populations, further reducing their ability to rely on cultivated crops as a food source and potentially increasing reliance on HFA. In addition, the reported destruction of productive assets and cattle raids during attacks, and the employment of productive asset liquidation coping strategies, likely further reduced communities' ability to engage in self-sufficient livelihood activities both during displacement and after any possible return. Finally, the conflict reportedly also temporarily but severely disrupted the provision of critical health and nutrition services, as well as the provision of HFA. This may have limited households' ability to mitigate severe hunger.

December 2021-April 2022's attacks, subsequent displacement, and reported disruption to lives and livelihoods in Leer County likely continued the trend of conflict events in the county, which have contributed to compounded vulnerability, negative food security outcomes, and impacts to communities' ability to sustain themselves via traditional livelihoods mechanisms. Indeed, the October 2022 IPC analysis, the first since the attacks, projected that by April 2023, one year after conflict culminated in April, 50% of the population would face emergency-level (P4) food insecurity, the greatest in the country, with renewed 5% pockets of catastrophic conditions.²⁵

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ENDNOTES

1. UNMISS. [“Leer County: Relative Calm Resumes After Waves of Brutal Violence, But Humanitarian Situation Dire.”](#) 6 May 2022; UNMISS. [“Attacks against civilians in southern Unity State, South Sudan \(February-May 2022\).”](#) 2022. 4; IOM. “South Sudan Population Estimates.” 2022.
2. Ibid.
3. IPC. [“South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition Situation for February-March 2022 and Projections for April-July 2022.”](#) 9 April 2022; UNMISS. [“Attacks against civilians in southern Unity State, South Sudan \(February-May 2022\).”](#) 2022. 4; IOM. “South Sudan Population Estimates.” 2022.
4. IPC. [“South Sudan IPC Key Messages February July 2022 Report.”](#) 9 April 2022. 9.
5. Ibid.
6. Amnesty International. [“Anything that was breathing was killed.”](#) 2018. 7-10.
7. IPC. [“South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for January 2017 and Projections for February - April 2017 and May - July 2017.”](#) 1 January 2017.
8. MSF. [“South Sudan: More than 150,000 people at risk following severe flooding in Bentiu.”](#) 23 November 2021.
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10. UNMISS. [“Leer County: Relative Calm Resumes After Waves of Brutal Violence, But Humanitarian Situation Dire.”](#) 6 May 2022; UNMISS. [“Attacks against civilians in southern Unity State, South Sudan \(February-May 2022\).”](#) 2022. 4; IOM. “South Sudan Population Estimates.” 2022.
11. UNMISS. [“Attacks against civilians in southern Unity State, South Sudan \(February-May 2022\).”](#) 2022. 8.
12. Amnesty International. [“Anything that was breathing was killed.”](#) 2018. 21.
13. Participants in the remaining FGDs did not discuss previous displacement to the islands.
14. UNMISS. [“Attacks against civilians in southern Unity State, South Sudan \(February-May 2022\).”](#) 2022. 9.
15. FEWS NET. [“Livelihoods Zone Map and Descriptions for South Sudan.”](#) 2018. 32.
16. Ibid.
17. FAO. [“Special Report: 2021 FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission \(CFSAM\) to the Republic of South Sudan.”](#) 9 June 2022. 29.
18. UNMISS. [“Attacks against civilians in southern Unity State, South Sudan \(February-May 2022\).”](#) 2022. 13.
19. Ibid.
20. FEWS NET. [“Livelihoods Zone Map and Descriptions for South Sudan.”](#) 2018. 32.
21. Ibid. 31-32.
22. FEWS NET. [“Special Report: Trends in acute food insecurity, 2013-2018.”](#) 21 December 2018. 3.
23. FEWS NET. [“Livelihoods Zone Map and Descriptions for South Sudan.”](#) 2018. 32; FEWS NET. [“Special Report: Trends in acute food insecurity, 2013-2018.”](#) 21 December 2018. 3.
24. UNMISS. [“Attacks against civilians in southern Unity State, South Sudan \(February-May 2022\).”](#) 2022. 13.
25. IPC. [“South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October-November 2022 and Projections for December 2022-March 2023 and April-July 2023.”](#) 3 October 2022.

About REACH Initiative

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).

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