

Photo: WFP

Humanitarian Situation Overview: Ethiopia - South Sudan Cross-Border Displacement

February 2024 | Greater Upper Nile | South Sudan

Severe humanitarian needs and rising violence has spurred widespread displacement of South Sudanese refugees from Ethiopia into South Sudan. Many of those displaced intend to remain in South Sudan and require support to reintegrate. Needs in areas of return are high, and outcomes are likely to worsen with the onset of rains, particularly for those unable to access humanitarian assistance.

KEY MESSAGES

- Between July 2023 and January 2024, severe humanitarian conditions and spiralling violence [displaced at least 109,000 South Sudanese refugees](#) from the Gambella region of Ethiopia to South Sudan, more than 10% of Ethiopia's total refugee population.
- The population influx compounds an already serious humanitarian situation within communities of Jonglei and Upper Nile States facing severe underlying challenges, including widespread acute food insecurity and malnutrition. These same communities continue to receive thousands of returnees fleeing the war in Sudan, placing significant pressure on already limited resources and over-strained services. As the population in these areas grows, the risk of severe humanitarian outcomes is likely to increase, particularly after the start of the rainy season.
- Findings suggest that many of those displaced from Ethiopia wish to remain in South Sudan, and moreover, explicitly do not want to return to Gambella despite perceptions that living conditions in camps there have improved. The June-October 2023 [suspension of humanitarian food aid](#) seems to have eroded trust in the dependability of basic services provided to refugees in camps, and [recent violence](#) - reportedly carried out along ethnic lines - has shaken feelings of physical security. Nevertheless, many were unable to exclude the possibility of their eventual migration back to Gambella. Conditions in areas of return are difficult, while the resumption of humanitarian food assistance in Gambella would provide short-term relief.
- Without concerted multi-sectoral assistance aimed at both short-term and durable solutions, it is plausible that many of those displaced from Gambella will gradually migrate back to the refugee camps. Findings suggest that such an outcome runs contrary to the wishes of affected populations, risks inflaming already tense relations between groups in Ethiopia, and undermines longer-term reintegration efforts.

CONTEXT

Over the second half of 2023, severe humanitarian conditions and widespread violence drove large-scale displacement of South Sudanese refugees from the Gambella region of Ethiopia to South Sudan. Between August and December, 105,814 South Sudanese nationals were recorded crossing the border.¹ As of August 2023, Gambella hosted approximately 383,000 South Sudanese refugees across seven camps,² more than one-third of Ethiopia's refugee population.³

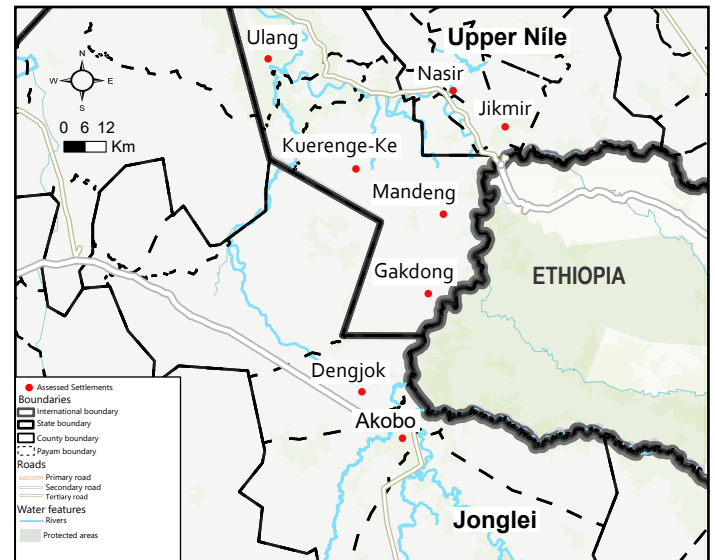
In June 2023, humanitarian actors suspended all food assistance across Ethiopia in response to "widespread food aid diversion."⁴ In September, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said they had verified reports that the suspension had contributed to at-least 30 hunger-related deaths in Gambella's refugee camps.⁵ HFA for refugees resumed in early October,⁶ and in November, plans were announced for a nationwide resumption.⁷

Beginning in June and increasingly after the aid suspension, a series of armed attacks and clashes, reportedly carried out along ethnic lines,⁸ killed more than 100 people across Gambella.⁹ The violence, which involved the targeting of civilians,¹⁰ is reported to have resulted in the destruction of entire villages¹¹ and the disruption of humanitarian access.¹² Though tensions in Gambella are long-standing, periodically resulting in clashes between groups native to both sides of the South Sudan – Ethiopia border,¹³ assessment findings suggest that insecurity between June and November was characterized by atypical levels of violence against refugees.

Most arrivals interviewed at points of entry (PoEs) reported intending to settle in counties along the border, including Akobo county of Jonglei State, and Ulang, Nasir, and Maiwut counties of Upper Nile State,¹⁴ which since April 2023 have also received thousands of returnees fleeing the war in Sudan.¹⁵ Of persons recorded crossing from Ethiopia between August and October 2023, more than 80% reported returning to their pre-displacement area of residence.¹⁶

To inform a better understanding of humanitarian needs, risks, and population movement dynamics following these significant contextual developments, REACH conducted an assessment in Akobo, Nasir, and Ulang Counties in November and December 2023.

Map 1: Assessment coverage



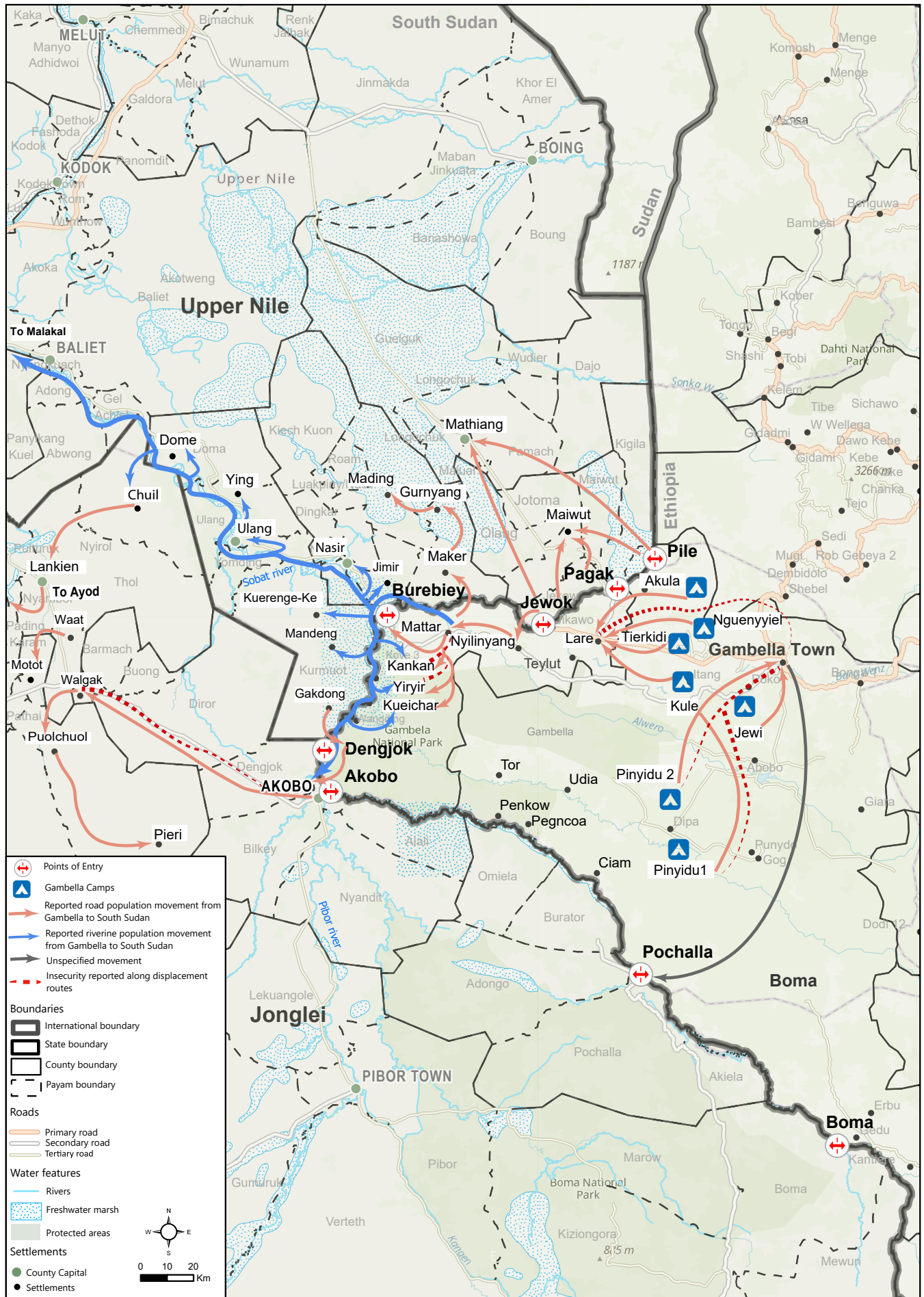
METHODOLOGY

Primary data collection consisted of 36 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 15 key informant interviews, and was conducted between 27 November and 12 December, 2023 in Akobo, Nasir, and Ulang Counties. FGDs were held separately with South Sudanese nationals who had recently arrived from Ethiopia ("returnees"), and individuals who had resided in the assessment location prior to the population influx (the "host community"). Key informant interviews were conducted with humanitarian service providers and local authorities. Assessment locations were selected on the basis of their large returnee population, and based on logistical feasibility.

Two FGD guides were employed. The first explored population movement dynamics and the second humanitarian needs, including access to food and basic services, in both areas of departure and return. The former was conducted with returnee heads of household, while the latter was conducted with both returnees and the host community. Key informant interviews focused on broad contextual developments and dynamics around assistance provision. Qualitative findings are indicative of the situation at the time of data collection, and are not statistically representative.

A secondary data review was conducted between 15th November and 15th December 2023, including analysis of IOM-DTM population flow monitoring data. These preliminary findings also draw on needs assessments conducted by various humanitarian international NGOs, on inter-agency needs assessments (IRNAs) conducted between August and October 2023, and on various other documents prepared by humanitarian actors.

Map 2: Reported population movement between Gambella and South Sudan, July - December 2023



GAMBELLA: ACUTE SHOCKS AND DISPLACEMENT

Between August and December 2023, two interconnected drivers precipitated widespread displacement of South Sudanese refugees from Gambella to South Sudan. First, the June suspension of HFA sharply reduced food availability within aid-reliant refugee settlements, triggering atypically severe food insecurity throughout Gambella’s camps.¹⁷ Second, a surge in violence within and near camps limited physical mobility and prevented households from engaging in critical livelihoods and/or coping activities. For example, FGD participants commonly reported that the HFA suspension had resulted in near-total reliance on wild foods, but that physical insecurity had restricted movement to bush areas where wild foods were available.

Armed clashes involving attacks on South Sudanese refugees increased shortly after the June HFA-suspension, according to returnee FGD participants, frequently along roads connecting camps to nearby towns and in adjacent bush areas.¹⁸ Returnees commonly described the level of violence directed towards refugees as unprecedented, despite long-standing tensions between various community groups that have historically resulted in violent clashes and displacement.¹⁹ Participants in several FGDs reported instances in which refugees were attacked or killed while foraging for food or firewood, or while attempting to take food from nearby farms, accounts corroborated by earlier findings published by the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC).²⁰ Attacks on refugees in camps, including the razing of shelters, were also identified to REACH by protection partners, and were reported to have continued up until November.

While many FGD participants made no connection between the suspension of food assistance and the deterioration in physical security shortly thereafter, some perceived a link between the aid stoppage, contentious relations between humanitarian actors and local authorities, and a withdrawal of local authorities from their normal security duties, allowing perpetrators of violence access to refugee populations.

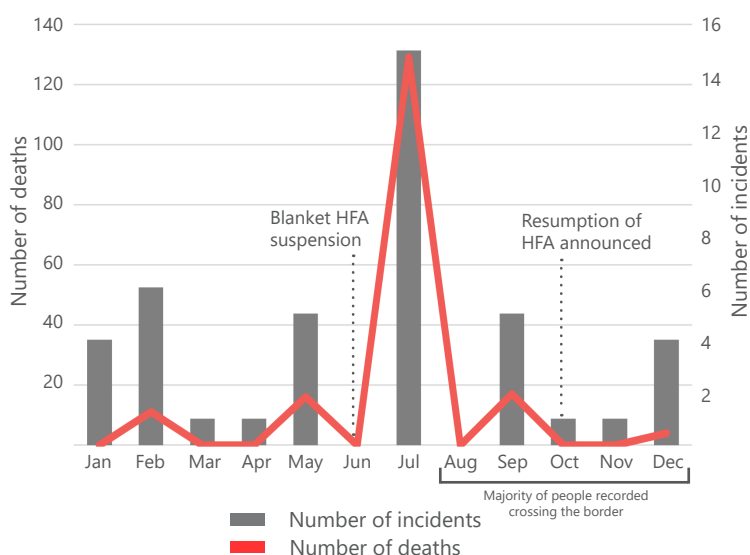
Beyond growing hunger, returnee FGD participants commonly described a broader decline in living conditions across Gambella’s refugee camps beginning in July. Returnees described disruptions to the provision of healthcare services, disease outbreaks, the suspension of education services, and disruptions to water supply. The decline in living conditions

appears linked to insecurity-related disruptions to humanitarian access in July, followed by a partial resumption of exclusively life-saving activities.²¹ Participants in five groups reported that the severity of conditions in the camps had contributed to hunger-related deaths of residents, also corroborating reports by the EHRC,²² and mirroring outcomes reported elsewhere in Ethiopia.²³ The severity of outcomes reported over the second half of 2023 indicates extreme reliance of refugees on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs.

Recent arrivals consistently identified Pinyidu 1, Pinyidu 2, and Jewi refugee camps (and, less frequently, Kule 3) as locations where conditions had been most severe throughout the HFA suspension. These camps are located further from the South Sudan border and deeper into territory populated mostly by the host community, with whom relations are coloured by long-standing tensions, according to participants, placing residents there at greater exposure to targeted violence and insecurity-related mobility restrictions. Participants in several FGDs described movement during this period as either dangerous or impossible, greatly reducing the capacity of residents to cope with increasingly severe needs, for instance, by collecting wild foods, accessing markets in adjacent towns, or accessing financial support from relatives.

Recent arrivals described undertaking arduous and sometimes dangerous journeys from Gambella to South Sudan. In five FGDs, participants reported having experienced or witnessed violence in transit (including attacks, killings, robbery, or abductions), while others reported travelling only at night to avoid

Figure 1: Number of violent incidents vs number of reported deaths in Gambella, January to December 2023; ACLED



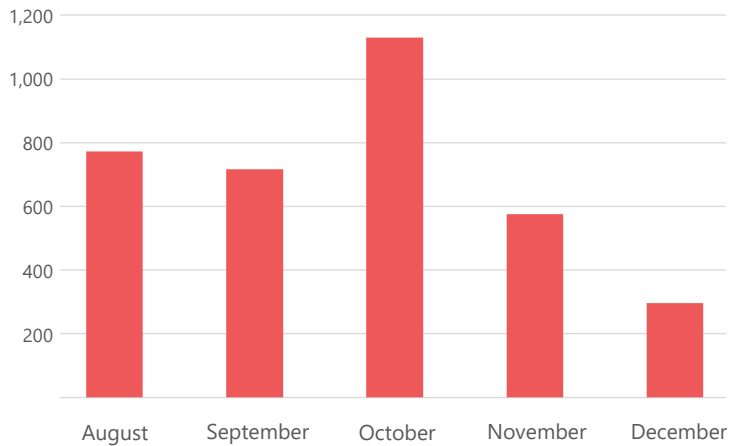
confrontations with the host community. Those without financial means to access vehicle or boat transport reported walking the entire duration of their journey from Gambella to areas of destination in Eastern Jonglei or Upper Nile States, which reportedly takes several weeks when traveling with small children. Lack of food was the most commonly reported challenge faced in transit, particularly given the reportedly widespread exhaustion and poor health condition of travellers. Participants in two FGDs reported observing persons dying in transit due to sickness. Healthcare providers in Ulang and Akobo reported that some returnees were arriving in severe health condition, and that arrivals in November and December appeared more vulnerable than those who had arrived in previous months.

While the majority of camp residents were consistently reported to have migrated, large numbers of people had remained despite severe humanitarian conditions, according to participants in most FGDs. Those who remained comprised two distinct population groups. First, persons unable to financially or physically access transportation, including elderly persons, persons with physical disabilities, young children, and acutely malnourished or sick individuals. Second, persons with access to familial support – commonly described as “better off” – were also reported to have remained. FGD participants described this group as having the financial or social capacity to withstand the impacts of the food assistance pause, enabling them to remain in the camps and wait for assistance to resume. As such, it is likely that rapid and profound demographic shifts have occurred within Gambella’s refugee camps since August.

GAMBELLA TO SOUTH SUDAN: POPULATION MOVEMENT

Though cross-border movement between Gambella and South Sudan is historically commonplace - to visit family, seek safety, access services, or conduct business²⁴ - migration trends over the second half of 2023 were highly atypical in both scale and nature. Between August and October, the number of people recorded crossing into South Sudan from Gambella was more than four and a half times higher than over the same period in 2022.²⁵ Ninety-one percent of the 8,000-plus recorded movements (comprising more than 60,000 individuals) from Gambella to South Sudan between August and October 2023 were self-reported forced displacements, roughly eighty

Figure 2: Average number of daily arrivals to South Sudan from Ethiopia recorded at 11 PoEs, between August and December 2023; IOM, UNHCR, RRC. Dashboard.



percentage points higher than in 2022.²⁶ Assessment participants consistently described migration patterns over the second half of 2023 as unprecedented.

Further, the scale of inflows could be considerably greater than the roughly 109,000 recorded. Secondary sources capture large discrepancies in the number of arrivals recorded by [population flow monitoring](#), by local officials, and by humanitarian needs assessments. For instance, one joint-agency assessment conducted in Akobo (21 – 28 August) verified roughly 12,700 arrivals from Ethiopia, far greater than the 3,129 recorded by population flow monitoring at the time.²⁷ Another conducted in Ulang (16 – 21 August) notes that population flow monitoring had captured the arrival of 800 returnees from Ethiopia, whereas local officials recorded more than 12,000.²⁸

The large majority of those interviewed at PoEs reported intending to settle in their county of origin, most commonly Nasir, Akobo, Maiwut, or Ulang counties.²⁹ Returnees have largely settled within the host community, residing with friends or relatives, and are spread across various payams, according to local authorities and secondary sources.³⁰

Over the final week of December and first week of January, the daily number of people recorded crossing into South Sudan from Gambella slowed to less than 100 per day, on average.³¹ The reduction of inflows likely reflects an improvement in living conditions within Gambella’s refugee camps following the resumption of HFA in October, and an improvement in humanitarian access following the stabilisation of security across much of the region in

August. Small-scale migration of returnees back to Gambella was reported at the time of data collection, though net inflows remained positive (more below).

SOUTH SUDAN: ACUTE NEEDS AND MOVEMENT INTENTIONS

High levels of underlying vulnerability in areas of return: Areas receiving returnees in Jonglei and Upper Nile States face severe humanitarian challenges, and as such, have limited capacity to absorb and support thousands of newly displaced people.

The IPC projects that 20% of the combined population of Akobo, Nasir, and Ulang counties will face emergency (Phase 4) levels of food insecurity between December 2023 and March 2024, a number expected to increase to 28% during the lean season.³² All three counties are expected to remain in IPC Acute Malnutrition (AMN) Phase 4 (critical) until June 2024, indicative of an “emergency” acute malnutrition prevalence between 15 and 29%.³³

Water, sanitation, and hygiene conditions in areas of return are extremely poor. In Ulang, for instance, 80% of the population collects drinking water from a river or stream while 83% of the population practices open defecation.³⁴ In Nasir, local authorities reported that just four of the county’s twenty-two boreholes are functioning, leading people to collect drinking water directly from the river.

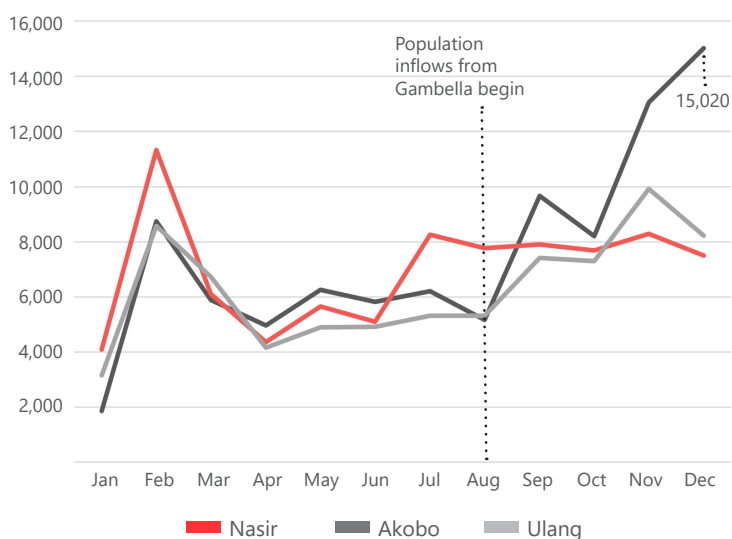
Despite high market reliance between January and July, few households have the economic capacity to meet their minimum needs. FSNMS R29 found that 88% of households in Akobo, 94% in Nasir, and 90% in Ulang do not have the economic capacity to meet their minimum monthly needs.³⁶ Such high needs, and limited resources enabling community and household level coping, point to extremely high levels of underlying vulnerability, and suggest that areas to which returnees have settled have minimal capacity to absorb and support new arrivals.

Health and nutrition: Assessment participants consistently reported that the population influx coincided with a sharp deterioration in public health, placing immense pressure on the capacity of largely humanitarian-operated healthcare systems. A rise in health needs between August and December is well captured by secondary data.

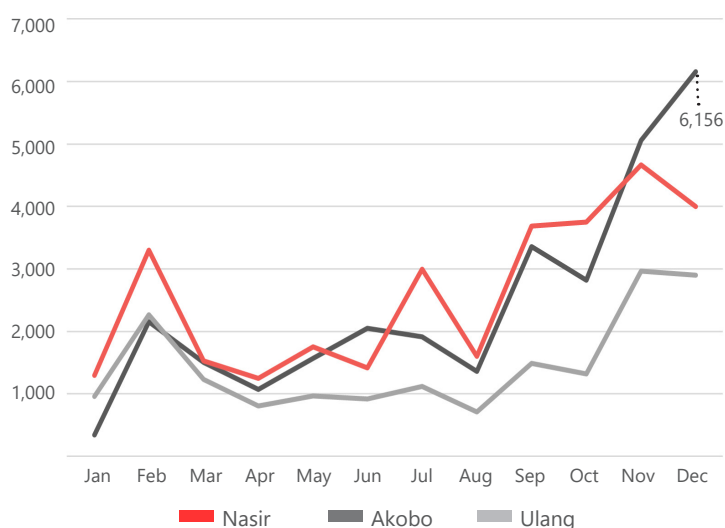
Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response

Figures 2, 3 and 4: Total recorded consultations (2), malaria cases (3), and measles cases (4) between January and December 2023, by county; WHO IDSR. Dataset.

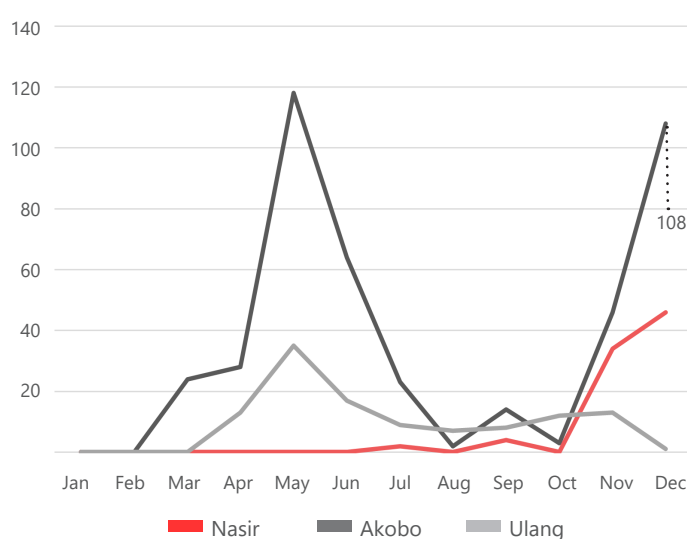
Total number of consultations recorded across all health facilities:



Total cases of malaria recorded across all health facilities:



Total cases of measles recorded across all health facilities:



(IDSR) data reflect a sharp increase in the number of recorded malaria cases between August and December in all three assessed counties (more than quadrupling in Akobo and Ulang, and more than doubling in Nasir),³⁷ which FGD discussion participants and healthcare KIs attributed to inadequate shelter, a lack of mosquito nets, and persistent standing flood water, particularly in Nasir. In November, a measles outbreak was declared in Nasir,³⁸ while a pre-existing outbreak in Akobo has worsened since August.³⁹ The impact of large population inflows on public health is well documented in other parts of the country that have received large numbers of returnees from Sudan.⁴⁰

The population influx and the associated increase in health needs has put immense strain on healthcare systems. In Akobo, for instance, humanitarian partners reported that medical supplies allocated for four months had been exhausted in less than one. Healthcare providers in Akobo and Ulang reported that burden placed on secondary healthcare facilities in particular were compounded by low public trust in primary health clinics, which are often understaffed or stocked-out of basic medications, leading people to seek basic healthcare services at secondary healthcare facilities.

Food security and livelihoods: The precise severity of food insecurity amongst returnees from Ethiopia (and of remaining refugees in Gambella) remains a critical information gap, though piecemeal data suggests it could be severe, and is likely to deteriorate with the onset of rains around May. Returnees and host community members consistently flagged food as a priority need.

Returnee FGD participants commonly reported that their displacement aligned with harvest activities in Ethiopia and in South Sudan, when food availability is at an annual high, providing some relief for severe levels of hunger in transit and upon arrival to areas of return, and likely staving off worst-case food security outcomes. Host community FGD participants in all three counties reported that, relative to previous years, comparatively normal weather patterns had enabled a fruitful harvest in 2023, resulting in relatively abundant food availability in the final quarter of 2023.

Host community members, however, widely reported that the population influx had contributed to an accelerated depletion of harvested food stocks, causing most stocks to have exhausted around December. The high burden placed on the

host community has been corroborated by other humanitarian assessments,⁴¹ and mirrors the impacts of arrivals from Sudan in other areas of country.

Though existing information is insufficient to make confident statements on the food security status of returnees from Ethiopia, one humanitarian-conducted needs assessment in Akobo East (August 2023) suggests food security outcomes among arrivals could be severe. Of 272 respondents, 60% were found to have a "poor" food consumption score, and 65% reported engaging in emergency coping strategies, indicating that most returnees may be unable to meet minimum food requirements despite engaging in unsustainable or negative behaviours.⁴²

A SCOPE registration was underway or had been recently completed in all three counties at the time of data collection, and general food distribution (GFD) is scheduled to commence in all three counties in March, according to KIs,⁴³ though it is unclear at the time of writing to what extent returnees will be integrated into the response plan. In any case, it is likely that sharing of food assistance will be common, meaning beneficiaries will consume less than per-person ration allocations intend.

Until roughly August 2024, primary food sources will consist of wild foods and fish, livestock, small-scale dry-season agriculture, markets, and humanitarian food assistance. Fishing especially will be a key component of household food security, as many communities of return lie adjacent to major waterways such as the Pibor and Sobat Rivers. Returnees and host community FGD participants commonly reported that limited availability of fishing equipment, tools for cultivation, and tarps - which are used to collect and transport large quantities of firewood and construction materials along waterways - were the primary barriers to self-sufficiency.

Movement intentions: Participants in nearly all FGDs reported that many, if not most, recent arrivals are unwilling to return to their previous location of residence in Gambella despite the resumption of services there. Aversion to returning to Gambella was most commonly linked to perceptions of an increasingly unpredictable and hostile security situation, deepened distrust in the reliability of basic services and humanitarian assistance, and feelings of gratitude associated with returning to one's area of origin.

Findings on intentions are corroborated by a number

of secondary sources, including one humanitarian conducted assessment in Akobo East (August 2023), which found that 79% of new arrivals reported no intention of moving over the subsequent six months,⁴⁴ as well as by population flow monitoring, which shows that over half of all recorded arrivals intend to stay in South Sudan permanently. Nevertheless, returnee FGD participants often acknowledged that, should living conditions deteriorate in their area of current settlement, or should they be unable to meet their basic needs, they will be forced to migrate elsewhere, most viably to Gambella where their registration as refugees entitles them to a range of services.

Participants in most groups were aware that HFA had resumed in Gambella's refugee camps, but commonly communicated the perception that rations had been reduced, or that assistance may be permanently stopped in the near future. Uncertainty regarding the dependability and extent of humanitarian services in Ethiopian camps seems to contribute to an unwillingness to resettle in Gambella.

Despite data indicating the intention of most returnees to remain in areas of return, population outflows back to Gambella were reportedly ongoing at the time of data collection. Protection partners in Nasir and Ulang counties reported that, beginning in late November, the number of people recorded crossing back into Gambella from South Sudan had increased (though the inflow-outflow rate remained net positive), the primary reasons for which were to access healthcare, to access education services, and to collect humanitarian food assistance.

Importantly, population flow monitoring indicates that movement intentions may vary significantly by geographic area of settlement. For instance, 70% of people reporting Nasir as their county of destination reported intending to remain in South Sudan permanently, while only 22% of those reporting Maiwut as their county of destination reported the same.⁴⁶ Such large variations in movement intentions likely stem from parallel variations in the level of humanitarian-provided services, or in perceptions of the likelihood of accessing assistance.

Access to education identified as key pull-factor:

Assessment participants consistently identified access to education as a key pull-factor from South Sudan back to Ethiopia. While most returnee FGD participants communicated intending not to return to Gambella, returning to attend humanitarian-operated schools in refugee camps was frequently cited as an

exception. KIs reported that education is cost-free in Ethiopia, and that high-scoring students can attain a full-scholarship to an Ethiopian university. Education, specifically higher-education, was described as a vital resource enabling future employment and self-sufficiency, and as such, was regarded as an invaluable long-term investment. Schools in South Sudan were perceived as poor quality, non-existent (especially in the case of secondary education), or too expensive to attend.

As such, assessment participants commonly reported that much of the returning population over the short term will disproportionately comprise school-aged individuals seeking to resume their education. The outward migration of students back to Gambella to attend schools was ongoing at the time of data collection and continued through January, according to updates from humanitarian actors.

Primary needs and assistance preferences: Primary needs most commonly identified by returnees in areas of return were food and shelter. Also commonly reported were non-food items (NFIs) including cooking and sleeping materials, mosquito nets as well as healthcare, and education services. Recent arrivals commonly reported that they were unable to transport basic NFIs along displacement routes, owing to the duration and difficulty of the journey, and as a result were highly dependent on resources provided by the host community. Due to overcrowding in host-community shelters, many returnees were reportedly sleeping out in the open.

In areas of return, humanitarian intervention at the time of data collection was reported by KIs to have consisted mainly of cash and NFI distributions - but only for a relatively small number of households meeting vulnerability criteria - and site-level support to health and nutrition facilities.

The large majority of recent arrivals reported being aware of distributions conducted, but having not received any assistance since arriving to South Sudan. Some reported that registrations and distributions had been conducted in payam headquarters close to major waterways, restricting access for populations in more remote in-land areas, or that registrations and distributions had taken place prior to their arrival.

Returnee participants in six FGDs and host community participants in one FGD reported that humanitarian assistance intended for returnees had been diverted to members of the host community, including cash and NFIs. In several instances, this

was attributed by participants to nepotism, and reported to be the decision of local chiefs. The risk of assistance exclusion is likely highest for households that chose not - or were unable - to return to their area of origin.⁴⁷ Some FGD participants in Nasir and Akobo reported being unwilling to return to their exact area of origin due to negative perceptions of security there. Several participants from Nasir Town associated the presence of military barracks there with a heightened security risk, preferring instead to settle in adjacent payams.

PROJECTIONS, RISKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The return of South Sudanese nationals from Gambella refugee camps brings both risks and potential longer-term opportunities for affected populations.

Risks: The population influx will continue to strain limited resources at the household and community levels, mirroring well-documented impacts in other parts of the country that have received large numbers of returnees from Sudan. Returnees commonly reported being unable to transport most of their possessions, and are thus highly dependent on the host community to meet their basic needs. Harvested food stocks have likely exhausted or will exhaust towards the beginning of 2024, in most assessed areas, extending the duration of the lean season. Public health conditions and the capacity of health systems also remain a key concern.

Population inflows also risk exacerbating local intra-communal tensions, plausibly increasing the risk of revenge killings, according to KIs, though broader relations between arrivals and the host community were unanimously described as unproblematic. One August 2023 protection assessment conducted in Akobo East found that 25% of returnees were limiting their movement due to the threat posed by revenge attacks.⁴⁸ Small-scale returns to Gambella, particularly of young men, due to the threat of revenge killings, will likely continue through 2024.

Opportunities: FGD participants and KIs outlined two potential advantages associated with the population influx. First, the population influx enables the re-population of areas that were abandoned during the 2013-2018 crisis. The depopulation of these areas was commonly associated with increased insecurity and criminality, in that large remote spaces allow for the freer movement of armed persons. Perceptions of insecurity in more remote payams

have contributed to a trend of migration to peri-urban population centres, such as Akobo Town and Ulang Town. Second, some assessment participants expressed hope that the population increase could facilitate greater agricultural production in the second half of 2024, helping to alleviate chronically acute food insecurity resulting in part from consistent crop production deficits.⁴⁹

Major challenges facing humanitarian action:

Within a landscape of reduced humanitarian funding,⁵⁰ it is likely that humanitarian actors will face major operational challenges in responding to the needs of affected populations along the Ethiopia-South Sudan border. Cluster focal points in Upper Nile State have raised concerns over the lack of funding available to transport supplies from Malakal to areas along the Sobat corridor, while the Shelter/NFI Cluster reported a funding gap of more than a quarter-million USD for multi-purpose cash assistance.⁵¹ The World Food Programme is facing profound funding cuts, forcing difficult prioritization choices focused on famine prevention, while the Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster has reported it is unable to assist returnees in areas of return due to resource constraints.⁵² Without concerted multi-sectoral re-integration support, the gradual migration of most returnees back to Gambella refugee camps is highly likely. Assessment findings suggests such a scenario runs contrary to the wishes of affected populations, would be counterproductive to long-term reintegration efforts, and risks exacerbating underlying tensions between groups in Gambella.

In particular, the provision of livelihood support would likely facilitate reintegration and reduce the risk that recent arrivals will return to Gambella. Livelihood support, including seeds, fishing equipment, agricultural tools, and start-up capital, were frequently highlighted by FGD participants as central to their ability to remain in South Sudan. In settlements along the Pibor and Sobat corridors, communities engage in dry-season cultivation along the riverbanks, and practice fishing year-round. As such, the provision of seeds, farming equipment, and fishing kits, will facilitate the reintegration of returnees, and enable greater self-sufficiency of impacted communities. Emergency life-saving assistance, though vital to reducing the risk of excess mortality, will likely not be enough to enable sustainable re-integration.

The lack of secondary education services in areas of return are likely to remain a primary push-factor for recent arrivals, particularly among secondary-school aged youth and families with young children. As such,

the provision of education services will also be a key component of long-term reintegration support.

Risks faced by refugees in Gambella: The impact of recent violence on the physical security and mobility of refugee populations in Gambella demonstrates their exposure to physical safety risks. Refugees settled in the camps of Pinyidu and Jewi appear especially vulnerable to future bouts of violence, given their distance from the South Sudan border and proximity to communities with whom relations are evidently contentious and volatile. Further, secondary sources consistently identify the growing population of refugees as an aggravating factor of conflict amongst Gambella's various communities.⁵³ Testimony of returnees suggests that, relative to previous bouts of violent conflict, refugees experienced atypical levels of violence between June and November 2023, a possible indication that their living situation has become increasingly precarious.

Critical information gaps persist in Gambella:

The region faces persistent humanitarian-access challenges, restricting the flow of information to humanitarian planners and practitioners.⁵⁴ Of all humanitarian assessments conducted in Ethiopia between August and November 2023 and recorded in the OCHA database, only 3% (four assessments) were conducted in Gambella despite the region hosting over one-third of the nation's refugees.⁵⁵ In the coming months, displaced persons are likely to return from South Sudan, possibly due to severe needs in their areas of displacement, while the needs and demographics of camp residents are likely to have shifted dramatically in the wake of cumulative acute shocks. Understanding how needs, perceptions, and intentions of camp residents have changed within this new context will be vital enabling to evidence-based assistance.

REFERENCES

1. UNHCR, UN-IOM, & The South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. "[Population Movement From Ethiopia to South Sudan.](#)" Dashboard. Accessed 9 January, 2024.
2. UNHCR. "[Ethiopia: Total Refugee and Asylum Seekers.](#)" Accessed 14 December 2023.
3. UNHCR. "[Ethiopia Refugee Crisis: Aid Statistics and News.](#)" Accessed 12 January, 2023.
4. WFP. "[Widespread food diversion impacts WFP food distributions across Ethiopia.](#)" 9 June, 2023; USAID and Government of Ethiopia. "[Joint Statement by USAID and Ministry of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.](#)" 8 June, 2023.
5. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. "[Resumption of timely, adequate, and responsive provision of food aid critical.](#)" Press Release. 20 September 2023.
6. WFP. "[WFP resumes distributions to refugees across Ethiopia.](#)" 9 October, 2023; UNHCR. "[Resumption of food distribution for refugees in Ethiopia. Update #3.](#)" 25 October, 2023.
7. Reuters. "[US to resume food aid across Ethiopia next month.](#)" 15 November, 2023.
8. Addis Standard. "[Security Crisis in Gambella region severely impacts human rights, needs urgent attention – EHRC.](#)" 24 July, 2023; Addis Standard. "[Nine killed, 17 injured in latest violence in Gambella, regional government says situation under control.](#)" 25 May, 2023.
9. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), [acleddata.com](#). Dataset. Accessed 10 January, 2023.
10. Ibid.
11. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. "[Gambella Region: The high level of violence and human rights abuses caused by the region's security demands further attention from the government](#)" [translated from Amharic]. Press release. 23 July, 2023.
12. UNFPA. "[Ethiopia Humanitarian Situation Report – July 2023.](#)" 11 August, 2023.
13. Borchgrevink, Axel, and Lie, Jon Harald Sande. "Layer upon Layer: Understanding the Gambella Conflict Formation." *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies*. 2012; Tasgara, Asafa. "Assessing causes of inter-ethnic conflict in Ethiopia: Emphasis on Anuak and Nuer conflicts in the Gambella Regional State." October 2021; Gashaw, Tasew. "[Cross-Border Intergroup Conflict in the Horn of Africa: A Case Study of Ethiopia-South Sudan Borderland People.](#)" The Wilson Center. November 2017.
14. UNHCR, UN-IOM, & The South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. "[Population Movement From Ethiopia to South Sudan.](#)" Dashboard. Accessed 9 January, 2024.
15. Ibid.
16. IOM-DTM. South Sudan Population Movement. Dataset. Available for download on [data.humdata.org](#). October 2023 is the most recent month for which data is publicly available.
17. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. "[Resumption of timely, adequate, and responsive provision of food aid critical.](#)" Press Release. 20 September 2023.
18. Ibid. See also: Addis Standard. "[Three killed, 23 injured after unidentified militias launch deadly attack on public buses near Gambella city.](#)" 15 July, 2023.
19. See for example: Sudan Tribune. "[Ethnic Clashes in Gambella region of Ethiopia between Nuer and Anyuak Communities.](#)" 29 January, 2016. UNHCR. "[UNHCR on security alert, helps displaced people in western Ethiopia.](#)" 17 December 2003.
20. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. "[Resumption of timely, adequate, and responsive provision of food aid critical.](#)" Press Release. 20 September 2023.
21. Update provided by humanitarian coordination agency. 11 August, 2023. On file with REACH.

22. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. [“Resumption of timely, adequate, and responsive provision of food aid critical.”](#) Press Release. 20 September 2023.
23. The Associated Press. [“Researchers have verified 1,329 hunger deaths in Ethiopia’s Tigray region since the cease-fire there.”](#) 26 September 2023.
24. Rift Valley Institute. [“No one can stay without someone: Transnational networks amongst the Nuer-Speaking peoples of Gambella and South Sudan.”](#) 11. 2020.
25. IOM-DTM. South Sudan Population Movement. Dataset. Available for download on [data.humdata.org](#).
26. Ibid.
27. Emergency protection assessment conducted by a humanitarian INGO in Akobo East. August 2023. On file with REACH.
28. Initial rapid needs assessment (IRNA) conducted by humanitarian agencies in Ulang. 20 August, 2023. On file with REACH.
29. UNHCR, UN-IOM, & The South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. [“Population Movement From Ethiopia to South Sudan.”](#) Dashboard. Accessed 9 January, 2024.
30. Humanitarian conducted needs assessments in Akobo, Nasir, and Ulang counties. August 2023. On file with REACH.
31. UNHCR, UN-IOM, & The South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. [“Population Movement From Ethiopia to South Sudan.”](#) Dashboard. Accessed 9 January, 2024.
32. Integrated Phase Classification. [“South Sudan: Acute Malnutrition Situation for July - September 2023 and Projections for October 2023 - March 2024 and April- June 2024.”](#) Dashboard. Accessed 28 January, 2024.
33. Ibid.
34. Inter-Sector Needs Assessment. 2023. Dataset. On file with REACH.
35. Ibid.
36. Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring System (FSNMS) Round 29. 2023. Dataset. On file with REACH.
37. Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response. Dataset. On file with REACH.
38. Eye Radio. [“3 children succumb to measles in Nasir.”](#) 30 November, 2023; Emergency health assessment conducted by a humanitarian INGO. November 2023. On file with REACH.
39. WHO Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response (IDSR). Dataset. On file with REACH.
40. Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). [“Children at deadly risk of measles and malnutrition after fleeing conflict in Sudan.”](#) REACH. [“South Sudan cross-border displacement: Rapid food security assessment in areas.”](#) September 2023. of return - Rubkona County.
41. FEWS NET. [“Emergency \(IPC Phase 4\) and worse outcomes persist during harvesting period.”](#) Food Security Update. December 2023.
42. Emergency protection assessment conducted by a humanitarian INGO in Akobo East. August 2023. On file with REACH.
43. Bilateral updates from several key informants in January 2024.
44. Emergency protection assessment conducted by a humanitarian INGO in Akobo East. August 2023. On file with REACH.
45. UNHCR, UN-IOM, & The South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission. [“Population Movement From Ethiopia to South Sudan.”](#) Dashboard. Accessed 9 January, 2024.
46. Ibid.
47. REACH. [“The body does not carry the name: community perspectives on displacement, humanitarian categorization, and durable solutions.”](#) 2. October 2023.
48. Emergency protection assessment conducted by a humanitarian INGO in Akobo East. August 2023. On file with REACH.
49. FAO and WFP. [“Special Report: Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission \(CFSAM\) to the Republic of South Sudan.”](#) 21 June, 2023.
50. ECHO. [“Daily Flash Update. South Sudan – Funding shortfall amidst food insecurity crisis.”](#) September 2023; WFP. [“Cost of cuts: Funding shortfalls threaten to push millions facing hunger to brink of starvation.”](#) September 2023.
51. Update provided by humanitarian coordination agency. 9 September, 2023. On file with REACH.
52. Ibid.
53. Borchgrevink, Axel, and Lie, Jon Harald Sande. “Layer upon Layer: Understanding the Gambella Conflict Formation.” International Journal of Ethiopian Studies. 2012; Tasgara, Asafa. “Assessing causes of inter-ethnic conflict in Ethiopia: Emphasis on Anuak and Nuer conflicts in the Gambella Regional State.” October 2021
54. See OCHA Ethiopia national access maps for months of August and November 2022, and January, April, August, October and December 2023. Available on [Humanitarian Data Exchange](#).
55. OCHA. [“Ethiopia Assessment Registry Snapshot.”](#) 13 November, 2023.

ABOUT REACH

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