

Conflict shocks and underlying vulnerability: Regulation of mobility and disruption of livelihoods in Tonj East, 2018-2022

April 2023 | Warrap State, South Sudan

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in 2018 and escalating in 2020 and 2021, communities in Tonj East have experienced increased exposure to conflict-related shocks, resulting in the regulation of mobility and disruption of livelihoods.¹ Such shocks have impacted livelihoods and coping capacity and have had acute consequences on food insecurity in the county.²

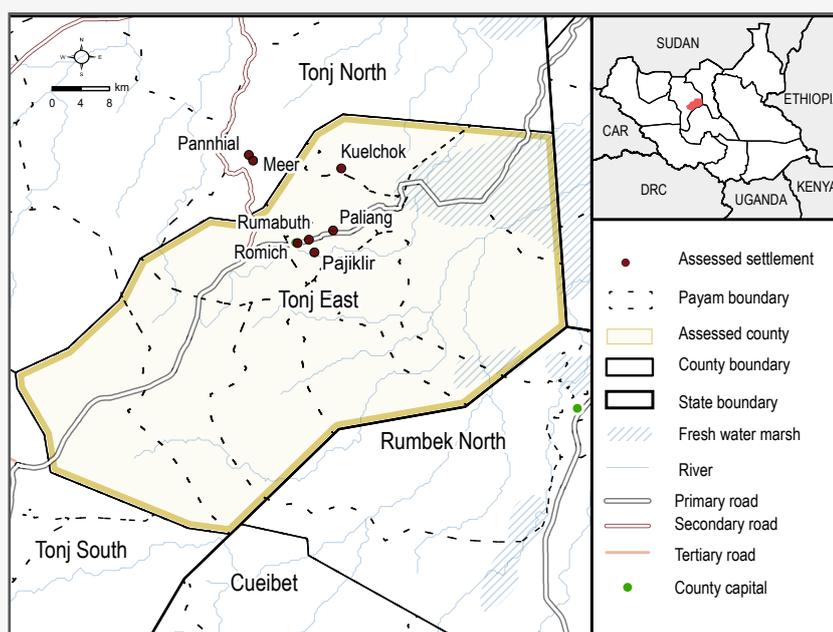
Conflict shocks - driven by an interplay between political dynamics at the national and sub-national levels and inter- and intra-communal dynamics - are reported to have increasingly affected towns and settlements across the county, manifesting in the destruction of homesteads, property, and service provision facilities.³ They have also resulted in an exponentially greater number of people displacing from or within Tonj East since 2018.⁴ Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) analysis suggests that such shocks have been particularly detrimental to agriculture-based livelihoods strategies, with violent events either targeting crops or disrupting cultivation cycles.⁵

REACH assessment findings from September 2022, corroborated by data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database project (ACLED), suggest that conflict-related shocks in Tonj East have most often occurred at a time of year – the early and late rainy season (June to July and October to November) – when cattle are nearby settlements, and are relied on for consumption coping during the concurrent lean season.⁶ This suggests that conflict-shocks may be having their greatest proximate impact on food access and coping capacity when communities face their largest consumption gaps.

This underlying vulnerability is particularly notable in eastern Tonj East, Greater Luanyjang, where limited infrastructure development interacts with barriers to mobility, frequently restricting movement by Greater Luanyjang's residents along the area's northern, eastern and southern county borders, and its western intra-county border.⁷ These mobility barriers have, during periods of conflict, manifested in reduced grazing area for cattle, limited options for displacement and distress migration, disrupted market supply chains, and access denial for humanitarian service providers.⁸

Situated against multiple years of atypically severe flooding, beginning in 2019 and occurring often during the lean season, the increase in conflict-related shocks in Tonj East since 2018 – most notably in August 2020, September-December 2021, and February-March 2022 – has seemingly had repercussions for the food security and livelihoods of affected populations in the county.⁹ The purpose of this brief is to explore the repercussions of increased conflict-related shocks on basic needs, particularly in regard to food security.

Map 1: Assessment Coverage



DISPLACEMENT & REGULATION OF MOBILITY

Since the International Organization for Migration (IOM) began tracking displacement in South Sudan in 2014, 46,887 IDPs originating in Tonj East have reportedly been displaced as a result of violence.¹⁰ Since 2018, IOM data reflects increased levels of displacement from or within Tonj East as a result of conflict-related shocks. Following the end of the 2013–2018 crisis, the number of IDPs reportedly displaced by conflict has increased an average of 85.75% each year, and in 2021, more than two times as many people were displaced by conflict than during the entire 2013–2018 period.¹¹ Violent conflict since September 2018, which has reportedly had an increasingly greater impact on relatively high density areas including towns and settlements, appears to have forced larger numbers of people to displace. Conflict-driven displacement made up more than half of reported displacement in 2021, more than flooding driven displacement, despite severe atypical flooding occurring that year.¹²

Conflict-shocks in Tonj East have also regulated mobility by preventing displacement. REACH findings and secondary data suggest that in parts of the county, Greater Luanyjang in particular, conflict-shocks have restricted communities' movement and prevented people from displacing to improve access to food or livelihoods opportunities – of particular consequence because shocks have occurred with greater frequency during the lean season.¹³ Participants in nearly all FGDs conducted on population movement during primary data collection in Tonj East in September 2022 reported that conflict-related shocks had restricted their mobility. Findings suggest that the conflict-induced restriction of mobility has, at times, resulted in a *de facto* blockade for some communities, which people are reportedly unwilling to cross to access services or food sources, even after a shock has passed, due to fears of renewed insecurity.¹⁴ For instance, participants in most FGDs conducted on population movement reported that both conflict-shocks and perceptions of insecurity had prevented them from moving to access services.

The regulation of mobility, whether through shock-related displacement or the restriction of migration, has seemingly had severe impacts on the food security of vulnerable populations in Tonj East. Displacement impacts the self-production of food through the disruption of cultivation cycles and destruction of crops, and can result in the loss of assets, creating impediments to food purchases.¹⁵

In the Tonj East context, the prevention of mobility may have even more serious consequences for vulnerable communities' food security and livelihoods needs. Communities which are prevented from migrating and from which humanitarian service providers are blocked may be forced to make choices between their physical safety and food security.¹⁶ Additionally, where conflict- and flooding-related shocks compound, mobility may be even further inhibited.¹⁷

METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

The following is based on a triangulation of data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Database project (ACLED), other secondary resources and primary qualitative data collected by REACH between the 2nd and 14th of September 2022, in Greater Luanyjang, Tonj East.

During this period, a REACH assessment team conducted 7 focus group discussions (FGDs) focused on population movement, 9 FGDs focused on Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL), 2 FGDs focused on the social and historical context of the county, and 3 FGDs focused on cattle migration. All FGDs were disaggregated by sex and IDP status. In addition, the team conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with 3 humanitarian service providers in the county, comprising the health, nutrition and humanitarian food assistance (HFA) providers operating there.¹⁸

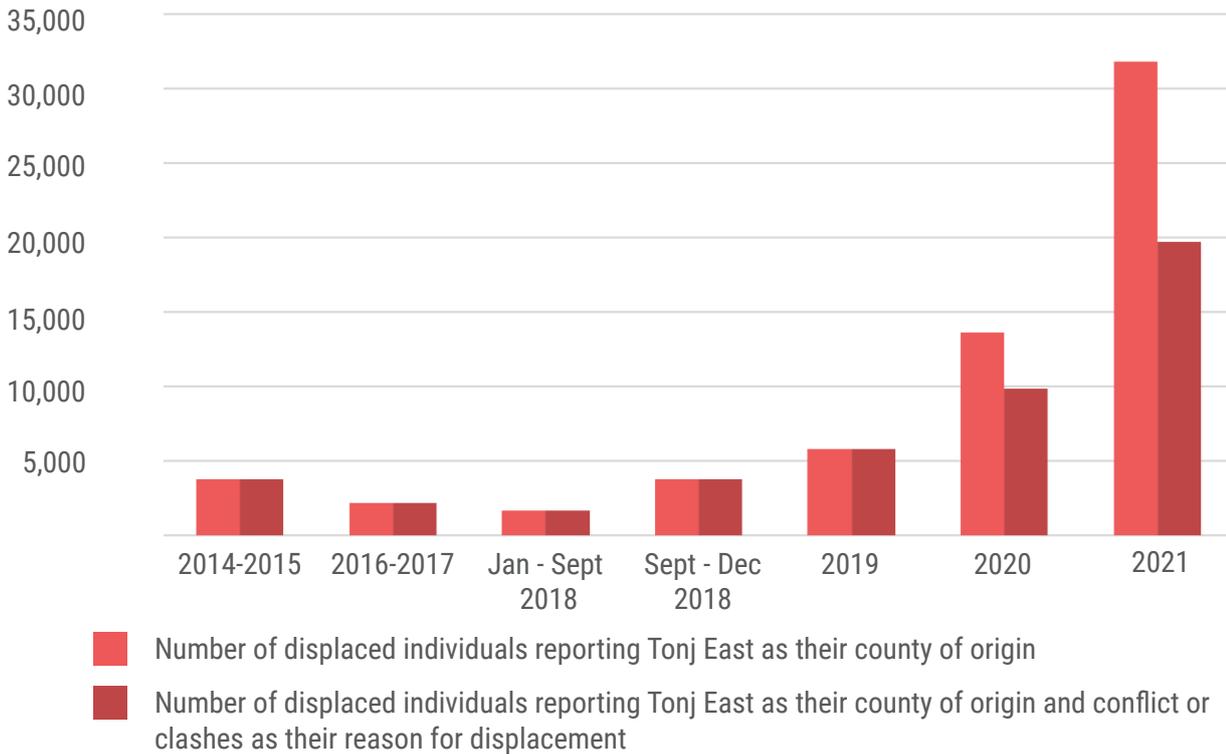
The team conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with local authority officials and community representatives to gain a better understanding of the situation in the area. Qualitative FGD and KII assessment tools were triangulated with interactive proportional piling exercises during the discussions and interviews, 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' perception.

Findings from this assessment are indicative of the situation at the time of data collection, between the 2nd and 14th of September 2022, and are not statistically representative of the area's population. When references from this assessment are made in the following text they are identified as such in the endnotes.

DISRUPTION TO LIVELIHOODS

Conflict shocks impacting Tonj East since 2018 were to reported to have substantially disrupted communities' ability to engage consistently in self-sustaining livelihoods activities. Seemingly, this disruption has occurred both as a direct result of the shocks themselves, but also as a byproduct of the regulation of mobility explored above. REACH findings and secondary sources suggest that livelihood disruption has happened via several modalities, namely the destruction, theft or obstruction of productive assets; the disruption of cultivation cycles and destruction of crops; and the destruction or obstruction of humanitarian service provision.¹⁹ Conflict shocks occurring during the lean season – increasingly the case in Tonj East – appear to have resulted in especially severe impacts.

Figure 1: Displacement from or within Tonj East (2014-2021). Source: IOM DTM



Destruction, theft, and obstruction of productive assets

Throughout the 2018-2022 period, the destruction and looting of productive assets appears to have become a primary characteristic of conflict-shocks impacting communities in Tonj East.²⁰ Participants in more than half of FGDs conducted on food security and livelihoods during primary data collection in September 2022 reported that, for at least some communities in Tonj East, conflict-shocks during this period resulted in the theft of tools and cooking supplies and often caused widespread destruction of homesteads, a finding corroborated by secondary sources.²¹ Such theft and destruction can have negative impacts on vulnerable populations’ abilities to engage in livelihoods activities to address consumption gaps.

Participants in most FGDs conducted on population movement reported that in the three years prior to data collection (2019-2022), conflict shocks have occurred most often during the early- and late- rainy season, a period of time when cattle are kept nearby to settlements to assist with consumption coping through the use of milk, according to participants in 2 FGDs on cattle migration. As a result, conflict shocks during this period, which are often characterized, at least in part, by cattle-centered violence (cattle raiding etc.), are likely to compound the negative impacts on the food security of vulnerable populations: cattle is seemingly more likely to be stolen when it is most needed by the community.²²

Conflict-shocks since 2018 have been also reported to have obstructed access to markets. Though markets are not technically productive assets themselves, they serve as purchasing points for such assets and have been historically relied on for food purchases in Tonj East during lean season food shortages.²³ Shocks which impact

markets have become increasingly common since 2018, with markets in multiple population centers destroyed in 2020 and 2021.²⁴

Disruption of the cultivation cycle and destruction of crops

In addition to affecting livelihood activities through the destruction, theft or obstruction of productive assets, shocks and shock-driven displacement or mobility restrictions have reportedly impacted livelihoods activities through the disruption of the cultivation cycle and destruction of crops. In 2020, IPC analysis found that conflict has had a “drastic effect on cultivation, as many people had their crops stolen, are too scared to cultivate, cultivated early and left or did not cultivate at all.”²⁵ Such disruptions can have critical impacts on the livelihoods of vulnerable, settlement-based populations, for whom findings suggest cultivation is the most common livelihood activity (reported by participants in more than half of the FGDs conducted on food security and livelihoods).²⁶

Disruption to the provision of humanitarian services

Finally, conflict-related shocks in Tonj East have disrupted the provision of humanitarian services in the county, both through access denial (for service providers and for beneficiaries) and through the destruction and vandalism of humanitarian service provision sites.²⁷ These disruptions were particularly pronounced in 2021, when insecurity related mobility restrictions prevented humanitarian service providers from accessing Greater Luanyjang, impeding re-supply for health and nutrition facilities and bringing humanitarian service provision to a halt in the area while facilities were looted and vandalised or destroyed.²⁸

It is likely that such disruptions to service provision in Tonj East have had disproportionately negative consequences on the food security of the county’s most vulnerable communities, who tend to rely more heavily on humanitarian assistance. In 2020, the IPC Technical Working Group (TWG) concluded that disruptions to the provision of assistance would prevent HFA from mitigating catastrophic (P5) food insecurity for an estimated 5% of the population.²⁹ In 2020 and 2021, disruptions to health and nutrition services, either via the denial of access for service providers, the inability of beneficiaries to access services, or the destruction of service provision sites, are reported to have left vulnerable people unable to access potentially lifesaving health and nutrition services.³⁰

Notably, the impacts of insecurity-induced disruptions to humanitarian service provision are likely to have been compounded in 2022, as reductions in funding for the humanitarian response have further limited service provision throughout the country, including in Tonj East.³¹ Of the 22 health and nutrition facilities operating in the county at the beginning of 2022, 12 reportedly reduced staff and services due to changes in funding since the start of 2022, and services at the remaining 10 were suspended in October 2022.³²

IMPACTS ON FOOD SECURITY

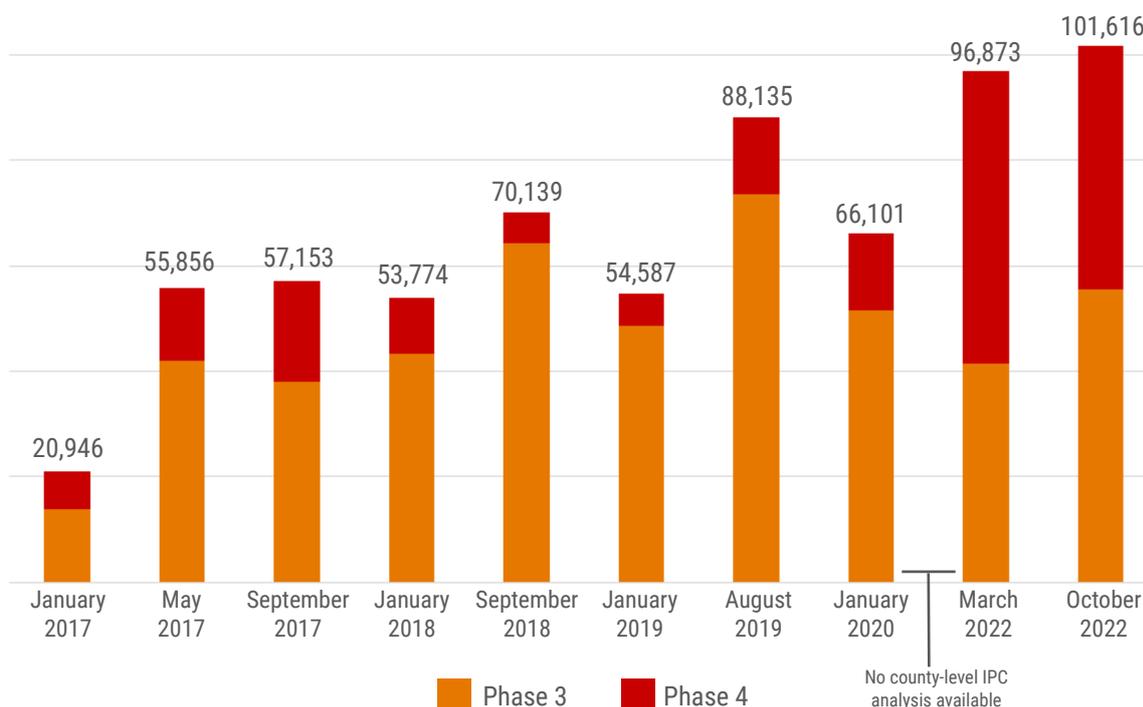
Worsening conflict-shocks in Tonj East since 2018 their impact on mobility and livelihoods has occurred alongside a starkly deteriorating food security situation. IPC analysis since 2018 underscores this link: as the number of shocks impacting Tonj East have escalated, so too has the number of people experiencing crisis-level or greater food security outcomes (see figure 2).³³ From January 2018 to the

January 2020 projections for February-April 2020, IPC analysis classified the county as area level Phase 3 (crisis-level) in all but two projections.³⁴

In October 2020, an external quality review requested by the IPC Technical Working Group found that “persistent [...] violence and cattle raiding has had a drastic effect on cultivation, as many people had their crops stolen, are too scared to cultivate, cultivated early and [displaced] or did not cultivate at all. Normal coping mechanisms have been diminished as many people are afraid to collect wild foods as it is dangerous and have had their usual support structures eroded.”³⁵ The review concluded that in October 2020 Tonj East was experiencing Phase 4 (emergency-level) food insecurity, with 5% of the population experiencing Phase 5 (catastrophe-level) insecurity, a number analysts projected would rise to 10% by the April-July 2021 period.³⁶

In October 2021, an increase in conflict-related shocks drove similarly extreme food security outcomes in the county. IPC analysis from April 2022, which used October 2021 household level data, classified Tonj East again as Phase 4 (emergency-level). The aforementioned blockade preventing humanitarians from accessing Greater Luanyjang and affected populations from displacing to access food or services had ramifications on the collection of food security data.³⁷ Blocked from collecting household-level data, the IPC could not assign a classification for an estimated 46,018 people in Makuac, Paliang, and Paweng payams. These areas, which were among those affected by the blockade, likely contained populations who were among those most vulnerable to food insecurity due the impacts of repeated shocks.³⁸ In 2022, despite a reported decrease in conflict-related shocks compared with the

Figure 2: Total number of people in Tonj East classified in the current period as AFI Phase 3 or higher since January 2017;
Source: IPC



previous year, Tonj East was again classified as Phase 4, with analysis projecting that during the April-July 2023 period, 70% of the population would face Phase 3 (crisis-level) or worse food insecurity.³⁹

CONCLUSION

Assessment findings and secondary data indicates that since 2018 the number of conflict-related incidents in Tonj East has increased, with seemingly greater impacts on relatively high-population areas, increasingly during the lean season. These shocks have likely impacted food security and humanitarian needs more broadly, through the regulation of movement and the disruption of livelihoods. Throughout this period, the county has experienced a precipitous deterioration in food security as demonstrated by negatively trending IPC findings.

Conflict-shocks have impacted needs both by displacing communities from their homes and by restricting movement to displacement areas. During periods of increased conflict shocks in 2020 and 2021, violence and the threat of violence reportedly restricted displacement as a means of coping, including to improve access to food and reduce threats to physical safety. Conflict events in Tonj East have also driven progressively larger-scale displacement, peaking in 2021 when more than two times as many people were displaced by conflict-shocks than during the entire 2013-2018 period.

Such regulation of movement has seemingly impacted populations' access to livelihoods, and consequently, access to food. Conflict shocks and subsequent displacement have reportedly resulted in the theft of productive assets, such as tools and cooking supplies, the destruction of crops, disruption of the cultivation cycle, and the destruction of homesteads. Combined with disruptions to humanitarian service provision both during and after conflict shocks, affected populations have seemingly been left with little opportunity to engage in self-sustaining livelihoods mechanisms or meet consumption needs through aid provision.

Trends since 2018 suggest that this dynamic is unlikely to change in the near term, indicating that drivers may be going unaddressed. In this context, the future food security of affected populations will likely hinge on whether conflict shocks continue to regulate mobility, disrupt access to livelihoods, and impede the provision of humanitarian aid.

ENDNOTES

PAGE 1

¹ [Armed Conflict and Event Data Project \(ACLED\) Dashboard](#); Joshua Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 55-56 December 2022; Pauline Eloff. ["Armed Conflict, Organised Violence, and Food Insecurity in South Sudan."](#) 5. February 2021.

² IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8. November 2020.

³ Joshua Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 55-56. December 2022.

⁴ Discussions in 4 of 7 FGDs conducted on population movement during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022; Joshua Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 55-56. December 2022; United Nations Peacekeeping. ["UNMISS, Warrap state authorities visit Marial Lou, appeal for peace and reconciliation in the region."](#) 22 September 2021. IOM. ["SSD DTM Mobility Tracking R12 baseline areas dataset."](#) 2022.

⁵ IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8. November 2020.

⁶ Discussions in 2 of 3 FGDs conducted on cattle migration during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022; [Armed Conflict and Event Data Project \(ACLED\) Dashboard](#)

⁷ REACH. ["Tonj South & East Rapid Assessment."](#) 6. September 2021.

⁸ Joshua Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 36, 54-55. December 2022.

⁹ Ibid. 54-55; direct observation.

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¹⁰ IOM. ["SSD DTM Mobility Tracking R12 baseline areas dataset."](#) 2022.

¹¹ Note: IOM DTM Mobility Tracking began in 2014 and thus does not comprise data from the first year of the civil war period (2013-2018).

¹² IOM. ["SSD DTM Mobility Tracking R12 baseline areas dataset."](#) 2022.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Discussions in 6 of 7 FGDs conducted on population movement during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022; IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8. November 2020.

¹⁵ World Bank Group. "South Sudan Poverty Note." 5. October 2014; Discussions with 3 of 9 FGDs conducted on food security and livelihoods during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022.

¹⁶ Pauline Eloff. ["Armed Conflict, Organised Violence, and Food Insecurity in South Sudan."](#) 7. February 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ OCHA. "HRP – Humanitarian Operational Presence (January to November 2022)." December 2022.

¹⁹ Joshua Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 56. December 2022; IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8. November 2020; Discussions in 2 of 3 FGDs conducted on cattle migration during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022; Pauline Eloff. ["Armed Conflict, Organised Violence, and](#)

[Food Insecurity in South Sudan.](#)" 12. February 2021; OCHA. ["Tonj South and East multi-sectoral needs assessment 12-17 May 2020 Final."](#) 3. 2020; Discussions in 3 of 7 FGDs conducted on population movement during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022.

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²⁰ Joshua Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 56. December 2022; IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8. November 2020.

²¹ Discussions in 4 of 9 FGDs conducted on food security and livelihoods during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022; Pauline Eloff. ["Armed Conflict, Organised Violence, and Food Insecurity in South Sudan."](#) 13. February 2021.

²² Discussions in 2 of 3 FGDs conducted on cattle migration during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022.

²³ REACH. ["Tonj South & East Rapid Assessment."](#) 6. September 2021.

²⁴ Pauline Eloff. ["Armed Conflict, Organised Violence, and Food Insecurity in South Sudan."](#) 12. February 2021; OCHA. ["Tonj South and East multi-sectoral needs assessment 12-17 May 2020 Final."](#) 3. 2020; Discussions in 3 of 7 FGDs conducted on population movement during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022.

²⁵ IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8.

²⁶ Discussions in 6 of 9 FGDs conducted on food security and livelihoods during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022; FEWS NET. ["Livelihoods Zone Map and Descriptions for the Republic of South Sudan \(Updated\)."](#) 32. August 2018.

²⁷ Joshua Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 55-56. December 2022.

²⁸ Ibid. 55.

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²⁹ IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8.

³⁰ REACH. ["Tonj South & East Rapid Assessment."](#) 9. September 2021.

³¹ MSF. ["British aid cut threaten hundreds of healthcare facilities in South Sudan."](#) 1 June 2022; Discussions with service provider key informants during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022.

³² Discussions with service provider key informants during primary data collection in Tonj East. September 2022.

³³ IPC. "IPC Analysis 2017-2022, South Sudan." Dataset.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Craze. "And Everything Became War." 36; IPC. ["South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation January 2020 and Projections for February - April 2020 and May - July 2020."](#) 20 February 2020;

IPC. ["South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation for October - November 2020 and Projections for December 2020 - March 2021 and April - July 2021."](#) 23 December 2020.

³⁶ IPC. ["Multi Partner Real Time Quality Review – IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis \(South Sudan, November 2020\)."](#) 8.

³⁷ Ibid. 8-10.

³⁸ Craze. ["And Everything Became War."](#) 36; UNMISS. ["UNMISS, Warrap state officials visit Tonj and call for peaceful negotiations to end conflict."](#) 17 October 2021.

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³⁹ IPC. ["South Sudan: Acute Food Insecurity Situation October - November 2022 and Projections for December 2022 - March 2023 and April - July 2023."](#) 3 November 2022.

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).