



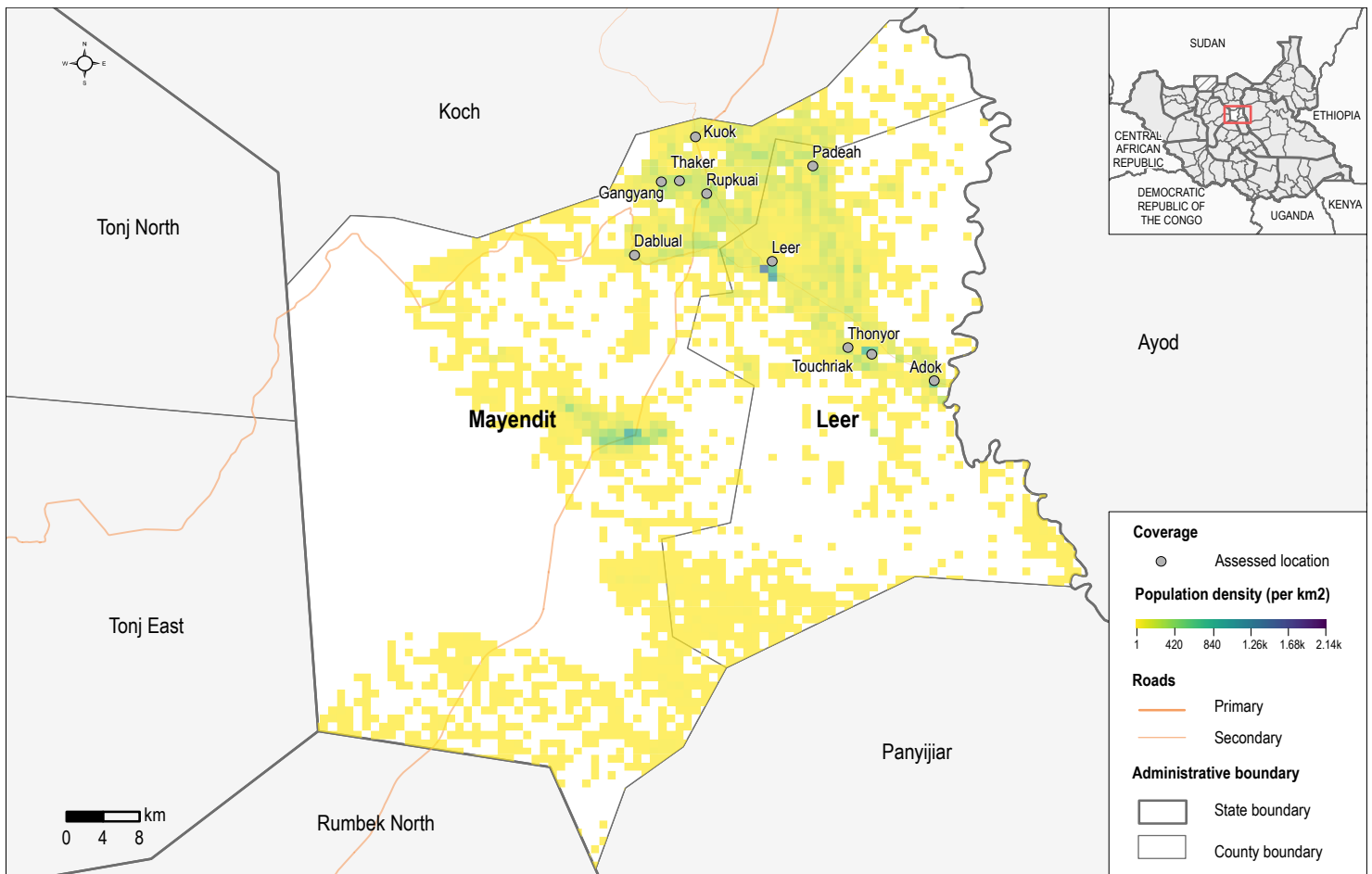
Compounding shocks and consequences for food security, coping capacity, and social stratification in Leer and Mayendit counties

Unity State, South Sudan, June 2021

Key Findings

- A series of compounding shocks, particularly the 2013-2019 civil war and atypical flooding in 2020, have restricted the viability of traditional livelihood activities in Leer and Mayendit counties. Cultivation and cattle keeping have been particularly affected, resulting in substantial food consumption gaps, especially for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees.
- Access to food is expected to be atypically low during the upcoming lean season (May-July), especially in Mayendit, as cattle will likely remain far from settlements until early 2022. Availability of food is unlikely to increase substantially after July, as host community households have little access to land for cultivation, due to flooding. Populations reportedly face substantial barriers to adapting livelihood activities, and consequently primarily consume wild foods and humanitarian food assistance (HFA). Existing barriers to food, such as a lack of access to livestock and land, and time poverty, may be further exacerbated by a third year of atypical rainfall.
- In the coming months, the risk of malnutrition and morbidity could be further compounded by increasingly limited provision of, and access to, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and nutrition services.
- Since the start of the civil war, social stratification in Leer and Mayendit counties has changed significantly. Due to the aforementioned shocks and subsequent displacement of the most affluent residents, the remaining population consists primarily of poor households with few assets.
- Findings suggest that traditional methods of resource redistribution have eroded. As a result of the civil war, mechanisms of power have shifted away from chiefs and community elders towards youth groups, who have different priorities for the distribution of resources.
- Chiefs' courts, which are traditionally relied upon by the poorest in society to access food and resources during times of need, have been especially negatively affected by changing power dynamics, as well as by a lack of resources to redistribute.
- As a result of the erosion of traditional community-level coping mechanisms, resource distribution appears to have become increasingly dependent on familial and social networks, which may result in highly vulnerable groups without connections, such as IDPs and returnees, having reduced access to support. These dynamics may cause future periods of food insecurity to be more severe and to develop faster than before.

Map 1: Assessed locations in Leer and Mayendit counties, Unity State, June 2021



Assessment Rationale

A series of compounding shocks have resulted in severe humanitarian needs across South Sudan. This was reflected in the October 2020 [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(IPC\)](#) workshop, during which pockets of populations facing catastrophic (Phase 5) levels of food insecurity were identified in six counties.

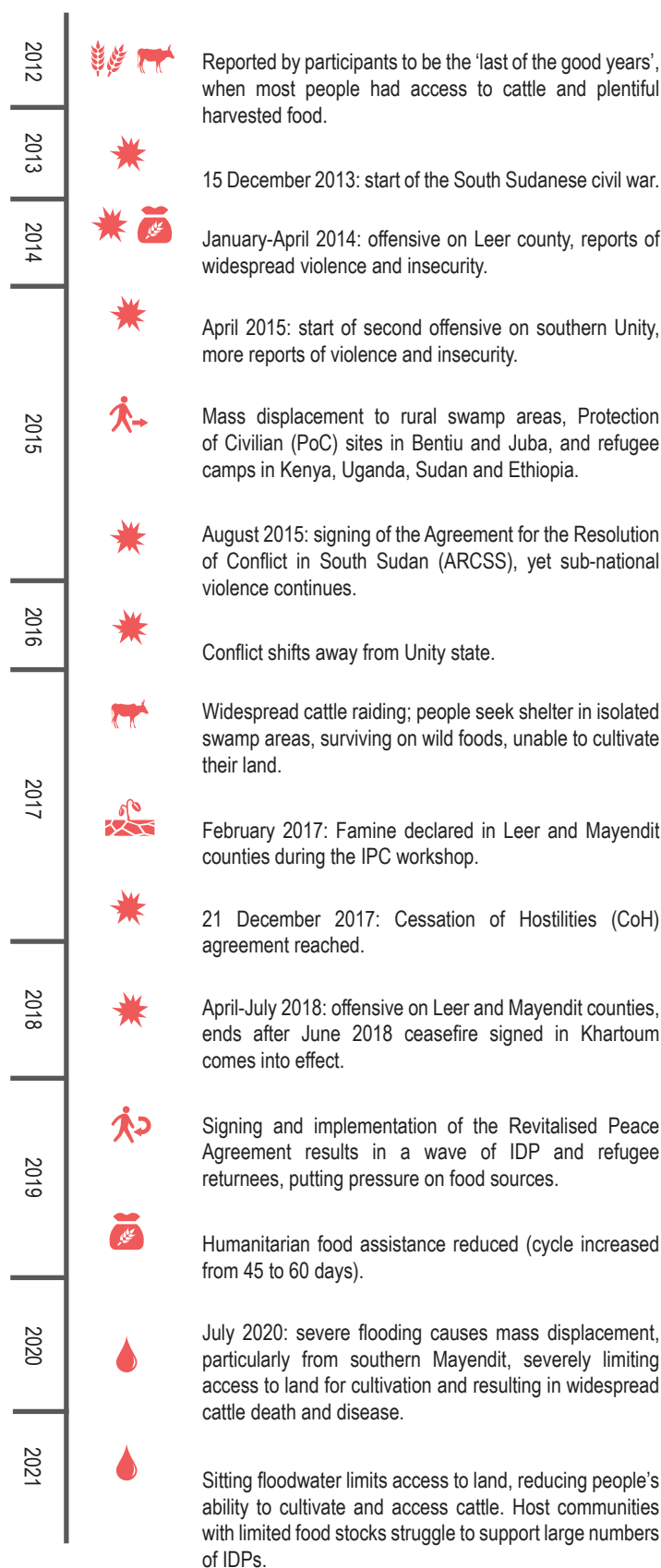
Between April and July 2021, IPC findings projected Mayendit county to be experiencing levels of food insecurity consistent with IPC Phase 4 (Emergency). Leer county was projected to be in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis). IPC Phase 4 is characterised by households either having large food consumption gaps, reflected in very high acute malnutrition and excess mortality, or employing emergency livelihood strategies and asset liquidation to mitigate large food consumption gaps.² In IPC Phase 3, households either have food consumption gaps that are reflected by high or above-usual acute malnutrition, or they are marginally able to meet minimum food needs but only by depleting essential livelihood assets or through the use of crisis level coping strategies.³

Despite the severity of the projections for Leer and Mayendit counties, widespread acute food insecurity across South Sudan has meant that limited humanitarian resources have primarily been sent to the counties where populations facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity were identified, as well as a number of additional counties that had been affected by severe flooding.

Since the October/November 2020 workshop, REACH's [Integrated Needs Tracking system \(INT\)](#), an analytical framework that brings together multisectoral data from across the humanitarian response, has consistently indicated that Leer and Mayendit were at 'very high risk' of increasing humanitarian needs.⁴ In order to investigate whether humanitarian conditions in Leer and Mayendit have deteriorated, REACH, the Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster (FSLC), and the World Food Programme (WFP) conducted an assessment in southern Unity State in June 2021.

The assessment team visited the locations detailed in Map 1 with the objectives of i) gaining a snapshot of current humanitarian needs and gaps, ii) identifying variations in needs between different geographic areas and population groups, iii) understanding the impacts of years of cumulative shocks on the ability of households to engage in traditional livelihood activities, and iv) understanding the effect of shocks on the ability of traditional institutions to redistribute community assets and to protect the most vulnerable.

Figure 1: Timeline of compounding shocks in Leer and Mayendit counties, between 2012 and 2021^{5,6}



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Unity State, South Sudan, June 2021

Methodology

The assessment comprised two main qualitative methodological components: focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). The assessment focused on the counties of Leer and Mayendit in southern Unity State.

Data collection took place between the 4th and 14th of June. During this period, a total of 36 FGDs were conducted with host community members, IDPs, and refugee returnees, across Leer and Mayendit counties. The FGD component consisted of five thematic areas: i) shocks as they relate to food security and livelihoods, ii) social group analysis and wealth ranking, iii) susceptibility to famine conditions, iv) WASH service access and functionality, and v) access to services. Separate FGDs were held for men and women, and participants were disaggregated by location of origin. In addition to the FGDs, a total of 12 KIIs were conducted with community chiefs and health and nutrition service providers. The KII component consisted of two thematic tools: i) health and nutrition service provision, and ii) chiefs' courts functionality. 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, 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.

The assessment took place towards the start of the rainy season, which normally runs from May until mid-November.⁸ During the lean season (May-July) households typically exhaust food stocks and have to employ consumption- and livelihoods-based coping strategies to meet consumption gaps. The assessment findings are indicative of the situation at the time of data collection, and are not statistically representative of the area's population.

Livelihood profile

Leer county is situated in the Nile basin fishing and agro-pastoral livelihood zone.⁹ Households in this livelihood zone typically rely on a combination of livelihood activities, including fishing, cultivation, livestock rearing, and harvesting of wild products. Reliance on fishing is relatively high and fishing is usually practiced throughout the year. The availability of fish is typically lowest during the rainy season when the Nile swells, carrying high volumes of water, and households largely transition to fishing in lakes and swamps.¹⁰

Most households practice rain-fed farming. Sorghum is the primary staple grown and is harvested in November, while maize is usually harvested in September. During the dry season, between November and April, food stocks are consumed and cattle migrate

Picture 1: Cattle in the settlement of Theker, Mayendit county¹¹



away from the homestead to access water. Access to cattle is particularly important during the lean season, when food stocks have been exhausted. In a typical year, prior to the 2013-2019 crisis, household food stocks would reportedly last for most of the agricultural year, however, since 2013, this has been reduced to between two to four months for the average household, according to FGD participants. As sorghum stocks decrease, market purchases typically increase. During the lean season, poor households earn cash from the sale of firewood, papyrus mats, local brew, and in some cases, the sale of goats.

Mayendit county is situated in the northwestern flood plain sorghum and cattle livelihood zone.¹² Almost all households, from poorer to better-off, have typically been engaged in cultivation and livestock rearing. These activities are supplemented by fishing, hunting, and the collection of uncultivated native products and plants. The main cultivated crop is sorghum, while groundnuts, sesame, maize, pearl millet, legumes, and vegetables are also grown.¹³ Livestock are very important assets, particularly cattle, and fishing is practiced by most households during the rainy season when the flood plain is inundated with water.

Context and shocks

The pre-crisis period around independence was widely viewed by FGD participants and KIIs as 'a time of plenty'. Participant reports suggest that, during this period, most people in Leer and Mayendit counties had sufficient access to food, with most people reportedly consuming two to three meals per day. While there were some reports of cattle raiding, society was relatively peaceful, and people were able to move freely. The vast majority of households owned cattle and there was a thriving livestock trade with animals being sold to buyers in Sudan and Juba. Food stocks would reportedly often last for the full year as people had access to land beyond the immediate homestead. According to FGD participants and KIIs,

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Table 1: Names given to recent periods of food insecurity according to FGD participants from Leer and Mayendit counties

1988	Ruon Nya Kuajok - 'The year of the Kuajok tree', during which people were reportedly surviving on kuajok leaves
1997	Ruon Gatluak Gai - 'The year of Gatluak Gai', a military commander, and Ruon Khor - 'The year of fighting'
2013 - 2018	Ruon Kor - 'The year(s) of conflict'
2020 - 2021	Ruon Nyoch - 'The year of the flood'

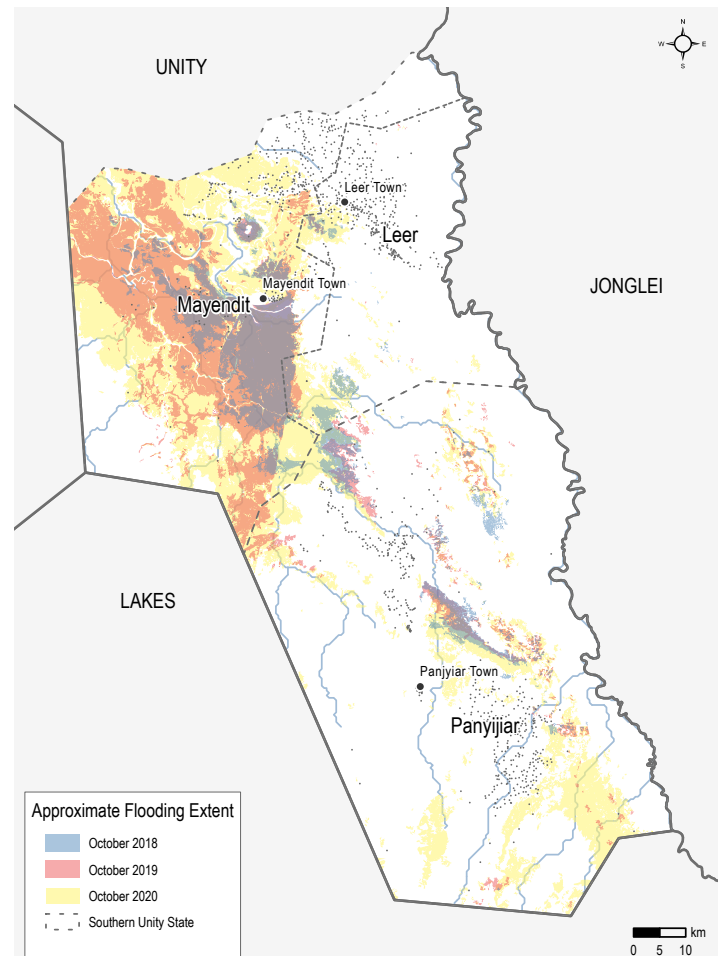
Leer town had the second biggest market in Unity State after Bentiu and the population was far larger than today, estimated by NGO workers to have been between 140,000 and 170,000 individuals.¹⁴

Through proportional piling exercises, participants reported that over half of the population (approximately 55%) from Leer and Mayendit left these counties during the **2013-2019 crisis**; especially those with resources (see social group analysis). Some of those who left reportedly travelled to refugee camps and family in Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya, while others were displaced internally to Juba town and the Protection of Civilian sites (PoCs) in Juba and Bentiu. An unknown but significant number of people were reportedly killed.¹⁵ Those who remained within Leer and Mayendit, around 45% of the population, reportedly fled to the islands along the River Nile whilst others were displaced to the nearby bush and forested areas during successive waves of attacks. Many of the people who remained behind were reportedly killed, or died of hunger-related causes.¹⁶ During this period, some people cultivated crops, with some FGD participants reporting that they would return from their displacement location to their homestead at night to cultivate small plots. Most people depended heavily on fishing and wild foods, particularly water lily. Access to HFA became especially widespread after the declaration of famine in 2017, which resulted in a substantial increase in HFA being distributed.

The effects of the crisis are reportedly still felt to this day. Many households have been fragmented, resulting in a chronic lack of labour and physical exhaustion, which has exacerbated the effects of flooding by limiting households' abilities to engage both in livelihood activities and other household tasks, such as collecting water and caring for vulnerable family members.

Findings suggest that widespread insecurity remains in Leer and Mayendit, and parties to the conflict remain in the region, forming a barrier for IDPs returning to their areas of origin. This can be illustrated by FGD participants who were displaced to northern Mayendit from Mayendit south. In the local culture, names are commonly given to distinct periods of time to refer back to those

Map 2: Flooding extent in southern Unity state, October 2018, 2019, and 2020



periods (see table 1). However, FGD participants reported not yet having named the crisis, feeling that the crisis' impact is still ongoing and insecurity continues to be prevalent.

Community members, NGO staff, chiefs, and local authorities reported that the current period of hunger is not as severe as those of 1988, at the peak of the crisis (reported to be late 2015 and mid 2018), or during the famine period of 2016 and 2017. However, according to participants from Touchriak (Leer) and Dablui (Mayendit), the current hunger is worse than at least one previous period of hunger during the 1997 conflict.

Findings suggest that the current level of hunger has been exacerbated by the pressure placed on host communities by the presence of returnees and IDPs from flood-affected areas, without a commensurate increase in HFA. During the assessment, two instances of hunger deaths were reported to have occurred in 2021, the first being an IDP displaced to Thonyor (Leer) by flooding, and the second being a returnee from Bentiu. Displaced populations, particularly those with limited social networks in their area of displacement, are likely to be particularly vulnerable.

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Food security and livelihoods

Years of cumulative and compounding shocks (see Figure 1) have substantially limited the ability of households in Leer and Mayendit counties to engage in traditional livelihood activities, particularly cattle keeping and cultivation. Barriers to shifting livelihood activities (see Fishing section), means that many people, particularly IDPs and returnees, are highly dependent on the consumption of wild foods.

Cattle

Cattle are a fundamental part of the local livelihood system and fulfill a range of other social and cultural obligations, particularly the payment of dowry, fines (in the event that a relative has committed an offense), and sharing with vulnerable family and community members in times of need. However, **access to cattle has reportedly decreased significantly** since the 2013-2019 civil war. During the war, disruption of the local population's ability to sustain itself was a key tactic employed by parties to the conflict.¹⁷ As a result, cattle was targeted and widespread theft of cattle took place. Additionally, due to a lack of alternative sources of food, people reportedly commonly resorted to consuming their livestock as a coping strategy, which further reduced their herd size.

In addition, flooding has further limited access to cattle by reducing available pastures and causing death and disease. According to cattle keepers in Thonyor cattle camp, and Vétérinaires Sans Frontières (VSF) mobile livestock healthcare staff, foot and mouth disease (FMD) is widespread, and cannot be vaccinated against, which is compounded by a chronic lack of drugs for treatment. Furthermore, FGD participants reported that flooding has altered migration routes and most cattle have reportedly not returned to the homestead, as would usually happen during the rainy season. Most cattle are not expected to return to settlements until early to mid 2022, when flood waters are expected to have decreased. Many of the remaining cattle are reportedly no longer producing milk. As a result, **most people are unable to use cattle as a source of food.**

All the while, few households are reportedly able to obtain new cattle. FGD participants reported that cattle are returning piecemeal through dowry payments, and that child marriage is increasing, with girls as young as 12 getting married in order for their families to obtain cattle. Continued reductions in the cattle population are likely to have a further negative and disproportionate impact on girls. Despite livestock disease, populations in the cattle camps have far greater food security than populations in the homesteads, where there are higher proportions of vulnerable households.

Crops

FGD participants from across Leer and Mayendit reported that, prior to the 2013-2019 crisis, harvested food stocks, which mostly comprised maize and sorghum, would last the typical household until the next harvest the following year. However, during the

Picture 2: Waterlily seeds drying in Mayendit county¹⁸



crisis, most people were displaced from their original homesteads, limiting access to land, labour, and cultivated food. **Access to land has continued to pose a barrier to cultivation in the post-war period, particularly in southern Mayendit,** which has been largely inundated with water since July 2020. For instance, community chiefs in Dabluah, Mayendit county, reported that they could not allocate community land to IDPs, because it was flooded. FGD participants from Padeah reported that there had been no harvest at all in 2020 due to flooding.

Among those who were able to harvest in most assessed areas of Leer and Mayendit in the 2020-2021 season, **harvested stocks were reportedly already exhausted by January 2021,** seven months earlier than during the pre-crisis period. As a result, there appears to be a general consensus across the two counties that **the upcoming lean season (May-July 2021) will be particularly severe,** especially if flooding occurs for the third year in a row.

Residents are expected to harvest maize in September and sorghum in November. However, in large parts of Mayendit, residents have only planted crops in the area immediately surrounding their homesteads, reportedly comprising approximately just 20% of their 'normal area of cultivation'. Limited harvests due to a shortage of land is anticipated to be a challenge across parts of southern and western Leer.

As a consequence of the low access to traditional livelihoods and increased food consumption gaps, the main food sources for the majority of the poor residents have reportedly become wild food collection and fishing, according to FGD participants.

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Wild foods

During the crisis, food consumption gaps were reportedly filled by an increased dependence on water lilies.¹⁹ Lilies would be ground into a paste and cooked, or eaten raw. Similarly, many poor households across Leer and Mayendit were reportedly atypically dependent on wild foods at the time of data collection. FGD participants in Gangyang, Mayendit county, reported that, at the time of data collection, wild foods accounted for around 80% of their diet, particularly water lily seeds and roots (63%), and palm tubers and nuts (15%).

Dependence on wild foods will likely remain high until at least September 2021, when the maize harvest is expected. Continued heavy rainfall and flooding would further exacerbate existing barriers to movement and access to wild foods, and reduce the availability of some wild foods that tend to fall into standing water.

Fishing

The livelihood activities typically practiced by people in the Northwestern Flood Plain Sorghum and Cattle livelihood zone are cultivation and pastoralism. However, due to severe flooding, extensive stagnant water, and a consequent lack of land for grazing and cultivation, the geographic characteristics of southern Mayendit have become increasingly reflective of the Nile Basin Fishing and Agro-Pastoral Livelihood Zone.²⁰ **Assessment findings suggest that, due to a range of factors, many households have been unable to successfully shift livelihoods.**

- **Lack of labour** – during the assessment period, there was a visible lack of men in most of the assessed locations. FGD participants in Gangyang, Mayendit county, estimated that, of the men present in the settlement pre-crisis, 42% had been killed or had died of hunger related causes between 2013 and 2019, 20% had been displaced and had not returned, 18% were at the cattle camps, 15% were in the settlement, and 5% were working in the local market or with NGOs. The lack of men significantly affects livelihoods such as fishing, which is typically considered to be the responsibility of men; since it does not fit within the traditional labour profile of women and girls, their engagement with the activity is limited.
- **Time poverty** – there is a high proportion of female-headed households, frequently with a high number of vulnerable dependents. Within these households, childcare, collection of water, preparation of land, and the collection of wild foods are typically the sole responsibility of the household head, leaving little to no time for fishing.
- **Lack of equipment and knowledge** – fishing is practiced seasonally in Leer and Mayendit counties. However, there is a reported lack of knowledge among the remaining populations on how to fish. FGD participants consistently reported that a lack of fishing equipment, particularly hooks and nets, was a substantial barrier to fishing. During the assessment, young

Picture 3: Aerial view of flooding in southern Unity State, June 2021²¹



children were observed fishing with mosquito nets in swampy areas.

Social groups and structures

Historically, the social structure in Leer and Mayendit counties has reportedly consisted of four groups: the better-off 'riang riang', the middle segment of 'ney tin te tah', the poor 'chan', and the extremely poor 'changai'. Years of cumulative and compounding shocks have limited access to traditional livelihood activities (see Food Security and Livelihoods), altered population demographics, and resulted in a burgeoning population of poor and extreme poor.

Riang riang – 'Better off': reported by participants to be the largest pre-crisis social group, the riang riang used to account for almost 50% of the population. Their presence has since reportedly decreased to around 8% of the population, according to FGD participants from Touchriak. Prior to the crisis, this group was characterised by households with large livestock holdings, large families, farms, business investments, and family connections across the country and overseas. This group **provided employment, supported relatives, and formed the cornerstone of an effective community support mechanism**, often providing milk or a lactating cow, money, or sorghum to poorer households during periods of hunger.

Ney tin te tah – 'The middle': reported by participants to be the second largest social group prior to the crisis, accounting for almost 25% of the population. Since the crisis, their size has reportedly decreased to around 10% of the population. Prior to the crisis, this group reportedly owned sufficient assets to meet familial and community-based obligations and to advance socially.

Many of the riang riang and ney tin te tah possessed the resources to flee from Leer and Mayendit during the crisis. Others were killed or had their assets stolen or destroyed. Nowadays, they are reportedly worse off than before the crisis. Many are engaged in business or salaried work with NGOs. The small group of ney tin te

tah especially has minimal surplus to share with the growing group of chan and changai.

Chan – ‘The poor’: reported by participants to account for around 20% of the population prior to the crisis, the proportion of chan has since reportedly increased to around 30% of the population. Households in this category were characterised by limited access to livestock. Harvests were generally much smaller than those of the riang riang and ney tin te tah, and chan households had a relatively high reliance on fishing. Most of the chan lacked the necessary financial resources to flee Leer and Mayendit during the crisis, and many were reportedly killed, died of hunger, or displaced locally to the islands along the Nile.

Changai – ‘The extreme poor’: reported by participants to account for just 15% of the population prior to the crisis, the proportion of changai has since reportedly increased substantially to around 50% of the population, in part because of the presence of unregistered IDPs and IDP/refugee returnees. Households in this group are highly vulnerable, with limited social networks, and are often headed by women, children, older people, or people with disabilities. During the crisis, most changai households reportedly fled to the islands and survived primarily on waterlilies. Wild foods remain a key source of food for the changai.

Prior to 2013, the riang riang and ney tin te tah groups were able to support the majority of chan and changai in the event of a crisis, and they owned assets that could be redistributed at the community level to support the most vulnerable members. The 2013-2019 crisis and flooding from July 2020 to the present day have resulted in mass displacement, livelihood collapse, food consumption gaps and substantial social shifts, depleting resources and **limiting the ability of a now relatively small group of ‘better off’ to support a growing population of poor households.**

Institutions and community coping

Chiefs’ courts are the most common and resilient legal institution in South Sudan. They are frequently the sole functioning justice mechanism at the boma²² level. Chiefs’ courts have been an entrenched part of the government legal system since the 1930s, and they continue to be recognised by South Sudanese statutory law.²³ The courts have typically been able to function even under extreme pressure; **chief’s courts can then transition into ‘hunger courts’**, which primarily or solely see cases related to hunger and the redistribution of resources to those members of the society who are most in need. Claimants either argue that a pre-existing legal claim should be prioritised because of their level of hunger, or they make a new claim, typically against relatives, on the basis that their relatives have an obligation to help them.²⁴

Assessment findings suggest that the ability of chiefs to effectively redistribute assets at the community level has been severely eroded in some areas of Leer and Mayendit counties. This appears to be mainly due to two factors: i) a structural shift

in community power dynamics, away from traditional community leaders, such as chiefs and elders, towards youth groups, and ii) widespread livelihood collapse and a consequent lack of food or assets to redistribute within the community. These factors call into question the future resilience of chiefs’ courts during periods of acute food insecurity, and thus the ability of the most vulnerable populations to cope, without recourse to this mechanism.

Challenges to chief court functionality

Some chiefs reported that their authority and redistributive capacity had begun to decline substantially even before the 2013-2019 crisis. Prior to the crisis, chiefs would reportedly often be entrusted with extra rations during food distributions, which they would be able to redistribute to the most vulnerable groups through existing community-based support systems. However, these socially important methods of resource redistribution have been **difficult to reconcile with international aid guidelines, values and policies.**²⁵ The ending of extra rations being given to chiefs may be a contributing factor to the reduced functionality of the chiefs’ courts, since they have further diminished the role of the chiefs in resource redistribution.

In addition to this dynamic, FGD participants from across Leer and Mayendit consistently reported that the 2013-2019 civil war has resulted in a mass influx of arms, which have primarily ended up with groups of youth. This has reportedly resulted in a **structural shift in community power dynamics away from chiefs and community elders and towards youth groups.** As a result, **boma and payam**²⁶ **chiefs consistently reported lacking the authority the authority to enforce claims made through chiefs’ courts.** As a consequence, over time, people have reportedly stopped turning to chiefs to access food in times of need.

The groups that have gained control of the arms are reportedly geographically and socially isolated, meaning that they have limited capacity or desire to engage in the community-wide redistribution of resources. Due to the danger of getting caught up in acts of violence, community members reportedly also do not wish to be associated with these groups. A police chief reported that, while there is a functional police force, widespread ownership of weapons, and the threat of retribution has substantially **limited the ability of police to tackle crime and enforce court rulings.** Church leaders reportedly also continue to hold power, and are able to initiate dialogue, but according to participants they have minimal power to address acts of violence.

The proliferation of arms and the breakdown of traditional mechanisms of countering violence has reportedly had a particularly significant effect on women. Female FGD participants consistently reported that **gender-based violence (GBV) and the theft of food assistance are widespread issues,** which have persisted since the end of the crisis. The physical and psychological effects of GBV are reportedly compounded further by a lack of healthcare facilities, medical professionals and psycho-social support.

Chiefs' courts are reportedly **most functional in locations where community dynamics and governance structures remained largely intact during the crisis** because residents, including community elders and chiefs, remained in their settlements or returned shortly after the conflict. Conversely, chiefs' courts are reportedly **no longer functional in settlements where most people, including the local leadership, were displaced**. Chiefs' courts are reportedly also not functional in areas where people from different locations have settled and where chiefs from multiple communities are present, since no one chief is able to exercise power over the entire population. This is reportedly especially problematic because social fragmentation has resulted in increased tensions between families from different communities.

Consequences of limited chief court functionality

Hunger courts were reportedly operational in two assessed locations within Leer and Mayendit counties at the time of the assessment, as reported by community chiefs. However, because of the chiefs' limited power to redistribute goods, most claims are reportedly referred to WFP. FGD Participants in Dablual, Mayendit county, reported that the local courts have been primarily focused on hunger since 2014, and estimated that 70% of the cases currently being brought before the court are related to hunger.

The types and quantities of food being redistributed down family lines appear to differ substantially from the pre-war period. Chiefs from both assessed counties consistently reported that communities currently have little to no food or livestock to redistribute. Prior to the crisis, hunger claims were usually settled by the redistribution of grain, cash, and livestock (or livestock products). However, the chiefs reported that, in the post-war period, most households are only able to share wild foods and goods received through HFA.

Overall, assessment findings suggest that, in the assessed areas of Leer and Mayendit, chiefs' courts are unable to effectively govern hunger through redistribution, and that most sharing of resources among community members has become dependent on familial and social relationships. **As a result, highly vulnerable groups, particularly those with limited social connections, may fall through the cracks.** This is very concerning given the potential for a third consecutive year of atypically severe flooding in 2021, with associated displacement and further shocks to livelihoods further limiting the redistributive capacity of community members.

A collapse in the community's capacity to cope with a lack of food represents a crucial shift in the potential for extreme levels of food insecurity to develop. Chiefs from Adok reported that, at the height of the 2017 famine, hunger courts collapsed because there was no food to redistribute among the community. Given the structural societal changes since then, the point at which some courts may collapse and cease to function in the future could happen much earlier than during the pre-war period.

Dyke maintenance

Finally, community fragmentation and shifts in power have also affected the ability of chiefs and community elders to organise and enforce other community activities, particularly dyke maintenance. Prior to the crisis, men would be fined if they failed to mobilise and repair the dykes each year. However, according to FGD participants from Touchriak, widespread displacement and a reported lack of community spirit limited the ability of authorities to enforce participation in dyke maintenance activities, likely increasing the future vulnerability of geographically proximate populations to atypical seasonal flooding.

Perceived solutions

Lawlessness is largely attributed to severe levels of hunger and the reported inability of youth to access food through other means. Many youths reported having 'nothing to do', but share the community elders' desire for better education and to transition towards lawful livelihoods. The feasibility of this transition is seen to be intrinsically related to stability at the national level, which is yet to be achieved, according to community leaders and youth from across Leer and Mayendit.

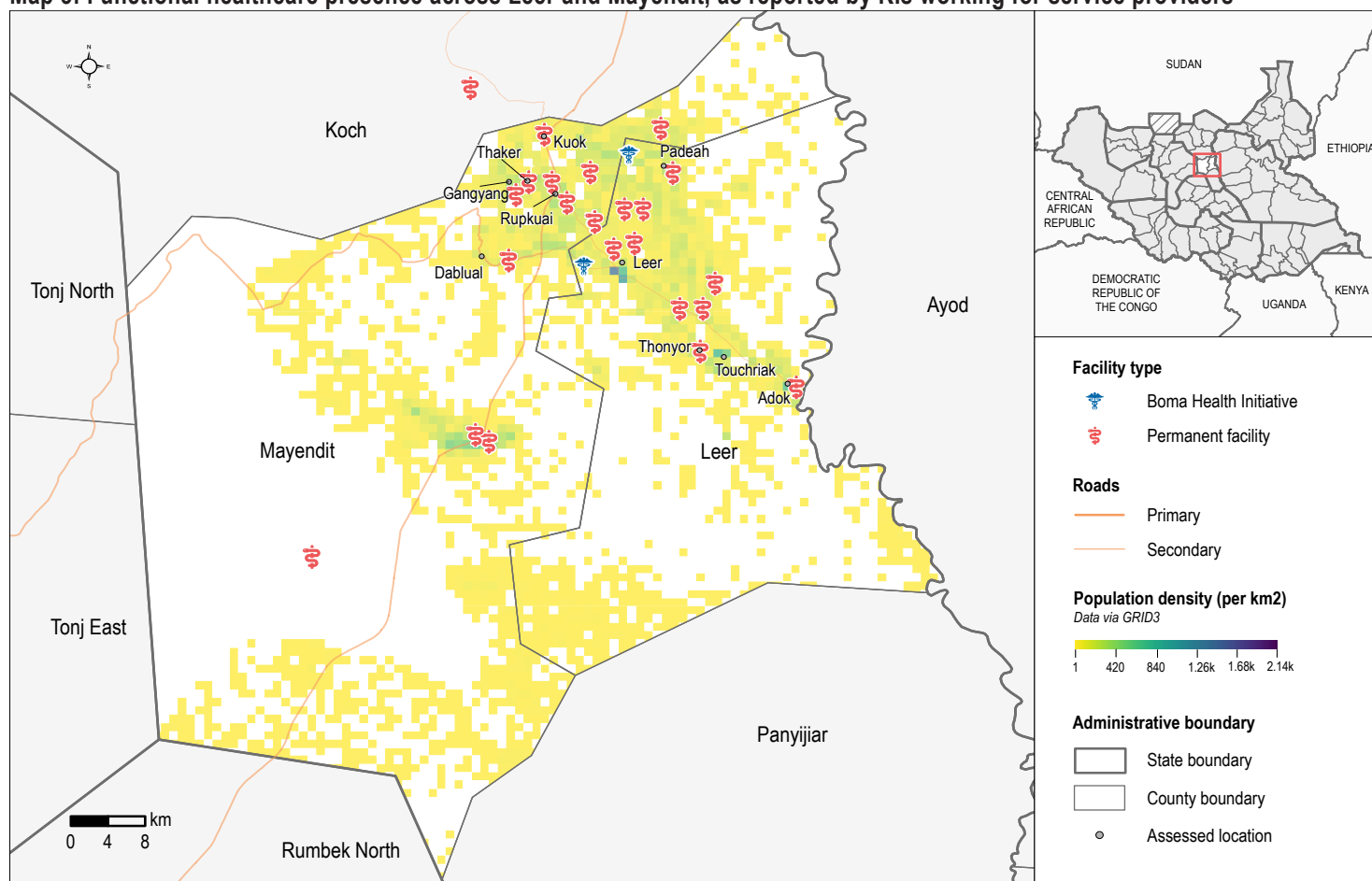
During the crisis, food consumption gaps were reportedly filled by an increased dependence on water lilies.²⁷ Lilies would be ground into a paste and cooked, or eaten raw. Similarly, many poor households across Leer and Mayendit are reportedly atypically dependent on wild foods during this current period. FGD participants in Gangyang, Mayendit county, reported that wild foods currently account for around 80% of their diet, particularly water lily seeds and roots (63%), and palm tubers and nuts (15%).

Dependence on wild foods will likely remain high until at least September 2021, when the maize harvest is expected. Continued heavy rainfall and flooding would further exacerbate existing access barriers to movement and the collection of wild foods, and reduce the availability of some wild foods that tend to fall into standing water.

Humanitarian Food Assistance (HFA)

The importance of HFA is particularly high, given the deterioration in the food security situation in Leer and Mayendit, and the limited ability of chiefs to effectively redistribute assets at the community level to help support the poorest and most food insecure. The last biometric registration of populations across Leer and Mayendit counties took place in October 2019. Since the registration, the overall population of both counties, and therefore **the population of unregistered individuals, has reportedly increased substantially.** Children born since October 2019 have reportedly not been registered to receive HFA. Additionally, since the end of the crisis, there has been an influx of refugee and IDP returnees, along with people that were displaced by the flooding of July 2020, most of whom are not registered in their current displacement locations. Participants from

Map 3: Functional healthcare presence across Leer and Mayendit, as reported by KIs working for service providers



the settlements of Adok and Touchriak estimated that approximately 35% of the current population are unregistered. These findings were supported by community leaders, NGO staff and FGD participants from across Leer and Mayendit counties. The presence of sizeable unregistered populations puts significant pressure on the existing host population to share the little they have.

Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Access to water was one of the main challenges reported by participants. FGD participants in Leer ranked hunger and water collection as the most severe challenges in their community, followed by violence including GBV, looting and cattle raiding.

FGD participants across Leer and Mayendit counties frequently reported that, while there are boreholes in their settlements, they are insufficient to serve the entire population. Continued displacement has increased congestion and waiting times at water points, and water quality at boreholes is often poor. As a result, many residents reportedly rely on rivers and swamps as secondary water sources. Single headed households reportedly rely most heavily on swamp and river water. This is a consequence of the widespread range of responsibilities that fall upon household heads, meaning that most do not have time to travel and wait at water points.

According to FGD participants, almost all community members practice open defecation due to a chronic lack of latrines, with

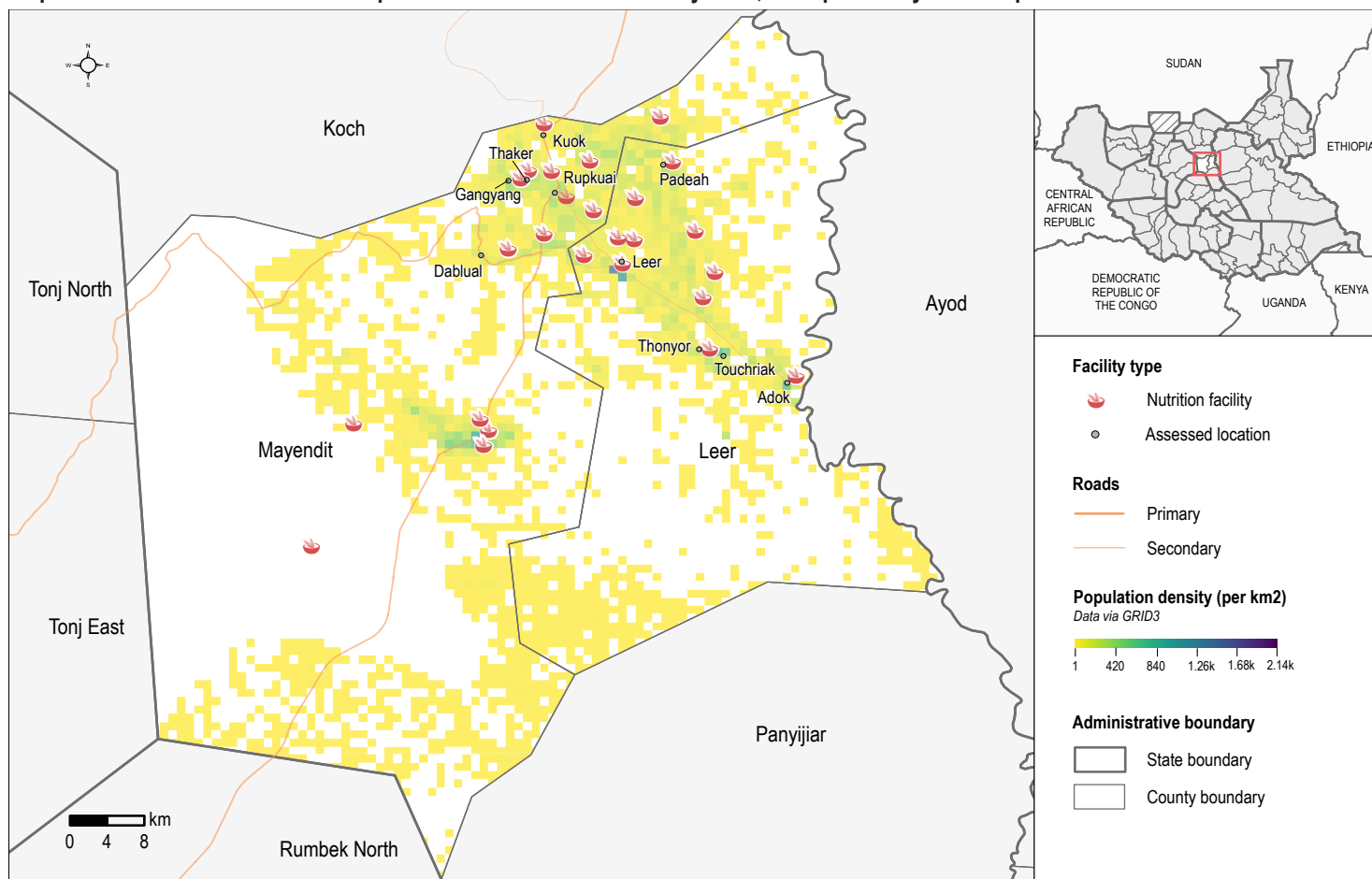
most KIs reporting that there are no functional latrines at all in their settlements. Flooding has limited movement away from the immediate vicinity of settlements. This has meant that people are increasingly defecating close to important water sources which are relied heavily upon by particularly vulnerable groups, reportedly resulting in widespread diarrhoea and typhoid, compounding existing vulnerabilities.

Health and Nutrition

According to KIs working for health and nutrition service providers across Leer and Mayendit counties, all such facilities (see maps 3 and 4) remained functional throughout 2021, except for those in the settlements of Guat, Thonyor, Juong, Leah and Rubin Char, which were forced to close temporarily between March and June due to violence. However, FGD participants consistently reported that distances between facilities are large, and that health and nutrition facilities lack qualified healthcare professionals, medication, and diagnostic equipment. These barriers particularly affect fragmented IDP and returnee households, many of whom are socially isolated and have vulnerable dependents, and therefore cannot travel to facilities. As a result of the lack of access, residents reportedly increasingly rely on traditional remedies.

Vulnerability has also increased since the flooding in July 2020, which resulted in widespread shelter destruction, further limited access to non-food items, and caused widespread displacement.

Map 4: Functional nutrition centre presence across Leer and Mayendit, as reported by service provider KIs



Many people, especially IDPs, are reportedly living in temporary shelters without access to mosquito nets or blankets, increasing their exposure to diseases such as malaria.

The lack of access to functional health and nutrition services is likely to be exacerbated in the coming months, as increased rainfall and flooding are expected to limit the movement of people and supplies and increase disease exposure. Additionally, insecurity may further reduce service availability. Since 21 May, there have reportedly been three targeted attacks on humanitarian staff working in Panyijiar county alone, resulting in two fatalities and the temporary suspension of operations.²⁸

Community members from Dablual reported that malnutrition within the settlement is much more widespread this year compared to previous years, and that they expect the situation to deteriorate further in the near term. In the coming months, in addition to the decreasing functionality of key services, access to food is expected to decrease further until the maize harvest in September 2021.

Conclusion

Since independence in 2011, a series of compounding shocks, particularly conflict and atypical flooding, have restricted the viability of traditional livelihood activities, namely cultivation and cattle keeping, in Leer and Mayendit counties. As traditional livelihood activities have become increasingly unviable, household resilience

has eroded, resulting in substantial food consumption gaps, particularly among IDPs and returnees. These shocks, as well as protracted years of needs and stressors, have simultaneously altered social stratification and power structures, resulting in a large population of poor and very poor residents, and causing a shift in power away from chiefs and community elders towards youth.

These dynamics have eroded the functionality of culturally important methods of community-level resource redistribution, namely chiefs' courts, which were traditionally relied upon by the poorest groups within society. With limited mechanisms and a lack of resources to redistribute in the community, most sharing amongst community members has become dependent on familial and social relationships, leaving highly vulnerable groups, often lacking social networks, unable to access community or kinship support in times of need.

Although hunger is reportedly not as pressing now as it has been at certain times in the past, the decreased resilience of the population, the reduced functionality of traditional social systems to deal with hunger, and relatively low access WASH facilities and medical care, mean that future stressors may lead to a faster and more severe deterioration in humanitarian conditions. It is key for humanitarian coordination mechanisms to be aware of the dynamics in the area and be prepared to respond to signs of deteriorating conditions or shocks that may cause such a deterioration.

Endnotes

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4. REACH. [Integrated Needs Tracking \(INT\) System](#). March 2021.
5. Amnesty International. [Anything that was breathing was killed](#). July 2018.
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8. Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET). [Livelihoods Zone Map and Descriptions for the Republic of South Sudan](#). August 2018.
9. *ibid.*,
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11. Cattle in the settlement of Theker, Mayendit county ©IMPACT/2021
12. Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET). [Livelihoods Zone Map and Descriptions for the Republic of South Sudan](#). August 2018.
13. *ibid.*,
14. Leer county was estimated to have a population 59,120 in 2020, while Mayendit county's population was estimated to be 66,015.
15. Amnesty International. [Anything that was breathing was killed](#). July 2018.
16. *ibid.*,
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18. Waterlily seeds drying in Mayendit county ©IMPACT/2021
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20. Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET). [Livelihoods Zone Map and Descriptions for the Republic of South Sudan](#). August 2018.
21. Aerial view of flooding in southern Unity State, June 2021 ©IMPACT/2021
22. A boma is the lowest-level administrative unit, below payams, in South Sudan.
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