



Background

Renk County in Upper Nile State, South Sudan is a major transit centre and border crossing for people and goods traveling to and from Sudan. Since independence in 2011, Renk town has become a major destination and transit point for returnees from Sudan and, since the beginning of the current conflict in 2013, for internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing conflict in other areas of Upper Nile State. Despite large-scale agriculture and opportunities for cash labour, malnutrition has remained high for years.¹

Due to the limited presence of humanitarian actors and to the geographic, cultural and economic differences from Juba, humanitarian needs in Renk County have gone largely untracked. REACH has operated in Renk County since January 2017, and currently conducts road monitoring to track the movement of IDPs and returnees through Renk town. In April 2018, Sudanese authorities closed the border crossing between Renk County and Sudan. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating in the area reported that returning refugees were stuck at the border for days or weeks at a time, and often turning to alternative methods to cross the border into South Sudan. There were also reports of increased market prices and rising hunger in Renk town.

To facilitate a better understanding of population movement and cross-border trade, and as part of a wider assessment of regional displacement from South Sudan,² REACH conducted primary data collection in Renk town in May 2018. This consisted of three focus group discussions (FGDs) with South Sudanese returnees, IDPs, and eleven key informant (KI) interviews of humanitarian actors working in Renk County, market traders in Renk town and host community government officials. Market price data was gathered from six additional traders in Renk town. Additional data was utilized from 20 previously unpublished KI interviews on market functionality conducted with traders in Renk town in May 2017. Secondary data from a SMART survey conducted by Medair in May 2018 was referenced as well.

The market and IDP settlement at the border with Sudan in Wunthow were not assessed, due to access issues. Although the assessment findings are not generalizable across all of Renk County, they provide an indicative understanding of the needs and current humanitarian situation in assessed areas.

Key findings

- Displacement to Sudan in 2015 due to insecurity reduced the labour force and limited agricultural cultivation in Renk County.
- High inflation and currency devaluation in Sudan since November 2017 has limited purchasing power in Renk County, because nearly all products are imported from Sudan.
- Periodic border closures by the Sudanese government since April 2018 have led to food price shocks, as supplies dwindle and informal cross-border trade incurs heavy surcharges.

- Nutrition issues have persisted for years, leaving approximately one-quarter of the population malnourished.

Demographics and livelihoods

This section describes the assessed populations currently residing in Renk County. Their origins and the push and pull factors influencing them are described in the following section.

Renk host community

The population of Renk County includes people from all over South Sudan, as it has largely been perceived as secure and prosperous.³ In the 1970's and 1980's, Renk County became an important farming and trade area after the Government of Sudan introduced mechanized agriculture schemes. Simsim, groundnuts and sorghum are still produced on large farms using tractors and casual labourers.

Primary livelihoods in Renk County were reported by government officials to be subsistence farming, casual labour and fishing. However, rains in 2017 were insufficient for a decent harvest in some areas of the county. Government officials and NGO staff reported that small-scale and subsistence farming has been further limited by high costs for land rental, tractor rental and fuel. Much of the land was reported to be owned by community groups and large-scale landowners; renters must pay cash and/or a portion of their harvest to the landowners.

Casual labour work is limited to certain months of planting and harvest, which vary depending on the crop. Community leaders reported that some large farms have not resumed full operations since insecurity in 2015 caused displacement to Sudan and farm shut-downs. In response, large numbers of people reportedly left for Sudan in late-2017 in search of casual labour jobs.

Livestock are kept along the Nile and on the west bank of the river in Manyo County. On a daily basis, milk from these herds is brought to the markets in Renk town. Some of the cattle keepers are reported to be Arab pastoralists who return to Sudan during the rainy season.

Internally displaced persons

Three camps in Renk County host returnees and IDPs: Abayok, Payuer and Wunthow. NGO partners reported that it can be difficult to differentiate IDPs from host community because Renk County has always been a diverse transit centre, with people from across South Sudan transiting through or staying in the county. Furthering this, home sites in Abayok IDP Camp, immediately to the south of Renk town, are being platted and sold to residents in a process of converting it from an IDP camp into a formal part of Renk town.

IDP leaders reported that opportunities for casual labour are limited, except during the time of harvest in September and October. Instead, IDPs gather firewood, grass and fish for sale. They reported that people are interested in cultivation, and that

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there is land available for rent, but that they do not have enough money to cover start-up costs. Monthly general food distributions in the IDP sites are an additional food source.

Renk town host community leaders reported that additional IDPs from within Renk County, as well as returnees from Sudan, were coming to live in Renk town. They were choosing to not live in the IDP camps because they were previously familiar with the host community, and did not feel comfortable in the IDP camps.

Sudan

As of January 2018, 168,950 registered South Sudanese lived in refugee camps in White Nile State, Sudan. Khor Al Waral was the largest site, with nearly 50,000 people. In these sites, 88% of those registered were women and children.^{4,5} Most of these people reportedly fled from fighting in South Sudan in 2014 and 2015.

Sudan's economy has been struggling with high inflation, rising food prices and fuel shortages since late-2017.^{6,7} These issues have affected northern areas of South Sudan that rely on Sudanese trade for most of their goods.

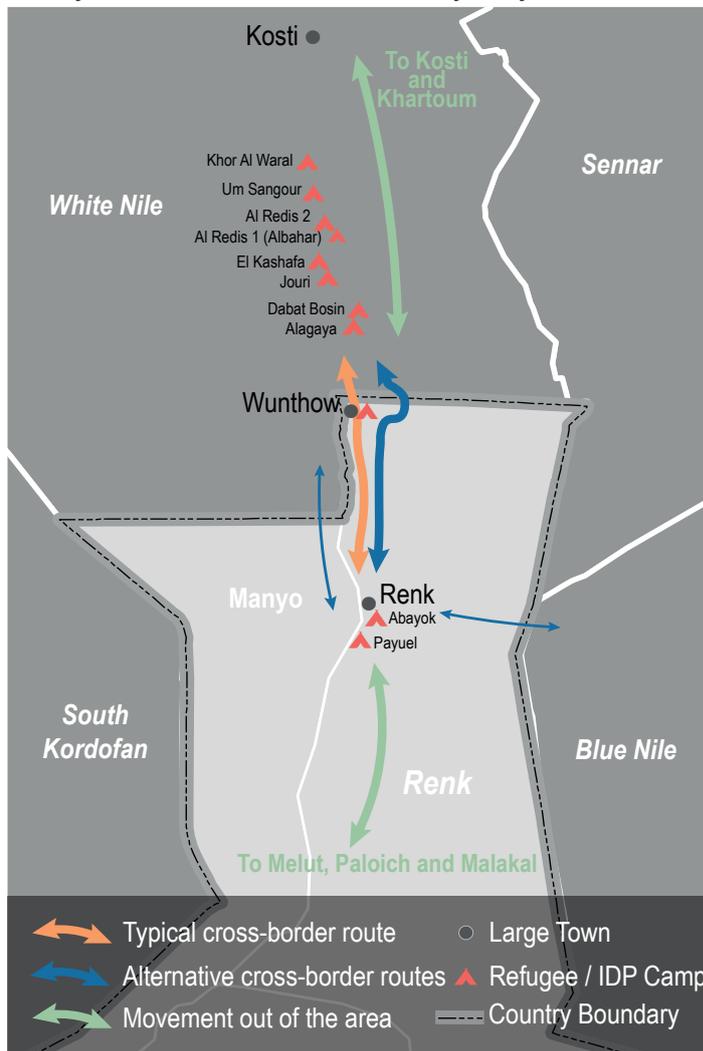
Some returnees reported that tensions are growing between host communities and refugees in White Nile State. This is reportedly worse than its been since cross-border fighting took place in 2012, and was attributed to the worsening economic situation in Sudan.

Population movement and displacement

Renk is a major transit hub for movement to and from Sudan. In 2011, large number of returnees from Sudan settled in and around Renk town; many of them reportedly intended to continue on to their home areas of South Sudan, but were unable to afford further travel. Then, between 2013 and 2017, waves of IDPs from across South Sudan settled in Renk, due to insecurity in their home areas. Ongoing and continuous movement has occurred between Renk and Sudan as people seek security and livelihood opportunities; this is to and from both Khartoum and the refugee camps in White Nile State.⁸

According to REACH's ongoing road monitoring along the main road from the Sudanese border into Renk town, the inflow of households returning to South Sudan through Renk town in March and April was much higher than the outflow of households departing toward refugee camps in Sudan. In April, the proportion of households departing Renk town toward Sudan further diminished, reportedly due to new restrictions on entries into Sudan. The majority of households transiting through Renk Town were heading toward the Malakal Protection of Civilians (PoC) site. Both the households going to Sudan and those coming back reported to be primarily motivated by family reunification. Half of all recorded movements through Renk town was of people just passing through.⁹ Returnees participating in FGDs often reported spending just one night in Renk town before taking river or road transportation into Sudan or deeper into South Sudan.

Map 1: Reported movement and trade routes between Renk County, South Sudan and Sudan, January - May 2018



Border closure

In April 2018, Sudanese officials began imposing periodic border closures at the main crossing in Wunthow. This is a continuation of a pattern that has occurred for a number of years.¹⁰ Agreements for a series of fully opened border crossings have never been enacted, and complete border closures have happened repeatedly. This has put severe pressure on South Sudanese border communities reliant on Sudan for grazing lands, access to services and trade.¹¹

Returnees reported that the border is actually only closed for a few hours or days at a time. Once enough people, especially women and children, have gathered on the Sudanese side, the border is opened to let them through. However, the flow from South Sudan into Sudan is reportedly more restricted, with people forced to wait in Wunthow for days or weeks before they are allowed to cross.

If people need to cross while the border is closed, it is reportedly possible to arrange to use alternative routes, however this is much more expensive.

NGO staff and community leaders reported that border closures

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cut access to higher levels of medical care which are available in Kosti and Khartoum. They attributed the deaths of multiple pregnant South Sudanese women to their inability to cross into Sudan to treat complications.

Cross-border trade

Renk markets

The people in Renk County are highly reliant on markets for their food. Local authorities reported that most traders in Suk Asabi, the main market in Renk town, purchase their goods from wholesalers in Renk or Wunthow who have imported the goods from Sudan. Very little is brought from Juba because transport costs are high; these are generally specialized non-food items such as clothing and hygiene products. Some locally produced food, including simsim, sorghum, vegetables and fish, is sold in Renk town, but much is reportedly shipped to Sudan or Juba for sale.

Sudan inflation

Traders reported that, in the past, they were able to avoid some of the impacts of the inflation of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP) by purchasing their goods in Sudanese Pounds or United States dollars. Since late-2017, since the Sudanese economy began experiencing massive inflation of its own, prices have risen dramatically; Renk's near-total reliance on Sudanese imports leads to major susceptibility to the movement of the Sudanese economy. Between May 2017 and May 2018, the average price of some foods has doubled or even tripled.

There has even been an increase in the prices for food grown in Renk County, as the inflation of fuel prices increased the cost of transporting goods to the market. This is compounded by the large-scale exportation of foods to Sudan and Juba, creating a dearth of affordable food in the market, despite its nearby production.

Border closure

Traders and NGO staff reported that border closures have caused dramatic and erratic price changes to essential items, especially fuel and staple foods. Even just a three day closure can reportedly cause a tripling of prices as supplies dwindle and smuggling fees

Figure 1: Comparison of average market prices (in SSP) in Suk Asabi, Renk town, between May 2017 and May 2018¹²

Item	Amount	May 2017	May 2018	% Change
Rice	20 kg bag	3,800	7,600	100%
Beef	1 kg	500	492	-2%
Chicken	1 kg	600	1,017	69%
Fish	1 medium	130	400	208%
Sorghum	1 kg	n/a	275	n/a

spike. Food can still be brought in from Sudan through alternate routes, such as along smaller roads to the east of Wunthow, through Blue Nile State, or along the west bank of the Nile, but using these routes incurs higher prices.

Food security and nutrition

Nutrition assessments have consistently found high rates of malnutrition in Renk for years. NGO partners reported that in the past these findings seem to have been dismissed by humanitarian actors because of the relatively high levels of food production in the area.

Food security

NGO partners reported that they saw improvements in the food security and livelihoods (FSL) situation in Renk in the latter half of 2017 as population displacement reduced and farms resumed operations. However, these improvements were lost in 2018 due to the rapid rise in the price of food in the area, due to inflation in Sudan and periodic border closures. Even the prices of some locally produced foods, such as sorghum, have gone up, because of rising fuel costs and exportation.

The high prices for food, combined with stagnant wages for casual labour, means people continue to not have enough money to feed themselves. NGO staff reported that food insecurity was worse in remote eastern areas of the county, where access to fishing in the Nile was limited.

Assessed malnutrition

In May 2018, Medair assessed food security and malnutrition trends among 402 children from the host community and 424 children from the IDP population. The assessment found very high acute malnutrition in both the Renk host community and IDP populations using measurements of weight-for-height z-scores.¹³

The host community had a global acute malnutrition (GAM) prevalence of 26.2% and a severe acute malnutrition (SAM) prevalence of 6.4%. IDPs had a GAM prevalence of 22.8% and a SAM prevalence of 6.0%. For both populations, this marked a reduction in GAM of roughly 6% and a reduction in SAM of roughly 1% since May 2017. Both populations had a prevalence of oedema of 0.0%.^{14,15}

NGO KIs attributed these rates to inadequate household food security due to inflation, unemployment, poor harvests and low

Figure 2: Malnutrition prevalence among children 6 months to 59 months of age in Renk County using weight-for-height z-scores by community, May 2018¹⁶

Community	SAM	GAM
Host community	6.4%	26.9%
IDP community	6.0%	22.8%

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access to land, as well as morbidity caused by low access to health services. However, Medair's assessment of food security indicated that hunger and reliance on coping skills may not be as low as expected. Further research is needed to confirm the severity of the food insecurity and livelihoods situation in Renk County.

Spillover from Sudan

*"Better to come here and eat tree leaves and fish
[than to go hungry in the refugee camps in Sudan]."*

-Middle aged man returning to Renk town, South Sudan
from White Nile State, Sudan

South Sudanese returning from Sudan reported challenging conditions and limited resources in places of refuge in Sudan. Some described returning to South Sudan primarily as a search for food and livelihoods.

NGO KIs indicated that conditions in the refugee sites in Sudan are inadequate to ensure proper nutrition. Of the children being brought in for severe malnutrition to Medair's clinic in Wunthow, an estimated 98% live in the refugee camps in Sudan. Their caregivers have reported that health and nutrition services are inadequate at these camps, forcing them to travel repeatedly to South Sudan for ongoing treatment. This travel was already expensive and time-consuming, but since April 2017, when the border has often been closed, it seems to have become prohibitively so; nearly all cross-border movement to the clinic has stopped, potentially leaving malnourished children stranded in Sudan without support.

Conclusion

Persistent malnutrition in Renk County is affected by issues of cross-border movement and trade with Sudan. Insecurity in Renk County, which started in 2015, caused mass displacement to Sudan, reducing the available labour force and limiting agricultural cultivation. High start-up costs for small-scale and subsistence farming, combined with exportation of food from large-scale farms, has further limited the food supply. As such, most food is imported from Sudan, or reliant on imported fuel for cultivation and transport. This has made Renk County sensitive to fluctuations of the Sudanese economy, which since late-2017 has seen high inflation and currency devaluation. This has led to limited purchasing power in Renk County. These issues have been severely compounded by periodic border closures by the Sudanese government since April 2018, which has led to price shocks, as food supplies dwindle and traders turn to costly alternative trade routes. All of this seems to have led to a significant portion of the population of Renk County having insufficient cultivation or purchasing power to feed itself. Nearly one-quarter of the population is malnourished, a level that has roughly maintained for years, despite reductions in insecurity.

Further research is needed to understand the complex economic dynamics in Renk County, as other unassessed factors may be impacting nutrition levels of the population.

Endnotes

- 1 [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification. South Sudan Key IPC findings. January - July 2018.](#)
- 2 Including [REACH. Regional Displacement of South Sudanese: Returns from Kalobayei Refugee Settlement, Turkana County, Kenya. December 2017](#) and [REACH. Regional Displacement of South Sudanese: Kajo-Keji County, Central Equatoria, South Sudan and Moyo District, West Nile Sub-Region, Uganda. March 2018.](#)
- 3 [REACH. Situation Overview: Displacement in Upper Nile State. January - February 2017.](#)
- 4 [UNHCR. Sudan: White Nile Population Dashboard. Refugees from South Sudan. 31 January 2018](#)
- 5 According to [ElHassan, Idris. South Sudan "arrivals" in the White Nile State \(Sudan\). Sudan Working Paper #7. Chr. Michelsen Institute. December 2016.](#), these are not refugee camps but "waiting stations" according to the Sudanese government, and the people in them are not refugees but "arrivals." This is part of a complicated history of South Sudanese who lived in Sudan, owning homes and businesses and even intermarrying, then returned to South Sudan in 2011 with the official birth of the nation. When these people fled back to Sudan a few years later due to fighting and poor living conditions, many returned to the same areas of Khartoum and White Nile State that they had lived before. Their status and rights have been an ongoing point of contention.
- 6 [Reuters. Sudan inflation rises to 57.65 pct in April. 16 May 2018.](#)
- 7 [Reuters. Sudan's bread prices double after government cuts wheat subsidies. 5 January 2018](#)
- 8 [REACH. Situation Overview: Displacement in Upper Nile State. January - February 2017.](#)
- 9 [REACH. Renk Road Monitoring. February 2018.](#)
- 10 [Craze, Joshua. Contested Borders: Continuing Tensions over the Sudan - South Sudan Border. Small Arms Survey. HSBA Working Paper 34. 2014.](#)
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 2017 figures based on: Medair. Renk food prices analysis. June 2017.
- 13 According to [IPC Global Partners. 2016. Addendum to IPC Technical Manual Version 2.0: IPC Tools and Procedures for Classification of Acute Malnutrition. Rome.](#), the World Health Organization defines population-level malnutrition of children 6 to 59 months of age as the combined percentage of Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM) cases; this is called the Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate.
- 14 Medair. Anthropometric and mortality survey preliminary findings: Renk County, Upper Nile State, South Sudan. May 2018.
- 15 According to Medair staff, SAM prevalence, including cases of oedema, spike in November, because caregivers often spend October harvesting remote fields as casual labourers away from their children.
- 16 Medair. Anthropometric and mortality survey preliminary findings: Renk County, Upper Nile State, South Sudan. May 2018.