

Situation Overview: Unity State, South Sudan

March 2017

REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

Introduction

Displacement trends, population needs and humanitarian access have all been negatively affected by the insecurity resulting from the ongoing conflict in Unity State, which began in July 2016. Although the food security situation in Koch, Leer and Panyijar has improved since last month, Mayom Guit and Rubkona have seen an alarmingly rapid decrease in food security, while the situation in Mayendit remained worrying. Furthermore, negative trend of access to most basic services continued in March.

To inform humanitarian actors working outside formal settlement sites, REACH has been conducting assessments of hard-to-reach areas in South Sudan since December 2015. The data is being collected through interviews on a monthly basis from communities across the Greater Upper Nile region, Greater Equatoria region and Western Bahr el Ghazal.

Between 6 and 29 March 2017, REACH interviewed a total of 623 Key Informants (KIs) from 335 settlements situated in 7 of the 9 counties in Unity State. In the Bentiu Protection of Civilians site (Bentiu PoC), 457 KIs were interviewed, while 166 were in Nyal. Since 85% of the respondents interviewed had arrived at their formal displacement site as recent as February or March, they had up-to-date information about the village of former

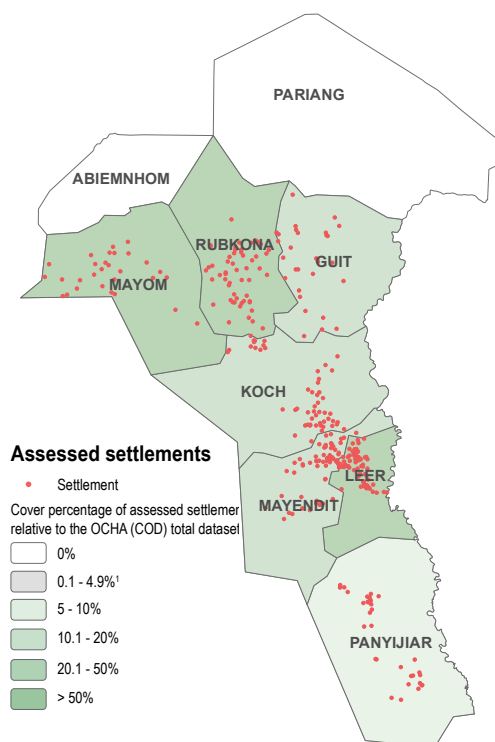
residence. This information therefore provides an accurate understanding of the current displacement and population dynamics. The remaining 15% had recent information about certain villages through contact with someone (usually a relative) that is currently living there.

The findings were triangulated through six focus group discussions (FGDs), secondary data and previous REACH assessments of hard-to-reach areas of Unity State.

This Situation Overview focuses on changes observed since the February Situation Overview for Unity State. The first section analyses displacement trends in March, and the second section evaluates the population dynamics in the assessed communities, as well as access to food and basic services for both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and local communities.

Population Movement and Displacement

Depopulation of assessed settlements has increased steadily since January, which is likely a reflection of security developments in the state. In March, 12% of the settlements reported that all members of the community have abandoned their villages, while only 10% and 6% reported the same in February and January respectively. Almost half (48%) of assessed settlements reported that more than



Map 1: REACH assessment coverage of Unity State, March 2017

half of the population had left the village. The highest numbers of depopulation have been recorded in conflict-affected Mayendit, where almost one-third (31%) of the settlements reported that no member of the community has remained, followed by Rubkona (23%). These high numbers of depopulation suggest displacement across Unity State remained a key trend in March.

Bentiu PoC population has seen an increase in numbers since February. According to population estimates, 121,225 people have sought protection at Bentiu PoC at the end of March, up from 118,851 in mid-February.¹ New arrivals were mostly from Rubkona, Koch, Guit and Leer. Furthermore, in Nyal Town, which is traditionally a common destination for IDPs fleeing conflict in southern Unity State, REACH Port Monitoring has observed high numbers of people arriving mainly from Mayendit (59%) and Leer (35%).²

However, it is highly likely that recorded movement to formal displacement sites does not adequately reflect the extent of ongoing population movement in Unity State. Many people from the most conflict-affected parts of the state are reportedly unable or unwilling to use the road that traverses southern Unity State to Bentiu PoC. Numerous incidents of looting, physical attacks and abductions of young female travellers by armed groups were reportedly experienced by FGD participants who used the road in February and March. As a result, many people who have been displaced from their homes reportedly preferred to remain hidden in the bush or in the swamps, despite the pronounced lack of food and access to services in such areas, rather than risk travelling to a formal displacement site.

Insecurity was reported by 78% of new arrivals in Bentiu PoC and Nyal as the main reason for

1 IOM, Site Profile Bentiu PoC, 16-31 March 2017.

2 REACH, Nyal Port Monitoring, March 2017.



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METHODOLOGY

To provide an overview of the situation in largely inaccessible areas of Unity State, REACH uses primary data provided by key informants who have recently arrived, or receive regular information, from their pre-displacement location or “Area of Knowledge”.

Information for this report was collected from key informants in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site and Nyal in Unity State throughout March 2017.

The first phase of the assessment methodology comprised a participatory mapping exercise to map the relevant settlements in Unity State. In-depth interviews were then conducted with selected participants using a standardised survey tool comprising questions on displacement trends, population needs, and access to basic services.

After data collection was completed, all data was examined at the settlement level, and settlements were assigned the modal response. When no consensus could be found for a settlement, that settlement was not included in reporting. Descriptive statistics and geospatial analysis were then used to analyse the data.

It must be noted that this represents a **change in methodology as of December 2016**, as REACH previously analysed data at the community level. This means that **this report is not directly comparable with Situation Overviews from before December 2016**.

leaving previous location, indicative of ongoing hostilities in Unity State. As in previous months, severe food insecurity continued to exacerbate displacement in March. Lack of food has been cited by 66% of KIs as reason to leave their former residence. This might be in part due to the continuation of the lean season, where crops are not yet ready to harvest, as well as the progressive depletion of food stocks and resources.

As the rainy season approaches, return movements to area of origin was one of the movement patterns observed towards the end of March. During the second half of March, more exits than entries to the PoC have been recorded by IOM movement trend tracking (804 entries and 1,208 exits),² a trend that will likely continue throughout the weeks and months to come. According to FGD participants, people, mainly from Rubkona, Guit, Koch and Leer are leaving the PoC to return to their areas of origin for cultivation. Ongoing food distribution in these counties has reportedly also encouraged return movements. However, security is still a key issue, especially in central Unity State, and FGD discussants explained that they consequently prefer to leave children and elderly persons in the PoC, which is reflected in demographic distribution in the PoC, where 37% are below the age of 5.³

For more information about displacement trends, please refer to the REACH Nyal Port Monitoring factsheet⁴ and January 2017⁵ and February 2017⁶ Situation Overviews.

Situation in Assessed Communities

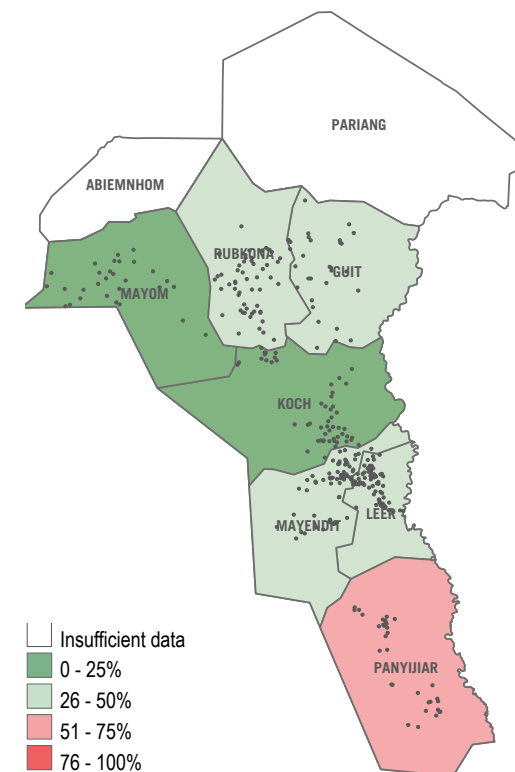
Demographic profile

Remaining population in assessed villages

In March, 80% of assessed settlements reported that most of the local community continued to live in their own homes, which is comparable to January (73%) and February (74%). Among the remaining 20%, 11 % of assessed settlements reported that the majority of local community lives in other homes in the same village, and 8% reported the majority to be living in the bush, which represents an improvement compared to 23% in February. The decreasing proportion of assessed settlements reporting local community to be living in the bush might be indicative of positive developments in terms of security in Unity State. Improvements have been most notable in Koch, where only 4% of settlements reported the majority of the local community to be living in the bush in March, compared to 16% in February. However, still a worrying high number of assessed settlements in Leer (22%) and Mayendit (20%) reported that the majority of the local community population was living in the bush, with limited to no access to basic services.

IDP population in assessed villages

One-third (33%) of the assessed settlements reported the presence of IDPs in their villages in March, slightly less than in February (43%) and comparable to January (36%). Of these, the majority (80%) arrived since the renewed



Map 2: Proportion of settlements reporting an IDP presence, March 2017

crisis in July 2016, and almost half (49%) arrived following the more recent upsurge in violence in November 2016. This suggests that high levels of displacement have been an ongoing trend in Unity State. In the light of general food scarcity, the arrivals of IDPs may reduce the resources of the local community that were already limited.

Similar to the preceding months, the gender distribution of the IDP population in assessed settlements is highly unbalanced. Of the assessed settlements reporting an IDP

2 IOM, Site Profile Bentiu PoC, 16-31 March.

3 IOM, Bentiu PoC Population Count, 29-30 March 2017.

4 REACH, Nyal Port Monitoring, March 2017.

5 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, January 2017.

6 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, February 2017.

presence, 89% reported that the majority or entirety of the IDP population is female, which represents a steady increase since February (80%) and January (73%). This uneven gender balance of IDP communities is most likely a direct result of the conflict. FGDs undertaken in Bentiu PoC indicated that a large number of men have joined or have been forcefully recruited by armed groups, while others are hiding from forced recruitment, often leaving women and children behind. It is important to underline that with the breakdown of family and community structures, which commonly serve as support mechanisms, women and children remain particularly vulnerable and exposed to gender-based violence and child-rights abuses.

Food security

Only 45% of assessed settlements reported having adequate access to food in March. Although this represents an improvement from

February (39%), the numbers are still low. The main reported reason for inadequate access to food in March was conflict, which has been cited by 60% of the assessed settlements, a proportion comparable to the preceding month (62%). With 28%, natural disaster was cited as second reason.

As a result of the declaration of state of localised famine in Mayendit and Leer counties in February by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Technical Working Group,⁷ humanitarian actors have scaled up efforts to respond to the famine with rapid response missions in the most affected areas throughout the month of March.⁸ The effectiveness of the humanitarian responses seems to be reflected in the REACH data collected in March, which shows an improvement of access to food in two of the three worst affected counties in Unity State. In Koch, the numbers of settlements that reported having access to food increased from

21% in February to 46% in March. At the same time, NGO or UN agency food distributions have been cited as the primary source of food in 49% of the settlements in Koch County. This represents a notable increase compared to 8% in February. In Leer, settlements with adequate access to food increased from 11% in February to 38% in March, while distribution has been reported as the primary source of food in 54% of settlements, compared to only 16% in February. The increase in food availability in these two counties have also been observed by some FGD participants who have reported that sufficient amounts of food have been distributed during the month of March. However, other FGD participants noted that they either did not get the chance to register for food distribution or the food distribution site was located too far away from their village. This explains the high proportion of settlements that still reported no adequate food access in March.

However, as opposed to Koch and Leer, no significant change in the food security situation was reported in Mayendit in March. As shown in Map 3, in March only 21% of the assessed settlements reported adequate access to food, which is comparable to February (25%). Most settlements in the county reportedly rely on wild foods (66%) and fishing (8%) as their primary sources of food, while only 20% reported having received food through distributions in March, which represents a decrease of 10 points of percentage compared to February (30%). This might be attributed to humanitarian access to Mayendit having been under negotiation at the time of the assessment, which hindered

large-scale humanitarian action.⁹ Furthermore, FGD participants from Mayendit indicated that looting of food rations that have been distributed is a common occurrence. This practice may be problematic as it undermines the effectiveness of humanitarian action.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the northern counties of Unity (Rubkona, Guit and Mayom) have shown a deterioration in food security since February. Mayom has seen by far the fastest aggravation in food security; While in February still 85% of assessed settlements in the county reported being food secure, in March only 41% reported the same. Natural disaster – mainly floods – have been cited as main reason for food insecurity in 92% of the assessed settlements. On the other hand, only one of the 29 assessed settlements reported receiving food distribution in the last three months. This rapid deterioration of food security is also reflected in the movement patterns, which show new arrivals to Bentiu town were mainly from Mayom County.¹⁰

Similar to the developments in Mayom, Rubkona and Guit have shown a rapid deterioration in food security; While in February still 92% of assessed settlements in Guit and 78% in Rubkona reported being food secure, in March only 61% in Guit and 46% in Rubkona reported the same, which represents a drop of over 30 points of percentage in both counties. This negative trend in food security might be partly attributable to the continuation of the lean season. As a reflection of the depletion of cultivated food stocks, the proportion of

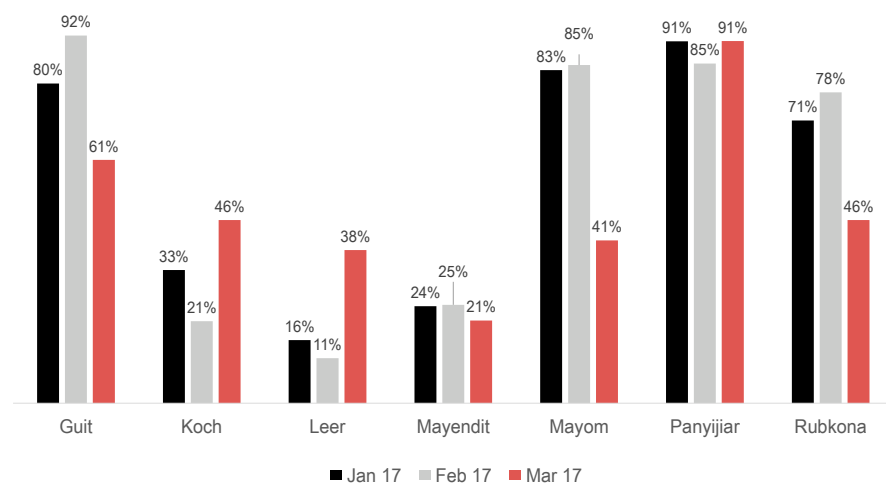


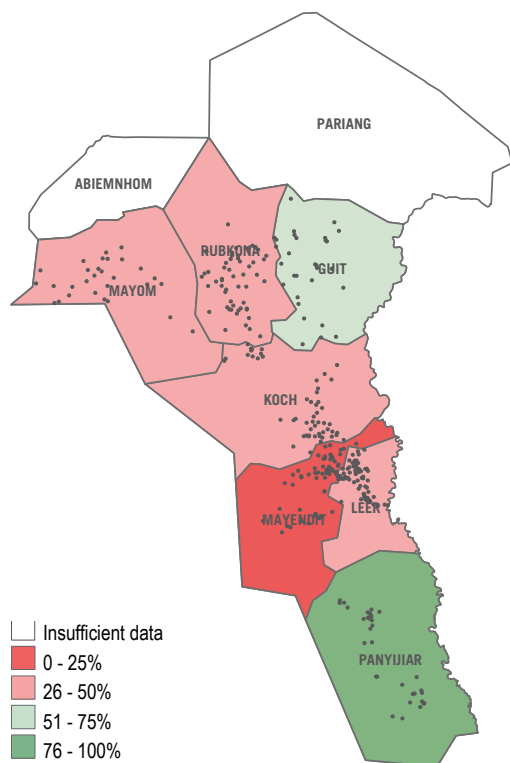
Figure 1: Proportion of settlements reporting access to food by counties, January-March 2017

7 IPC, IPC Global Alert - South Sudan - Localized famine and unprecedented levels of acute malnutrition in Greater Unity, February 2017.

8 WFP, South Sudan Situation Report #170, March 2017.

9 Voanews, Aidworkers Forced to Relocate From Famine-Stricken Area of South Sudan, March 2017.

10 CCCM, Cluster Weekly Report, 13-18 March 2017.



Map 3: Proportion of settlements reporting adequate access to food, March 2017

assessed settlements reporting cultivation to be their primary source of food dropped from 63% of assessed settlements in Rubkona and 26% in Guit in February down to 27% in Rubkona and 5% in Guit in March. Consequently, an increasing number of people in these counties are becoming increasingly dependent on food aid- a trend that is likely to continue throughout the next months. Humanitarian actors therefore need to scale-up food distribution efforts in the north of Unity State in order to counter these

negative developments in food security.

Livelihoods

In March, 79% of assessed settlements reported access to land, which is comparable to the previous month (78%). However, access varies between counties, showing lowest proportions in Leer, where only 57% of assessed villages reported land to be accessible for cultivation. Similarly, in Mayendit proportion of assessed settlements reporting access to land has significantly decreased, with only 65% reporting access in March, compared to 77% in February. This is possibly due to the outbreak of heavy fighting in Mayendit and Leer since the beginning of March, which led to large-scale displacements and occupation of land by armed groups.

In March, 43% of assessed villages reported lack of agricultural inputs such as seeds and tools, which represents a steady increase since January (36%) and February (38%). Displaying a consequence of conflict, looting continued to be the most cited reason for inaccessibility to agricultural tools and inputs in 31% of the villages. The second most cited reason for lack of tools and input has been the fact that people flee from violence and consequently leave assets behind (21%). FGD participants in Bentiu PoC further explained that seed stocks for the next cultivation season have either been looted or consumed due to lack food.

In the light of the of the approaching rainy season which usually starts in May and is traditionally the season for cultivation, humanitarian actors

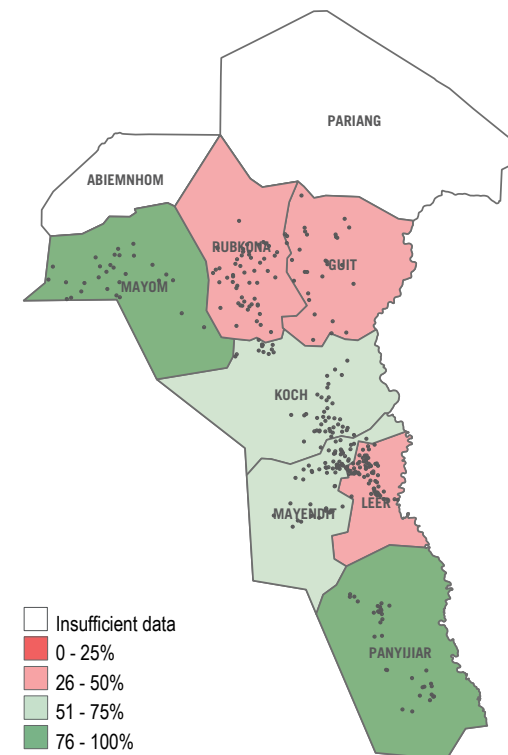
should focus on the distribution of agricultural inputs and tools, as long as roads are still dry and accessible in order to support sustainable cultivation. In the meanwhile, until crops are ready for harvest, fishing kits could supplement and support immediate food supply. Livelihoods intervention, however, would strongly be dependent on the security situation.

Protection

As a reflection of ongoing hostilities, conflict continued to be reported as the most important cause of death in Unity State, as cited by 52% of assessed settlements in March, which is less than in February (64%) and comparable to January (49%).

In March, 37% of assessed settlements reported physical protection to be available. It represents a constant decrease since the beginning of the year with 54% and 63% reporting the same in February and January, respectively. This decrease could be explained by the volatility of the security situation in Unity State, particularly in counties such as Leer, Koch and Mayendit.¹¹

Sexual violence continued to be the main protection risk for women as has been reported by half of assessed settlements (50%). The risk of sexual violence is highest in conflict-affected Mayendit (69%), Leer (72%) and Koch (57%). An important majority of assessed settlements (90%) reported that the perpetrators are most likely to be armed groups. These figures are consistent with the continuous allegations of rape that have been expressed against armed actors since the renewed upsurge in violence



Map 4: Proportion of settlements reporting access to safe water, March 2017

in July last year.¹¹ Appropriate support notably psychological one, should then be provided to women and girls.

For men, injury and killing appear to be the most prevalent protection concerns in 61% of the assessed settlements. Second most common protection concern for men, as reported in 24% of assessed villages, was forced recruitment. These practices also affect community resilience and access to other services, because key roles in the communities such as medical staff or teachers are traditionally occupied by men.

¹¹ UN News Centre, Killings, rapes in South Sudan continued “unabated” after July 2016 violence.

For example, in Guit the forceful recruitment of teachers led to the closing of at least one school, which subsequently impacted the education of 500 students.¹²

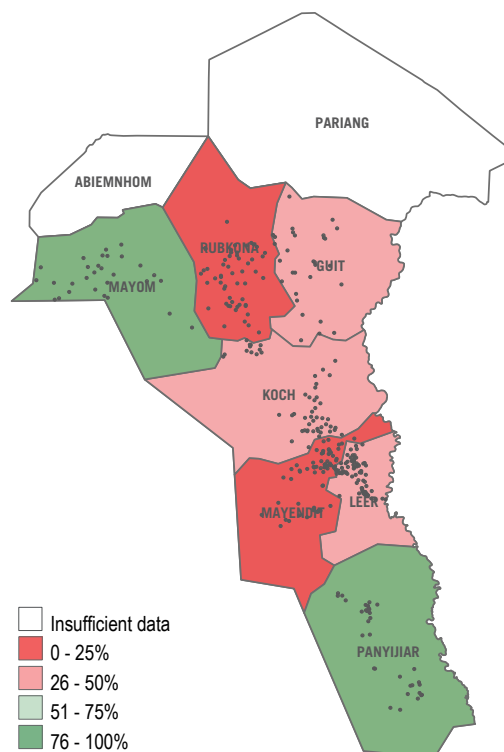
Water and Sanitation

Only 51% of settlements reported having access to safe drinking water in March, which represents a continuous decrease since February (58%) and January (64%). Of these, 95% reported boreholes to be their main source of safe drinking water, which is comparable to February (95%). This negative trend is mainly attributable to the continuing dry season in South Sudan during which water sources get more scarce. FGD participants further explained that many of the boreholes have been destroyed during fighting or due to flooding. People therefore reportedly resort to drinking untreated water directly from the rivers, which may cause deadly diseases like diarrhoea and cholera. Furthermore, as in previous months the vast majority of settlements (92%) reported that none of the population uses latrines, and consequently, open defecation may become problematic as another source of sicknesses. Where access is secured, humanitarian actors should therefore focus on the reparation and construction of safe water sources, as well as latrines in order to improve health conditions.

For more information about WASH services and practices in Unity State, please refer to January¹³ and February¹⁴ Situation Overviews.

Health

Overall, access to health services remained



Map 5: Proportion of settlements reporting access to health services, March 2017

low in March; only 44% of assessed villages reported to have access to health services, which is comparable to February (47%). Among the assessed settlements reporting access to health services, 55% reported being able to reach these facilities by foot in one hour or less. This low access to healthcare services has reportedly been among the main triggers for displacement in Unity State. In March, 41% of KIs cited lack of access to health services as among the primary push factors for leaving

their previous settlement.

It should be noted that access to health services in Rubkona is extremely probable to be underreported because services are concentrated in Bentiu PoC and other locations that are unlikely to be covered by REACH data, such as Bentiu town and Rubkona town. Accounting for these constraints, it appears likely that access to health services is higher in counties that are relatively stable (such as Mayom) and physically accessible (such as Guit and Rubkona), and lower in the conflict-affected counties of central Unity State.

Insecurity and lack of medical supplies continued to be reported as the main reasons for limited access to healthcare services in March. All of the assessed settlements that reported no access to healthcare also reported that this was due to lack of medicine, lack of staff or due to the fact that facilities had been destroyed during fighting. Half of the assessed settlements further mentioned insecurity as a main barrier to access healthcare. Where security situation allows longer term humanitarian intervention, as in parts of Rubkona, Guit and Mayom, priority should be given to distribution of medical supplies and provision of skilled staff to ensure resumption of healthcare activities. Other areas, such as Mayendit, Leer and Koch, where access to health care has been lowest but security situation remains volatile, could be covered with mobile clinics and vaccination campaigns.

As shown by Figure 2, malaria continued to be reported as the most common health

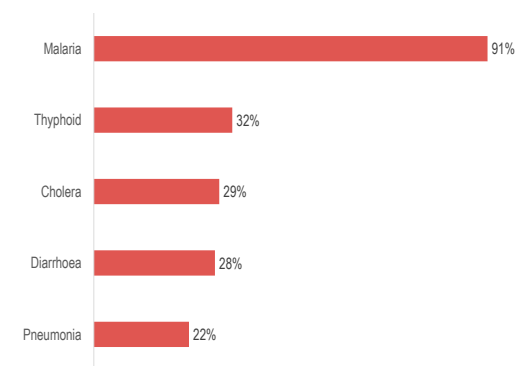


Figure 2: Most common health concerns by proportion of settlements, March 2017¹⁵

concern in Unity State in March (91%), which is comparable to February (86%). After malaria, typhoid (32%) and cholera (29%) have been reported as most common health concerns at the settlement level. This is consistent with reports of cholera transmission and fatalities in Rubkona, Leer, Panyijar and Mayendit.¹⁶

Education

Only 23% of assessed settlements reported access to education services in March, which is comparable to the preceding month (20%). Of the assessed settlements that reported no access to education, 74% cited direct or indirect impact of conflict to be the most important reason for low education services. These include insecurity (17%), abandonment of schools by teachers (22%) or the fact that school buildings had been destroyed by fighting (35%).

Access to education is significantly lower in relatively more unstable counties. In Leer, 99%

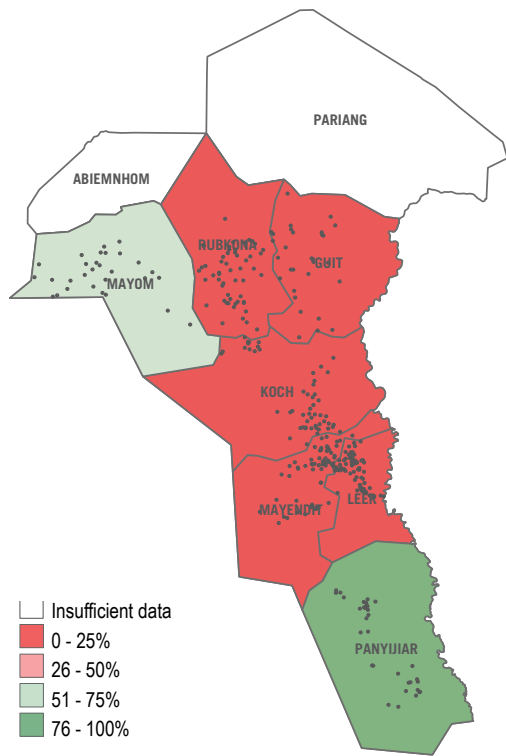
12 OCHA, South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot, March 2017.

13 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, January 2017.

14 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, February 2017.

15 Rank three most common health concerns normalized.

16 WHO, Weekly Epidemiological Bulletin, 20th-26th March 2017 16 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, January 2017.



Map 6: Proportion of settlements reporting access to education services, March 2017

of the assessed villages reported no access to education, followed by Mayendit and Rubkona (92% in both counties). It must be noted that in Rubkona, where humanitarian education programmes have been most extensive, many educational services were not reflected in REACH data because they are concentrated in locations that are unlikely to be covered by survey respondents, such as Bentiu PoC and Bentiu town.

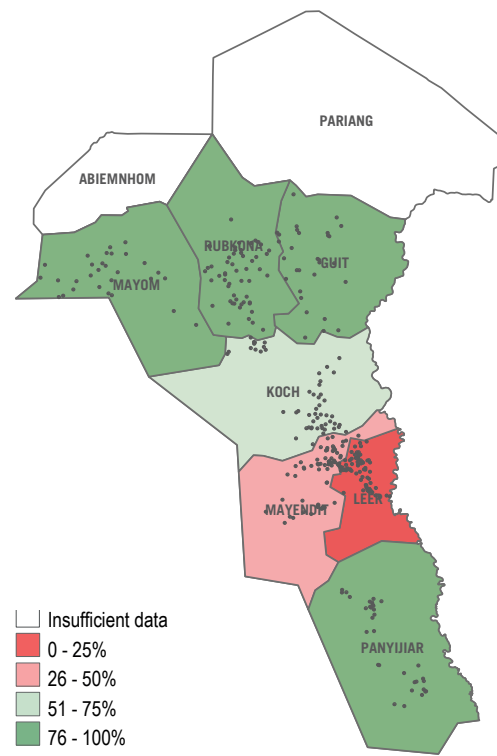
Although Mayom is still among the counties

which are best covered with education services, it must be noted that access to education deteriorated significantly; 69% of assessed settlements reported education services to be available in March, compared to 80% in February. Among the settlements reporting no availability of education services, 63% cited that no education facilities are available close by, which might be related to continuous movement of the population due to cattle keeping, search of water or movement related to floods. Further assessment by education partners operating in Mayom would be necessary to confirm and understand the reasons behind this deterioration.

Reported attendance rates show that far fewer girls attended school than boys. In only 30% of assessed settlements reportedly half or more of the school-aged girls attend school, while in 86% of assessed settlements the same has been reported for boys. Humanitarian actors should therefore consider incentivisation systems to encourage girls to attend school.

Shelter

The most prevalent shelter type for local community reported among half (50%) of the assessed settlements is the tukul, followed by rakooba (48%). These figures represent a slight improvement compared to the preceding month, when less (43%) of assessed settlements reported tukul as most common shelter type and 55% reported rakooba. Access to adequate shelter, however, varies between the different counties, as shown by Map 7. The most prevalent shelter type in comparatively



Map 7: Proportion of settlements reporting tukuls as the primary shelter type for the local community, March 2017

more stable Mayom, Panyijar, Guit and Rubkona is the more permanent tukul in the vast majority (90%) of assessed settlements. By contrast, lack of adequate shelter remains a worrying issue in central Unity State, where only 13% of assessed villages reported the same.

Due to the continuous conflict, large numbers of villages in Mayendit (69%) and Leer (58%) reported destruction of shelters during the

last month. Shelter destruction has been most prevalent in Leer, where in the beginning of the year 51% of assessed settlements reported tukul as main shelter type, while in March only 4% reported the same. Although shelter materials are available outside of the villages, insecurity reportedly obstructs people from rebuilding their permanent shelters (tukuls), and as a consequence high percentage (82%) of assessed settlements in central Unity State reported makeshift rakoobas to be the primary shelter type for local community in March.

In addition, shelter needs of IDPs continued to increase in Unity State in March. As shown by Figure 3, among the settlements reporting the presence of IDPs, 72% cited rakooba or improvised shelter as the most common shelter type for this population. The worst shelter conditions for the IDP population appear to be in Mayendit, where 29% of settlements reported for the first time since assessments began that most IDPs are living without any kind of shelter.

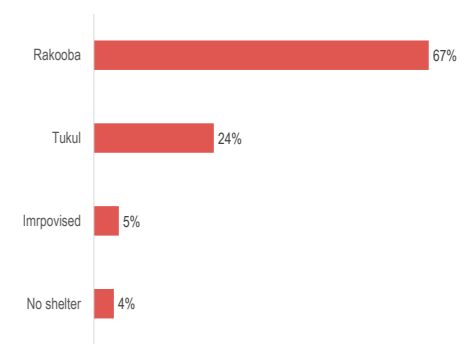


Figure 3: Most common shelter types for IDP population by proportion of settlements, March 2017¹⁴

Such situation has not been reported in any other county in March. FGD respondents from Mayendit confirmed that at the time of writing this report many displaced people live under trees, where they are exposed to weather conditions as well as risks associated with living outside, such as poisonous snakes.

Overall, these findings suggest that the majority of settlements in Koch, Leer and Mayendit are not able to adequately support the shelter needs of both the local community and the IDP population. They consequently need to be supported through provision of temporary shelter materials such as plastic sheets and ropes, whereby humanitarian actors should strongly prioritize IDP communities in Mayendit where the issue was found to be most severe.

Conclusion

Overall, access to primary services such as food, shelter, health and education remain very low in March, requiring large-scale humanitarian effort to address these needs.

The ongoing tension between the armed groups, along with the food security crisis, continued to negatively affect displacement trends, population needs and access to services. With 55% of assessed settlements reporting no adequate access to food in March, humanitarian actors need to continue the upscale of emergency food assistance beyond formal displacement sites. Food security remains the priority humanitarian need in Unity State, not only in conflict-affected counties of Leer, Mayendit and Koch, but also

in northern counties of Mayom, Koch and Rubkona, where the food security situation is rapidly deteriorating.

The proximity of the rainy season (when cultivation starts) represents an opportunity for humanitarian actors to ensure a comprehensive response to food insecurity in Unity State, by continuing emergency food distributions during the lean season, while at the same time encouraging sustainable livelihoods activities through provision of agricultural input (seeds, tools, fishing kits), which is lacking in 55% of the assessed settlements.

With the continuation of the highly volatile security situation in Unity State, physical protection (PoC sites) remains a priority need, and psychological support to people affected by conflict should be provided.

Contaminated water sources, coupled with poor hygiene situation, have contributed to the spread of diseases such as cholera along the river Nile. WASH actors should therefore scale up and prioritise construction and reparation of boreholes and latrines, especially in central Unity state, in order to improve access to safe drinking water.

Similarly, access to health care services remained low in March, which has been a major push factor for displacement. More than half of the assessed settlements reported having no access to health care services. This suggests that mobile medical teams and vaccination campaign activities should be scaled up in order to cover more of the hard-

to-reach areas.

Further, the provision of shelter materials such as plastic sheets and ropes should be given priority, especially in central Unity State, where many shelters have been reportedly destroyed as a consequence of conflict. Interventions should particularly focus on IDP hosting communities in Mayendit, where shelter needs were found to be most severe.

Finally, access to education remains extremely low in conflict-affected areas of Unity State, particularly in Leer, where only 1% of assessed settlements reported education services to be available. However, due to the security situation, it would be highly challenging for education actors to work in Leer. It is therefore likely that this trend will continue until security is re-established.

About REACH Initiative

REACH 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. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms.

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