

Accessing South Sudan

Humanitarian Aid in a Time of Crisis

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Since gaining its independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan has struggled to fulfill the promise of a new nation, eventually descending into civil war in late 2013. The country is now bearing the devastating human and financial costs of a complex conflict with ever-changing armed and political actors. Aid organizations face an array of humanitarian access constraints while working to address the acute needs of 7 million people, roughly half of the country. Although there is cause for cautious optimism after a peace agreement was signed in September 2018, these humanitarian needs will only grow in the absence of sustainable peace and a political solution to the manmade crisis in South Sudan.

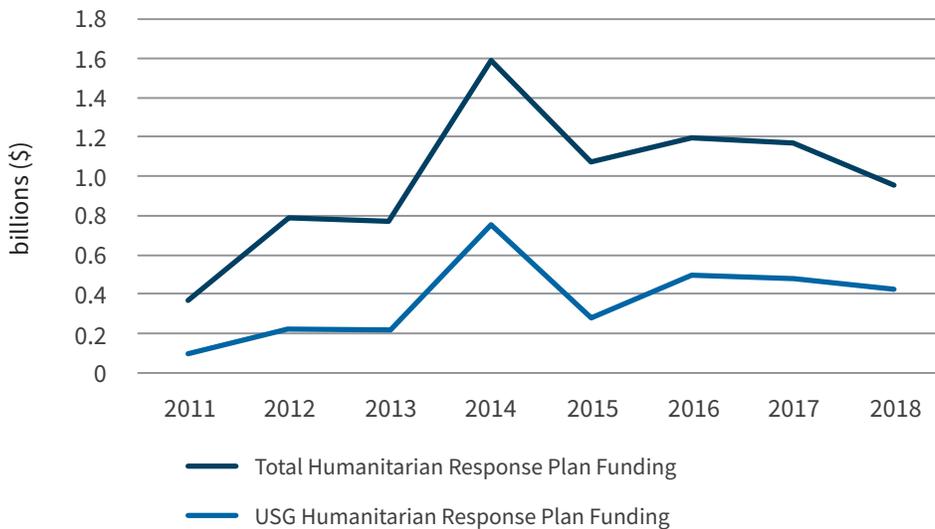
South Sudan has received significant humanitarian aid from the United States and the international community for decades. Since 2011, total humanitarian funding surpassed \$9.5 billion, most of which has been part of the coordinated South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan (SSHRP).¹ The U.S. government has provided almost \$3 billion to the SSHRP, with even more to development priorities.² This aid has helped and continues to help millions: in 2017 alone, more than 5 million people received food assistance, almost 3 million people received emergency health kits, and nearly one million children and pregnant and lactating women were treated for malnutrition.³

Some hoped that peace and prosperity would follow years of devastating armed conflict. Such hopes were, however, short-lived: South Sudan descended into civil war in late 2013. Since then, more than 4 million South Sudanese, or approximately 1 in 3 of its citizens, 85 percent of whom are women and children, have been forced from home.

The protracted crisis is further complicated by domestic political actors who seem immune from or uninterested in the suffering of their people and regional diplomatic processes that often result in fleeting promises of reconciliation before retreat into armed conflict.⁴ This has led to a staggering number of South Sudanese caught in the cross fire. Of the 7 million people currently in need of humanitarian aid, 5.3 million are food insecure.⁵ A recent study showed that the conflict has led to almost 400,000 deaths since late 2013.⁶

With so much need, the country relies heavily on external humanitarian funding, which should be credited for saving countless South Sudanese lives. However, the UN estimates current needs at \$1.7 billion, only half of which has been funded to date.⁷ At the same time, the Trump Administration initiated a comprehensive review of its aid programs to South Sudan in May 2018. In its statement, the White House said that while the United States remained “committed to saving lives, we must also ensure our assistance does not contribute to or prolong the conflict, or facilitate predatory

Figure 1: South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan Funding



Source: UNOCHA, Financial Tracking Service, Republic of South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan

or corrupt behavior.⁸ Ultimately, a cessation of hostilities, a more inclusive and reconciliatory political process that results in a functional government delivering services to citizens, and economic growth all are critical for South Sudan to one day emerge from this dark period in its history. These goals have proved elusive, primarily because of armed conflict, and aid groups find themselves dealing with predatory and often corrupt behavior that increases the human and financial costs of humanitarian access. Although similar or even more acute challenges may exist in other places (e.g., Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen), the constraints in South Sudan on aiding some of the most vulnerable people on the planet are no less formidable.

Inconsistent access in South Sudan is coupled with staggering human costs: today more than half of the country's population is in need of life-saving humanitarian aid. Protracted and widespread conflict means that people throughout the country are suffering, stretching the capacity of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and offering opportunities for state and nonstate actors to manipulate aid for their own, primarily nonhumanitarian purposes. To deliver humanitarian aid to vulnerable people, NGO workers must regularly navigate access with myriad local actors, many of whom are armed. They have limited money, food, supplies, and vehicles and thus see NGO-provided goods as ripe for exploitation.

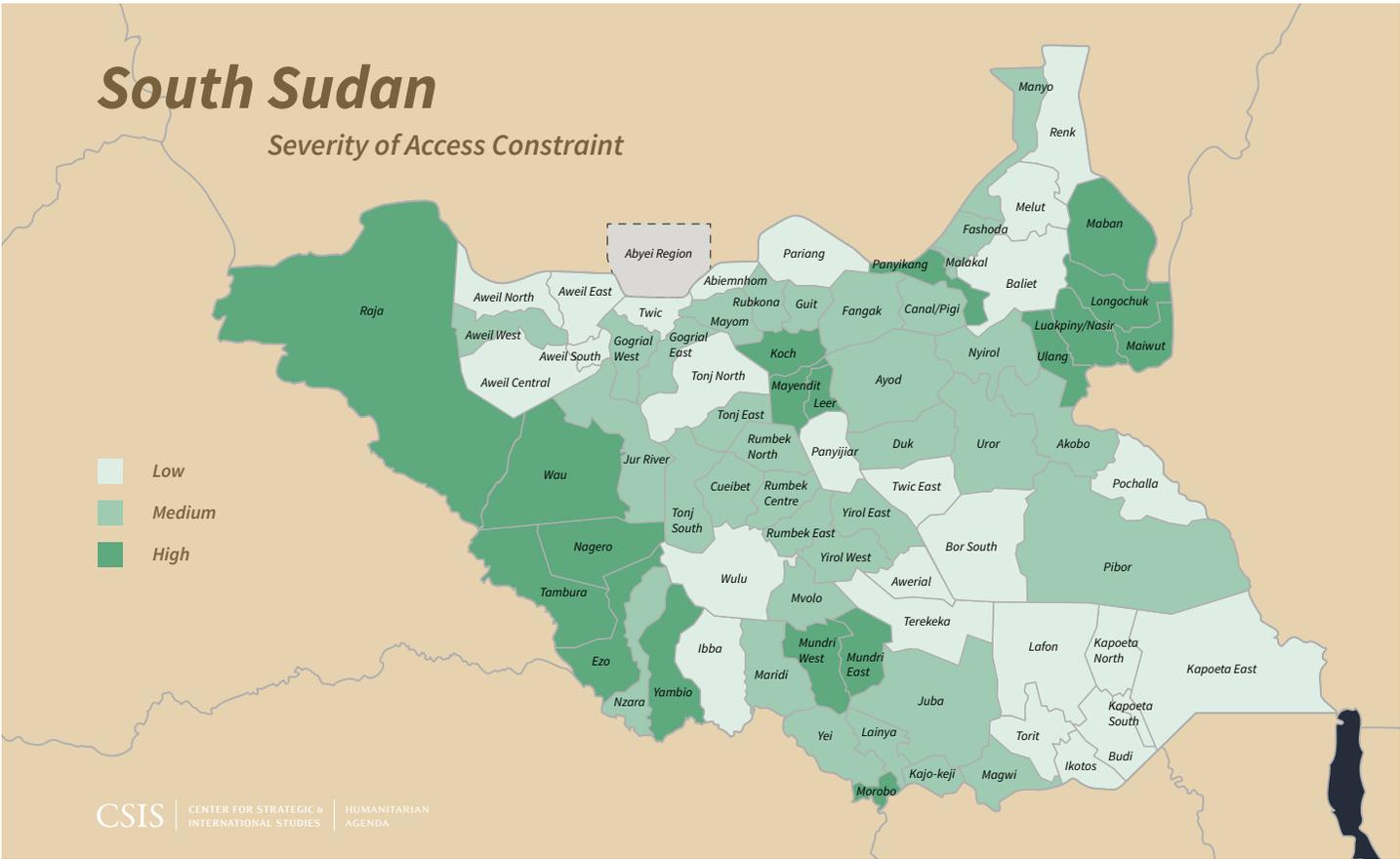
Thus, the human costs of humanitarian access constraints are most acute for those who are unable to receive assistance. But the costs to the people delivering that aid are also high. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of

Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) counts 192 organizations currently responding to the crisis in South Sudan with emergency programs; more than 100 aid workers from these and other organizations have died since the most recent conflict erupted in 2013.⁹ In 2017, South Sudan was the most dangerous country for aid workers, with 50 percent more workers killed than in Syria and 612 aid workers forced to relocate due to ongoing conflict.¹⁰ Already in 2018, 36 aid workers have been kidnapped, with a vast majority of those at risk working for national NGOs.¹¹ In response, many NGOs maintain security

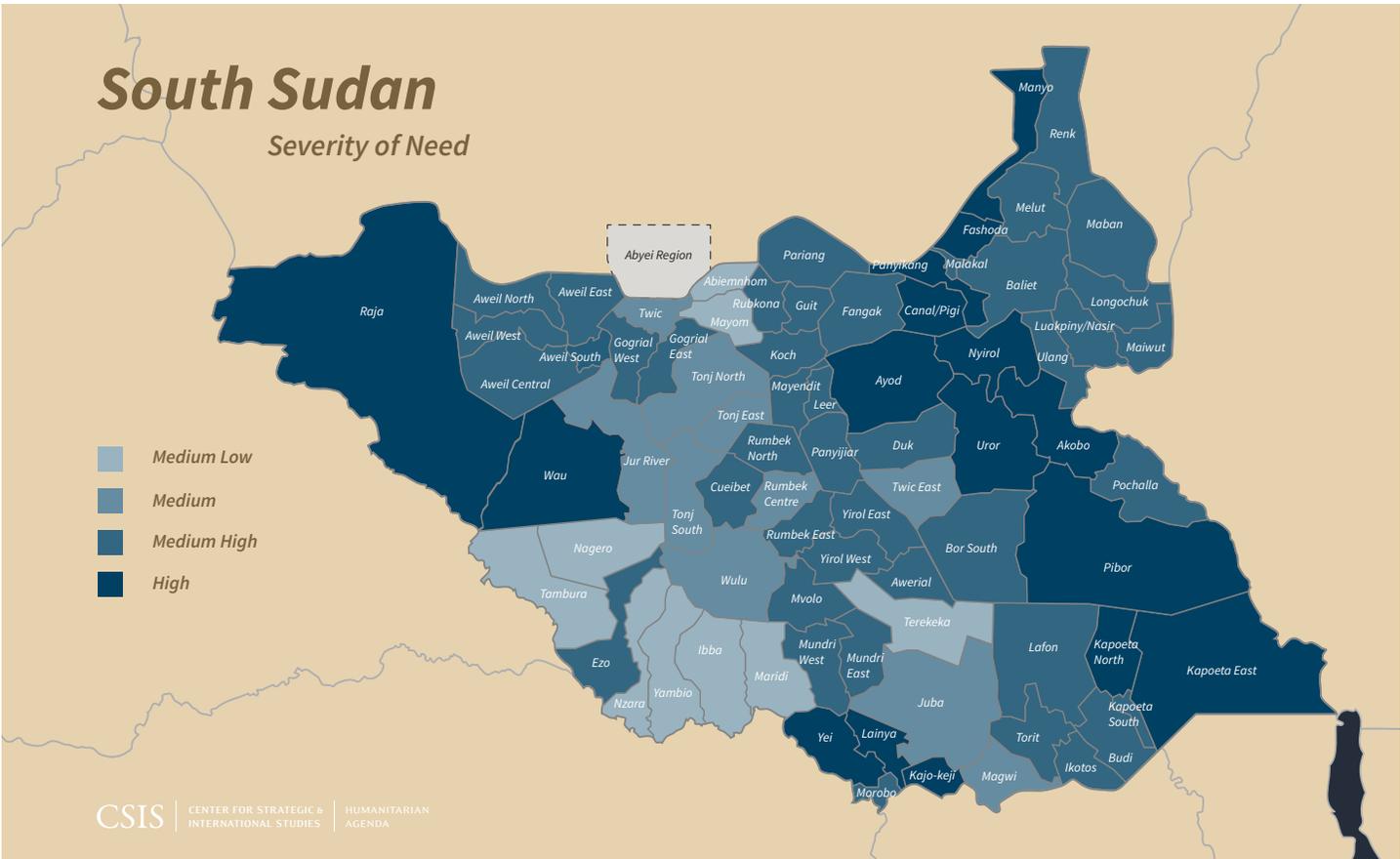
apparatuses that add to the already high financial costs of operating in South Sudan.

The financial and bureaucratic costs of delivering aid in South Sudan rank among the highest in the world.

Of the 78 counties in South Sudan, 18 have high-level (where access is extremely difficult or impossible) and 34 have medium-level (where it is regularly restricted) access constraints.¹² NGOs do have some access to all parts of the country, but it is intermittent, costly (in time and resources), and often comes at great physical risk to those delivering the aid. Myriad and ever-changing bureaucratic approval processes at the local, county, state, and national levels mean that NGOs sometimes spend months securing the necessary permissions to operate. Some reports suggest that access is controlled by armed actors not only for economic gain, but also to cut off humanitarian aid to people and places deemed disloyal or in opposition. As a result, some NGOs operate without official authorization, which puts them at risk for legal reprisal, while others are forced to pay bribes or be barred from the country altogether—all at the expense of donors, South Sudanese authorities, and most importantly, the 7 million South Sudanese who are in need.¹³ In a country rife with tribal conflict, local NGOs often face additional access challenges (e.g., an organization founded by someone of Nuer origin



Source: UNOCHA, South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Severity Overview (September 2018)



Source: UNOCHA, 2018 Humanitarian Needs Overview

may have difficulty operating in a predominately Murle part of the country), though they are often more risk tolerant and willing to operate in difficult locations to deliver humanitarian aid.¹⁴

Although many of South Sudan's access issues have political roots and solutions, these challenges are exacerbated by the fact that as much as 70 percent of the country is inaccessible by road during the rainy season, which typically lasts from June through September.¹⁵ Infrastructure, in general, has been a significant access constraint—as has the ubiquity of landmines and unexploded ordinance—in South Sudan for decades and continues to be one today.¹⁶ However, these constraints are more predictable and typically have clearer solutions and thus could be addressed should the political and conflict-related access issues be resolved.

In addition, humanitarian actors face significant, unpredictable financial and bureaucratic costs that delay delivery of services and divert funds from aid recipients.¹⁷ One international NGO with an in-country staff of fewer than 200 people estimates that it spends approximately \$350,000 per year in South Sudan on administrative taxes and fees.¹⁸ These financial costs are primarily paid to official or quasi-official entities; NGOs also have to negotiate humanitarian access with at least 70 distinct armed groups across the country, most of which demand different fees or conditions before granting access.¹⁹ With such a complex web of armed conflict, these actors can also change daily, invalidating previously negotiated access and starting the expensive, time-consuming, and dangerous process over again.

Additionally, humanitarian organizations have lost millions of dollars' worth of aid to looting, raids on compounds, theft, and other instances of criminal capture, not to mention the costs associated with regularly relocating or evacuating staff members because of any one of these factors.²⁰ NGO compounds outside urban areas are particularly susceptible to criminal capture when, due to insecurity or other factors, staff members are forced to evacuate. Although some of these costs are the results of an ever-deteriorating economy with limited opportunities for productive income generation, there have been anecdotal reports of increased animosity towards international actors who—paradoxically and particularly in the absence of a functioning government—are often seen as the only ones with the power to alleviate suffering, not independent and thus politically motivated, and even contributors to ethnic tensions.²¹ Looting and raids (e.g., when protesters attacked NGO facilities in Maban County in July 2018²²) can result in the loss of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid, which

not only increases access costs but also ultimately affects the number of beneficiaries able to receive aid.

Finally, the financial costs to the South Sudanese economy are significant and long-term. It is estimated that the effect of hunger alone on labor productivity could mean \$6 billion in lost GDP if the conflict lasts an additional five years. If the conflict lasts for another 20 years, the total loss to GDP could be between \$122 billion and \$158 billion, devastating to an economy that has already dropped from a GDP of \$15 billion in 2014 to \$2.9 billion in 2018.²³

Despite the significant human and financial costs of access in South Sudan, there are things that the international community can do to alleviate some of these constraints.

Ending the conflict should be the top priority. However, in the absence of broad and sustainable peace, humanitarian assistance efforts must focus on securing access. Above all, humanitarian actors must act with unity of purpose, bolstered by bilateral and multilateral donors and by the United Nations. A united front to advocate for greater access and backed up by credible threats of local if not national withdrawal is important and can be achieved in several ways. Cutting humanitarian aid funding as a punitive measure, however, could make the security situation worse, so any discussion of withdrawal should consider the potential negative repercussions of doing so.

First, more and better data is needed on the costs—human and financial—of humanitarian access. Although some NGOs keep internal records of access-related costs and incidents, they may be reluctant to share them with perceived competitors or out of fear of local reprisal should their disclosure become public. NGOs have a credible fear of being perceived by local actors as policy instruments of governments, which limits information sharing and must be addressed at a higher, more institutional or donor level. NGOs should be incentivized—through assurances of confidentiality and impartiality—to share information with a credible and independent entity (e.g., UNOCHA, the Humanitarian Country Team, or the South Sudan NGO Forum), which should establish—or, in the case of UNOCHA, which periodically reports access incidents, strengthen—a common confidential reporting system and database for disruptions to humanitarian access.²⁴ These

data, which should include financial costs which are not well understood, should be anonymized and made available in raw and aggregated form to the NGO Forum and various donor agencies and implementing partners.

Second, donors (e.g., the U.S., UK, and Norwegian governments, the European Union, the UN, and others) should use these data to push for greater standardization, consistency, and transparency in fee collection, ideally administered by one entity in the government of South Sudan. The establishment of a single entity responsible for administering fees and collecting payment (as achieved in Sudan during the early years of the conflict in Darfur) would constitute a major advance in alleviating humanitarian access constraints, especially if codified into law via legislation.²⁵ A credible diplomatic official (e.g., the U.S. Ambassador or the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General) should establish a standing meeting with the vice president responsible for the single entity charged with fee administration, relying not just on the stated policies of the government but informed by the experiences of humanitarian aid organizations, as presented during multi-donor coordination meetings.²⁶ The meetings with high-ranking government officials would elevate the humanitarian access issues—both aggregate and specific—faced by aid groups, present a unified set of demands backed by credible threats of withdrawal from certain areas or the entire country should reported access challenges remain, and discuss any proposed modifications to standardized fees once they are established.

Third, NGOs operating outside Juba must coordinate closely with one another at the sub-national level, especially when sharing access challenges. A collective approach should be as local as possible but as national or international as necessary, supported strongly by all donors to avoid diversion of funds to only those NGOs not facing access constraints. Although they should document access challenges via the central system discussed above, these groups also should coordinate with one another and present a united front to local actors over which the central government in Juba may or may not have control. If that does not work, this united front should then elevate concerns to national or international levels, supported by NGO leaders and donors. If these local, national, or international interventions do not alleviate access constraints, the NGOs should consider the possibility of actual withdrawal from a territory.

Although a united front—backed by credible threats of withdrawal—might not be the best way to resolve the

political conflict, it is arguably the most important and achievable approach to humanitarian access challenges in South Sudan. Other tools worth further exploration include:

- More flexible funding that reflects the dynamic nature of conflict in South Sudan, which results in regularly shifting territorial control and front lines of conflict;
- Surgical, tactical, and multilateral sanctions or embargoes against high-level political actors and entities that regularly and egregiously impede humanitarian access and robust oversight to reinforce these actions;
- Consultations with humanitarian actors and South Sudanese experts (e.g., the South Sudan Research Network²⁷) in diplomatic and political efforts to end the conflict. The primary purpose of the consultations would be to analyze these efforts from the perspective of their potential effect on humanitarian access, and to ensure that all actors remain focused on upholding established humanitarian principles;²⁸
- Funding for the joint training of NGO personnel—potentially through the NGO Forum—in principles of humanitarian diplomacy and front-line access negotiation.

It is worth mentioning that the crisis in South Sudan is manmade and primarily political and acute humanitarian needs will remain unless there is political reconciliation. That however, will be difficult and complicated to achieve; reconciliation may require changes in leadership, is laden with historical baggage, and is prone to false promises of peace. Although a peace agreement was signed in September 2018 between President Salva Kiir and the former vice president and rebel leader Riek Machar, this is the twelfth such agreement since 2013. There is cautious optimism that this latest peace agreement will succeed where the others have failed, primarily because of the deep involvement of neighboring Sudan and Uganda and the return of Machar to Juba for the first time since 2016. Peace, however shaky, also presents an opportunity for reengagement by the United States and other actors. Humanitarian access should be at the top of their renewed agendas, especially since celebratory speeches in Juba by Kiir and Machar in late October referred to the importance of free, unhindered humanitarian access.²⁹ Humanitarian aid—especially efforts to promote peace and social cohesion, address food insecurity and nutritional needs, and restore livelihoods—is critical but ultimately tactical and thus should not be seen as a solution to the primarily political issues underlying the conflict in South Sudan.³⁰ Such aid must be coupled with diplomatic and political pressure to sustainably end the

underlying manmade conflict that is the ultimate cause of the humanitarian crisis.

Ultimately, all aid efforts in South Sudan should focus on better humanitarian outcomes for the South Sudanese people. Doing so is complicated and fraught with political and structural barriers to access. Humanitarian assistance is regularly manipulated for political purposes by local actors in South Sudan and aid organizations must be careful that their actions do not exacerbate tensions or conflict. Aggregating their knowledge from the field, uniting behind a common purpose, and elevating that purpose to political and diplomatic levels is critical to ensuring that those on the front lines have the ability to access the places that need it the most. ■

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