

Anticipatory Action

for conflict-induced displacement in South Sudan



Assessment Report



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Executive Summary

Akobo is one of the twelve counties (12) that constitute Jonglei state in Eastern South Sudan. Akobo County is the most remote and likely the least developed area of South Sudan, almost entirely lacking in roads and other infrastructure to connect it to the rest of the country and beyond. Most of the state is inaccessible by ground transport throughout the year except for a short and somewhat unpredictable portion of the dry season. The county is predominantly home to the Nuer ethnic group. It is affected by three inter-communal conflict dynamics: between the Lou Nuer and the Murle, between the Lou Nuer and the Anyuak and between the Lou Nuer and the Jikany Nuer. The conflict between the Lou Nuer and the Murle is the most significant dynamic and considered to be one of the most devastating inter-ethnic conflicts in Jonglei. The conflict is underpinned by a perception of cultural and ethnic differences and often manifests through cattle-raiding, killings and abductions which spiral into cycles of violence and revenge killings.

With funding from the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO), DRC developed an anticipatory action approach to support conflict-affected communities in Akobo, piloting a model to predict potential displacement caused by conflict events and to trigger anticipatory actions to support communities. The mechanism was developed in 2023 in close consultation with the local communities, in particular peace committees in payams (administrative sub-divisions) in and around Akobo town. The committees helped to identify the relevant activities to conduct ahead of escalations in conflict and displacement, as well as potential signals of impending conflict and displacement to monitor within the community. The response mechanism was triggered in mid-May 2024 when the predictive model forecasted an increase of 1,500 people displaced over the subsequent three months. When the triggers were reached, an activation occurred in which DRC invested in inter-community dialogue between the communities to reduce tensions.

In June 2024, there was a perceived de-escalation in Akobo, while neighboring Nyandit witnessed a significant intensification of communal conflict. Interviews with key stakeholders from the local communities and the wider humanitarian response and focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members, reveal that, while other factors and actors also contributed to reducing tensions in Akobo in June 2024, the **inter-community dialogue efforts initiated by DRC as part of the anticipatory action system contributed to the decrease in violence and conflict**. The de-escalation also had a number of positive spill-over effects including **faster returns of the displaced to their homes and access to hunting and fishing grounds, which have helped to reduce humanitarian needs and dependency, particularly related to food security**. This is also underscored by the fact that when probing community members and key informants about what would potentially have happened if anticipatory action had not been activated, there was general agreement that more people would have become displaced, fewer people would have returned home, and, as a result, there would have been a higher demand for humanitarian assistance.

From a value-for-money perspective this also indicates that significant savings in humanitarian aid were achieved as displacement was avoided. In the most likely scenario, where the

anticipatory action mechanism is estimated to have prevented the displacement of approximately 2,800 people, the return on investment is significant. For every euro spent during the activation, €6.6 were saved by the absence of having to respond to displacement.

When we account for savings resulting from more timely returns, the return on investment is even higher - 1:23 (i.e. for every euro spent during the activation, €23 were saved). These estimations are based on having only triggered the mechanism once.

While anticipatory action has proven its value both through its effective mitigation and prevention of humanitarian needs resulting from displacement, as well as from a cost-effectiveness perspective, it does not appear to have had a lasting impact on the long-entrenched conflict dynamics in the region. Doubling down on efforts to de-escalate immediate tensions may have contributed to enabling future dialogue efforts, yet the underlying conflict drivers remain unresolved. This underscores the need to couple the mechanism with longer-term peace and resilience building.

The assessment shows the vast, positive enhancement in dignity and cost-efficiency for displacement-affected communities that can be reached if conflict- and protection-sensitive anticipatory action for conflict-induced displacement is scaled up.

Acknowledgements

DRC would like to acknowledge the contribution by the Akobo country authorities and stakeholders for enabling the assessment exercise. DRC further recognizes the time and efforts by study respondents whose information facilitated the rich analysis.

DRC acknowledges the hard work of the assessment enumerators who worked tirelessly in difficult conditions to collect the data. Lastly, DRC acknowledges the project team in Akobo which mobilized respondents, identified enumerators and provided the necessary background and content to enrich the analysis.

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Background

This report aims to provide an overview of the key outcomes of the ECHO-funded pilot project titled “Enhancing anticipatory response to conflict displacement through community monitoring” with a focus on the activities undertaken in Akobo, South Sudan. The report provides a brief overview of the context, the anticipatory action mechanism that was designed, before going into the key findings from a qualitative assessment conducted in November 2024.

Context

Akobo is one of the twelve counties (12) that constitute Jonglei state in Eastern South Sudan. Akobo County is located to the East of Jonglei State, which borders Ethiopia. The county is split into two areas: Akobo East and West. Akobo east is subdivided into four Payams (Gakdong, Bilkey, Nyandit and Dengjok) and further into 12 Bomas. Nuer is the main tribe in Akobo East, although there is a small Anyuak population situated in Akobo town, both of whom are part of the Nilotic ethnic group. There are three Nuer clans in the area, all of whom are Lou Nuer.

Akobo County is the most remote and probably the least developed area of South Sudan, almost entirely lacking in roads and other infrastructure to connect it to the rest of the country and beyond. Most of the state is inaccessible by ground transport throughout the year except for a short and somewhat unpredictable portion of the dry season.

Akobo county is prone to drought and the population is nomadic, sometimes migrating to other locations in search of water and pasture for their livestock. The majority of the area is rural, with populations living close to the river. Most of the populations are pastoralists, raising cows, goats and chickens. Those located in the peri-urban bomas are sedentary and are largely restricted to government and NGO employees and IDPs. The main livelihood is agriculture although due to the flooding, insecurity, and population movement, few have been able to successfully grow food. Food availability fluctuates over the seasons. The months of March to May in the dry season are the most critical as harvested food stocks are finished. The rainy season starts in May/June and ends in mid-November, so crops are planted in May/June and harvested in August, when food supply is the most secure. The majority of the population lives close to the river, so fish is freely available all year round.¹

Understanding the Conflict Situation in Akobo East County

“The people of Akobo east have faced decades of conflict with Murle, Anyuak, political conflicts, inter ethnicity violence, and various rebel group movement activities.”² .

Akobo county, as a predominantly Nuer area, is less directly affected by national level conflict dynamics. There are three conflict dynamics in Akobo related to inter-clan and inter-ethnic

¹ Rhamz International (2023): Study of the Protection of Civilian Risks in Conflict for Anticipatory Actions, Danish Refugee Council

² Key informant quoted in: Rhamz International (2023): Study of the Protection of Civilian Risks in Conflict for Anticipatory Actions, Danish Refugee Council

relations: between the Lou Nuer and the Murle, between the Lou Nuer and the Anyuak and between the Lou Nuer and the Jikany Nuer. The conflict between the Lou Nuer and the Murle is the most significant dynamic and considered to be one of the most devastating inter-ethnic conflicts in Jonglei. The conflict is underpinned by perception of cultural and ethnic differences and manifests itself through cattle-raiding, killings and abductions which spiral into a cycle of violence and revenge killings. Conflict resolution efforts by the state, church, and humanitarian actors have in the past been able to create periods of calm.³

The conflict dynamics and drivers are further influenced by hunger and unemployment. This creates opportunities to mobilize e.g. idle youth, while also creating an impetus for conducting raids, etc. to obtain resources to be able to obtain income and food. The conflicts are kept alive by a vicious cycle of revenge killings, which can last continue indefinitely due to the revenge dynamic unless halted by blood compensation.⁴

Displacement and needs arising from the conflict

While all the different conflict dynamics have potential to cause displacement, major displacement is primarily caused by the inter-ethnic violence between Lou Nuer and the Murle. Displacement often happens from the communities at the outskirts of Akobo which seeks safety inside Akobo or cross the border into Ethiopia. This happens both pre-emptively before violence and conflict escalates and after the violence has escalated. As of end September 2024, there were approximately 15,000 IDPs living in Akobo. Approximately 1/3 of the IDPs are from within Akobo County and of these around 1,400 people have been displaced since the period 2014-2018. A conservative estimate of the average duration of the IDPs in Akobo that are from other areas in Akobo County is 40 months.⁵

During conflict and displacement, there is often an increase of gender-based violence (GBV) in the communities which can take the forms of physical violence, sexual violence, psychological distress or emotional violence and economic violence. This is among other caused by the impacts on interpersonal relationships and disrupted access to social and family support systems. The displacement and resulting change in housing, financial disruptions and unemployment also contribute to increased violence.

Conflicts in and around Akobo have also led to the presence of mines and UXOs. This has resulted in loss of life and limb, with innocent civilians, including children, often falling victim. Furthermore, the presence of landmines has severely impacted the local economy, particularly in agricultural and grazing areas where farmers and cattle herders are unable to freely cultivate and graze on their land for fear of triggering a deadly explosion.

Violence also impacts on food security as it limits households' access to hunting, wild food gathering, and fishing sites, particularly important food sources during the lean season. High

³ Meraki Labs (2021): Conflict Dynamics driving displacement in Akobo, Danish Refugee Council

⁴ Meraki Labs (2021): Conflict Dynamics driving displacement in Akobo, Danish Refugee Council

⁵ IOM DTM (2024): South Sudan - Baseline Assessment Round 15

number of food insecure households is a persistent problem in Akobo and particularly among IDPs and returnee households.

Anticipatory Action in Akobo, South Sudan Mechanism

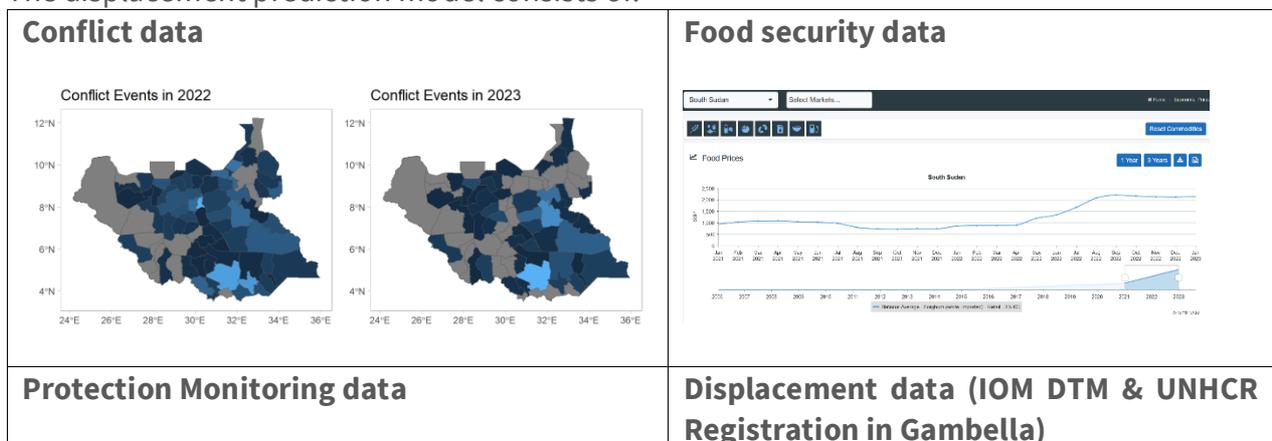
Anticipatory Action is gaining traction as an effective and much needed way to support communities and help them be prepared against shocks and stresses, but most anticipatory approaches focus only on climate shocks to date and are not well placed to support communities affected by conflict. DRC have been piloting AA for displacement with an aim to broaden the scope of anticipatory action and to better understand how such an approach can be useful to address the severe humanitarian needs arising from displacement. As such, DRC has been exploring how to integrate anticipatory action as part of the displacement response continuum alongside broader, long-term resilience work, as well as the shorter-term emergency responses and linking anticipatory action with these existing response modalities.

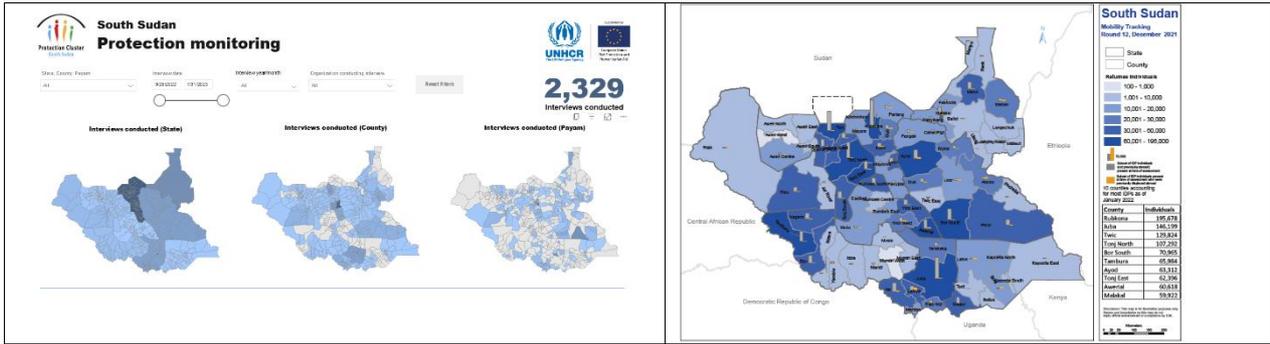
The data model for anticipatory action

With funding from ECHO, DRC ambitiously developed an anticipatory action approach to support conflict-affected communities in South Sudan and Burkina Faso, testing a predictive model that looks at potential displacement caused by conflict events and triggering anticipatory actions to support communities. The objective of the project was to further enhance the existing predictive model by adding additional granularity of data from protection monitoring and conflict data gathering activities conducted by field teams to improve potential of effective prediction of conflict events and testing said effectiveness, creating a replicable framework for anticipatory action in conflict settings for the benefit for the wider humanitarian system.

The mechanism was developed in 2023 in close consultations with the local communities, in particular peace committees in payams in- and around Akobo town. The committees helped to identify the relevant activities to conduct ahead of conflict and displacement escalation, as well as potential signals to monitor in the community of impending conflict and displacement.

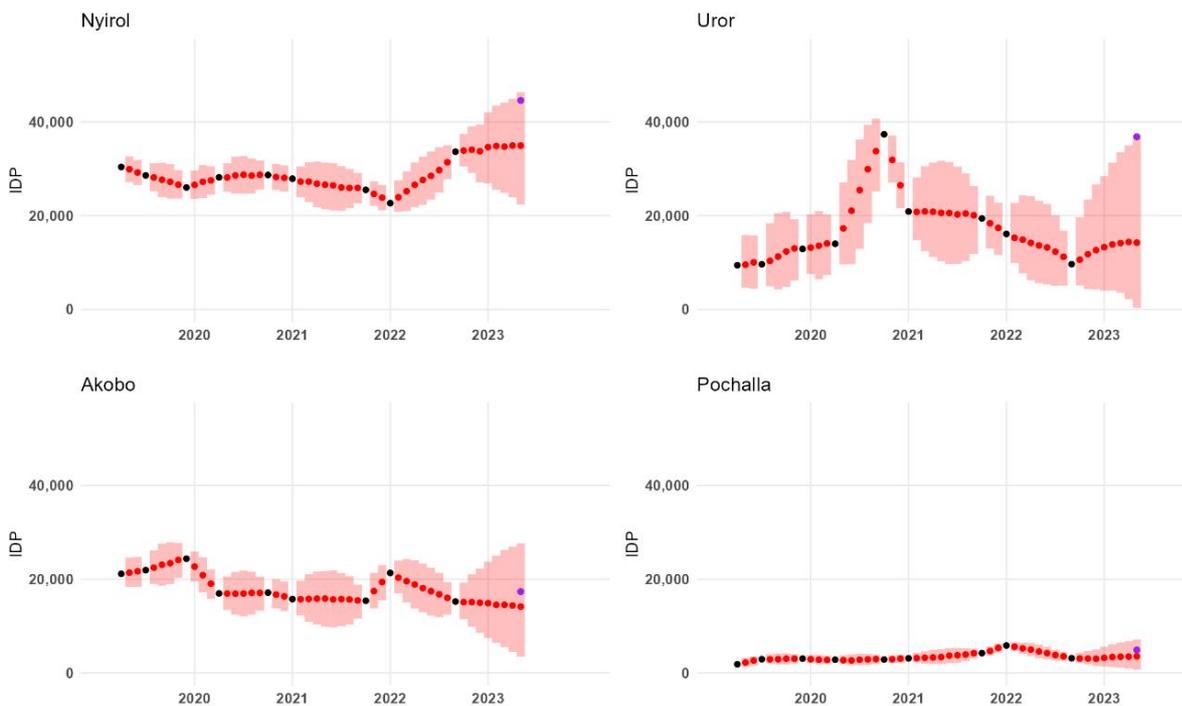
The displacement prediction model consists of:





Numbers for internally displaced in South Sudan is captured in IOM’s data around 2 times per year. That means that there are a lot of gaps between the data points, where we do not have displacement recorded. The model takes the gaps into account and tries to infer what would be a reasonable estimate in between the known data, given the data we do know (conflict, food sec., etc.).

The plot below shows the known data in black and the model estimates in red of what happened in between.



1: Displacement forecast example Jonglei state

The triggers for anticipatory action

The trigger based on the prediction model would be a predicted increase in displacement of 1,000 people three months into the future, which would capture the major displacement in late 2020, late 2021 and late 2022.

The trigger mechanism also used four key protection indicators:

- Arrivals into Akobo: Peace committee members highlighted that often people living in the communities on the outskirts of Akobo move preemptively into Akobo town when they fear attacks. Such movement into town is thus potentially a good indication of future attacks and displacement
- Violence incidents in the community: Peace committee members highlighted killings outside of Akobo as a sign of impending attack. This indicates that armed groups are encroaching and can also set off a spiral of revenge killings further escalating violence between the communities.
- Recruitment of youth to armed groups: Peace committee members highlighted that mobilization efforts of youth would be a good indicator of an impending attack
- Movement restrictions: It was highlighted that when people feel insecure going to fishing and hunting areas in the outskirts of communities, such movement restrictions are typically a sign of the presence of armed groups.

The thresholds for the different indicators were established based on historical analysis of the relationship between the indicators and conflict events the following four weeks.

The activities to be undertaken when triggering

In further dialogue with the communities a number of activities were identified to be taken based on the triggering of the mechanism.

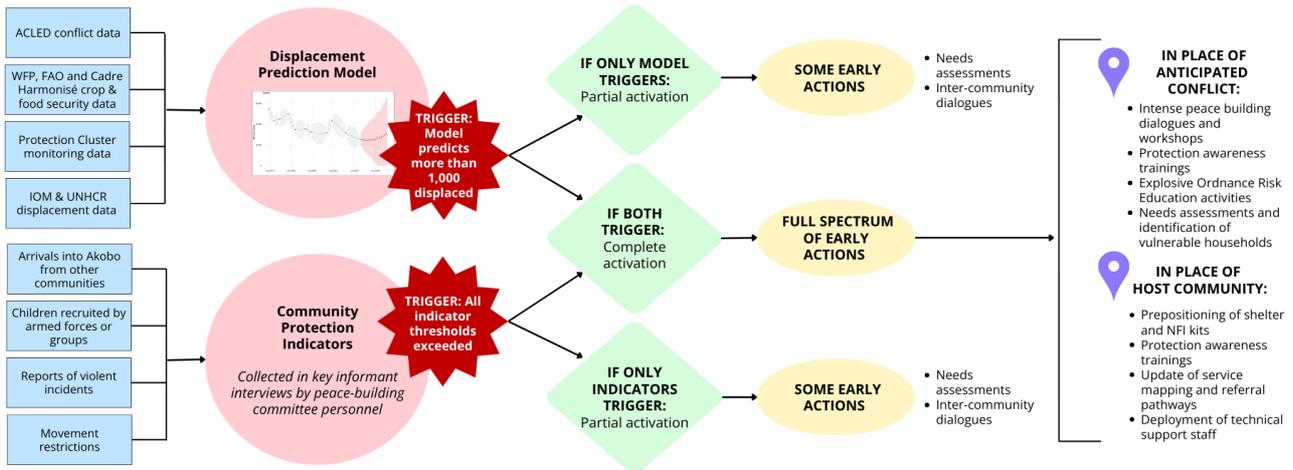
Prevention of escalation:

- **Community dialogue:** The local peace committees have vast experience conducting peace dialogue meetings and workshops with the affected communities to diffuse tension and aim for reconciliation. Their usual process for such dialogue is to initially have separate 2-3 day meetings with the affected communities and then a 3-4 day dialogue bringing the communities together. Such meetings typically include around 30 members from each community and around 20-30 members from the peace committee i.e. 90-100 people. This dialogue can also be facilitated through the church, which has a prominent role in both communities. DRC could support the activities by providing airtime and/or ICT to conduct the meeting and incentives for peace committee member participation. If the peace committees can agree to meet in person, DRC can support such efforts through arranging transportation, meeting venue, refreshments, incentives, and if needed tents (if dialogue meetings take several days).
- **Information sharing with humanitarian actors:** There were plans to establish a conflict prevention working group in Akobo. This would be a relevant arena for sharing information on any anticipated conflict and displacement to enable other actors in Akobo to initiate preventive measures. This would also include updating the **protection referral pathways and service mappings**. DRC could lead this effort through our presence in Akobo.

Mitigation of impact

- **Information sharing with affected communities.** The peace committees have experience engaging with the communities bordering the Murle communities and as such often impacted by the violence. They provide them with information about impending threats/risks and can also guide them to safe places, routes, etc. DRC could support such efforts through arranging transportation, meeting venue, refreshments and incentives. As part of the information sharing session, DRC protection staff provide **protection awareness and sensitization** to the community members.
- **Host community outreach:** The peace committees also have experience engaging with host communities preparing them for an influx of displaced. This includes e.g. messaging to ensure that host communities are welcoming, opening their homes, sharing their resources, etc. Another aspect mentioned is to engage with water point managers, as water point have registers of who can access them and as such needs to be opened up for influx of displaced. As part of the information sharing session, DRC protection staff provide **protection awareness, in particular related to GBV**, to the host community members. DRC could support such efforts through arranging transportation, refreshments and incentives. It could potentially also involve support for refurbishment of the peace committee's office to enable a proper meeting venue for such meetings to take place.
- **Needs assessment and beneficiary identification:** Based on the available evidence and likely impacted communities, DRC would initiate the needs assessment and beneficiary identification to be prepared to future support with a particular focus on **protection needs**. This information would be shared with the other humanitarian partners in Akobo in particular those with emergency programming.
- **Individual Protection Assistance:** Based on beneficiary identification and identified protection needs, individual protection assistance, including provision of cash and in-kind assistance including dignity kits can be provided to those in need or referred to other specialized agencies (e.g. child protection referral to Save the Children).
- **Pre-positioning of relief items:** Based on needs assessment and beneficiary identification, DRC could preposition relief items to support the influx.

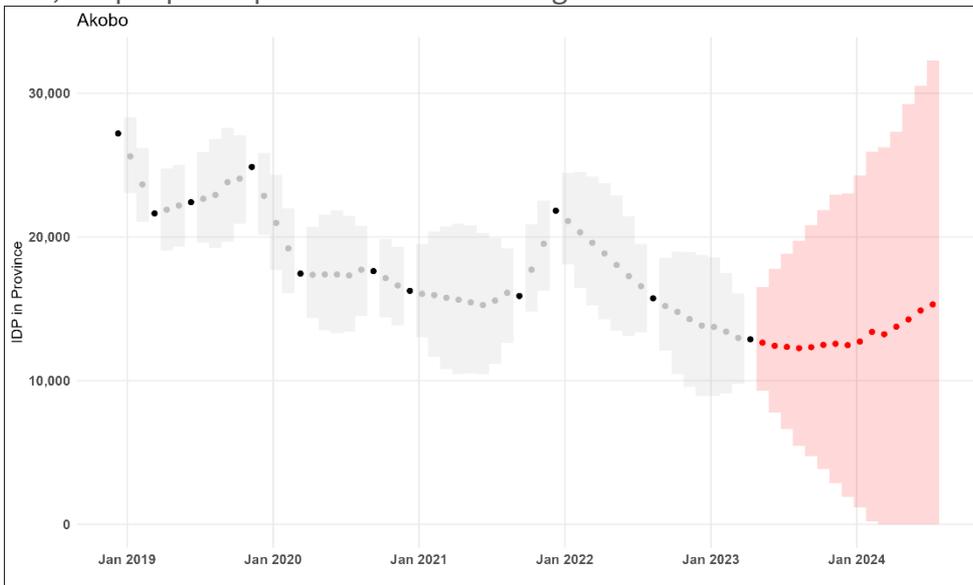
The mechanism was set up as a phased approach. If one of the trigger inputs (displacement forecasting model or community protection indicators) triggered, then some preliminary early actions would be taken. If both were triggered, the full spectrum of anticipatory actions could be initiated starting with intensified inter-community dialogue between the communities with an aim to de-escalate the situation.



2: Anticipatory action mechanism in Akobo

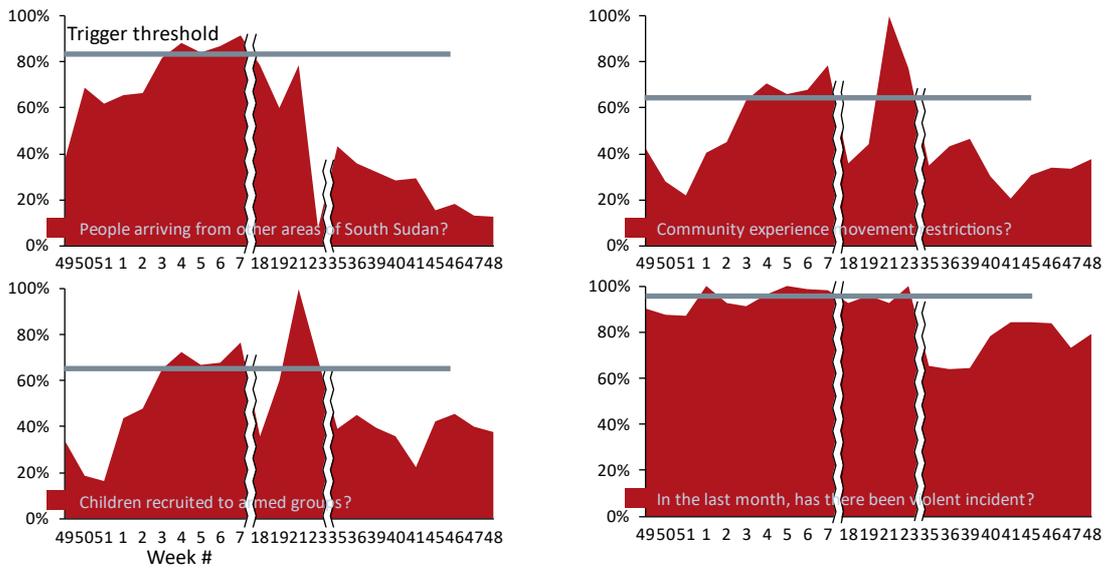
Activation in May 2024

The mechanism was triggered in mid-May 2024 when the prediction model forecasted an increase of 1,500 people displaced over the coming three months.



3: May 2024 displacement forecast Akobo

At the same time, three out of four of the protection monitoring indicators also reached their threshold values:



4: Protection monitoring indicators

When the anticipatory action mechanism was triggered, DRC alerted the peace committees. The peace committees mobilized their members and engaged peace committees from the Murle ethnic community. Peace dialogues were set up between 200 representatives including youth leaders, community leaders and local government authorities to de-escalate the growing tensions.

Key Findings

Immediate impact on tensions and conflict

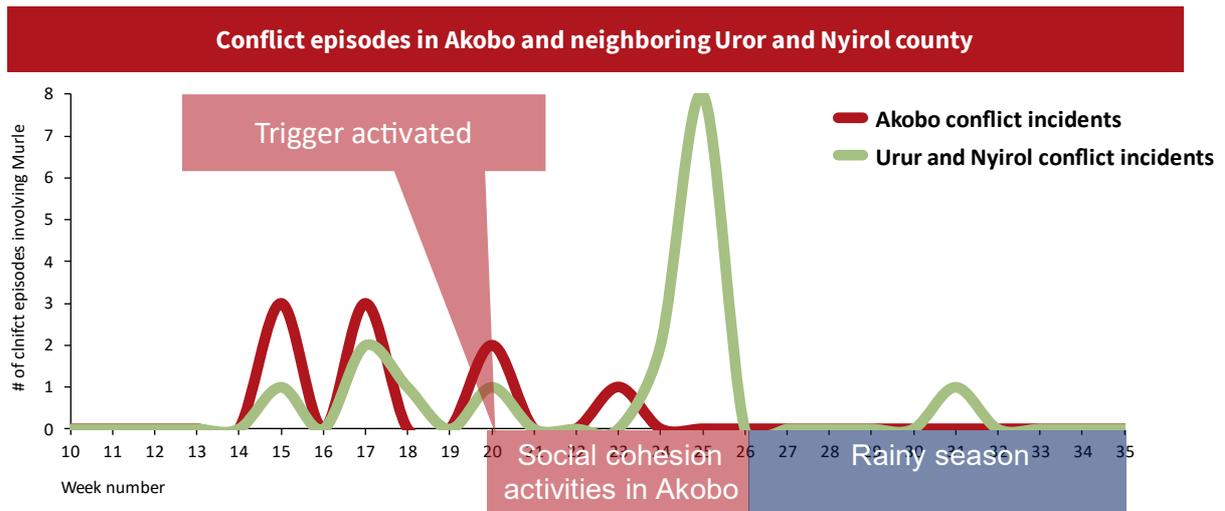
On 13 May 2024, a group of heavily armed youth – likely from the Murle ethnic group - attacked a cattle camp in Nyandit payam. At least 5 people were killed, and more than 5 people wounded. One child and a number of women were abducted during the incident, which happened despite an agreement on peaceful coexistence signed on 7 April between the Murle and Lou Nuer communities. Two days later, a group of armed youth from Murle killed a family of four in the Bilkey payam and also abducted five children.

“April - May, there was a growing tension between Murle and Lou Nuer, Murle raided cattle several times, they killed one person from Weechjiok and also they abducted children in different payams” FGD in Bilkey with female community members

Across the communities tensions and violent episodes were experienced during April and May. As with previous incidents, this mainly revolved around cattle raiding, abduction of women and children. While the immediate causes of tensions arise from the cattle raiding, women and child abductions, some of the underlying causes are seen to be the historical conflict between the communities, the poverty and economic challenges whereby the attacks are conducted in order to obtain resources to sell to obtain food or to loot people to steal their food and valuables. Lastly, an intermediate element is then the lack of education and employment of youth, which provides a fertile ground for mobilizing them.

The incidents prevented communities from accessing their farms or collecting firewood in the forest, which would lead families to go days without food, receiving only support where possible from neighbors. The fear and needs created by the incidents among the population living in Nyandit and Dengjock Payam lead more than 4,500 people to flee to neighboring bomas and payams. Most of these IDPs settled in nearby villages, others integrated in the community, while the rest found shelters in communal centers such as schools, churches and government premises within Akobo town.

In June, the situation seemed to de-escalate and only one conflict incident was recorded in June in Akobo where a man travelling with his children was killed and the children abducted by suspected assailants from Murle.



5: Conflict events involving Murle in Akobo and neighboring counties (Source: ACLED)

“Indeed, there has been a relative calm in Akobo and surrounding areas in the last few months. I think the peace dialogues and meetings that has been conducted by humanitarian agencies like DRC and Peace Canal helped to restore some level of peace”
 Bilkey Peace committee member

There were a number of factors contributing to reducing the tensions in June. Commonly cited among the key informants was the inter-community dialogue efforts conducted by DRC, but also other actors such as Peace Canal and Gender Engagement Call. This helped to demobilize youths and agree on pledges to end the violence and resolve issues around abducted children. The efforts were perceived to be very effective in ending the violence in Akobo by agreeing on avoiding further revenge killings and ensuring the return of abducted children and women.

“Yes, I've seen reports indicating that the conflict between the Lou Nuer and the Murle in Akobo did indeed subside in June 2024. This reduction in violence seems to be largely due to a peace dialogue held in Likuangule, a village in the Pibor area. During this dialogue, youth leaders from both communities pledged to end the cycle of violence and agreed on several key measures, including the safe return of abducted children and the establishment of a joint committee to monitor the implementation of these measures. It's encouraging to see grassroots initiatives like this making a positive impact” Humanitarian worker 1, Akobo

In addition to these inter-community dialogue efforts, a USAID-funded project titled Shejeh Salam. Under that project, activities have been conducted to promote economic opportunities and cash for work in order to dissuade violent behavior and help sustain peace. Activities have included develop and distribute micro-enterprise training and start-up kits including wheat grinding, bread making, river fishing, and tea stall startups. These fledgling businesses allow

women, youth, and other disadvantaged citizens to earn income and bring stability to their lives and families.⁶

A third factor that played into de-escalating the situation was the onset of the rainy season, which made it difficult to move around. This is a key factor in the conflict dynamics and most of the conflict episodes involving Murle happen in the dry season from November to May/June.

“The reason why cattle raiding and killing of vulnerable stops in June was because there were heavy rains that always keep Murle in their land therefore as we are in dry season now, these cases will be happening again.” Humanitarian worker 2, Akobo

As such, while other factors and actors also contributed to de-escalate tensions in Akobo in June 2024, the inter-community dialogue efforts initiated by DRC as part of the anticipatory action mechanism made a significant contribution to the decrease in violence and conflict.

Spill-over effects

The inter-community dialogue also had **positive effects** on other aspects. A key outcome of the inter-community dialogue was that it enabled communities to move more freely to hunt and fish, which is seen as critically important to ensure appropriate amounts of food for the communities.

“At the time, peace building actions were effective because we – Nyandit community - gained a lot of benefit. Children and women were taken to fishing camps. Many youths went to Burmarth [village on the border with Murle community] for bush cutting in order for them to build their houses. Hunters moved freely” Nyandit Peace chairman

As such, the activities not only contribute to de-escalate tensions but also to increasing food security by enabling access to important sources of food for the communities. This was particularly important in May/June as this is the lean season, where hunting and fishing are the primary sources of food.

Another **positive compounding effect** of the inter-community dialogue and resulting de-escalation was the fact that those 4,500 initially displaced in May were able to return to their communities faster. Somewhere between 1,500 and 3,000 of the displaced had managed to return to their homes by the end of July. The ability to return in this period was important in that this is also the cultivation period and thus important to ensure a proper future harvest and thus contribute to food security.

In mid-June, Murle clashed with cattle keepers from Nyirol county in different payams. At least 11 people, including two attackers, were killed. 7 people, including 2 women, were wounded and 3 children aged 5 to 7 were abducted. This was the highest number of conflict incidents recorded in

⁶ USAID (2024): Shejeh Salam: Building Peace for a Better Tomorrow https://dt-global.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/2024-02-Shejeh-Salam_Building-Peace-for-a-Better-Tomorrow.pdf

a single week in Nyirol in South Sudan's history. This raised concern whether the de-escalation efforts in Akobo had entailed a risk of pushing and intensifying conflict in the neighboring county. Key informants generally agree that the conflict dynamics in Nyirol and Uror are linked with the developments in Akobo.

“Yes, it thinks it is linked because the Murle people understand clearly that we are the same people with Uror and Nyirol. They do cattle raiding, abduct children here and there too”
Bilkey peace committee member.

There is a bit of diverging opinion on whether the de-escalation in Akobo impacted on the conflict dynamics in Nyirol.

“It's possible that the peace building efforts in Akobo indirectly influenced the conflict dynamics in Nyirol. When peace initiatives succeed in one area, they can sometimes lead to unintended consequences in neighboring regions. In this case, the de-escalation in Akobo might have displaced some of the conflict to Nyirol as armed groups and cattle keepers sought new areas for resources and control. However, it's also important to consider other factors, such as existing tensions and resource competition in Nyirol, which could have contributed to the conflict independently of the situation in Akobo. Humanitarian worker 1, Akobo

As outlined in the above quote, the de-escalation could have led armed groups and cattle keepers to move to other areas to gain access to needed resources and therefore created a zero-sum situation, where avoiding conflict in one area pushed it into the neighboring area. About four of the key informants share the sentiment that the dynamics in Nyirol were impacted by the de-escalation in Akobo. However, 10 key informants do not believe that the dynamics in Nyirol were impacted. Two of these 10 key informants even highlight that the de-escalation in Akobo contributed positively as in normal circumstances youths from Akobo would have joined the fighting when Nyirol came under attack, but due to the inter-community dialogues and pledges made, the youths in Akobo did not join in the fighting.

“Yes, it has great influence because when Nyirol youth came to mobilize Akobo youth for revenge attacks against Murle, the youth refused to go. Only few of them agreed but when they started going, they realized that they are few and they returned.” Gakdong peace chairperson

As such there is no firm or clear evidence that the de-escalation in Akobo created a negative spill-over effect, nor that it had a positive effect on conflict dynamics in the neighboring county. The evidence does suggest that there are a number a positive side-effect in the form of faster returns of the displaced, access to hunting and fishing grounds, which have helped to decrease humanitarian needs in particular related to food security.

Counter-factual scenario – what if efforts had not been undertaken

To understand the full spectrum of effects the inter-community dialogues had it is important to understand the counter-factual scenario: What would have happened if these dialogues had not taken place? While this is obviously a difficult undertaking, relying on the experiences of the communities themselves, that have lived through these cycles of violence many times previously, is the best option at approximating this.

It was clear from interviews with key informants in May that additional displacement and violence would occur unless the authorities intervened.⁷ Generally, KIIs agreed that if dialogue efforts had not been undertaken there would have been mass mobilization of youths, a significant increase in violence and killings, mass displacement and starvation. FGD participants also share this sentiment that violence and conflict would have escalated in Akobo and there would be significant negative spill-over effects on food security in the communities.

“War would continue and takes many people lives, cattle raiding, child abduction would increase. There would also be a massive hunger in the community.” FGD in Nyandit with male community members

“More cattle raiding and abduction of children would have continued. Killings along the roads would have escalated. There would have not been fetching of firewood, fishing and farming” FGD in Bilkey with male community members

There is also general agreement that, as a result, more people than the 4,500 people that were initially displaced would have become displaced during May and June. Nine of the key informants provided guesstimates of the number of additional people that would have been displaced, and these ranged from 200 to 7000 people. The average across these guesstimates was 2800 and only one key informant estimated below 1000 people.

A lack of inter-community dialogue activities would also mean that those that were displaced would be unable to return in the short term. The key informants generally agree that the IDPs would have stayed in displacement for at least 6 months.

“Without the dialogue efforts, the ongoing violence between the Lou Nuer and Murle communities would have likely persisted, making it unsafe for displaced individuals to return. The absence of reconciliation and dialogue would have prevented the rebuilding of trust between the communities, deterring people from returning to potentially hostile environments. Without the commitments made during the peace-building activities, efforts to recover and return abducted individuals and rebuild communities would have been significantly delayed. These factors together suggest a prolonged displacement period, with

⁷ UNHCR, Save the Children, INTERSOS, DRC, CIDO, Oxfam, ADA, GEC and MHA (June 2024): Protection Monitoring Report Assessing the Situation of IDPs displaced by conflict in Akobo East

people staying away for at least 6 months until a semblance of safety and stability could be established.” Humanitarian worker 1, Akobo

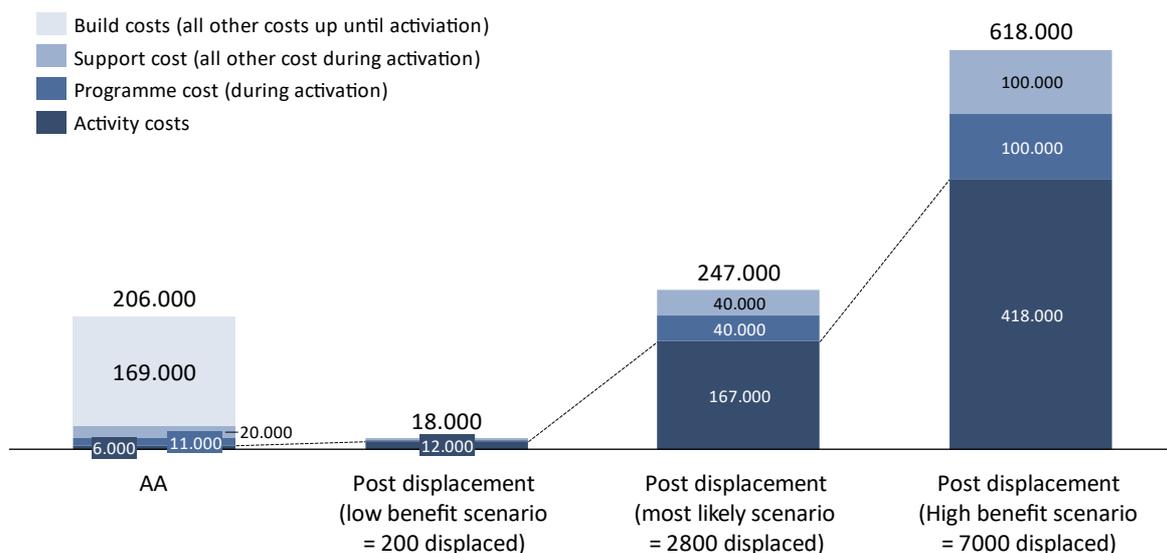
As such, it seems very likely that if the inter-community dialogue efforts had not been undertaken, then significantly more people would have become displaced, fewer people would have returned and as a result humanitarian needs would have been higher.

Avoided humanitarian costs

Given the conclusion that the inter-community dialogue made a significant contribution to de-escalation in Akobo and that, in case they had not been conducted, significant displacement would have occurred, it is possible to assess the avoided humanitarian costs. The simple way of calculating this is:

$$(\text{Average duration of displacement} \times \text{Cost of humanitarian assistance} \times \# \text{ of people avoided displaced}) + \text{Cost of delivering humanitarian assistance}$$

The method for calculating the costs is described in more detail in the annex. As shown in figure 6, the cost of implementing the anticipatory action mechanism was approximately €37,000 during the months of activation, including €6,000 for the activities. If the mechanism only contributed to avoiding 200 people becoming displaced, the anticipatory action approach would not have been cost-efficient as the cost of responding to 200 displaced people would be approximately €18,000. In the most likely scenario, where the mechanism managed to avoid approximately 2,800 people becoming displaced then the return on investment is significant: for every euro spent during the activation, €6.6 were saved on avoided displacement which in response costs would amount to almost €250,000. In this scenario, the entire cost of building the system would also be recovered, as the total cost of the anticipatory action project up until June 2024 was €206,000. In the high benefit scenario, the return on investment is 1:17 and including the building funding its 1:3. The breakeven point, disregarding the build cost, is 420 displaced people.

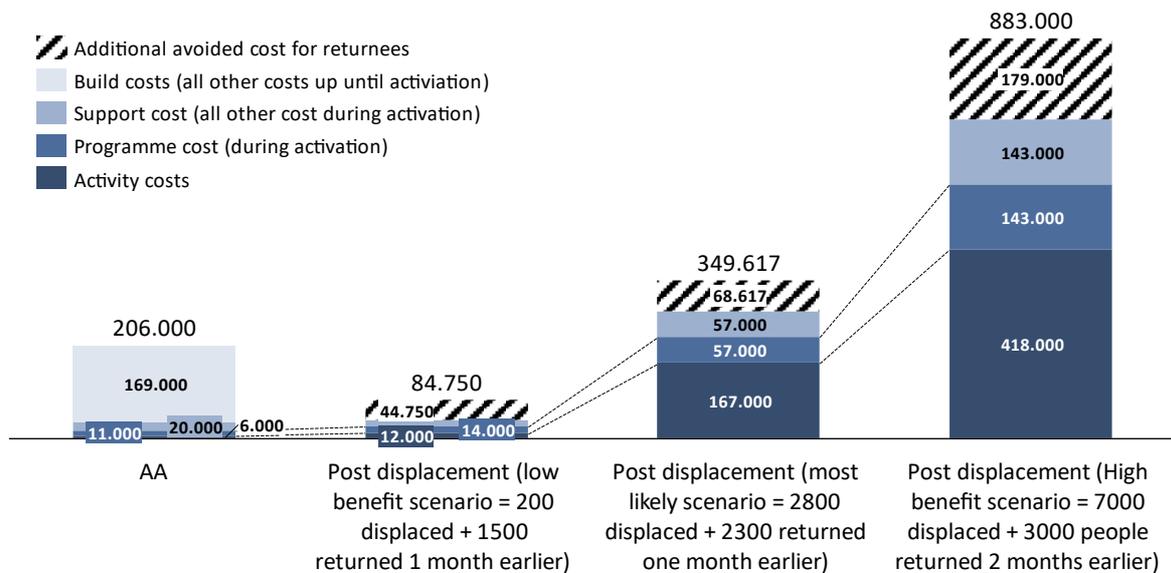


6: Avoided cost of displacement

These calculations do not take into account the additional avoided cost of faster returns by those that had become displaced. If these are added to the calculations, the return on investment further significantly improves. The scenarios would then be:

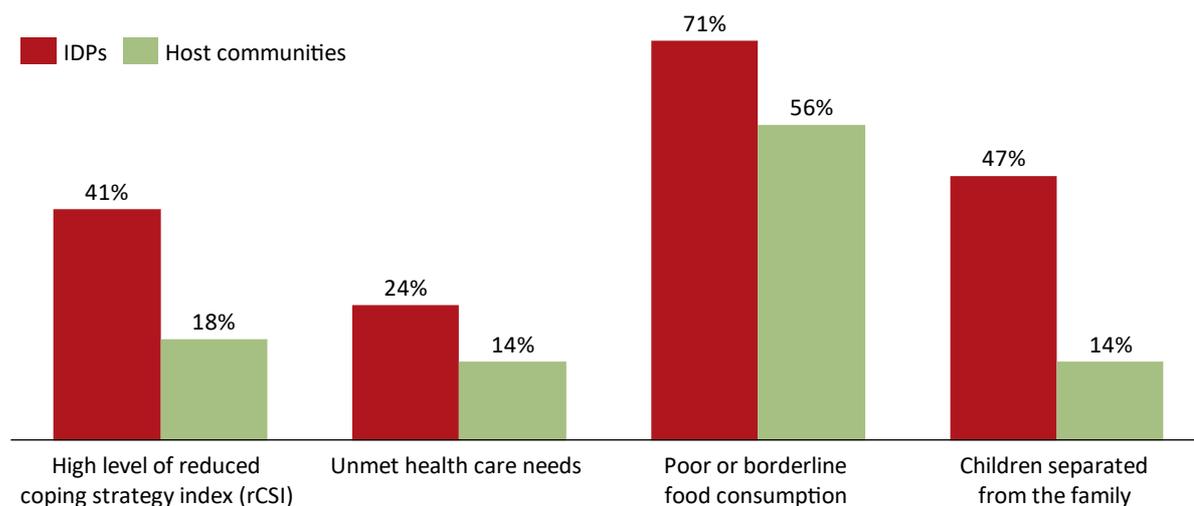
- Low benefit scenario: 200 additional people would have become displaced and the inter-community dialogue efforts contributed to 1,500 people returning to their communities one month earlier than otherwise possible
- Average / most likely scenario: 2,800 people would have become displaced and the inter-community dialogue efforts contributed to 2,300 people returning to their communities one month earlier than otherwise possible
- High benefit scenario: 7,000 people would have become displaced and the inter-community dialogue efforts contributed to 3,000 people returning to their communities two months earlier than otherwise possible

In this situation, the return on investment further improves. In the low-benefit scenario, there is a roughly 1:2.5 return on investment, while in the high benefit scenario the return on investment is 1:4 when including the build costs as well.



7: Avoided cost of displacement and slower returns

In addition to the financial aspects, the mechanism also contributed to reducing humanitarian needs and suffering. As highlighted by key informants and FGD participants, the mechanism through various pathways impacted positively on food security. The exact and detailed impacts of displacement on humanitarian needs is not feasible to assess due to unavailability of data from South Sudan. But data from neighboring Ethiopia shows that on a number of parameters IDPs are more vulnerable than host community members.



However, on some indicators the opposite was the case. E.g. 39% of non-displaced in Ethiopia feared harassment, intimidation or persecution, while it was only 25% for IDPs. Fear of exposure to conflict or violence was 18% for IDPs while it was 27% for non-displaced Ethiopians. Unenrolled school-aged children was 33% for IDPs, while it was 41% for non-displaced Ethiopians.⁸ This underscores the fact that in some instances – including in South Sudan - the displacement happens in already vulnerable areas and communities and the displacement can in certain instances lead to better access to services and support. And therefore, the impact on humanitarian needs is not straightforward to assess or conclude and would require more detailed multi-sectoral needs data from South Sudan.

Lasting impacts on conflict dynamics

There are mixed perceptions on whether the inter-community dialogue has had a lasting effect on relationships between the communities. Some of the key informants believe that the situation in November was calmer than usual because of the inter-community dialogue efforts.

“It is not like the past years because those years people used to go for attacks to the neighbors such as Murle, and Murle also do the same. However, right now there are no attacks between communities but a number of isolated cases, where they could take children on roads and also kill people but no planned attacks on villages anymore” Bilkey peace committee member

One aspect that is highlighted is that the youths in the two communities now have a line of communication, which can also help de-escalate future tensions. However, the underlying conflict dynamics are far from resolved. On 19 October 2024, suspected armed Murle community members abducted 3 girls in a forested area between Walgak and Lankien. Local officials confirmed the abduction noting that it was a violation of a peace agreement between communities in the region. Local youth pursued the attackers and on 23 October 2024 rescued 2

⁸ IDMC (2024): IDMC Severity Assessments 2024. Developed based on data from REACH Initiative's Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessments

abductees while 1 was shot dead. On November 9, suspected Murle armed youth abducted 2 children in Nyandit, which heightened tensions in the communities. In total, ACLED has recorded 4 incidents involving Murle in Akobo between July and November 2024. This is one more than last year and in 2022 zero incidents were recorded. This underscores that indeed conflict and tensions remain high despite the inter-community dialogue efforts.

“The situation has started to worsen in the last two days when Murle youths abducted a boy in Nyandit. The information is being spread by informing the Lou Nuer that Murle Youths are around the bush such that they can stay more vigilant. Information also came from Dengjok that footmarks have been found around the bush, and they are suspecting Murle” FGD in Bilkey with male community members

Given the number of conflict events that have occurred following the inter-community dialogue and the mixed perceptions on the lasting effects of these efforts, it seems fair to conclude that the efforts may contribute to facilitate further future dialogue that can help de-escalate situations, but the underlying conflict and drivers remain the same and the mechanism has not contributed to resolving these. It underscores the needs for ongoing peacebuilding efforts that these mechanisms can feed into and build upon.

Conclusions

1. Impact of Inter-Community Dialogues:

- **Reduction in Violence:** The dialogues facilitated by humanitarian agencies significantly reduced violence and conflict in Akobo by June 2024.
- **Positive Spill-Over Effects:** These efforts enabled communities to hunt and fish freely, improving food security, and facilitated the faster return of displaced individuals.
- **Conflict in Nyirol:** Some believed the de-escalation in Akobo displaced conflict to Nyirol, while others disagreed, noting that Akobo youths did not join the fighting due to peace pledges.

2. Counter-Factual Scenario:

- **Avoided Displacement and Costs:** Without the dialogues, there would have been increased violence, displacement, and starvation. The dialogues helped avoid these outcomes, reducing humanitarian needs and costs, with a significant return on investment.

3. Need for Continued Peacebuilding:

- The dialogues have not fully resolved the conflict but may facilitate future de-escalation efforts.
- Ongoing peacebuilding efforts are necessary to address the root causes of the conflict and build on the progress made by the dialogues.

Assessment Design and Methodology

The aim of the assessment is to gain an understanding of how anticipatory actions supported communities affected by conflict in Akobo. The specific objectives of the Anticipatory Actions (AA) assessment were:

- To identify the key successes and challenges and how they contributed to de-escalate tensions and mitigate conflict,
- Perceptions on how the situation would have likely unfolded in cases these actions had not been taken,
- To understand how conflict and protection norms change during the project's implementation, communities' ability to mitigate conflict before escalation and resolve conflict during escalation and displacement, and how different armed groups are engaged.
- Help to draw lessons and provide appropriate recommendations for future programming

Approach

Desk Review: DRC Country MEAL reviewed the different project documents; Project proposal, Log frames, Indicator Tracking Table, field progress reports, Protection monitoring reports, lessons Learned and other key documents. This was geared towards helping in the formulation of the assessment questionnaire and tools required for data collection.

Qualitative technique: This study predominantly employed qualitative approaches to gather data on conflict dynamics in and around the project areas. The techniques included but were not limited to Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII). These approaches provided a platform for an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the project deliverables as well as the apparent contributions of the project to the peacebuilding in Akobo County.

In total, **15 KIIs** and **11 FGDs were conducted** in the four (04) payams selected in Akobo for this impact assessment, namely (Bilkey, Nyandit, Dengjok and Gakdong) with different community stakeholders, partners, and local government officials as detailed in the table below. 8 enumerators were recruited, trained in the practical field guidance, administering FGD and KII interviews/questionnaire, and best practices during qualitative data collection, as well as pretesting the tool.

Table 1: Interviews conducted by payams

Payam	Key Informant Interview (KII)	Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
Bilkey	6	2
Nyandit	3	3
Dengjok	3	3
Gakdong	3	3

Total	15	11
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In addition to the community key informants, semi-structured questionnaires were disseminated to 10 members of NGOs working in the communities that had participated in a Protection monitoring report on displacement in May. Four of the members responded to the questionnaire.

Qualitative analysis of data from KIIs and FGDs was done through a systematic approach. First, the data was transcribed including the recorded discussions to capture all the verbal data accurately. After transcription, data entered into an Excel data saturation and analysis grid, which helped to facilitate organization and categorization of responses from the discussions or interviews. Thematic analysis was then conducted to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights within the data.

The insights from the KIIs and FGDs were triangulated to validate results, ensuring that the voices of the community are all well represented. Accordingly, qualitative analysis provided rich and nuanced insights, and this will be used for the understanding of project impact, identify gaps and discrepancies, informed decision-making and better future programming.

Avoided Cost calculation

Given the conclusion that the inter-community dialogue made a significant contribution to de-escalation in Akobo and that, in case they had not been conducted, significant displacement would have occurred, it is possible to assess the avoided humanitarian costs. The simple way of calculating this is:

$$\text{(Average duration of displacement x Cost of humanitarian assistance x \# of people avoided displaced) + Cost of delivering humanitarian assistance}$$

The average duration of displacement is conservatively estimated⁹ to be 40 months for people displaced within Akobo, as highlighted earlier. This does not necessarily capture people that are only displaced for a short period between data collection rounds. Based on key informant interviews, also highlighted in the section on returns, the likely duration would be 6 months. In the calculations, **2 months duration has been used**, which assumes that everyone would be able to return when the rainy season started. This is optimistic as only up to 2/3 of those that were displaced in May actually returned within 3 months' time. The cost of displacement is calculated by using the cost of MultiSector Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (MSSMEB), which in May stood at \$189¹⁰ or equivalent to €179. This should be considered the bare minimum cost of the humanitarian response and does not take into account lasting effects of displacement (e.g. lost access to education, health impacts, etc.) nor protection risks and harms.

⁹ This is based on IOM DTM (2024): South Sudan - Baseline Assessment Round 15. This data includes the year people were displaced. The conservative estimate is derived by using the least amount of time people can have been displaced e.g. for people displaced in 2024 they could have just arrived and therefore the duration is set at 0 months. For people displaced in 2023, the duration is set at 9 months (the assessment was completed in September, so this is assuming they were displaced 31 December 2023).

¹⁰ REACH Impact Initiatives (June 2024): South Sudan | Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMIMI)

For the number of people avoided displaced three scenarios are used based on the guesstimates provided by the key informants:

- Low benefit scenario: 200 additional people would have become displaced
- Average / most likely scenario: 2,800 people would have become displaced
- High benefit scenario: 7,000 people would have become

The cost of delivering humanitarian assistance is calculated on the basis of multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) distribution component as part of a larger ECHO-funded project conducted by DRC in Malakal with a distribution conducted in March 2024 to approximately 2,500 individuals. Programme (i.e. technical staff to deliver the aid) and support (i.e. transport, finance, HR, procurement, etc.) costs have been calculated on the basis of the ratio to the value being delivered. This assumes that there are no economies of scale in delivering MPCA. Programme cost was approximately 24% of the value of the MPCA and support cost roughly the same in the month leading up and the month of distribution.

These costs are benchmarked against the cost of the anticipatory action mechanism i.e. the activity costs (inter-community dialogue), the program and support costs needed to deliver these efforts (the month prior and the month during efforts). In addition to this, all the other costs incurred in the project in the month leading up to the activation, which can largely be considered the build cost, i.e. the cost of setting up the entire framework and mechanism and data collection on an ongoing basis.



Founded in 1956, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest international NGO, with a specific expertise in forced displacement. DRC is present in close to 40 countries and employs 9,000 staff globally.

DRC advocates for the rights of and solutions for displacement-affected communities, and provides assistance during all stages of displacement: In acute crisis, in exile, when settling and integrating in a new place, or upon return. DRC supports displaced persons in becoming self-reliant and included into hosting societies. DRC works with civil society and responsible authorities to promote protection of rights and inclusion.

Our 7,500 volunteers in Denmark make an invaluable difference in integration activities throughout the country.

DRC's code of conduct sits at the core of our organizational mission, and DRC aims at the highest ethical and professional standards. DRC has been certified as meeting the highest quality standards according to the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

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