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for every child

75

“Respond to our cry”

Children’s
urgent need for
help in South
Sudan



“Respond to our cry”

Children’s urgent need for help in South Sudan

“In our country, children are not being respected. Child rights are not respected here in South Sudan: the right to go to school, the right to eat, the right to protection, the right to security... so many rights that are not being given to us.”

Christine, 17,
UNICEF Child
Reporter,
June 2021



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Introduction

A new peace agreement has been signed, a transitional government is in place, but 10 years on from independence some **8.3 million people in South Sudan** are affected by one of the worst humanitarian crises in the country's history. A staggering 4.5 million children are affected – four out of every five children in the country. That is an increase of almost 400,000 children from the same time last year. The current lean season (May to July) is expected to be the most severe on record.¹

The humanitarian crisis in South Sudan is a child rights crisis. The commitments to children that are detailed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – which South Sudan ratified in 2015 – are not being met. These unmet commitments are manifold and interrelated. When children are deprived of the right to education, they are also being deprived of an environment that could protect them from exploitation and child labour. When they cannot access clean water, health care or sufficient food, their right to life is severely compromised. Grave violations against children continue.

This is not sudden, nor a surprise. It is the cumulative effect of years of prolonged conflict, chronic vulnerabilities, limited essential services and weak governance. The Human Development Index for South Sudan ranks the country 185 out of 189.² Social and economic vulnerabilities have been further challenged by plummeting oil prices, huge inflation, climate change, new outbreaks of subnational violence and now the impact of COVID-19.

A peace agreement does not mean immediate security, resources and services. The needs of children remain expansive. Many areas of the country are still affected by concurrent subnational violence, armed conflict, cyclical drought and perennial flooding. The country remains Africa's largest refugee crisis,³ with 3.8 million people displaced inside and outside the country;⁴ almost one third of the total population. Of those displaced, more than half are children.⁵

Funding for humanitarian assistance over the last ten years has been extraordinarily generous. It has saved lives, and helped meet millions of peoples' immediate needs in the absence of government services. For many children and their families, this support may be the only assistance they receive. Now is not the time to reduce this lifeline. Not while the acute needs of children are unmet; not while **the basic rights of most children living in South Sudan are not being realized.**

2.

Call for action

South Sudan has never faced this scale of need in its 10-year history. With competing humanitarian crises around the world and the economic fallout from COVID-19, UNICEF is deeply concerned about the devastating impact if donors further reduce funding at a time when the needs of children are so acute.

The Government of South Sudan ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in January 2015, and it bears the duty to uphold the rights of children throughout the country. However, **South Sudan needs to prioritize more investments that would advance the rights of children.** The national budget prioritizes security over basic health services. South Sudan struggles to pay recurrent expenditures. The country has limited infrastructure and has been fraught with conflict, leaving extremely limited resources at its disposal. The prospect of a government that generates sufficient revenue and institutes systems of accountability is a long way off. Meanwhile, the country's children are waiting to realize their rights.

The Convention is clear that States should do this to the "maximum extent of their available resources."⁶ And where States cannot follow through, **this duty falls "within the framework of international co-operation."**⁷ The international community must continue to stand with children to ensure their rights are respected and work to make sure they are realized. This duty to children will continue for some time yet. **Cutting aid cannot be an option right now.** Costs would be counted in lives and futures lost, and an even more expensive response in years to come.

"Most people survive from humanitarian assistance provided by the donors. This is what South Sudan needs the most."

Christine, 17,
UNICEF Child
Reporter,
June 2021

The **2021 Humanitarian Response Plan** identifies almost 1 million more people facing acute needs than last year. But only one third of it has been funded, leaving a shortfall of just over US\$1 billion⁸ – and all sectors massively underfunded.

“Give us our rights as children. Respect our rights as children. Respond to our cry.”

Christine, 17,
UNICEF Child
Reporter,
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On behalf of the children of South Sudan, UNICEF is calling for donors to:

- Increase humanitarian aid for South Sudan so that the Humanitarian Response Plan and UNICEF’s Humanitarian Action for Children appeal are fully funded, thus continuing support for children to realize their rights.
- Commit to longer-term programmes through multi-year funding, enabling more effective planning by providing predictable resources. In the words of one girl, “Time is needed for things to change dramatically in South Sudan” (Girl, 15, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020).

Almost everything that people have access to is the result of actions by the humanitarian community. For example, as of 2017, non-governmental organizations are responsible for almost 80 per cent of health service delivery.⁹ In other words, **there is no alternative to donor support and humanitarian action in the foreseeable future.** The removal of aid will not incentivize further domestic investment – these resources do not exist. But for the world’s youngest country, the progressive realization of rights will continue for some time yet.

The impact of cuts to humanitarian aid will be immediate and direct. Children will grow up without education. Children will be abused and exploited in the labour force or in armed groups or forces. Children will suffer from malnutrition and wasting, impairing their cognitive ability and limiting their chances of leading productive lives as adults. Children will not grow up to be change makers for their communities and country. Children will die. In the absence of government capacity, all other duty bearers – including donor governments, UNICEF and other United Nations agencies, international NGOs and the private sector – must act now.

SOUTH SUDAN

Humanitarian Response Plan needs for 2021:

\$1.68 billion

Humanitarian Action for Children needs for 2021:

\$180 million

The Humanitarian Response Plan is only around one-third funded, with the United States of America, Canada and the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) being the top funders. (OCHA Financial Tracking Service, June 2021)



3.

Rights unrealized

The dire situation in South Sudan means that most children are unable to access even their most basic rights. These rights seek to protect something very simple, yet very precious: the right to be a child. They acknowledge that the child, by reason of her or his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care. They even protect the right of a child simply to play. All who have a stake in a child's life – family, communities and governments – **must create and maintain a safe space around a child**, especially in times of acute need.

The right to life

"... every child has the inherent right to life"

Article 6,
Convention
on the Rights
of the Child

■ **1 in 10 children** die before their 5th birthday

■ An estimated **1.4 million children** are suffering from acute malnutrition

■ Open defecation is practiced by **63%** of South Sudan's population

"It is painful when you see a lack of healthcare due to poverty... life is worth more than money." (Girl, 17, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020)

The right to life is comprised of a right to good health, development, nutritious food and clean drinking water. But instead of enjoying these rights, children in South Sudan face malaria, pneumonia, vaccine-preventable disease and death. Increasing levels of **malnutrition** are threatening lives – the outcome of an epic failure of services critical to child survival: primary health care, and water, sanitation and hygiene. From late 2020 through the first half of 2021, it has been projected that around 313,000 children will need treatment for **severe acute malnutrition**.¹⁰ **Diarrhoea** underpins malnutrition and is one of the top three causes of child mortality in South Sudan. Children are being treated for malnutrition with therapeutic food, but the circle is not being closed if there is world-class malnutrition treatment, but **no access to safe water**. Only 41 per cent of the population has an improved water source within a 30-minute round trip collection time.¹¹

The right to life

“I am very concerned about the increasing number of children arriving every day. They suffer from severe acute malnutrition, but also have diarrhoea, vomiting, fever and malaria,” explains Simon, a nurse in a Pibor stabilization centre.

Floods and violence are causing this spike in malnutrition and disease. Floods are washing away food supplies, as well as making drinking water dirty and unsafe to drink, making malnutrition worse. As well as violent attacks on people, homes are being destroyed, scarce food supplies are looted and water points are being wrecked by conflict. Thuwen Aieyi fled the violence, enduring a three-day walk with her son, seven-month-old Acheren. When they arrived in Pibor, Acheren was ill with severe acute malnutrition, a fever and diarrhoea – a heartbreakingly common story in the area. Pibor has been hit hard by the crisis. One in five children under 5 years of age is suffering from acute malnutrition, which is well above the emergency threshold of 15 per cent. Most children suffering from severe acute malnutrition with complications do not survive without proper medical treatment. Acheren received therapeutic treatment at the stabilization centre and is doing well, but if funding is reduced, many like him will meet a different fate.

[Read more: Will we be able to care for the growing number of children in need?](#)



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"... the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health"

Article 24,
Convention
on the Rights
of the Child

- By mid-2021, it is estimated that **7.7 million people** will be in need of food assistance.

Food insecurity also contributes to the alarming prevalence of acute malnutrition. In Pibor County in October 2020, 85 per cent of households had no food at all in the house, which presents a real risk of massive malnutrition.¹² The cases of severe acute malnutrition in Pibor in the first quarter of 2021 were more than double from the same period as last year.¹³

At the last estimate in December 2019, only 7 per cent of children under five in South Sudan have a minimum acceptable diet,¹⁴ meaning that most children in the country do not have the right vitamins and minerals in their diet, which can lead to oedema, stunted physical and cognitive development, and death. It further weakens children's resilience to illness, making their right to health even more remote.

Furthermore, water needs to be safe and proximate, not only to protect children from malnutrition and waterborne disease, but also to protect them from violence. If a village does not have safe water available nearby, children are often sent out to collect water from the nearest point. If a girl is sent out, she may then be at risk of **rape or physical assault**, another threat to her physical and mental health.

When 1.4 million children are facing severe and moderate malnutrition,¹⁵ when 1 in 10 children are dying before their fifth birthday,¹⁶ when 51 per cent of children are using water from limited or unimproved sources¹⁷ and most live in areas where open defecation is practiced, they are not coming anywhere close to accessing the "highest attainable standard of health".

Perhaps humanity does not yet know the limit of that right, but the minimum standard must at least be to save children from diseases and conditions that we know how to prevent, including diarrhoea, malaria, polio and measles. This would at least give them a chance.

Too many children live without that in South Sudan.

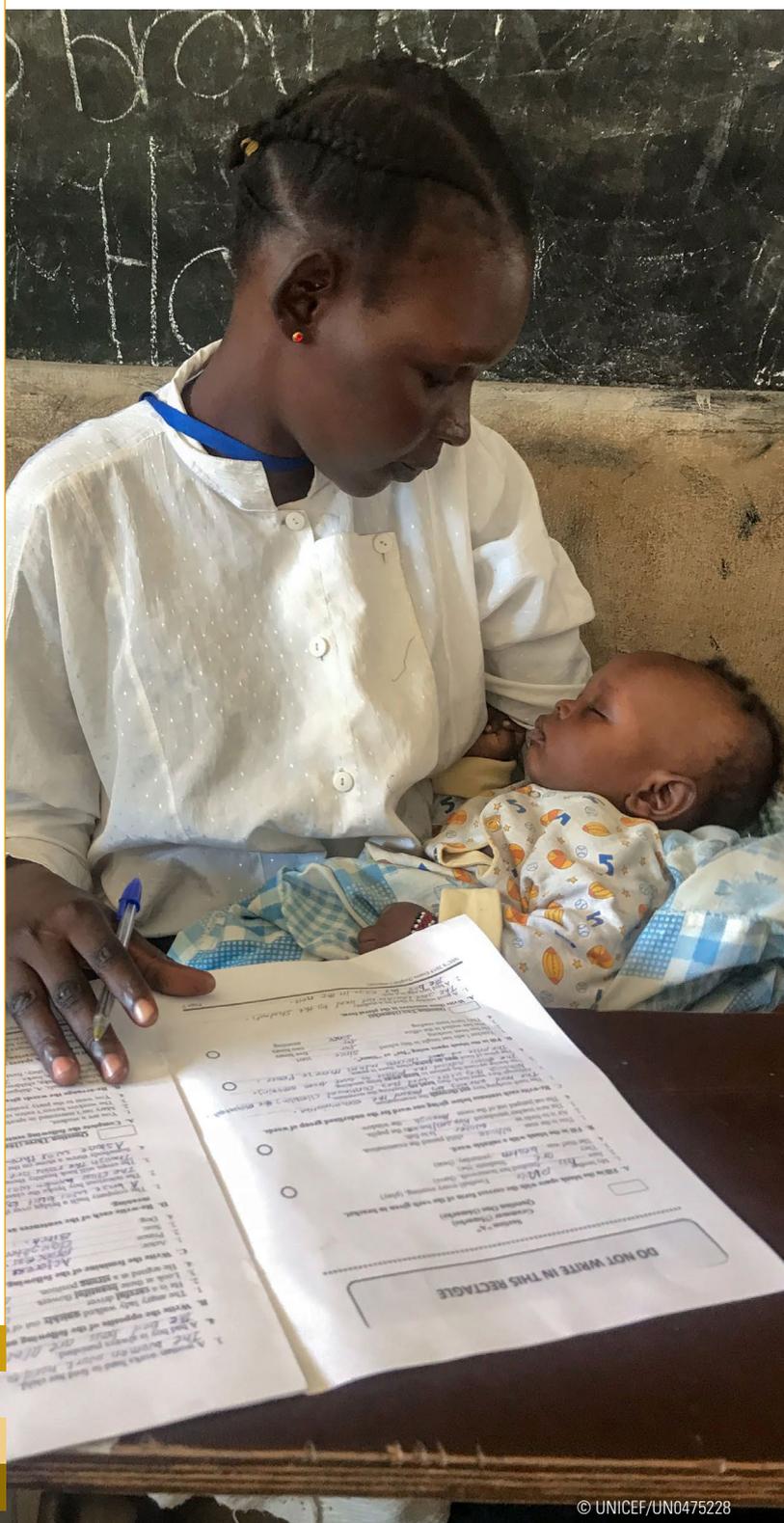
The right to education

Empty chairs in normally crowded classrooms. The girls who usually sit in them will probably not return.

The closure of schools due to pandemic restrictions exacerbated a national education crisis – and it created a catastrophe for girls' education. Many girls have become mothers. Some have fallen victim to sexual and gender-based violence. "If the girls are not busy, and engaged in school, some of the parents who don't know the value of the education may end up engaging the girls in forced marriages," says Giir Thiik, a Primary Eight teacher, highlighting the protective environment that schools can provide.

With help, these girls can return to school, even with their babies. Years ago, Mot fled fighting, missing out on school for years. At 24, a new mother, she returned to sit her Primary Eight exams. "I always wanted to become an educated person," says Mot. "I would like to continue my education and hopefully one day I can go to university and become a nurse."

While Mot's example for girls today is inspiring, it is also rare. She could return only because the humanitarian community, including UNICEF, supported her school with materials, training and incentives for teachers, and by establishing an active Parent Teacher Association. There was even someone to help with her baby and the babies of other returning girls while Mot was doing her exams. Take away even some of the funding and these wonderful opportunities for girls and young women disappear too.



Read more: [Empty seats / Young mothers returning to education](#)

The right to education

“... the right of the child to education”

Article 28,
Convention
on the Rights
of the Child

An estimated 3.1 million children need education support. Furthermore, South Sudan has the highest proportion of out-of-school children in the world. The country is experiencing a **learning crisis**, at the heart of which is a generation of children who are missing out on a basic education. Schools have reopened after months of COVID-19-induced closures, but the fact is many children may not return. “Most girls have dropped out of schools. Many of them are now mothers. They got pregnant during this COVID-19,” (Nyajima, a schoolgirl).¹⁸ This is one of many problems facing girls and their school ambitions. “**Child marriage** is a common problem. Steps are being taken to reduce school dropouts among girls, but the number of dropouts is on the rise. We will not have women as future leaders if they are married as girls and cannot go to school,” (Girl, 17, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020) Indeed, these girls may become young, illiterate mothers, whose children are at added risk of going through the same vicious cycle. “If you marry early, you will not have a good future, you will face a lot of problems like not giving your children the right medicine because you can’t read the labels. Education gives you a better future,” (Nora, 18 years old). In addition, tragically, malnutrition can cause stunted growth and brain damage, which threatens a child’s right to education years before they are old enough to enter school.

Poor quality teaching compromises a child’s right to education. Less than one fifth (18 per cent) of all primary school teachers are trained to teach¹⁹ and may not even have finished school themselves. “You do not expect good teaching as the teachers are not qualified. They lose interest and leave as they are not paid their salary.” (Boy, 16, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020). Female teachers may also leave the teaching profession due to concerns over menstrual hygiene and safety in the workplace. This **deprives girls of role models** within the school, as well as de facto counsellors who can help them overcome the negative impact of harmful social norms associated with menstruation, child marriage and gender-based violence.

With violence, food insecurity and extremely limited health services pushing children to the cliff edge of vulnerability, schools represent a lifeline. They exist for students to learn, but offer so much more. Schools disperse information, for public health and nutrition, which children pass on to their households, making them powerful agents of change. School is also a **delivery platform**

– for deworming and vitamin A supplementation, for example – helping to realize rights to well-being. Schools also offer protection, and closures (due to COVID-19, for example) or dropping out of school both negatively affect a child’s right to protection. Girls may fall prey to **sexual and gender-based violence**.

Endemic poverty makes the problem more urgent. It influences dropouts as “some children go on the street because they need to make money to survive,” (Boy, 15, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020), thereby exposing them to exploitation. For each additional year in school, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could rise by 18 per cent.²⁰ Not realizing a child’s right to education could cost the economy, meaning that the next generation of children could also miss out, perpetuating a cycle of rights deprivation. Failure to guarantee the right to education now impacts on the lives of children not even born yet.

“Education can transform and raise important people to help develop the country. When a child grows up, they will do more because of being in school. With education we are storing up riches for the future.” (Girl, 17, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020).

“Education, help, security, protection... there are so many things that children need. So many rights not being given to them, so much corruption and child abuse...”

Christine, 17,
UNICEF Child
Reporter,
June 2021





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The right to a family and protection

"I don't know. I don't understand," says Nyalak Aru, when asked why she was abducted a year ago. It happened in broad daylight, within sight of the entire village. But nobody was able to prevent it. Abductions of women and children is common practice in South Sudan. Women and girls are abducted to be raped, boys to be trained for subnational fighting and cattle raiding. There were an estimated 680 cases of abduction in 2020 alone.

"After we were abducted, we walked for more than 14 days through the bushes. We barely had something to eat or to drink. Once I asked for water for my little sister. I was beaten."

The man to whom Nyalak was given worried that the authorities would discover he was keeping an abducted child. He sent her to the chief of the village who returned her to the local authorities. From there she was brought to an interim care centre. Here, Nyalak received psychosocial support, as well as family tracing services, supported by UNICEF. And there has been success: her mother has been found and she is going home.

UNICEF is working with partners to assist and reunify unaccompanied and separated children, including abducted children like Nyalak. More than 6,000 have been reunified with their parents since 2013. Thousands more are still waiting.

[Read more: "I want to go home"](#)

The right to a family and protection

“... the child ... should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding ...”

Preamble,
Convention
on the Rights
of the Child

In South Sudan, more than **7,000 children currently need help in tracing a family member**.²¹ These children are separated from their families. There are currently 1.62 million people displaced within the country, more than half of whom are children. To be clear: these children **do not have homes**.

- Some **65 per cent of women and girls** have experienced physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetimes.

But sometimes even the home does not offer the protection it should. “It makes me sad that when I do not do something I should, and my mother or father beats me.” (Girl 10, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020). If nowhere else, the home should be a place of safety. However, girls and women in South Sudan experience pervasive **violence** throughout their lives, as a result of conflict, but also within their own homes.²² And the system for children to be protected from this violence is, at best, basic.

“... protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.”

Article 19,
Convention
on the Rights
of the Child

Over half of women in South Sudan are married or in union before age 18. “**Child marriage**, teenage pregnancies and sexual diseases have increased... Child marriage can take you from somewhere to nowhere,” (Girl 17, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020).

Child marriage can lead to school dropouts and early pregnancies, which can have serious physical and mental health complications for young, uneducated women. “When a girl is impregnated, she is called a woman, but she has the psychological trauma of her childhood ending.”²³ Indeed, conflict and poverty are creating unseen damage in children. South Sudan has critical levels of **mental health** issues because of conflict: 59 per cent of South Sudanese report signs of distress including depressive symptoms.²⁴ Only 6.5 per cent of at-risk children have access to psychosocial support and other child protection services.²⁵

Subnational tension and cattle raiding threatens children’s stability and put them at risk of violence. For example, in Jonglei State, raiders **attack and abduct women and children**. Reports detail **gender-based violence**, in addition to exploitation, as women and children are being used as productive assets and bargaining chips – and for the purposes of sexual exploitation or child labour.”²⁶South Sudan is not stable. We need peace with the freedom to move freely. There are a lot of gangs in my neighbourhood and fights... Girls are taken and raped. If you care about your life, you stay home. The insecurity really affects our lives as children,” (Boy, 13, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020).

Since 2013, nearly 13,000 cases of grave violation of child rights have been documented.²⁷

“... the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development ...”

Article 32,
Convention
on the Rights
of the Child

Children formerly associated with armed forces or armed groups paint a picture of violent recruitment campaigns, harsh military training, inhumane living conditions, frequent abuse and ill treatment, and the denial of education, adequate medical care and communication with parents or relatives. Some 2,100 children are currently waiting to be reintegrated into the community – and a further 900 awaiting verification and release.²⁸

Even if we take away the exposure to violent conflict or flooding, children are still collecting water for the family, looking after younger siblings or being married off before they reach the age of 10. There are endemic issues at play here, but they affect children now.

4

Triggers and drivers

“In South Sudan we suffer a lot from climate change, and we are facing this in our daily lives. A lot of areas get flooded with water and a lot of children die in the flood. And because of cutting down trees the floods are increasing. Droughts are also making it hard to get food. It destroys plants and crops,” (Yar, schoolgirl).²⁹

Average temperatures in South Sudan have increased by approximately 1–1.5°C since the 1970s. Rainfall patterns are less predictable, and **droughts and flooding** have become more frequent and widespread.³⁰ Historically, many communities in South Sudan move with the seasons, but the scale of people movement is now beyond the norm. Rains and floods are much less predictable. Instead of feeding crops, flood waters destroy them. Floods cause **massive displacement**. In 2020 alone, the country saw some of the worst flooding in decades, affecting more than 1 million people. Moreover, floods make roads impassable and airstrips unusable, seriously limiting the ability of humanitarian agencies to access communities – but more critically, floods inhibit the ability of communities to access services.

And when the flood waters recede, they reveal **high levels of need and vulnerability**: crops, homes and livelihoods destroyed. Incomes lost. Year on year, **coping mechanisms deteriorate until they are exhausted**. As cycles of flooding and drought continue, services become more restricted. Humanitarian services are disrupted or destroyed. Latrines are often damaged, which can **pollute open water sources, causing waterborne disease to spread**. Stagnant flood waters play host to mosquitos, which leads to increasing malaria in displaced communities.

The increasing severity of rains and droughts means cattle owners need to move their herds further, affecting communities even more. Owners move their herds in search of safe, verdant land, moving into areas beyond their usual boundaries. This in turn can be the **cause of conflict** as cattle-herders and pastoralists vie for use of the same land. Thus, climate exacerbates conflict, and one single flood event in South Sudan can be associated with multiple conflict incidents. For example, in Jonglei State, loss of winter pastures due to flooding was a driver in massive subnational conflict in early 2020.³¹

Triggers

In 2020, Nyachimach and her family were displaced four times in as many months. The first two times were because of armed conflict in Manyabol, then Gumuruk. The last two times was due to flooding within Pibor.

The months of instability has taken its toll on Koli, her daughter. At the makeshift UNICEF-supported health centre – replacing the flooded permanent building – Koli tests positive for malaria. A mid-upper arm circumference test also confirms that she has severe acute malnutrition. She is sent for treatment in the nearby nutrition centre, also supported by UNICEF and also a tent, because the outpatient therapeutic centre has also been flooded.

Mama Maze is at the same centre with her children. Kaka has diarrhoea, moderate acute malnutrition and has been coughing. Kaitlin is severely malnourished. As with Nyachimach's family, Mama Maze's family has been displaced multiple times due to fighting and flooding. With these double triggers, it is no wonder that their children are suffering from more than one issue. But when the girls have recovered from the malnutrition, the malaria and the diarrhoea, what then?

These families were among the estimated 600,000 people who were affected by flooding last year; numbers that are set to swell higher in 2021.

[Read more: Double trouble: Conflict and floods are pushing people to their limits](#)



Subnational conflict has always been commonplace in South Sudan. However, there has been a rise over the last year. But this rise is not just about resources. As national and state governments are forming, aligning different power balances, tension is increasing. Local groups – including armed groups – start to make themselves heard. Historical rivalries and tensions have space to flourish. **Cattle-raiding** is a weapon in these conflicts too. Not only are cattle a precious resource linked to livelihoods – and dowries for girls – they represent power and status in the community. Theft of cattle can thus undermine tribal status, making it a valuable weapon in subnational conflict. Raiding can also be an opportunity for **abductions**, such as in Jonglei State. And violence in Pibor has disrupted malnutrition treatment, including looting of therapeutic food supplies.³²

Underpinning all of this is the **high level of poverty** across the country, with cattle and land representing valuable, finite resources. The economy is extremely volatile and fragile. The Government has very little income. The price of goods is high, the job market is virtually at a standstill and livelihood options worsen during the rainy season. Economic strife and worsening unemployment drive tensions and exacerbate localized conflicts. The country is faced with a **weak rule of law**, which can contribute to impunity and the normalization of extreme violence.

There is a high number of **unemployed youth**, aggrieved by years of conflict, disempowered by a system that has not invested in their growth or the future of their country. In addition, several **armed groups** are creating instability through attacks on communities, aid workers, traders and supplies for economic gain.

The transitional government has not yet tackled the fragmentation of political forces around the country. The Government has also not yet come to grips with sustainable development, nor investment in and delivery of public services.

“The crisis that children are facing... child abduction, cattle raiding, communal conflict, displacement, violence in the country, gender-based violence... Also, the people are facing a famine, floods are very dangerous, farms have been destroyed, houses have been destroyed.”

Christine, 17,
UNICEF Child
Reporter,
June 2021

5.

Response

The humanitarian community is making a huge difference in South Sudan. The strongest programmes are multisectoral, seeking the most efficient and logical ways to urgently address needs and uphold child rights, acknowledging that a child’s experience of the world is not compartmentalized into sectors. For UNICEF, the focus is on collaborative efforts to **address acute needs through interventions that meet multiple rights**.

UNICEF’s humanitarian work **promotes sustainability**. South Sudan has been in the grip of a complex emergency for most of the last 10 years. So, UNICEF works with partners to help **build capacity and resilience in local partners and communities**. For example, even in Upper Nile State, which suffers from flooding and very high levels of conflict – leading to severe humanitarian needs – a health programme run by a collective of partners through the Boma Health Initiative is working on development programmes, not just temporary assistance. Rights cannot be temporarily enjoyed.

Integrated programmes and community mobilization

UNICEF has been scaling up interventions to tackle the biggest killers of children: malnutrition, pneumonia, malaria, measles and diarrhoea. These illnesses are all affected by flooding and food insecurity – and the living conditions they cause, including displacement and compromised sanitation, thus necessitating WASH, health and nutrition interventions. From January to April 2021, UNICEF treated more than 70,000 children with severe acute malnutrition and enabled more than 183,000 people to access safe water.³³ Many more will need help before the year is out.

Much of this work hinges on engagement at the local level. “Children and local communities can play their part, through unity and connection,” (Girl, 15, Focus Group Discussion, December 2020). Community mobilizers have been the cornerstone of these interventions. Their outreach services promote hygiene, improved sanitation practices and vaccination – as well as instructing mothers what to do when children need help. Community workers support community management of childhood illnesses, such as pneumonia, and the prevention of malnutrition. UNICEF is extending this to engage communities in operation and maintenance of water systems and institute community approaches to sanitation.

Getting children back to school and helping them stay there

UNICEF is supporting a massive effort with partners to get 2 million children back to school after COVID-19 restrictions closed them, in addition to the 2.8 million who were out of school before the pandemic.³⁴ This is part of a longer-term strategy to enrol children in school and retain them by making school a place where they want to be. This includes boosting quality by providing teachers with classroom and teaching supplies, improving access to water near schools, and providing girls with dignity kits, to help when they menstruate. Schools must be places of safety and protection. And when children can't get to a school, UNICEF is also looking at learning modalities that can reach more children, such as via radio.

Protecting children

Critically, UNICEF is further integrating protection across all programming so that there are multiple entry points for action. In 2021, UNICEF is aiming to help 100,000 women, girls and boys accessing gender-based violence risk mitigation, prevention and response interventions. Supporting the mental health of children, who have witnessed or experienced violence – as part of conflict, in the home or in school – is a priority. This year UNICEF has already reached more than 10,000 children with psychosocial support against a targeted 80,000.

Social and behaviour change communication

Changing social norms and behaviour is a critical component of all programmes: communicating the life-saving value of vaccinations, the importance of handwashing, exclusive breastfeeding, sanitation, the need to send girls to school and peacebuilding activities for youth. This is about education and changing mindsets; adjusting people's expectations not only so they realize their rights but learn to demand them. And for parents and caregivers to understand their position both as rights holders, and duty bearers when it comes to their children.

UNICEF's key results for children in South Sudan in 2020

- 198,394 children treated for severe acute malnutrition.
- 305,981 people were provided with access to basic water services.
- 1,791,230 people were provided with curative consultations, including 818,267 children.
- 795,473 children and young people (including 344,498 girls) in humanitarian situations were supported with pre-primary, primary and secondary education.
- 234,432 children were reached with critical child protection services.
- 8.6 million people were reached with life-saving messages on disease outbreaks, education, nutrition, health, WASH and child protection.

UNICEF CHILD
REPORTER

Zikra Gibriel
Alfred, 17

"You find girls three times more likely to die due to childbirth than complete Primary Eight. Girls who are not married should be supported. They need reproductive health services to avoid early pregnancy because girls who stay in school enjoy a broad range of opportunities for their future.

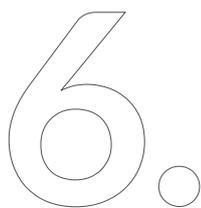
Most girls drop out of school because of poverty and lack of support in the family. Our parents use us as a source of income through dowry. They force us to marry early without asking us our choices and opinion. Some of us girls don't acquire education but have a bright future inside of us. We have the ability and the skills but there is no way to apply it because we lack the knowledge.

Some of us girls lost our parents, we live with our guardians who mistreat and make us do a lot of work, day and night, with no rest. Other girls involve themselves in prostitution to get money. We girls need to be protected. Are we created to cook, clean, wash and fulfil people's desires? Who will fulfil and listen to our problems?

We need your collective responsibility and we need to be empowered to realize dreams and aspirations; we need to be saved from the burdens, which is beyond comparison because we are suffering."

[Read more: On behalf of all us, daughters of South Sudan](#)





The cost of inaction

If we do not continue to invest in children for South Sudan, **the impact will be profound and the consequences long-lasting.**

Some 2.4 million people, including women and girls, will remain without **access to life-saving health services**. This will worsen the already high mortality rates in women and children. The risk of **disease outbreaks** will increase, made worse by **poor access to water** that could affect 5.6 million people. These deprivations could, in turn, mean that children will face increased levels of **malnutrition** – perhaps up to 1.4 million. Some 2.8 million out-of-school children will be robbed of their **right to education**, dooming them to a cycle of poverty. An estimated 1.6 million internally displaced people, particularly children and women, will continue to face unspeakable trauma through **neglect, abuse, exploitation, child labour, forced recruitment and gender-based violence**. Not enabling access to peacebuilding and vocational activities would leave many youth disempowered.³⁵

Failure to systemically address child rights now will lead to **a cycle of short-term solutions** not addressing root causes of rights deprivations. For example, addressing the food crisis alone will not assuage the child rights crisis if political, security and development solutions are not found. Social cohesion, peacebuilding and climate resilience must form part of humanitarian actions.

There is also the risk of **reversing the gains that have already been made**. And if this occurs it would take even more resources to rebuild. For example, UNICEF has worked with implementing partners and donors to train teachers and support them with one-off incentive payments, in lieu of payment by the Government. Without this, there is a risk of teachers leaving schools and this investment being lost. This also underlines that while acute needs are addressed, durable solutions must be sought.

The **cost to peace and the economy** could be very damaging. Demographers the world over are excited about the prospect of a demographic dividend in Africa, with a shift to fewer dependent people relative to working-age individuals that could boost development.³⁶ With young people aged below 25 years making up 62 per cent of the population, South Sudan has huge potential to benefit.

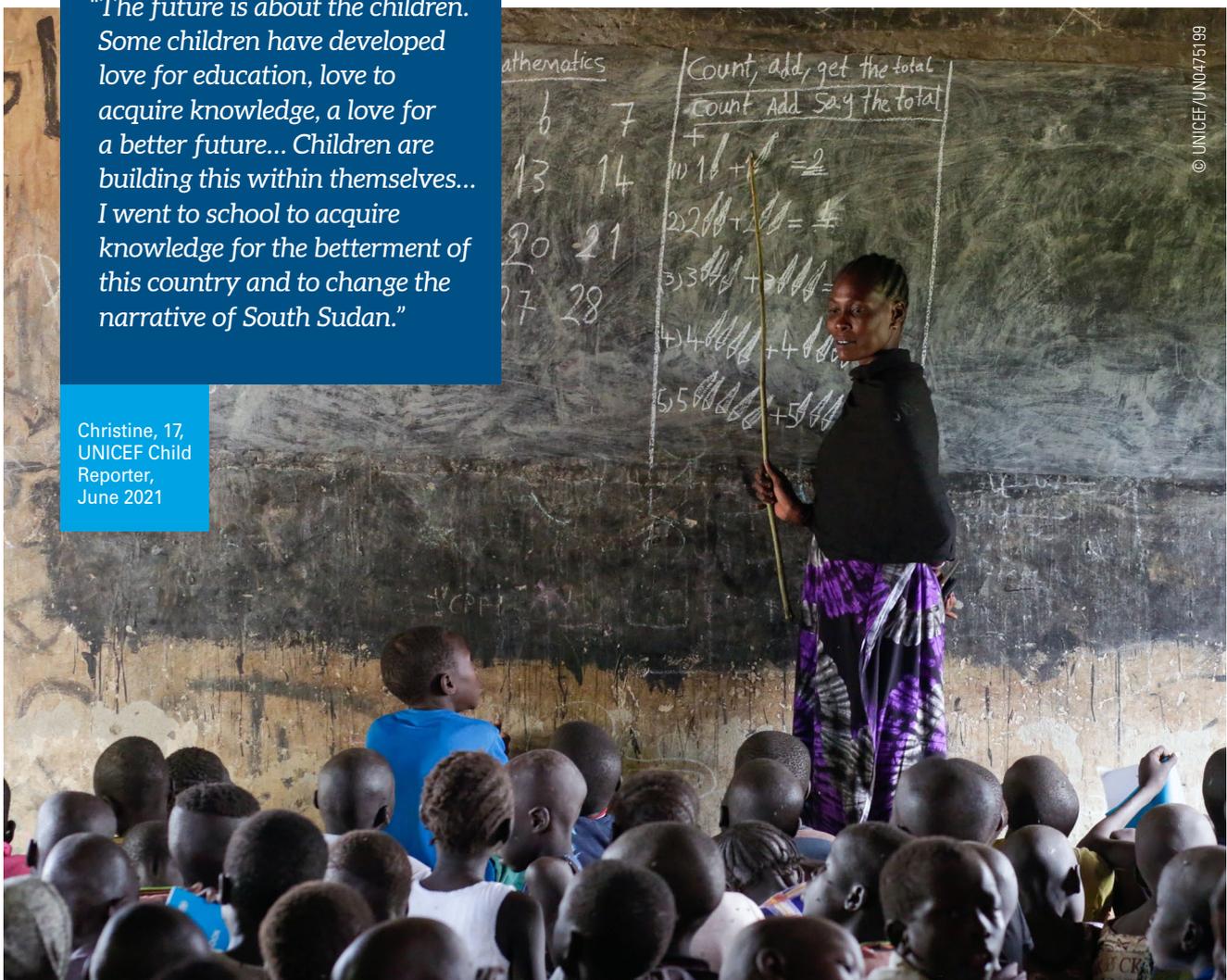
Secondary education alone could make a massive difference: it has a positive effect on cognitive skills, which in turn correlate strongly with increased wages and GDP growth, poverty reduction.³⁷

But South Sudan currently looks unlikely to take advantage of this potential dividend, with young people largely unable to access the health and education services – and opportunities for meaningful and proactive economic engagement – that they need to realize their own potential. In other words, the child rights crisis could mean that the country misses out on a huge opportunity to deliver better for its children – now and for generations to come.

All humanitarian actors have capacity to respond and make a lasting difference to child rights; to help children change the narrative. The humanitarian community just need the resources. And children just need their rights.

“The future is about the children. Some children have developed love for education, love to acquire knowledge, a love for a better future... Children are building this within themselves... I went to school to acquire knowledge for the betterment of this country and to change the narrative of South Sudan.”

Christine, 17,
UNICEF Child
Reporter,
June 2021



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For every child

Whoever she is.
Wherever he lives.
Every child deserves a childhood.
A future.
A fair chance.
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For each and every child.
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And never give up.



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