INFORMATION NEEDS, PREFERENCES AND BARRIERS FOR DISPLACED COMMUNITIES IN MALAKAL, SOUTH SUDAN
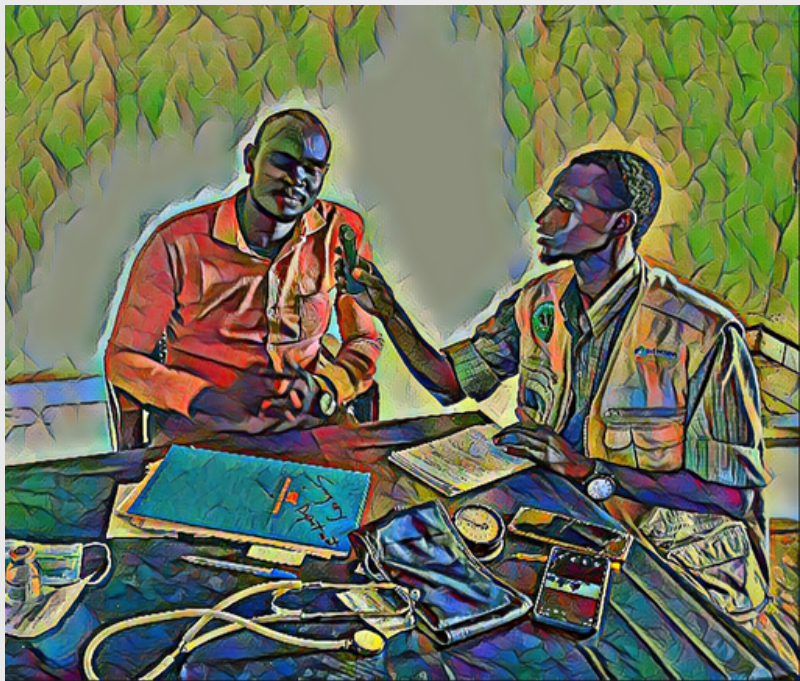
January 2024

Information Ecosystem Assessment

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1. **EXECUTIVE** SUMMARY

This report assesses the information needs, preferences, and barriers to accessing information about aid provision experienced by the refugee and returnee communities in Malakal, South Sudan.

Data for this Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) was collected in October and November 2023, incorporating perspectives of Sudanese refugees, South Sudanese returnees recently displaced from Sudan, and South Sudanese living in Malakal, including previously displaced people as well as those in the host community. **The vast majority (99%) of survey respondents were of South Sudanese origin.** Since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023 between the Sudan Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, more than 460,000 people have crossed from Sudan to South Sudan and over 28,000 have arrived in Malakal (IOM DTM).

Internews undertook an IEA to assess the information needs, priorities and expectations the newly displaced community – as well as those already living in Malakal - may have on the provision of timely, accurate and relevant humanitarian information. This assessment used both qualitative and quantitative methods including Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), a community survey, and desk research. Data was collected with the support of Community Engagement Network (CEN) Community Correspondents and enumerators recruited from the crisis affected community.

This assessment was done as a part of a WFP-supported project implemented by Internews and CEN that aims to improve the efficiency of humanitarian response through the provision of safe and accessible two-way information services. To deliver these services effectively, it is important to first understand the information ecosystem within which people live.

Access to timely, relevant two-way information channels is a key element of humanitarian response, allowing communities to be aware of their rights, access services efficiently, share their questions, concerns and feedback and influence the delivery of services. When survey respondents were asked how satisfied they are with the information regarding humanitarian services that is available to them, satisfaction levels were generally low, with 19% of respondents being either very or somewhat satisfied and 43% being not at all satisfied. The feedback was generally consistent across genders and time of displacement, although satisfaction was slightly higher for women than men. **Overall, less than 10% of survey respondents said they were "very satisfied" with information on humanitarian services.**

In Malakal, respondents expressed a **primary preference for receiving information about humanitarian services through radio**, with 55% of respondents listening most days, predominantly in the morning. The second and third preferences were for community representatives and face-to-face communication, respectively. Digital access was also found to be higher among new arrivals (72%) when compared to those who had been living in Malakal (46%) for some time. There were smaller gender differences as well, with 67% of men reporting having accessed the internet compared to 53% of women. However, there are nuances within each of these preferences, which indicates that humanitarian actors should always utilize a variety of methods to maximize communication reach in communities.

Around half of respondents showed a preference for humanitarian agencies to share information in Arabic. Respondents described the use of Arabic is a unifying language,

however, it also presents barriers for people who can better express their needs in other local languages. **More than half of respondents showed a preference for languages including Dinka, Nuer, Chollo and English.** This indicates a need for verbal and written communication in a diverse set of languages, this is particularly important for complex or sensitive information that could be misinterpreted.

There is also **need to ensure that more people understand humanitarian feedback mechanisms, how to provide feedback and make complaints.** Results showed that many respondents faced challenges in this regard, with the majority (53%) stating they either didn't know how to share feedback, or tried but could not find the appropriate channel or process. This presents challenges for the accountability of the response overall, and means humanitarians are not getting the information they need to improve their programs. It could also result in the erosion of trust in responders over time if community members do not feel they have been listened to, or how a role in shaping how services are provided to them.

Although not exhaustive, findings from this assessment are designed to support humanitarian efforts on community engagement through a stronger understanding of existing barriers to accessing information, community language preferences, and preferred information channels and platforms.

With the support of the World Food Programme (WFP), Internews and the Community Engagement Network (CEN) are collecting and responding to community questions and concerns in Malakal, and producing audio programs in local languages that are narrowcast to people via the Community Voices audio program and through the Nile FM radio station. The findings of this assessment will also contribute to WFP's work on Accountability to Affected Populations by ensuring they are communicating through the most appropriate channels and platforms for the full range of community members.

2. INTRODUCTION

An information ecosystem is a complex and interconnected network both human and technological, that contributes to the production, dissemination, and consumption of information within a given environment. The Internews Information Ecosystem Framework (IEF) is a conceptual model that helps describe the big picture of the information landscapes we work in, understand the dynamic relationships between people and their information supply, and design context-specific information solutions. In humanitarian responses, we adapt this framework to understand how communities access information enabling them to connect with humanitarian services and voice their perspectives to responders. Internews conducts assessments of Information Ecosystems in a wide variety of contexts. To access more assessments, visit our website here.

Access to information in Malakal, and across the Upper Nile has been hindered by infrastructure limitations, including unreliable communication networks and insufficient access to technology. Conflict further increases the risks and barriers communities face accessing the information they need to inform decision making.

The conflict in Sudan has further constrained access since April 2023 when clashes erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Response Forces (RSF), sending hundreds of thousands of people fleeing across the border into South Sudan. These concurrent barriers have collectively strained the availability of crucial information, impeding the flow of essential updates and exacerbating the already complex conditions in the region.

The city of Malakal is located in the northeast of South Sudan in Upper Nile State, close to the border with Sudan and Ethiopia. The city has borne the brunt of conflict in the last decade, leading to disruptions to the city's service infrastructure, governance mechanisms, and social fabric. Fighting has caused heavy destruction in Malakal, forcing many people from the town and surrounding region to relocate to the United Nations (UN)-managed Protection of Civilians (POC) site, as well as to neighboring Wau Shilluk, and elsewhere in South Sudan. More recently, the PoC site has exceeded its capacity with the recent surge in arrivals from neighboring Sudan. As of January 2024, the PoC hosts around 35,000 residents, and a fluctuating number of new arrivals stay in a Transit Site, which provides temporary accommodation for people travelling onward to other parts of the country.

Given Malakal's dual role as a waiting point for returnees en route to various destinations within South Sudan and as a final destination itself, the population is a complex and changing one. This highlights the need for accurate and timely information to cater to the changing population and its diverse needs.

This Information Ecosystem Assessment was conducted as a component of WFP's Accountability to Affected Population (AAP) work in South Sudan. Through the support of Internews and CEN's Community Voices project, WFP aims to strengthen accountability through in-depth community listening, analysis of community feedback, and creation of audio programming to ensure two-way communication mechanisms. This assessment is a core part of that work, to understand the existing information ecosystems in which refugees, returnees, and host communities live.

The assessment is structured to first look at the three most preferred channels of information on humanitarian assistance: radio, community representatives and face-to-face communication, to understand the nuances present in these community preferences. This is followed by other issues around information needs and access, including digital access, language preferences and the understanding and use of humanitarian feedback mechanisms. Finally, the gaps and barriers that keep people from accessing the information they need. We also identify recommendations for key stakeholders working in Malakal to strengthen effective communication and engagement with the affected community.
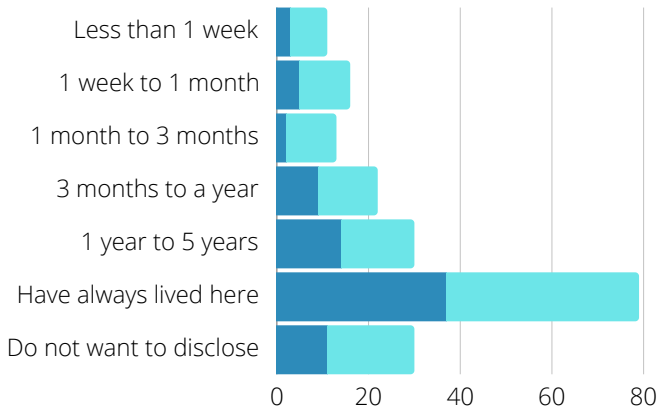
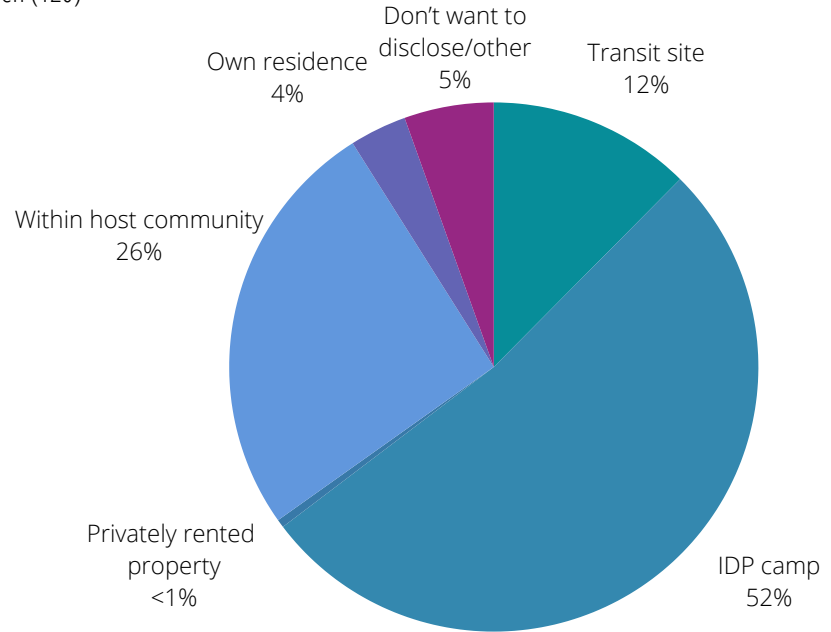# 3.DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS

Age
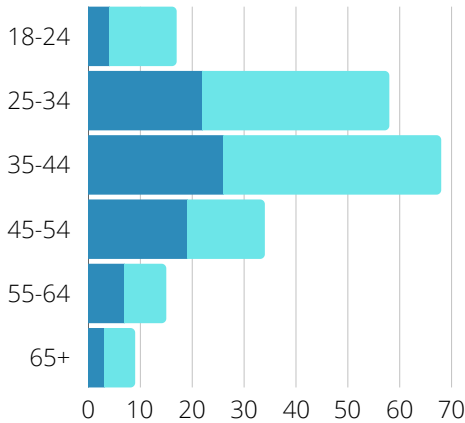
Total Respondents:
- ■ Men (81)
- ■ Women (120)

99% of respondents were of South Sudanese origin. Less than 1% of respondents were refugees.
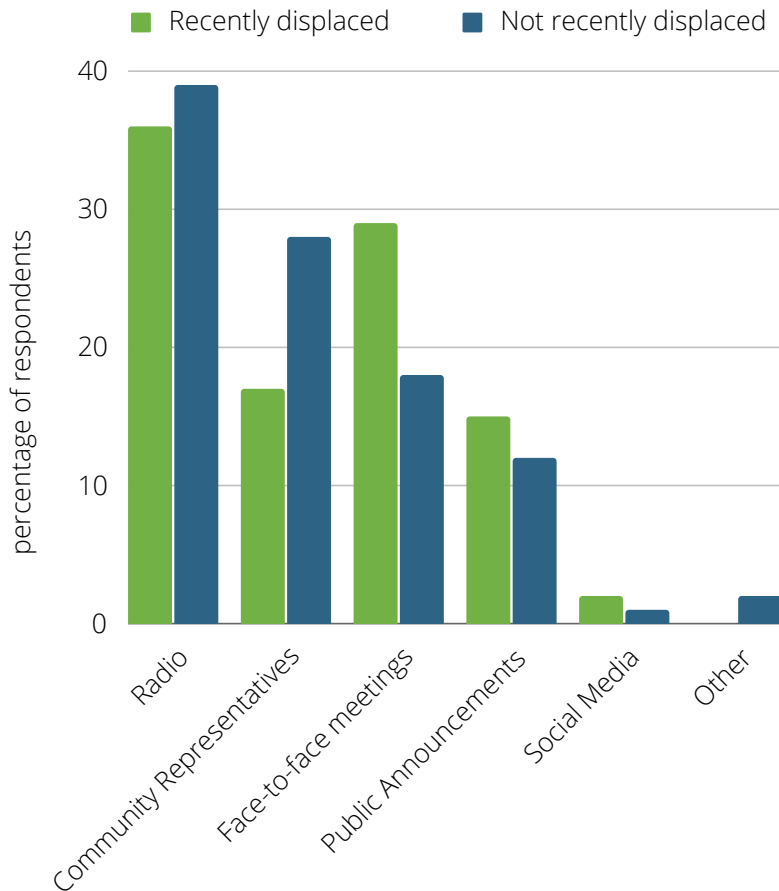
How long have you lived here?

Where do you currently live?

- Don't want to disclose/other 5%
- Own residence 4%
- Transit site 12%
- Within host community 26%
- Privately rented property <1%
- IDP camp 52%

Figure 1: Preferred Methods to Communicate about Available Services

Recently displaced ■ Not recently displaced ■

percentage of respondents

(Radio, Community Representatives, Face-to-face meetings, Public Announcements, Social Media, Other)

Preferred Communication Channels

Residents primarily prefer to receive information about humanitarian services via radio, via community representatives and face-to-face. **Radio emerged as the most preferred method for people to get information from humanitarian agencies (34%),** but community representatives (30%), face-to-face meetings (21%), and the PA system (12%) all received significant responses as well. This reflects many of the practices used by aid agencies currently to communicate with people.

Radio

Radio broadcast and other forms of audio programming have been a primary method of local information sharing used by humanitarian groups and local government officials in recent years. However, such spaces have not been spared the violence of the conflict: some radio stations have been attacked and looted in the past in Malakal, while others struggle to maintain regular broadcasting or have fallen into disrepair as a result of the economic crisis. The two main radio stations survey respondents mentioned listening to were Nile FM (a local station managed by CEN) and Radio Miraya, a near-national radio station managed by UNMISS, with a few respondents mentioning others, including Eye Radio (a popular station based in Juba) and Radio Tamazuj (a Netherlands-based shortwave and digital station) and Sout el Mahabba. Sout el Mahabba is the only other locally run radio station, a station in the Catholic Radio Network (CRN) that shares some local news and religious information.

The government radio station, South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation, is in a state of dereliction, although government sources reported tentative plans to reestablish a radio station. **Lacking more localized broadcast information options, residents are often driven to rely on more national radio stations** (via traditional or digital broadcast if they have the internet access or devices required) which can act as a barrier to accessing hyperlocal information about humanitarian service availability and issues relevant to their local area.

Today, Nile FM serves as a primary local information source for residents in Malakal: on-air since February 2015, Nile FM is a community radio station that supports the information needs of communities receiving humanitarian assistance, with a focus on humanitarian-related topics including service delivery and accountability for humanitarian partners. The radio station broadcasts in Arabic for 14 hours a day, 7 days a week with a range of approximately 25-35 kilometers. The station was shut down temporarily from mid-October to mid-November 2023 due to financial difficulties, which included the period of data collection for this assessment.

Radio, cont.

The Nile FM cutoff was reportedly disruptive for residents and humanitarians alike in Malakal. NGOs mentioned adapting by relying additionally on megaphones, the public address systems and other ad hoc measures for information sharing in the community. While the station is back on air at the time of writing, the disruptions caused by the station's temporary closure highlight the prominence of radio as a mode of information sharing in Malakal. Additionally, it sheds light on the financial difficulties that numerous local media outlets in South Sudan confront amid the prevailing economic crisis.
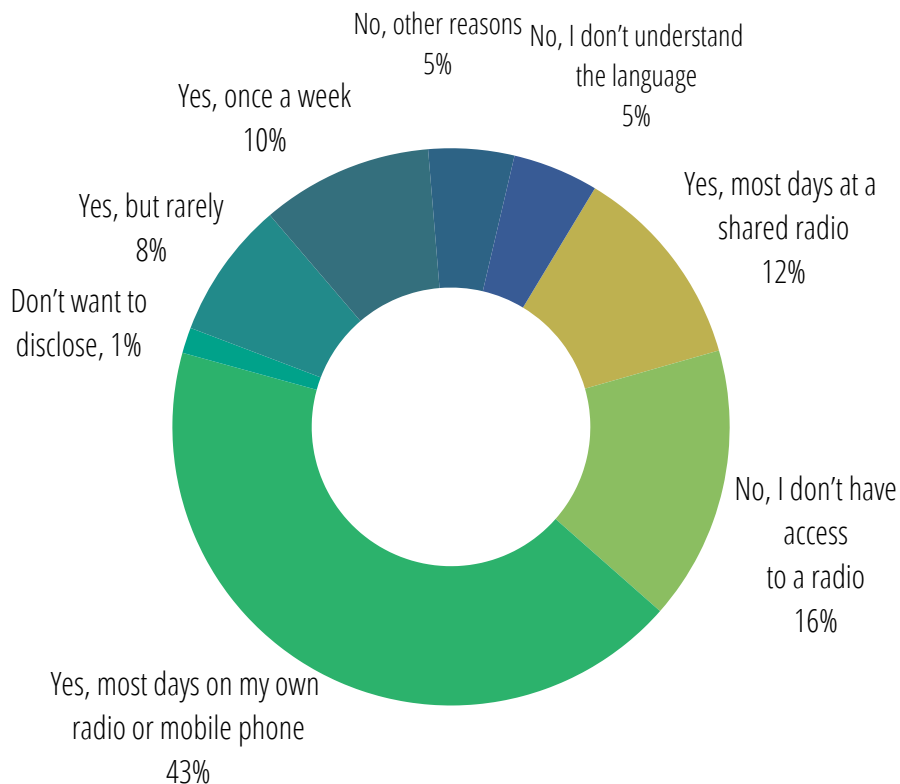
73% of survey respondents mentioned listening to the radio since their arrival in Malakal. While most were able to listen on their own personal radio or mobile phone most days (44%), many others used a shared device (12%) or only listened to the radio once a week (10%) or rarely (8%). Importantly, a further 16% reported not having access to radio at all. Focus group respondents confirmed the preference for information via the radio, although many mentioned listening to it on their phone. Humanitarian distributions of radio sets have occurred in the Malakal PoC site in recent years, and these have contributed towards radio access for women who are less likely to own a mobile phone.

Radio

Figure 2: Have you listened to the radio since arriving here?

No, other reasons 5%
No, I don't understand the language 5%
Yes, once a week 10%
Yes, but rarely 8%
Don't want to disclose, 1%
Yes, most days at a shared radio 12%
No, I don't have access to a radio 16%
Yes, most days on my own radio or mobile phone 43%

In focus group discussions, **people shared that they trust local media because they give them more information about what is happening in their community**, including information on humanitarian services. Focus group participants commonly mentioned reliance on Nile FM as a primary, trusted source of information, albeit one they did not have access to at the time of data collection. Nile FM was also frequently mentioned in focus groups as a means of giving feedback to humanitarian agencies.

Most people reported listening to the radio in the morning, including between 5am-8am (29%) or from 8am-11am (19%). Women were more likely to report listening to the radio in the evening 5pm-12 am (10%) or very early in the morning (5am-8am, 12%). It's important to consider the need to repeat humanitarian information regularly throughout different times of the day to be more effective at reaching a larger and more diverse audience.

Information Sharing through community representatives

Besides radio, **survey respondents said they would prefer humanitarian agencies to use community representatives to share information with them**. Local community structures already serve as one of the primary information sources for residents. Structures differ in Malakal's PoC compared to in Malakal town, with the latter divided into three zones where individuals are elected and assigned by the local government to share information and updates with residents. PoCs similarly have a leadership structure for elected community representatives, with positions held by representatives of key community groups including youth, women, and the elderly. Elections for the positions take place every year. Once elected, such representatives are responsible for informing people about relevant services, fielding complaints, and serving as a link between residents, humanitarians, and government officials. Some organizations also support the formation of specialized committees who play a role in information sharing on particular issues or with particular groups in the community. **Religious leaders and their congregations are another popular way to share important information and updates**, and some focus group respondents reported a high level of trust in information provided by religious leaders.

Trust in local community structures varies across location and demographic in Malakal. Elected representatives in the Malakal PoC are generally trusted, however some residents have in recent months expressed concern and confusion regarding their role as interlocutor between residents and aid agencies. Local aid organizations highlighted how this issue has generated serious debate in relation to funding cuts - and therefore service cuts - by some organizations present in Malakal. While cuts were allegedly communicated to community leaders, residents were not always notified, and thus were not always aware of the reason for service cut offs or changes. Community representatives play a crucial role in delivering humanitarian information in preferred languages and tailoring it to community needs. However, they can also function as information gatekeepers, potentially restricting the free flow of information to certain groups within the community. This highlights the need to ensure information is shared through diverse sources and channels.

Patterns of trust may also differ for recent arrivals to the PoC. Local NGO sources noted that some PoC residents had been requesting new elections for the community representatives. The heavy influx of new residents coming from different backgrounds has contributed to the perception that such representatives do not adequately represent the viewpoints and needs of residents in the PoC, while more people continue to arrive to the PoC each day.

Figure 3: Who do you currently go to when you have questions about assistance?

Legend:
- Food Assistance
- Cash Assistance
- Nutrition Support
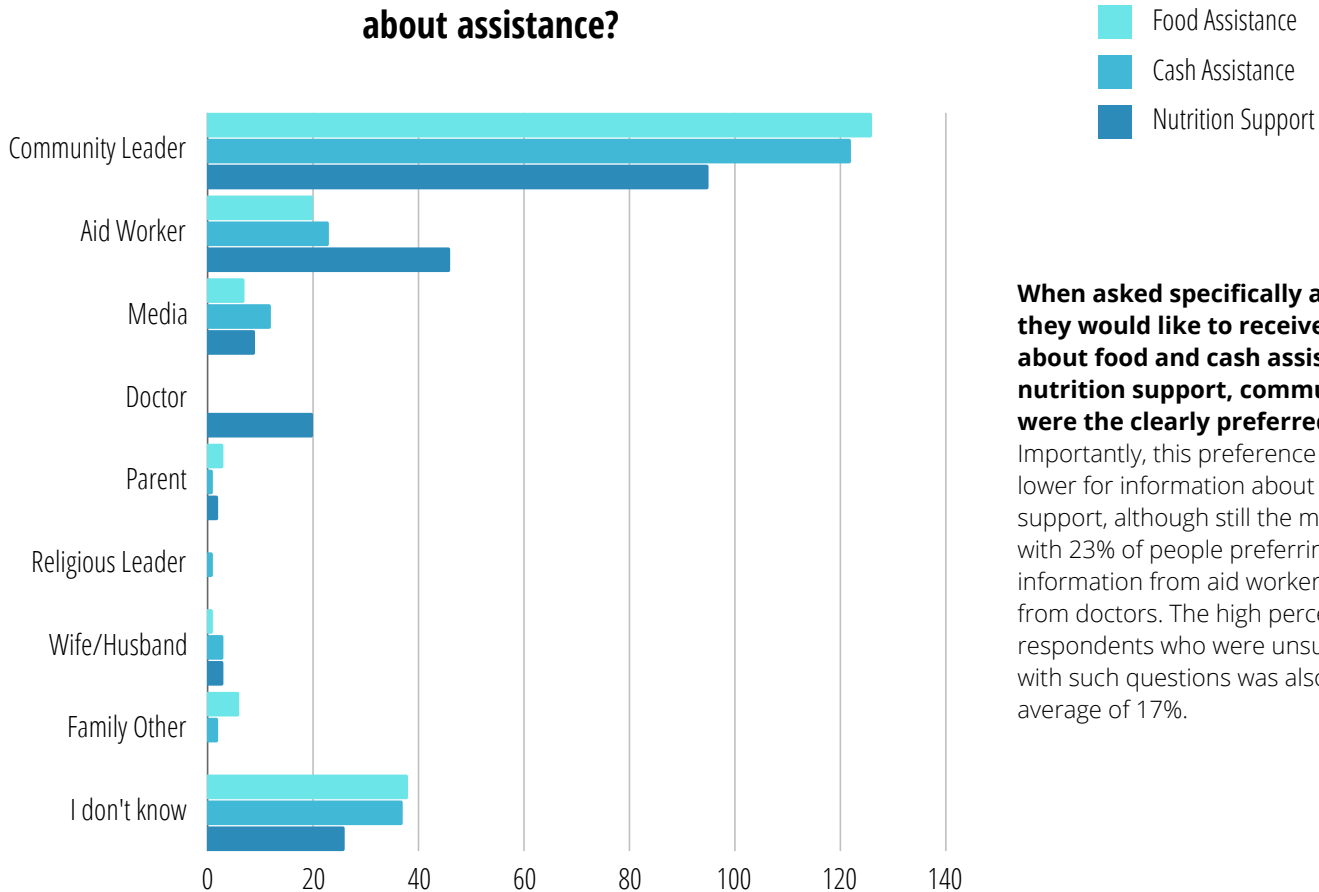
When asked specifically about how they would like to receive information about food and cash assistance, and nutrition support, community leaders were the clearly preferred answer. Importantly, this preference was slightly lower for information about nutrition support, although still the majority (47%), with 23% of people preferring such information from aid workers and 10% from doctors. The high percentage of respondents who were unsure where to go with such questions was also notable at an average of 17%.

Figure 4: Comparison between preference for humanitarian information through community representatives versus face-to-face

- ■ Community representatives
- ■ Face-to-face
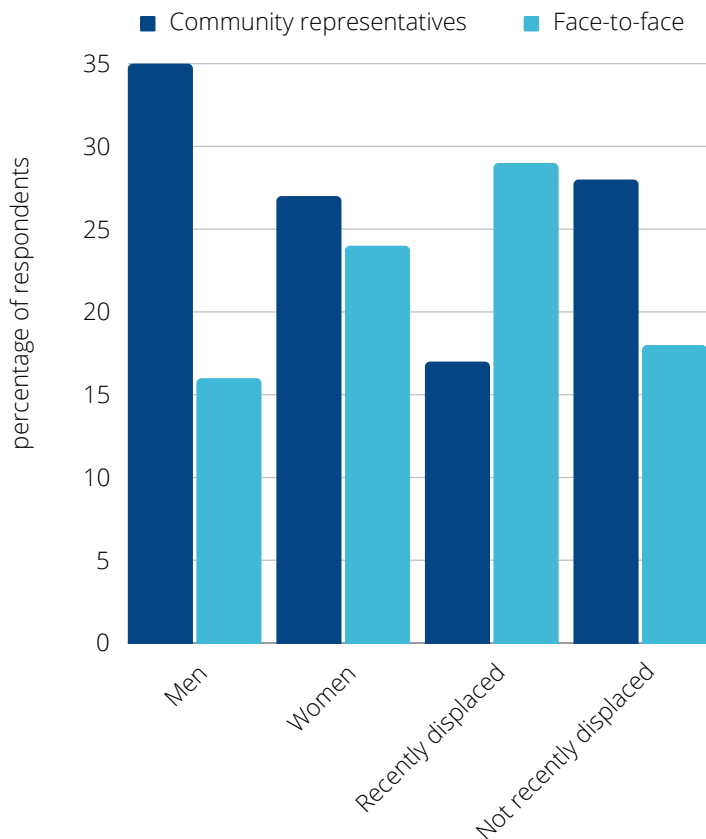
Face-to-face information sharing

Face-to-face interactions with aid agencies were a strong third preference for residents surveyed on how they would like to receive information about humanitarian services. This is already a widespread practice; within the PoC in particular, NGOs conduct door-to-door visits, or organize community meetings or events to share and discuss information with residents. Protection Desks established by NGOs also offer a way to get information and respond to questions on protection and are typically placed in proximity to other community centers to increase accessibility.

Some focus group respondents said they prefer face-to-face methods of receiving information because they can see the person directly, which helps them to more easily ask questions and decide whether they trust the information or not. A government respondent shared their perspective that **community members prefer receiving information in groups because there are multiple witnesses, and any misunderstanding can be more easily corrected**. Within survey respondents, women were more amenable to face-to-face meetings than men (24% compared to 16%). Interestingly, recent arrivals from Sudan were more partial to face-to-face meetings compared to other respondents (30% to 18%). This is likely because newer arrivals do not have long-standing relationships with community representatives and may need more time to build up such trust.

Face-to-face information sharing, cont.

The feedback indicates the importance of building trusted relationships with all parts of the community to enable effective information sharing. Face-to-face information sharing also allows the community to clarify and ask questions about the information being shared and to tailor it to their personal circumstances. Aid agencies using these methods should ensure that any face-to-face communication is two-way, encouraging a discussion with community members that allows for questions and concerns to be raised.

While some respondents preferred the transparency of face-to-face meetings, **others acknowledged sensitivities around certain issues, such as protection concerns, which were unlikely to be shared in group settings**, noting the importance of sensitivity and creating safe and private spaces for sharing protection-related information.

Other forms of communication

In addition to individual and group meetings, megaphones are commonly used to share information in Malakal. Respondents suggested that megaphone use should be increased in residential areas to make sure it reaches more people, but that it should not be the only method for communication.

Some organizations also use posters to share information; however, this communication medium can be limiting considering the literacy rates and variety of languages among residents in Malakal. **These static forms of communication can also become quickly out of date and do not allow for the community to clarify information and tailor it to their needs**. While currently most posters are in English and Arabic, one respondent recommended that the language of posters should be diversified, and more infographics be incorporated which will help more people access that information.
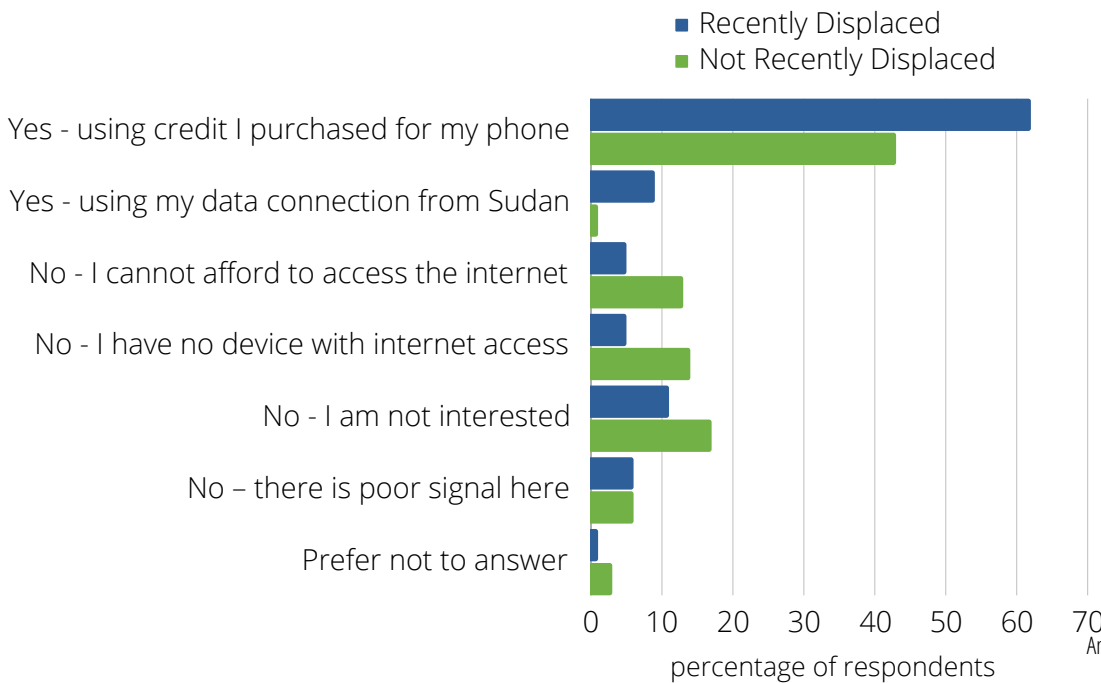
TV

By comparison, TV did not emerge as a popular platform for information access, as mentioned by multiple participants in focus group discussions very few people have access to a TV set. Of those surveyed, **only 4% of respondents had access to a television**.
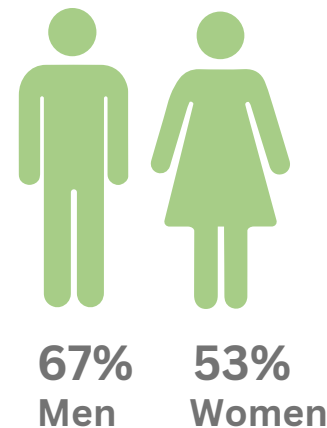
Digital Access

The use of digital mediums is limited due to cost and infrastructure restrictions. High speed internet is limited in Malakal, and many residents do not own smart phones that have internet access or do not regularly have access to data networks. **Most respondents do own a mobile phone (83%) although a sizable portion do not (16%), at rates very similar across the length of displacement.** This indicates that there continue to be barriers to people owning mobile phones for both new arrivals and for those who were displaced earlier, as well as for host community members. However, there was a gender difference, with 93% of men saying they owned a phone while only 75% of women said the same.

Figure 5: Have you accessed the Internet since arriving here?

■ Recently Displaced
■ Not Recently Displaced

- Yes - using credit I purchased for my phone
- Yes - using my data connection from Sudan
- No - I cannot afford to access the internet
- No - I have no device with internet access
- No - I am not interested
- No – there is poor signal here
- Prefer not to answer

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70

percentage of respondents

Internet access - gender breakdown

67% Men   **53%** Women

Digital Access, cont.

58% of total respondents reporting having accessed the internet since arriving in Malakal and 39% said they had not. The primary reasons given for not having accessed it were lack of interest (13%), having no device to access internet (11%), cannot afford to access internet (10%), and lack of signal (5%). **People who had accessed the internet had used primarily credit they had purchased for their own mobile phone (52%)**, with smaller numbers reporting using their data connection from Sudan (5%) or through another person's hotspot (2%).

There were, however, significant differences between new arrivals and others' internet use: **recent arrival survey respondents were more likely to have accessed the internet than longer-term residents (72% compared to 46%)**. There were smaller gender differences as well, with 67% of men reporting having accessed the internet compared to 53% of women. Interestingly humanitarian actors interviewed have the perception that community members, especially women, do not use electronic devices often, which is not necessarily demonstrated in the survey data.

Out of the respondents who reported having accessed the internet, 51% of them mentioned using social media channels every day, and an additional 30% mentioned using it weekly. Among those with internet access, daily social media use is much higher among men than women (65% compared to 40%). Only 8% of total respondents with internet access said they do not use social media. Daily social media use is also much higher among new arrivals compared to others (39% versus 21% reported using social media channels every day).

Facebook was the most popular social media channel by far (45%), followed by Signal at 20%, then WhatsApp and Telegram each below 5%. Although social media usage is relatively high, only 2% of respondents said social media is how they would like humanitarian actors to communicate with them about available services.

Language

Primarily, information about humanitarian services is disseminated by official sources, including humanitarians and government officials, in Simple Arabic. It is widely seen as the language which unites the many ethnicities represented in Malakal. **However, of the people surveyed, Chollo was the language most spoken at home (56%), followed by Arabic (19%), Dinka (13%) and Nuer (10%)**, and 13% of respondents said that language presented a barrier to information access. This breakdown was fairly similar for South Sudanese who had recently been displaced as well as the host community, although people more recently displaced were slightly more likely to speak Arabic at home. Interestingly, despite the diversity of languages spoken in the home, most respondents would still prefer aid workers communicate information in Arabic (47% for verbal communication and 45% for written communication).

Language, cont.

However, the dominant use of Arabic could present barriers for people who can better express their needs in other languages and some aid workers did agree that there should be a higher diversity of language options. **Importantly, more than half of people surveyed prefer a language other than Arabic for communication with aid workers; including Dinka, Nuer, Chollo, and English.**

It is also important to note that within the population of Malakal, different forms of Arabic are preferred by different people. While aid workers coming from the capital may be most comfortable using Juba Arabic for instance, some people more recently arriving from Sudan may be more comfortable communicating in Sudanese dialects or Modern Standard Arabic. Further, some Arabic speakers may be less comfortable reading and writing in that form. More in-depth research and ongoing collaboration with affected communities is required to ensure that communications in Arabic are reaching as many people as possible.

Disaggregating preferences by gender also shows a higher preference for written information in non-Arabic South Sudanese languages among women (43% of women compared to 25% of men), while men more commonly preferred English (32% of men compared to 11% of women).

Figure 6: What language would you like aid workers to use when speaking with you?
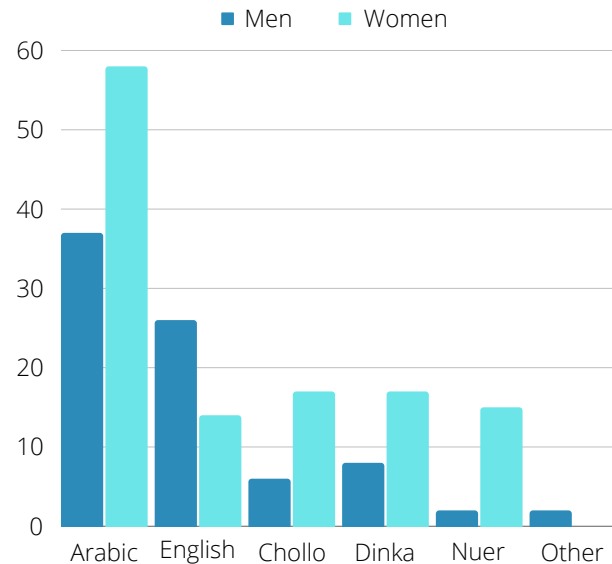
Women were also more likely to express difficulties with language access of radio broadcasts than men (5% of women compared to 0% of men), **highlighting that the use of minority languages may help increase information access for some women.**

Misinformation and rumors

Misinformation did not emerge as a significant concern in field work. Some rumors were identified by respondents relating to food assistance and political topics. However, **focus group respondents shared a number of strategies they employ when encountering information from a source that they do not trust**, including not sharing that information further, finding other sources to cross-check the information against, going directly to the source to try to identify if the information is true, and rejecting the information. They try to verify information through identifying if the source is trustworthy and checking from other sources, including community leaders and religious leaders. Respondents also suggested that there is a need for increasing the number of communication channels and increasing community awareness on different sources of information. This demonstrates some awareness of misinformation and concerns about it, even though it did not emerge in the data collection as a serious issue.

Past reports by Internews indicated a link between rumors and misinformation and community tensions in the Malakal POC in 2021. While recent field work did not identify specific cases indicating a current issue of concern, the linkages between Malakal and the conflict in Upper Nile over the last decade serve as a reminder of the sensitive information environment that persists in Malakal until today. Emerging pieces of misinformation should be monitored and tracked to ensure the appropriate response.

Humanitarian Feedback Mechanisms

It is well understood that the presence of two-way communications systems between humanitarians and local communities can help develop a greater feeling of ownership and trust in the aid response. These systems are a critical measure towards more accountable programming ensuring organizations to use power responsibly by taking account of, giving account to, and being held to account by the people they seek to assist. A variety of feedback mechanisms are present in Malakal. However, **while most survey respondents (57%) had not made or wanted to make a complaint or suggestion, 23% reported interest in sharing feedback or had previously attempted to share feedback**. Men were more likely to show interest in sharing feedback with 30% of men saying they had either made, or wanted to make a complaint, compared to 18% of women. Of those that did not submit feedback, the majority (28%) mentioned they were not sure how to, while a further 14% were unable to find the right platform or person to submit their feedback. Perceptions that submitting feedback was pointless or risky were also present, although not as common: 8% of people were worried they may lose services if they provided feedback, while 8% felt their feedback would not prompt a change.

Humanitarian Feedback Mechanisms cont.

Opinions in focus groups were mixed regarding the ease of sharing feedback with humanitarian actors. Some respondents said they previously used Nile FM to share feedback but could no longer do so while the station was closed (at the time of data collection), while others said they had reported feedback directly to humanitarian agencies as well in the past. The rate at which people felt they had adequately received a response for their feedback was mixed.

Community representatives also play a role in collecting feedback and sharing it with humanitarian agencies. This allows representatives to advocate for solutions to concerns that affect many people in their community, as well as the sharing of feedback in an anonymized way that may make some people feel more comfortable sharing concerns or complaints. To increase uptake in feedback mechanisms, humanitarian actors should work to develop and support a range of options for delivering feedback that are widely accessible to the community. Importantly, information about how to access these channels should be better publicized, as well as raising awareness of why feedback is important and how it is used to improve services.

Figure 7: If you chose to not make a complaint, why did you choose to not make one?

1 Didn't know how 35%

2 Couldn't find the right person/platform 18%

3 Other reasons 14%

4 Thought they wouldn't listen 11%

5 Worries I might lose access to services 10%

6 Worried about safety (individual/family) 7%

7 Afraid of being judged 5%

Gaps and Barriers

The most common reasons people struggled to access information related to not knowing where to go for information (36%), the multiplicity of sources needed to get the information they were looking for (19%), and language difficulties (13%). Similar results emerged when people were asked where they go to for information about specific services (food assistance, cash assistance and nutrition support), where an average of 17% of respondents responded, "I don't know" (See figure 3). Interestingly this number was lower when referencing specific services rather than a more general question about a time they were not able to get the information they need, suggesting that people have different levels of information about different services.

Information gaps are more acute for recently displaced respondents. 50% of these respondents mentioned not knowing where to go for information as a primary difficulty compared to 31% of other respondents.

Recently displaced respondents also reported difficulties with the large range of sources needed to find the information they needed (21%), and reading/writing difficulties were also a barrier for some (7%). There were also small gender differences; for women, not knowing where to go for information (29%), the multiplicity of sources (16%) and confusing or contradictory information (7%) presented the most common barriers. For men, it was not knowing where to go (22%), the multiplicity of sources (11%), and the language used (6%).
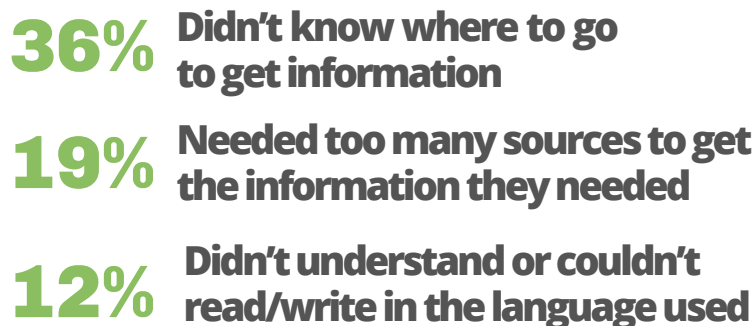
In focus group discussions, information challenges spanned a broad range of topics, and respondents primarily mentioned needing further information related to basic needs, healthcare, protection issues and security.

Notably, **some topics mentioned specifically were support for people with disabilities and information and awareness-building about GBV, as well as how to return to their homes**. Some people also mentioned needing service-related information about food security programming and cash assistance. Beyond the need for information about humanitarian services, the need for information about security conditions and pathways to peace locally in Upper Nile were frequently mentioned by focus group participants, particularly by residents in the Malakal PoC.

Figure 8: Think of the times you struggled to get the information you needed to access services.
What made it difficult?

36% **Didn't know where to go to get information**

19% **Needed too many sources to get the information they needed**

12% **Didn't understand or couldn't read/write in the language used**

Other responses:
- Information was poor quality (confusing, contradictory or out of date) **7%**
- The terminology used was too complicated **6%**
- The information was too general and not specific to my location/questions **6%**
- I didn't know what information was true **4%**
- Other **10%**

Humanitarian respondents noted that low quality or availability of services can contribute to a deterioration in trust in the aid response – in particular when changes in services are not adequately communicated to the community.

People also noted that in addition to being accurate, information shared with the community also needs to be timely. **Respondents noted the difference between the ability to pass information easily and quickly in the PoC setting compared to villages that require travel**. One government official shared their experience that this has sometimes meant that people were not able to access assistance, including food, because notice was sent out too late.

The same official was concerned that this might affect women more, who are more likely to be out of the house when notification is sent. This highlights the importance of information about distribution or services being shared well in advance, using a range of communication channels to ensure equitable access and allow for planning.

Gaps and Barriers cont.

The unique vulnerabilities of different community groups in Malakal were referenced regularly in discussions with residents, government officials, and aid agencies. Survey respondents shared that they thought that women face distinct challenges in accessing information, as well as recent returnees and older people. Feedback was similar in focus group discussions, where people noted that **community dynamics sometimes make women feel uncertain about speaking up when in groups with men, and will more freely express themselves when in groups of women**. Heightened challenges for women may also be giving rise to their comparative preference for face-to-face information sharing comparative to men.

A similar dynamic was observed for younger people according to respondents, who felt younger people might fear expressing themselves in front of their elders.

Additionally, some people shared that women are less likely to come to as many meetings as men and therefore may miss out on some information being shared, while older people may not be able to move to receive information due to mobility and distance challenges. The complexity of the information needs of different groups means that humanitarians need to consider multiple methods to share the same information in order to make sure that the entire community can access it.

Focus group participants also reiterated the importance of information on GBV-related issues and services, further highlighting their view that women face specific risks and challenges in the community. Respondents also expressed hesitations to discuss certain issues openly, in particular regarding GBV concerns. Respondents saw these issues to be very sensitive, and therefore more difficult to access information about.

People are also hesitant to come forward when GBV incidents occur, highlighting the continued need for more safe and confidential pathways for people to report GBV. Similarly, child marriage was another protection risk that was raised by respondents as something they wanted more information about. However it also emerged as a topic many of them do not feel comfortable discussing openly or asking questions about publicly.

> **"Some of the returnees...arrive after 10,15 or 20 years of being outside South Sudan. Some where born abroad and have never been to South Sudan, so their safety nets are not well established."**
>
> **--NGO staff member**

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are designed to support humanitarian actors in Malakal to provide clear and accurate information, informed by community priorities and needs.

- **Continue to work with community leaders to share information** from humanitarians to community members and vice versa. This should include support on how to effectively share complex information, including changes in services as well as the reasons for them, and should include communicating uncertainty. However, reliance on community leaders should not preclude other direct forms of communication.

- **Increase the amount of radio programming** available to people, and utilize radio as a way to also collect feedback from community members (i.e. call in shows). Consider ways to increase access to radios or phones with radio capabilities.

- **Diversify the languages used to provide information** on humanitarian services. Nearly half of respondents prefer to be communicated with in a language other than Arabic, and efforts should be made to ensure that access to information on services is not limited to Arabic. In addition, more research should be done into the specific forms of Arabic spoken in Malakal.

- **Consider identifying ways to provide internet access** to community members, such as in community centers or other popular gathering places, such as information desks or health centers. Respondents already access the internet regularly but also cited barriers, including cost, that make it difficult. Aside from service information, people can use internet access for many reasons, including being in touch with family and working to make their own plans for return and reintegration.

- **Work to strengthen the community's understanding of how to make complaints and give feedback**. The most prevalent reason people who wanted to provide feedback or complaints did not, was because they did not know how. Humanitarian agencies should work to ensure that existing complaints mechanisms are well-known, appropriate and accessible to the affected communities.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are designed to support humanitarian actors in Malakal to provide clear and accurate information, informed by community priorities and needs.

- **Ensure that humanitarians are communicating clearly** around changes and reductions in services. Humanitarian agencies often hesitate to share information when there is any lingering uncertainty, which can result in delays in the sharing of important information as well as a reduction in trust. Utilize preferred channels, including radio, face-to-face information sharing, and community leaders to proactively share information on changing services, even when there may be uncertainty remaining.

- **Consider remedies to the specific challenges** different groups in the community face in both accessing and sharing information. For example, some respondents shared that women will be more willing to share information and to ask questions in spaces and groups without men. This may also be true for other groups, including youth and children.

- **Identify safe pathways to share increased information** about gender-based violence and other protection issues. Respondents shared both that they wanted more information on GBV and protection, but also that they felt less comfortable seeking out such information. Information channels and platforms should be identified so more information can be shared in safe ways. More research should be done to support the identification of such channels and platforms.

- **Use two-way methods of communication** in addition to one-way methods. Each of the preferred forms of communication can be done in a two-way fashion, and humanitarian agencies should always aim for two-way options in any channel of communication, including radio call-in shows, collecting feedback directly while sharing information face-to-face, or working with community leaders to feed information back to aid workers.

- **Increase the number of channels** of information that people have access to. This will enable different people within the community to access information in the way they prefer. An increase in sources and channels of information will also help people have more ways to cross-check when they access information that may or may not be trustworthy, including misinformation and rumors.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

7.METHODOLOGY

This assessment used a mixed methods approach using a combination of a community survey, 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members, as well as 9 key informant interviews (KIIs) with government and humanitarian representatives present in Malakal.

All 201 survey participants were from South Sudan except one Sudanese respondent. Participants were selected through accessibility and snowball sampling methods, in consultation with NGO staff and community members. Selection criteria included diversity of gender, age, location and tribe. KIIs and FGD participants were selected by Community Engagement Network (CEN) according to their knowledge on the subject, status or role within their respective community, and availability. KII and FGD guides were semi-structured, ensuring coverage of the criteria while leaving ample room to explore and engage directly with the unique contributions produced by respondents.

Limitations

This assessment faced some limitations, many due to the rapid nature of the research which placed limitations on the number and diversity of community members that could be involved and the depth to which issues could be investigated. This research should be repeated over time to allow for a thorough understanding of the changing community needs over time.

As the research team was recruited from the community, shared biases, cultural perspectives, and social norms among local researchers may influence interpretations, potentially introducing bias in research outcomes. In addition, literacy figures presented in this research are self-declared and no comprehension tests were performed.

There is a need for more research into some topics, for example, more nuance on the different forms of Arabic spoken by the various groups in Malakal. In addition, more research into how different groups communicate with community representatives would also support strengthened two-way communication through community structures.