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INFORMATION NEEDS, PREFERENCES AND BARRIERS FOR DISPLACED COMMUNITIES IN RENK, SOUTH SUDAN

December 2023

Information Ecosystem Assessment

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	03
2. Introduction	05
3. Demographics	06
4. Findings	07
5. Recommendations	18
6. Acknowledgements	20
7. Methodology	21



1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report presents an assessment of the information needs, preferences and barriers to accessing information on aid service provision experienced by the refugee and returnee communities in Renk, South Sudan. Data for this Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) was collected in October and November 2023, including the perspectives of Sudanese refugees, South Sudanese returnees displaced from Sudan, South Sudanese host community members, and a small number of refugees of other nationalities who have returned to the country since fighting erupted between Sudan's army and the

paramilitary Rapid Response Forces (RSF) in mid-April 2023. As of 12 November, a total of 373,168 individuals had arrived in South Sudan, more than 90% of which pass through Renk as they seek shelter, protection and other services. Renk is a small but growing town that lies on the White Nile River in Upper Nile state.

Internews undertook an IEA to assess the **needs, priorities and expectations the newly displaced community 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. In order to provide such services it is important to first understand the information ecosystem within which people live.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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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. Key findings related to how the community would like to receive information from humanitarians. **Only 12% of respondents said they were 'Very Satisfied' with the information related to humanitarian services available to them;** most respondents sit somewhere in the middle with 81% saying they are 'A little' or 'Somewhat' Satisfied. Respondents overwhelmingly prefer to receive information from humanitarian actors face to face in group settings, with radio as the second most preferred option.



However, the existing radio options that are accessible in Renk and listened to are larger, national stations and do not provide sufficient locally relevant information or information that connects this community with the available humanitarian services. In addition, some key informant interviews also recommended using megaphones to publicly broadcast messages. **Although less than half of people surveyed speak Arabic at home, most respondents would like to receive both written and verbal information from humanitarian actors in Arabic** (80% and 75% respectively), with English being preferred by 17% of people for written communication and 18% for verbal.

The survey and focus groups also found that people **need more information on how to provide feedback and make complaints to humanitarians.** Although most people surveyed (46%) said they did not have any complaints to share, those who did struggled to understand how to make 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 CEN are collecting and responding to community questions and concerns in Renk, and producing local language audio program that is narrowcast regularly to refugees and returnees via the Community Voices audio program. 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.

For a more detailed set of recommendations for actors, see pages 18 and 19.

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 us 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

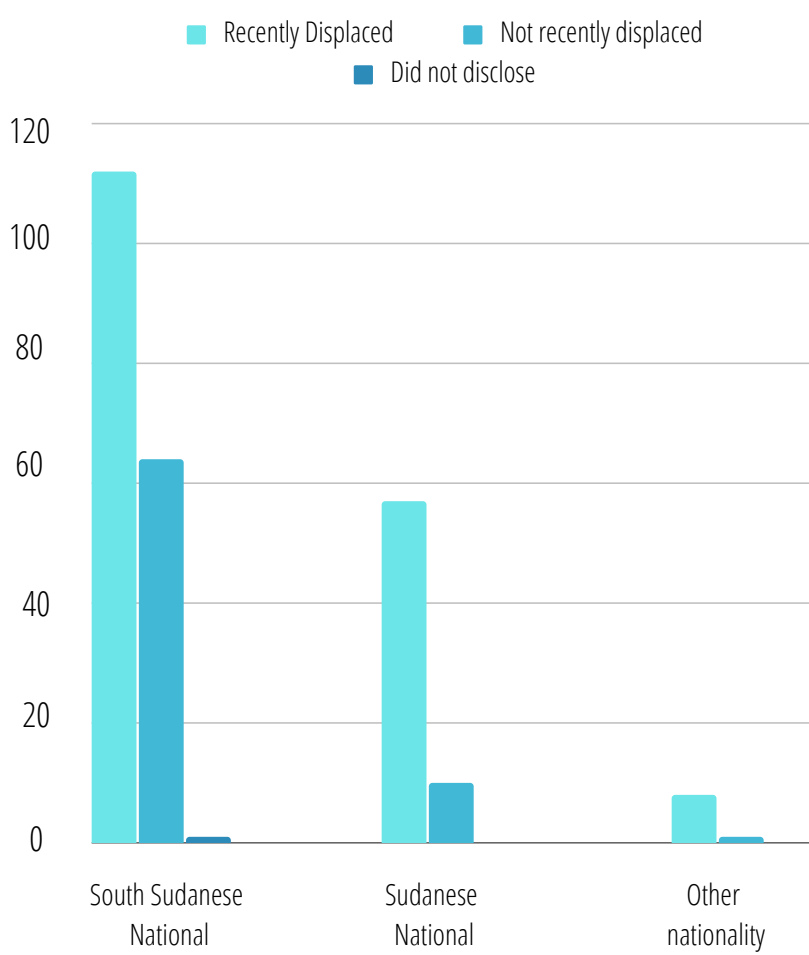
information enabling them to connect with humanitarian services and voice their perspectives to responders. Internews conducts assessments of Information Ecosystems in a wide variety of contexts. To access more assessments, visit our website [here](#).

This assessment is structured to first address community information preferences, to **understand how communities currently get their information and what languages, channels and platforms they prefer to use**. We then look at humanitarian information needs and feedback mechanisms, and community perceptions of what is available to them.

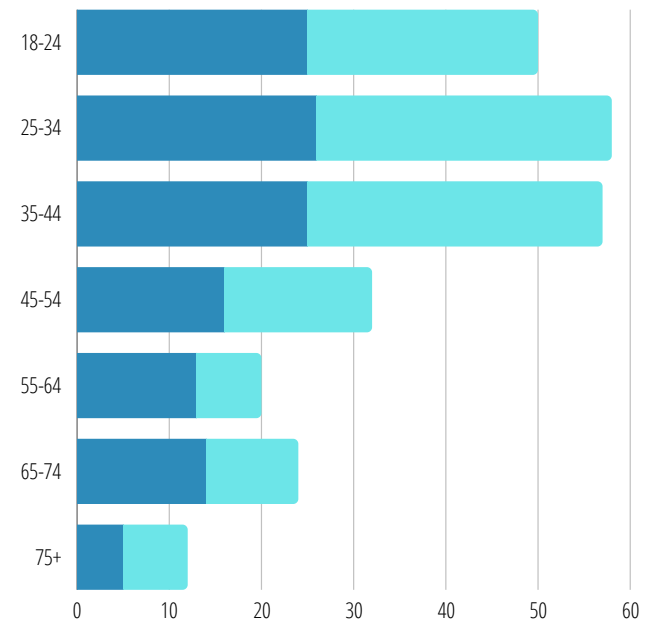
This Information Ecosystem Assessment was conducted as a component of WFP's Accountability to Affected Population (AAP) work in South Sudan. Through the support of Internews and CEN's Community Voices project, WFP aims to strengthen accountability through in-depth community listening, analysis of community 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.

Finally, we look at the **primary gaps and barriers people face to accessing the information they need**. We also identify recommendations for key stakeholders working in Renk to support effective communication and engagement with the affected community.

3. DEMOGRAPHICS OF RESPONDENTS



Total Respondents:
 Men (124)
 Women (129)



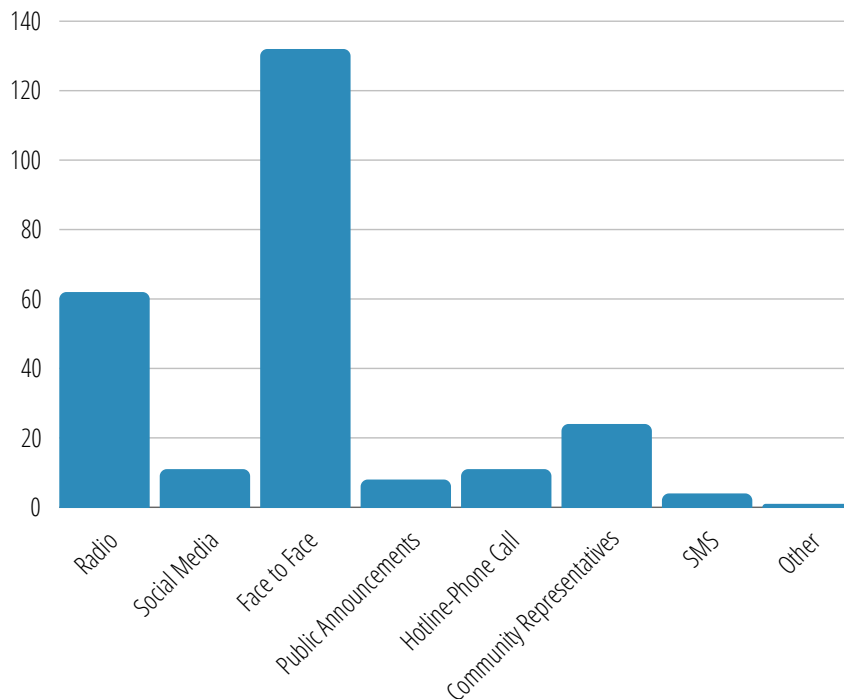
4.FINDINGS

4.1 Preferred Communication Channels

Face to Face Information Sharing

Information sharing through face-to-face interactions were by far the most preferred (52%) method to communicate about available services, with a strong preference for group meetings, rather than one-to-one interactions. **Face to face interactions are considered reliable and trustworthy**, fostering a sense of transparency, particularly when related to humanitarian aid distribution. Challenges were noted in information consistency and inclusivity in some cases, specifically when there is a lack of prior notification of when these meetings would take place. Megaphones and community gatherings are viewed as effective ways for aid workers to engage in face-to-face communication, and a number of respondents emphasized that it was better to communicate with groups of people rather than one-on-one. In Renk, humanitarian actors are working with community leaders to share information through face-to-face meetings, but it should be noted that only 10% of respondents preferred to receive information about humanitarian services via community representatives. However, in in-depth interviews, community leaders saw part of their role as passing along information to community members, demonstrating a different understanding than the preferences stated by many community members.

Figure 1: Preferred Methods to Communicate about Available Services



4. FINDINGS

Radio

Besides face-to-face communication, community members shared that **radio is the second most preferred option for receiving information from humanitarian actors.**

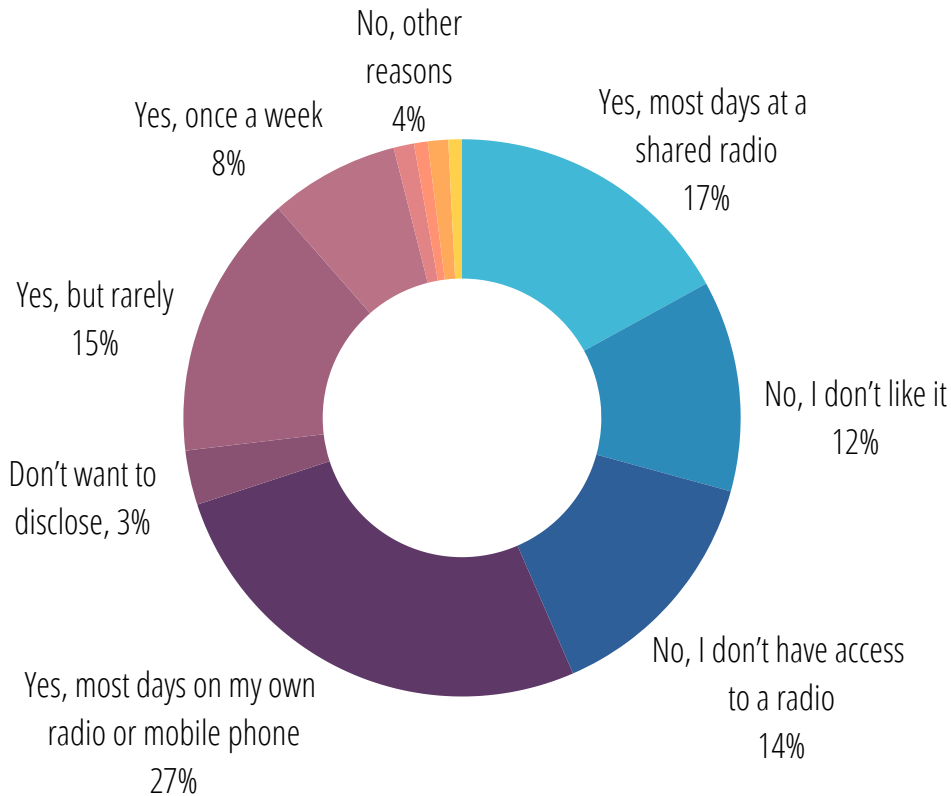
Radio signals are accessible with **the majority of respondents (43%) saying they listen to the radio most days.** However, only 17% of respondents have access to a radio-set in their household, which means many people either use their phones to listen or access radio signal through shared radios (see Figure 2). In Renk, the community relies on national or regional broadcasts that reach Renk from other areas within South Sudan. Among respondents who listen to radio stations, Eye Radio emerges as the most preferred (94%), with a large majority across all demographics favoring it consistently. This station is headquartered in Juba with a transmitter in Renk, and maintains significant popularity among different age groups and genders. The other radio station respondents said they listen to is Radio Miraya, a United Nations radio station owned and run by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Both broadcasters have a large reach throughout the country; the content offered aims to cater to a national audience but lacks local content designed specifically for refugees or returnees in this location.

Data suggests that radio stations are mostly listened to between 8-11 am, indicating a specific peak time for information consumption. Women respondents had a slight preference for evening listening (which suggests this may be the ideal time for programming targeting this demographic), but morning remained the most popular time across age groups. **Access is however a challenge for some users with 15% saying they don't have access to a radio set at all and 18% saying they use a shared radio.** This compares to 27% who use their own radio set or mobile phone to tune in. Renk residents also have access to an audio narrowcasting service called 'Community Voice' run by the Community Engagement Network, a South Sudanese NGO working in collaboration with Internews and supported by WFP. This project collects feedback from community members and pairs them with responses from aid agencies to create an audio dialogue between the two groups through an engaging audio program that is played on mobile speakers throughout the transit site, the reception center in Joda crossing point, Abu Khudara and Zero Center

4. FINDINGS

Radio

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



TV

Television ownership remains relatively low, with **only 15% reported having access to a television in their household**, and mainly from the South Sudanese host community (only 3% of recently displaced people said they have access to a television). In contrast, [a 2021 national audience survey](#) found that 49% of respondents had a television in their household. Television did not emerge in the KII or FGD as a priority for community members when it comes to communication on humanitarian assistance.

4. FINDINGS

Digital Access

Figure 3: Have you accessed the Internet since arriving here?



“Internet connection is very poor here in Renk and that’s why sometimes we use the radio as an alternative to get some information. One of the challenges that we face is related to a lack of information on nutrition and food distribution.”

- KII, Chair Person Renk Women Association

4. FINDINGS

Digital Access

Around 73% of respondents own a mobile phone, which may be linked to the fact that many new arrivals are from urban centers. 30% own a smart phone and 22% own a basic handset without internet capabilities, with a slight gender difference in phone ownership (68% of women versus 77% of men). This is a smaller difference than the findings of the 2021 [National Audience Survey of South Sudan](#) which found that mobile phone owners were more likely to be male by a difference of 13%. In Renk, age also plays a role in mobile phone ownership; it was much less likely for both men and women over 45 to report they owned a phone.

Nearly half of surveyed respondents have not accessed the internet since arriving in Renk (49%), with the main barriers being limited access to an internet enabled device (20%), financial barriers to purchase mobile data (10%), poor internet reception (3%) or no interest (17%). For those who can afford to, users use their phones to access mobile internet in a range of ways: 20% of respondents purchase data bundles to access internet services, approximately 23% have access to WIFI provided by a business or humanitarian agencies and less than 1% of respondents are still using their sim card from Sudan for internet access.

Limitations in reading and writing ability also impact internet behavior among some users, limiting some people to calls and audio messages only. While mobile data connectivity in Renk is highly unreliable, shops in the market offer hotspots for connectivity at a small cost. However, refugees from the transit center face challenges in accessing these spots due to transportation issues, which can become costly.

The data shows that among internet users, social media is a critical tool for communication with family and friends, however it was not a preferred method (4%) to receive information about humanitarian services. 39% of internet users access social media every day with a further 34% logging on at least once a week. **Younger users are significantly more likely to use social media than older users,** though the survey did not find significant gender differences. Facebook (62%) is the dominant application, followed by WhatsApp (35%), with only a small number of respondents citing Signal or Telegram.

4. FINDINGS

Who do community members prefer to receive humanitarian information from?

When asked how they access information about humanitarian assistance, aid workers are the primary source for information, with **42% of respondents saying they currently go to aid workers for information about assistance, including food, cash and nutrition support.** After that, community leaders currently play a key role, with 27% of respondents identifying community leaders as their choice when they have questions about humanitarian services. South Sudanese returnees were more likely than their Sudanese counterparts to say they prefer to go to community leaders with questions about assistance. Interestingly, these findings contrast with the responses to the question of how respondents would like to receive information from humanitarians (only 10% said through community representatives). This may indicate some ambivalence in people's feelings about receiving information from leaders. However, it seems that currently leaders do play a role in the provision of humanitarian information, which means it is worth continuing to invest in these channels. While informal sources like family networks contribute, they have a comparatively smaller impact, underscoring the significance of formal aid channels in addressing the information needs of individuals within the community.

In focus group discussions some specific information needs that emerged were the frequency and allocation of cash distribution, avenues for addressing cash-related queries, inadequate sanitation facilities, healthcare service limitations, and uncertainties about settlement status and education services for children. A number of people felt that insufficient prior notice for meetings hindered access to crucial information.

“One of the challenges that we face is related to a lack of information on nutrition and food distribution.”

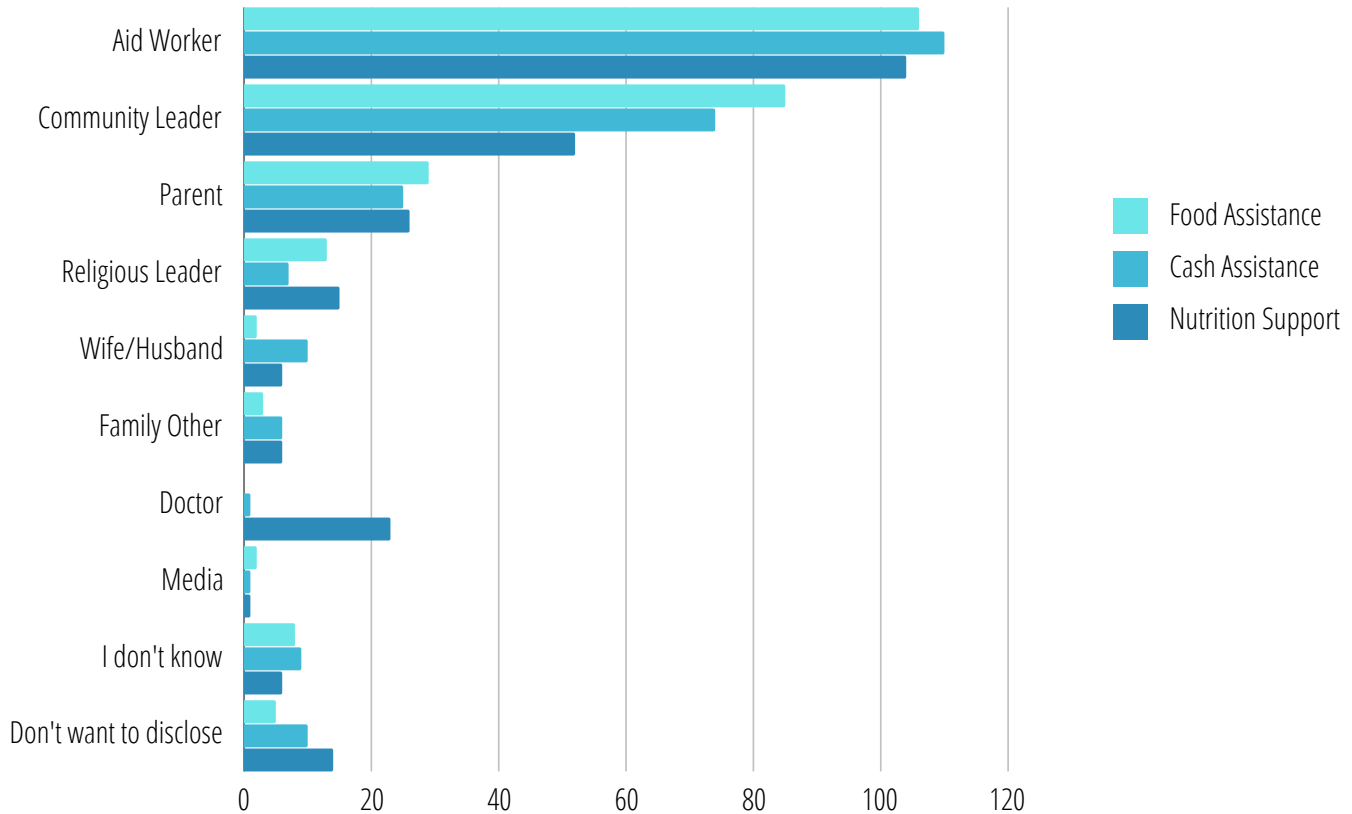
--Woman Leader, Renk

“Some people who just joined the Transit Centre from Joda don't have full information compared with those who have been living in the TC for some months”.

--KII, Refugee Woman Leader, Transit Centre

4. FINDINGS

Figure 5: Who do you currently go to when you have questions about assistance?



4. FINDINGS

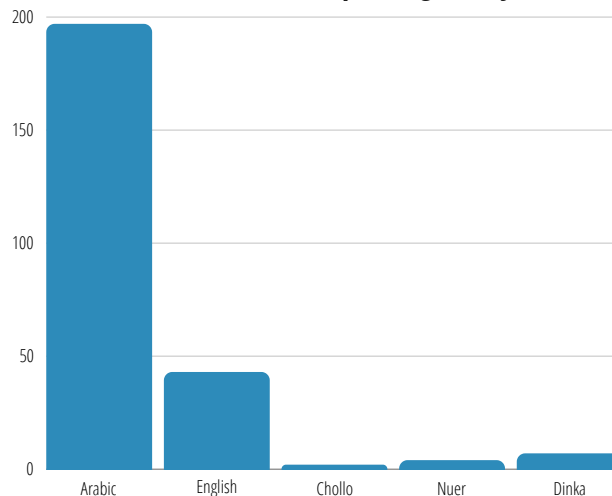
Language

We saw a distinct difference between the languages many respondents use at home and the language they would prefer that aid workers use for communication. **While 38% of respondents reported they speak Arabic at home, that jumps to nearly 76% when asked what language aid workers should share written and verbal information.** We saw this trend across most age groups. Various forms are in use among community members and aid workers including Sudanese Arabic (or colloquial Arabic with regional variations), Juba Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) or Classical Arabic as written forms of the language. Additional research is needed to investigate the forms in use in the Renk response and better understand where they may be contributing to information barriers for individuals or groups.

Close to 60% of respondents speak a local language at home (primarily Dinka, Bari, Nuer, Chollo, or Zande), however only 6% said they would prefer to use this language when interacting with aid workers. While only 3% of respondents said they speak English at home, 18% said they would like aid workers to use it when speaking to them. Currently, many humanitarian actors develop their flyers and banners in English, and this poses a significant barrier for many refugees and returnees. **A quarter of respondents said that they could not read or write in any language, which impacts how they use social media** (opting for calls and voice messages to exchange information) and necessitates humanitarian

agencies to go beyond sharing information about services in pamphlets and posters. Importantly, clear and contextual information shared through face-to-face interactions, group sessions and narrowcasting overcome these challenges, and it is also the preferred communication method of much of the community.

Figure 6: What language would you like aid workers to use when speaking with you?



4. FINDINGS

Information Sources and Trust

Humanitarian Organizations:

The community holds a high level of trust in both International and National Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs, NGOs). This trust is rooted in the perceived confidentiality practiced by humanitarian organizations, ensuring the protection of personal data, and their swift responsiveness to community concerns. Refugees and youth in particular shared that they have trust in humanitarian organizations. They believe that these organizations have demonstrated a commitment to addressing immediate needs, which reinforces their credibility. In contrast, trust in local, state, and national governments emerged in focus groups and interviews as relatively weaker.

Community Leaders:

Older refugees and returnees in focus group discussions and interviews shared that they trust community leaders as information sources, they view these leaders as selected representatives and trust their ability to effectively advocate for community interests. Some respondents shared that the establishment of committees, for example the Youth and Women Committees at Zero Church, effectively convey information in relatable ways. However, this should be contrasted with survey results that found that **most people prefer to get information on humanitarian assistance from aid workers directly.**

While this data is somewhat contradictory, it speaks to the need for multiple channels of information to meet the different needs and preferences of different community members. More research should be done in order to understand this variation in preferences.

"We preferred the information to be passed through megaphones. We trust information that comes from women or youth associations."
--participant in returnee focus group in Zero Church

"We trust camp managers because they know what we are going through on a daily basis. I trust information coming from family and friends. We believe what we see with our own eyes."
--participant in women's focus group in the Transit Center

4. FINDINGS

Humanitarian Feedback Mechanisms

Respondents were asked whether they faced any barriers sharing feedback (including questions, complaints and suggestions) with humanitarian agencies. Among those who had feedback, a significant portion of respondents refrained from complaining or offering feedback because they did not know how to voice their concerns (22%), or because they tried but could not find the right avenue of feedback (14%). **Nearly 39% expressed uncertainty in voicing feedback, highlighting a need for clearer channels.** This breakdown underscores the importance of facilitating clearer, more accessible feedback mechanisms for the community. Less prevalent responses included fears about potential repercussions (7%) or doubts about the effectiveness of complaining (3%). However, the majority of respondents (46%) didn't voice complaints because they didn't have any.

Gaps and Barriers

Some refugees and returnees continue to face challenges finding the information they need to access humanitarian services. **When we asked respondents to explain what made information access difficult, the majority (36%) said that they didn't know where to go to get the information they need.** Language also was raised as a challenge with 8% of respondents saying information was not in a language they understood, 8% saying that could not read or write in the language used, and a further 4% citing that the terminology used was difficult to interpret clearly.

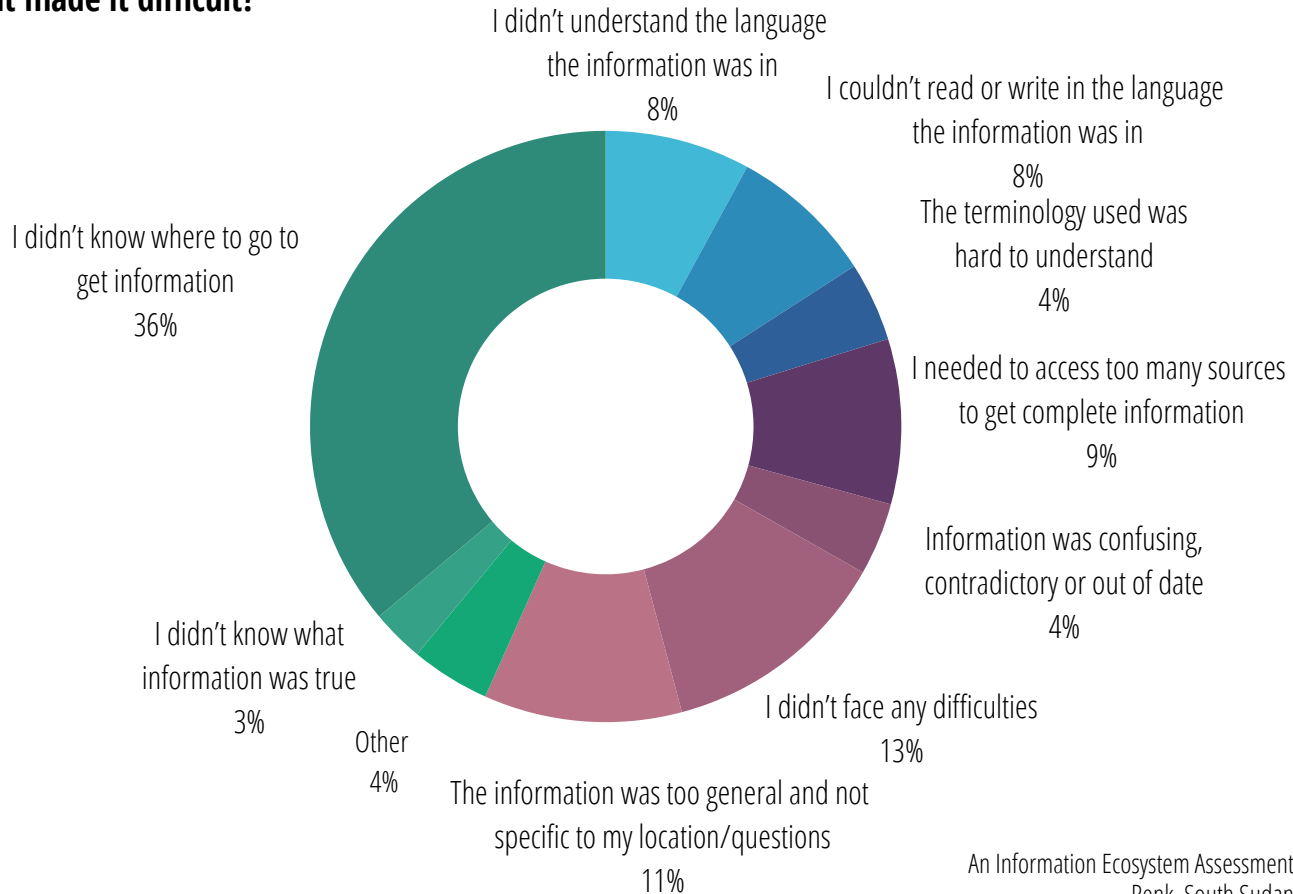
Some respondents also shared that information was too general, was confusing to them, or that they needed to access information from too many sources in order to have their question answered (see Figure 7).

While many respondents shared that humanitarian agencies are broadly trusted, they also shared some **concerns about both the reliability and timing of information shared from humanitarian agencies.** A number of respondents felt that information was controlled by humanitarian agencies, and they wanted more information shared with them. For example, some told us that they would receive tokens without clear guidance on when and where they can redeem them.

One important issue that did not emerge strongly in the field work is the particular needs of people with disabilities. Barriers that different people with disabilities face in accessing information can vary widely, as Internews found in an IEA that looked specifically at [information needs for people with disabilities in 2023](#). More research and community engagement needs to be done in Renk to understand the specific needs for returnees and host community members with disabilities.

4. FINDINGS

Figure 7: Think of the times you struggled to get the information you needed to access services. What made it difficult?



5. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- **Prioritize face-to-face communication** to share crucial information about humanitarian services. Face to face communication, in group settings, is preferred by the community. This two-way communication exchange should allow community members to clarify information, share questions and concerns. Sessions should be held in different locations and times of day to accommodate the needs of different sections of the community.
- **Offer a diverse range of communication options** to engage with the community. While the majority will be happy receiving information in group settings, field workers should note that not everyone will feel comfortable asking questions in this environment (especially for sensitive information or services, or those that face cultural barriers speaking up in these settings). Further, some individuals may not feel comfortable sharing feedback directly with the agency for fear of repercussions on service access, or may prefer a different language than the majority of the community. Community members should always be offered alternative methods to engage with information and fieldworkers in a manner that feels comfortable, and fieldworkers should regularly remind the community of the other communication options available to them such as the WFP-supported CEN Community Voice collaborative complaints and feedback mechanism.
- **Prioritize communication in aid delivery**. As much as possible, give people sufficient notice when scheduling meetings, organizing the distribution of goods, and changes in services. Communication should be seen as a central step in the planning of humanitarian aid services, not as an afterthought. Withholding or providing last-minute information can foster confusion and discontent within the community, implying a lack of respect for their needs. Moreover, poorly planned communication may undermine trust, facilitating the dissemination of misinformation regarding aid priorities, processes, and actor intentions. Often humanitarian actors choose to not communicate last minute decisions, which can make communities feel that information is being withheld. Consider sharing information even when there is some uncertainty about services. The CEN Community Voice program is available to all aid agencies to share information about services, respond to questions and complaints and discuss issues impacting the community.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

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

- **Use Arabic in written and verbal communication with communities.** However, more detailed investigation is needed to understand comprehension between the various forms of Arabic that are spoken in Renk by community members and aid workers. Do not assume comprehension and always allow space for clarification and questions. Consider options to communicate with those who prefer information in other languages (Dinka, Nuer, Chollo); although it was a small number, it is important to ensure that those who do not speak Arabic also have access to humanitarian information. In addition, some respondents reported they are unable to read or write in any language, so written communication should not be the only way crucial information is passed; ensure that verbal, audio or visual methods are also included.
- **Increase awareness of complaints and feedback mechanisms.** Community members were generally unaware of how they could provide feedback on aid services and why this was important. Aid agencies must proactively promote their individual complaints and feedback processes. Beyond the collection of community data, actors must ensure they are transparent about the feedback they are receiving and the actions they have taken in response. This can be done via community meetings, or through collaborative two-way complaints and feedback systems such as the Community Voice audio programming produced by CEN. This will build trust in these processes and encourage greater engagement from community members. Additionally, a collaborative CEA information campaign among actors could effectively communicate the significant role of feedback in shaping and improving aid services, thereby raising awareness within the community.
- **Engage community members in developing messages** based on their most urgent concerns and questions. This is a respectful approach to communication that will ensure that the information meets their needs and expectations and allows you to quickly identify any information that could inadvertently contribute to confusion or distress.
- **Continue to engage** community leaders to support two-way information flow, particularly in the host community.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report would not have been possible without the Renk community members who were so generous with their time in sharing their personal experiences and wealth of local knowledge on the Renk information ecosystem.

This assessment was produced with funding from the World Food Programme as a part of their commitment to Accountability to Affected Populations and people-centered programming, in line with their [Community Engagement Strategy for Accountability to Affected Populations \(2021\)](#).



7. METHODOLOGY

The project used a mixed methodological approach that combining Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), community surveys, and desk research. Information collected from the community in Renk was done through partnership between Internews and CEN, supported by WFP. The survey reached 253 individuals (124 men and 129 women) in Renk. 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.

In total, 5 FGDs were also conducted with a total of 97 participants (1 with refugees, 1 for returnees, 1 for youth group, 2 for women community members). 9 KIIs were completed with key stakeholders from the community such as community leaders, camp leaders, youth leader from Renk, and team leader from Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). All KIIs and FGDs were conducted by Community Correspondents.

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. And while communities clearly favored Arabic for interactions with aid workers and services, there is a need to further investigate the use of the various dialects that are present in Renk and whether they could be contributing to effective comprehension.

