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Organization of the
United Nations

Evaluation of the project
“Improving resilient
livelihoods through food
and nutrition security of
vulnerable communities,
especially women-headed
households in Wau and Torit
Counties of South Sudan”



**Project Evaluation Series
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Evaluation of the project “Improving resilient livelihoods through food and nutrition security of vulnerable communities, especially women-headed households in Wau and Torit Counties of South Sudan”

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Abstract

This report presents the findings of the final evaluation of project “Improving resilient livelihoods through food and nutrition security of vulnerable communities, especially women-headed households in Wau and Torit Counties of South Sudan” (OSRO/SSD/110/SWE). This project was implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) from December 2021 to November 2024. The evaluation assesses the project’s relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability in a context characterized by protracted conflict, economic instability and climate shocks that continue to undermine food systems and livelihoods in South Sudan.

The primary audience for this report includes FAO programme staff, Sida, South Sudanese government institutions, implementing partners, and humanitarian and development actors working in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

The evaluation pursued accountability and learning objectives through a mixed methods approach. Data collection included: a desk review of project and monitoring documents; a field mission to Wau and Torit Counties; semi-structured interviews with FAO staff, implementing partners, government counterparts and donors; focus group discussions (FGDs) with beneficiaries; household-level data from project studies; and a qualitative case study. Secondary quantitative data from nutrition and resilience assessments conducted under the project were also analysed.

Findings indicate that the project was highly relevant and aligned with FAO’s resilience priorities, national frameworks, and Sida’s strategic objectives on food security and gender equality. The project reached approximately 8 000 households, with a strong focus on women and youth. It also achieved notable results in improving household dietary diversity, strengthening women’s economic empowerment, expanding access to land and productive resources, and enhancing community-level natural resources governance. Evidence from a nutrition study shows substantially lower malnutrition relapse rates among children at ages from 6 to 59 months in project areas compared to national averages. The integration of nutrition-sensitive agriculture, climate-smart practices, livelihoods support and peacebuilding demonstrated the added value of a multisectoral, rural and community-based approach. Key challenges included procurement delays, literacy constraints affecting Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs), and variable adoption of certain technologies due to contextual and cultural factors.

The evaluation concludes that community-driven, gender-responsive and nutrition-sensitive resilience programming can deliver measurable and sustainable outcomes when well-integrated. It recommends: scaling up rural, community-based approaches; strengthening design and contextual analysis; and further institutionalizing gender equality and resilience building across FAO’s South Sudan portfolio.

Contents

| | |
|--|-------------|
| Abstract | iii |
| Acknowledgements | vi |
| Abbreviations | vii |
| Map of South Sudan | viii |
| Executive summary | ix |
| Main findings..... | ix |
| Conclusions and recommendations | x |
| 1. Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Purpose and intended users of the evaluation | 1 |
| 1.2 Context of the project | 1 |
| 1.3 Background of the project..... | 5 |
| 1.4 Scope and objective of the evaluation | 8 |
| 1.5 Structure of the report | 9 |
| 2. Methodology | 11 |
| 2.1 Questions | 11 |
| 2.2 Data sources and analyses | 11 |
| 2.3 Limitations | 12 |
| 3. Findings | 13 |
| 3.1 Evaluation question 1. Results | 13 |
| 3.2 Evaluation question 2. Lessons learned..... | 22 |
| 4. Conclusions and recommendations | 27 |
| 4.1 Conclusions | 27 |
| 4.2 Recommendations..... | 28 |
| Bibliography | 29 |
| Appendix 1. People interviewed | 33 |
| Appendix 2. Evaluation matrix | 34 |
| Appendix 3. Field visit itinerary in Wau and Torit Counties | 35 |

Boxes, figures and table

| | |
|--|----|
| Box 1. Case study: Preventing malnutrition relapse through resilience in Wau County | 16 |
| Box 2. Number of Studies conducted by the project..... | 22 |
| Figure 1. Acute Food Insecurity Situation in South Sudan..... | 3 |
| Figure 2. Map of Wau County | 4 |
| Figure 3. Map of Torit County | 5 |
| Figure 4. Project Implementation Areas of Wau and Torit..... | 7 |
| Figure 5. OTP Women group members at demo garden at the OTP center in Wau..... | 14 |
| Figure 6. Improved drought-resistant cassava variety planted by Youth Group in Wau County | 19 |
| Table 1. FAO Project Report showing differences between items planned and procured..... | 18 |

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The Evaluation Team would also like to thank the national partners in the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Health (Department of Nutrition), the Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries (Veterinary Department), the Ministry of Peace Building, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security in Wau (Western Bahr el Ghazal State) and Torit (Eastern Equatoria State).

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Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|---|
| AVSI | Association of Volunteers in International Service Foundation |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| FGD | focus group discussion |
| GBV | gender-based violence |
| GESI | Gender Equality and Social Inclusion |
| IPC | Integrated Food Security Phase Classification |
| KII | key informant interview |
| NRM | natural resources management |
| OTP | outpatient therapeutic programme |
| Sida | Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| VSLA | Village Savings and Loans Association |

Map of South Sudan



Notes: Refer to the disclaimer on the copyright page regarding the names and boundaries used in this map. The final boundary between Sudan and South Sudan has not been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not been determined.

Source: UN Geospatial. 2025. *Map of South Sudan*. [Cited 20 January 2025]. New York, United States of America. <https://www.un.org/geospatial/content/south-sudan-1>

Executive summary

1. This report presents the final evaluation of the project “Improving resilient livelihoods through food and nutrition security of vulnerable communities, especially women-headed households in Wau and Torit Counties of South Sudan” (OSRO/SSD/110/SWE). The project was implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) from December 2021 to November 2024. The evaluation was commissioned by the FAO Office of Evaluation to ensure accountability for results and to generate evidence-based learning to inform FAO South Sudan’s future programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.
2. The evaluation assessed the project’s relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability, with cross-cutting attention to gender equality, nutrition sensitivity, resilience and conflict sensitivity. The scope covered all project activities implemented in Wau County (Western Bahr el Ghazal State) and Torit County (Eastern Equatoria State) during the project period. Two overarching evaluation questions guided the analysis: i) what results the project achieved in the targeted areas and how sustainable these results are; and ii) what lessons can inform FAO South Sudan’s future programming.
3. A mixed methods approach was applied, which combined a review of project documentation and monitoring data with a field mission to Wau and Torit Counties. Primary qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with FAO staff, implementing partners, government counterparts, community leaders and beneficiaries. Secondary quantitative data from project-supported nutrition and resilience studies were analysed to triangulate findings.

Main findings

4. The project was highly relevant to the South Sudan context. It aligned with FAO’s strategic priorities, Sida’s objectives on food security and gender equality, and national development frameworks. The rural, community-based approach, which had been informed by a 2022 baseline study (FAO, 2022), enabled context-responsive and inclusive interventions. These targeted food production, nutrition, livelihoods and natural resources management (NRM).
5. The project reached approximately 8 000 households, with a strong focus on women and youth. Women’s economic empowerment was strengthened through improved access to land, livestock, agricultural inputs, income generation activities and financial mechanisms such as the Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA). Women’s participation in community decision-making increased through NRM and peace committees.
6. A nutrition-sensitive, multisectoral approach contributed to improved dietary diversity and food security. Evidence from a project-supported study indicates substantially lower malnutrition relapse rates among children at ages from 6 to 59 months in project areas compared to the national averages. Climate-smart and sustainable agricultural practices were promoted through training, demonstration plots and youth engagement, with positive spillover effects at the community level.
7. Key implementation challenges included: procurement delays; reduced quantities of some planned inputs due to market constraints; literacy barriers affecting the VSLA performance in some locations; and an uneven adoption of certain technologies due to cultural and

contextual factors. These issues affected efficiency and, in some cases, the sustainability of results.

8. The evaluation found that combining a rural, community-based approach with a broader multisectoral resilience strategy enhances ownership, inclusiveness and sustainability. Strong partnerships with government institutions, community structures and other humanitarian and development actors enabled synergies and reinforced results. However, the evaluation also highlighted the need for stronger contextual analysis at the design stage, clearer targeting criteria, and more realistic planning for procurement, training delivery and technology maintenance.

Conclusions and recommendations

9. The evaluation concludes that the project successfully demonstrated the added value of integrated, gender-responsive and nutrition-sensitive resilience programming in a highly fragile context. Community-driven approaches proved effective in strengthening food security, livelihoods and social cohesion, particularly for female-headed households.
10. To build on these results, the evaluation recommends scaling up rural, community-based approaches across FAO South Sudan's programme portfolio. This would further institutionalize gender equality and women's economic empowerment, as well as strengthen design through improved contextual analysis, targeting, and procurement planning. Enhanced capacity building strategies that account for literacy levels and the long-term maintenance of technologies are also recommended to improve sustainability and impact.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and intended users of the evaluation

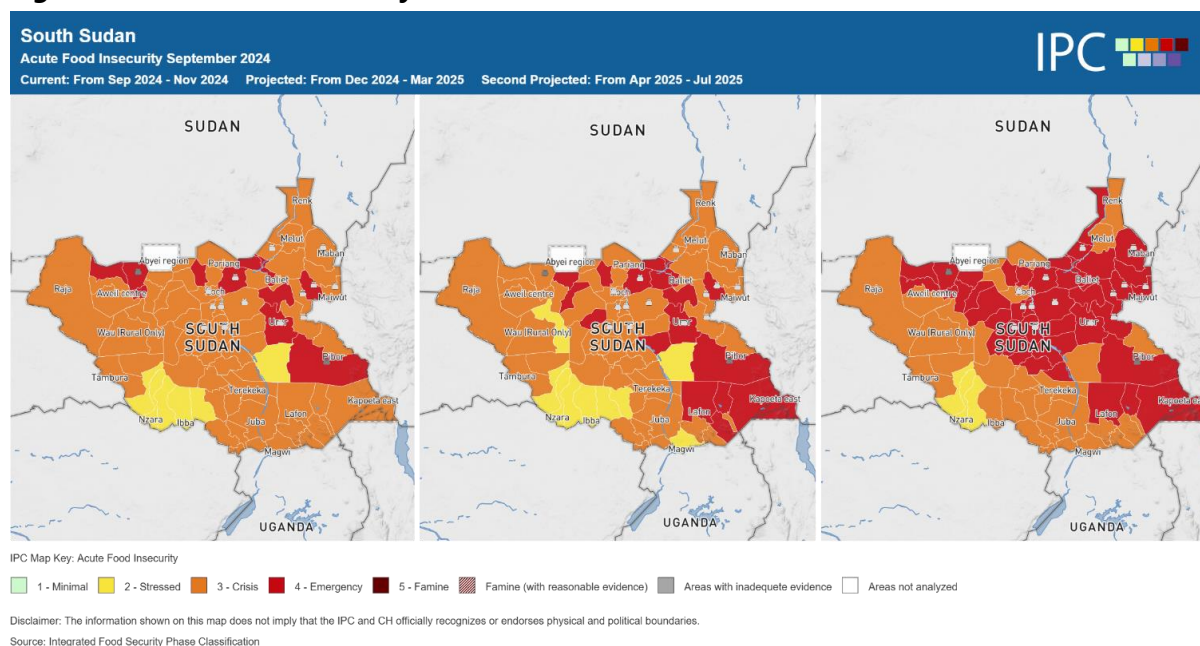
1. This final evaluation assessed the project's results and gathered evidence and insights from its implementation. It evaluated: the project's relevance to beneficiaries; the effectiveness of interventions in addressing needs; and overall accountability. Additionally, this evaluation identified key lessons that may be valuable for similar initiatives by FAO or other organizations that look to adopt comparable approaches and project design elements.
2. The primary users of this evaluation are stakeholders in FAO South Sudan and Sida, as well as the implementing partners: Association of Volunteers in International Service Foundation (AVSI); World Concern; and South Sudan government institutions such as the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, the Ministry of Health (Department of Nutrition), the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Peace Building in both Western Bahr el Ghazal and Eastern Equatoria, plus the local authorities of both Wau and Torit Counties.

1.2 Context of the project

3. Over two decades of civil war in South Sudan have led to massive loss of life, destruction and displacement that have impacted the region. In 2011, South Sudan gained its independence. Despite a peaceful separation from Sudan, political and economic tensions have persisted in the country. While the country's rich oil fields have been a source of economic optimism, the impact of conflict in 2013 and 2016, respectively, has led to a breakdown in services with severe consequences for the country. According to the 2024 human development index report, its human development currently ranks among the worst in the world after Somalia (World Population Review, 2024).
4. In 2021, as the project evaluation was starting, South Sudan's political context was being marked by ongoing instability, delayed implementation of peace agreements, and pervasive intercommunal violence. These factors significantly impacted food security and livelihoods across the country.
5. The situation in 2024 remained complex with the political landscape characterized by stalled peace processes, persistent intercommunal violence and severe humanitarian challenges. The implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict has been hindered by a lack of political will and trust among parties, leading to delays in critical reforms and preparations for national elections (Kannampilly, 2024). Additionally, the influx of refugees fleeing conflict in neighbouring Sudan has compounded the humanitarian crisis, exacerbating food insecurity and straining limited resources (Human Rights Watch, 2025). The situation in South Sudan, therefore, remains fragile.
6. During the project implementation period from December 2021 to November 2024, the broader country context was characterized by persistent insecurity. This prevented farmers from planting and harvesting crops, which severely impacted food production. Many households lost access to their farmland due to displacement or ongoing security threats. This led to reduced crop yields, and income and livelihood losses. Disruptions to livestock rearing, which is critical for many communities, further undermined food availability and household livelihoods. In addition, the economic crisis, compounded by the COVID-19

pandemic, led to skyrocketing inflation and a decline in the purchasing power of households. Prices for staple foods and basic goods surged, making it difficult for families to afford essential items. Reduced oil revenue, a primary income source for the South Sudan Government, also limited the ability to fund social and agricultural programmes.

7. The economy of South Sudan has been marked by high and volatile inflation and widespread market disruption. Heavily dependent on oil – the country’s dominant export – the national budget has been impacted by low production and low global prices for oil. The result is hyperinflation, which has eroded the purchasing power of vulnerable communities. Moreover, this has led to high food prices, declining agriculture performance, large-scale poverty and high unemployment. Most of the state and local government institutions are near collapse and unable to provide key basic services like agricultural extension, infrastructure and policy guidance. This is exacerbated by limited accountability and the breakdown of informal safety nets. Insecurity and road inaccessibility have hindered trade and market access. As a result, food supplies in local markets have been constrained. This has led to food shortages that further drive up prices. Reduced access to food in both urban and rural areas continues to deepen food insecurity.
8. Climate extremes of floods and prolonged dry spells are becoming more frequent in South Sudan. This leaves agricultural-based livelihoods exposed, especially amid an institutional absence regarding support for disaster risk reduction. According to a July 2024 Famine Early Warning Systems Network report (FEWS NET, 2024), the water levels of the Nile River had risen to record high levels. This indicates that the flood extension in the Sudd wetlands has increased. This limits movements and affects livelihoods due to increased livestock mortality and a loss of cultivated crops. Further, this causes displacement, as well as threatens the availability of and access to food at local and national levels.
9. Most humanitarian agencies have struggled to reach vulnerable populations due to the volatile security situation and logistical challenges in the country. The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of restrictions as it impeded the delivery of food aid, healthcare and livelihood support. These elements were critical for millions of South Sudanese relying on external assistance. At the time of project closure in November 2024, available food security analysis, including Famine Early Warning Systems Network reporting, indicated a deteriorating food security outlook in South Sudan. This reflected ongoing disruptions associated with flooding, continued internal conflict and a very high cost of living. While the main harvest during November 2024 improved food availability in some areas, poor road infrastructure and high transport costs limited the movement of goods to food-deficit regions. Crisis-level food insecurity, based on the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3, was expected to be widespread.

Figure 1. Acute food insecurity situation in South Sudan

Notes: From September to November 2024, and projections from December 2024 to March 2025 and from April to July 2025. Refer to the disclaimer on the copyright page regarding the names and boundaries used in this map. The final boundary between Sudan and South Sudan has not been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not been determined.

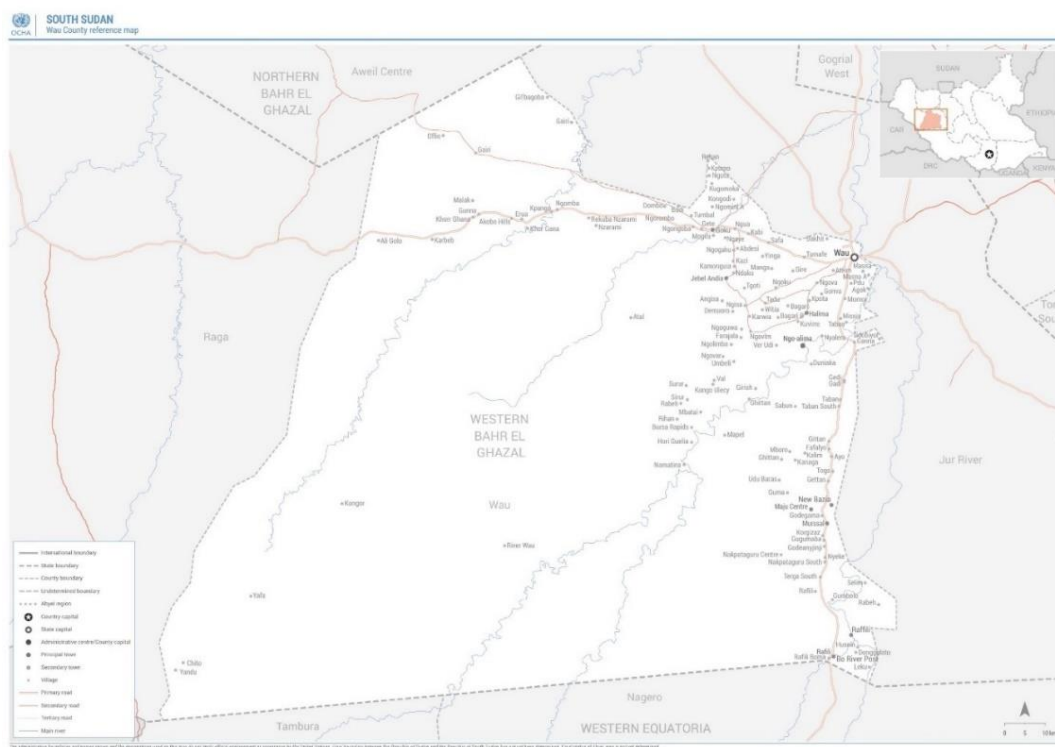
Source: IPC. 2024a. South Sudan: IPC acute food insecurity and malnutrition analysis September 2024–July 2025. In: ipcinfo.org. Rome. [Cited 5 February 2026].

1.2.1 Wau County, Western Bahr el Ghazal State

10. The internal conflict in Wau County, Western Bahr el Ghazal State has evolved since the national conflict erupted in December 2013. This has escalated in stages and involved various local and regional factors. Initially, tensions were fuelled by disputes over cattle and claims of land ownership of Wau Town, which then escalated into clashes between government and opposition forces – particularly around the Sudan People's Liberation Army's training centre in Mapel in 2014. This has led to displacement, notably to the Wau Protection of Civilians site, and prompted an increased security presence in the town. Despite the 2015 peace agreement, fighting has persisted. Tensions between the Dinka and Fertit communities in Wau Town have intensified, culminating in mass displacement, destroyed markets and infrastructure, and greater instability. The prolonged insecurity has worsened food insecurity, especially in outlying areas where humanitarian access is limited (rebel-controlled areas). Land disputes within Wau Town has increased, and nearby conflicts in Jur River and Raja Counties have added to the displacement pressure.
11. The Marial Bai Agreement, established in December 2016, was created between farming and pastoral communities to reduce tensions related to cattle. The government still monitors the communities, along with this agreement, to ensure limited conflict. Overall, the conflict has led to significant displacement, with some people still living at the Protection of Civilians site. Despite peace agreements and attempts at reconciliation, changes in the social fabric of Wau are still very noticeable and ongoing tensions persist. In fact, security clearance is required to travel a few kilometres out of town, with many roadblocks along the way.

12. With the ongoing conflict, economic decline and climate factors, Wau still faces acute food insecurity. As per the IPC assessments report of November 2024 (IPC, 2024a), Western Bahr el Ghazal State, made up of three counties – Wau, Raja and Jur River, has 91 394 children projected to suffer from acute malnutrition. This accounts for 4 percent of South Sudan’s national burden. One of the main causes was defined as poor dietary diversity (13.3 percent meeting minimum dietary diversity). It is expected that during the post-harvest season from October 2024 to March 2025, the malnutrition levels will remain unchanged in Wau (IPC Phase 2), and food insecurity will affect around 27.3 percent of the population.

Figure 2. Map of Wau County



Notes: The final boundary between Sudan and South Sudan has not been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not been determined.

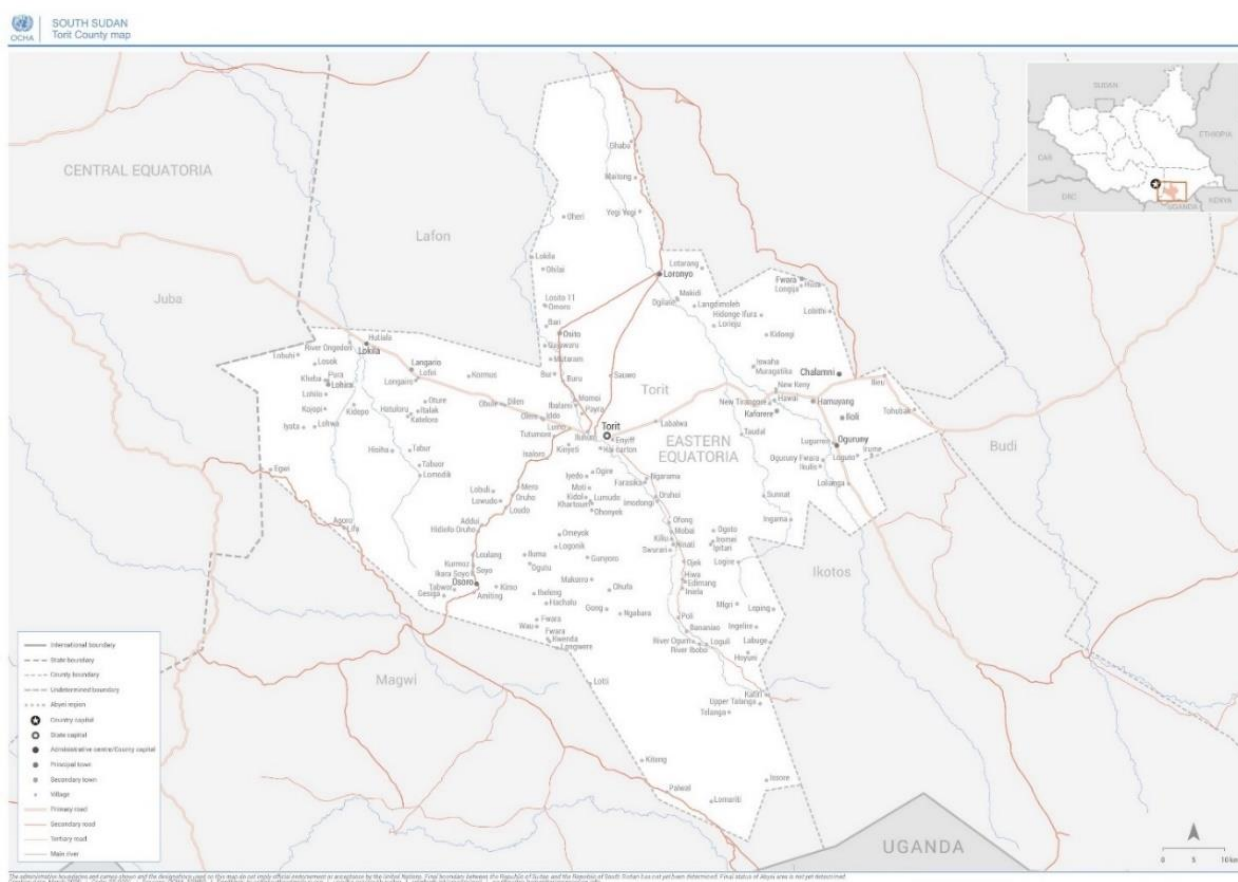
Source: OCHA. 2020a. South Sudan: Wau County reference map (as of March 2020). New York, United States of America. [Cited 5 February 2026]. <https://www.unocha.org/publications/map/south-sudan/south-sudan-wau-county-reference-map-march-2020>

1.2.2 Torit County, Eastern Equatoria State

13. Torit County, Eastern Equatoria State, continues to face ongoing challenges of food insecurity, intercommunal conflict and infrastructure issues (impassable roads). Despite some improvements in crop yields, many households still struggle with subsistence farming and rely on the market for food. The state faces significant acute malnutrition and food insecurity challenges, accounting for 8 percent of South Sudan’s malnutrition burden (IPC, 2024a). Key drivers have been attributed to intercommunal conflict. Certain areas have ongoing political conflict under opposition control. This has disrupted livelihoods and caused displacement. Both climatic conditions such as poor rainfall and inflation have reduced agricultural productivity and access to local markets. Additionally, poor dietary diversity, meal frequency and acceptable diet are causes of high malnutrition in the state.

14. Information from the November 2024 IPC report indicates that Torit County faced escalating challenges related to both food security and acute malnutrition. During project closure from October 2024 to March 2025, the county was classified with acute malnutrition under IPC Phase 3 (Serious), having deteriorated from Phase 2 (Alert). Food insecurity remained at IPC Phase 3 (Crisis). This shift in the malnutrition phase reflected a worsening public health situation, especially among children at ages from 6 to 59 months and pregnant or breastfeeding women. Contributing factors included inadequate dietary intake and poor infant and young child feeding practices. National data revealed that only 16.5 percent of children met the minimum dietary diversity and just 7.5 percent achieved the minimum meal frequency, indicating widespread suboptimal nutrition for healthy growth and development (IPC, 2024a).

Figure 3. Map of Torit County



Notes: The final boundary between Sudan and South Sudan has not been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not been determined.

Source: OCHA. 2020b. South Sudan Torit County reference map (March 2020). New York, United States of America. [Cited 5 February 2026]. <https://www.unocha.org/publications/map/south-sudan/south-sudan-torit-county-reference-map-march-2020>

1.3 Background of the project

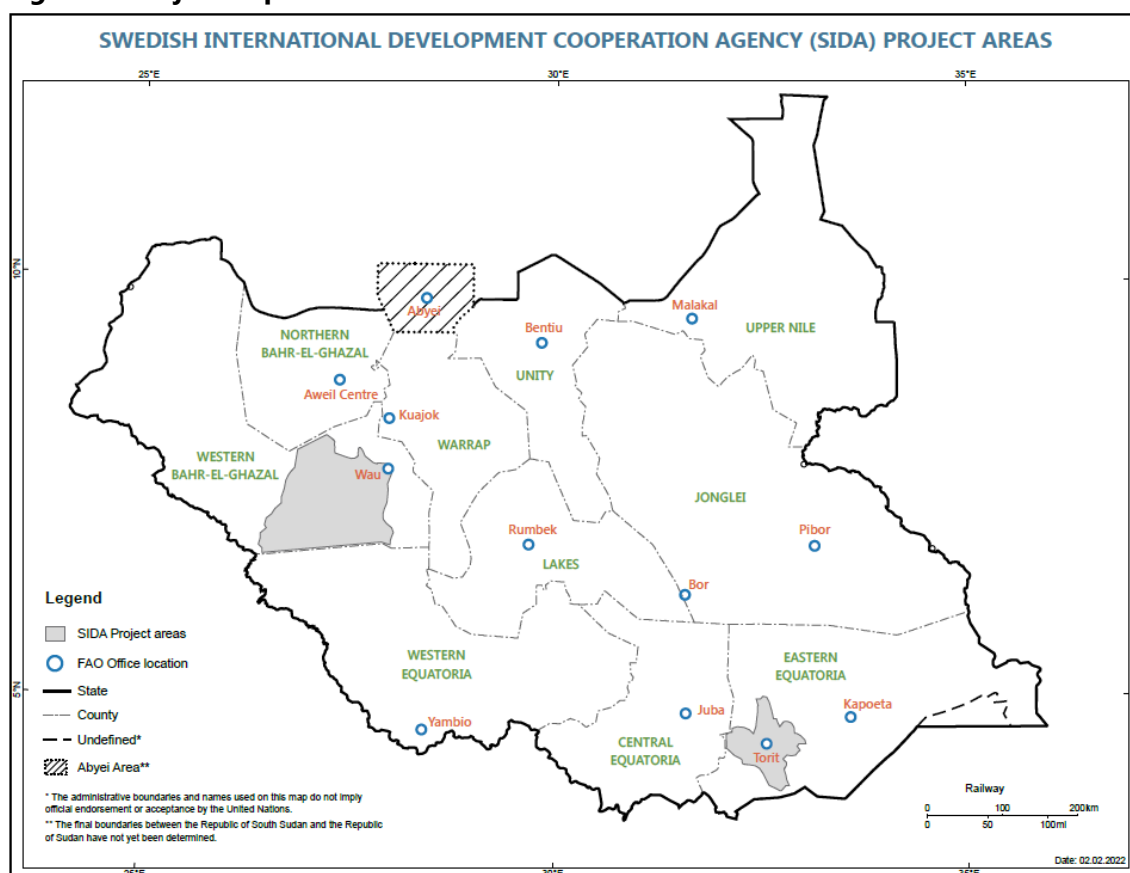
15. The project aimed to address the persistent food and nutrition insecurity and livelihood challenges in two specific counties in South Sudan: Wau and Torit. Implemented during a period marked by widespread conflict, economic instability, climatic disruptions and the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project tried to build on the emergency relief of

FAO and other United Nations organizations through resilience building strategies and by focusing on the most vulnerable populations – particularly female-headed households.

16. The three-year project ran from 1 December 2021 to November 2024. It was developed by FAO and financed by the Swedish Government through Sida with a commitment of SEK 60 000 000 (USD 6 272 8704).
17. The project's primary objective was to address livelihood challenges and improve the resilience of about 8 000 households selected at the boma level, of which 75 percent included women and youth from vulnerable, poor households in Wau and Torit Counties. The breakdown of beneficiaries was 2 500 households in Torit and 5 500 households in Wau.
18. The project's overall objective was to build resilience among the most vulnerable households. It focused on the following four outputs.
 - i. **Output 1. Access to diversified agriculture production and post-harvest handling inputs and technologies increased.** This output focused on improving agricultural productivity and post-harvest handling for vulnerable communities, particularly female-headed households in Wau and Torit. Key interventions included: establishing learning sites for women at outpatient therapeutic programme (OTP) centres and selected schools to promote hands-on training; and conducting gender assessments and safety audits to ensure inclusivity and project security.
 - ii. **Output 2. Access to information, skills and inputs for nutrition and climate-sensitive agricultural production improved.** Through this output, the core activities focused on nutrition and climate-smart knowledge and skills. By setting up demonstration farms and training beneficiaries on dietary and nutritional needs, the aim was to address health concerns related to malnutrition among children and pregnant or lactating mothers. According to the baseline report (FAO, 2022), an estimated 2 000 households (1 500 from Wau and 500 from Torit) were targeted to receive nutrition and climate-sensitive training.
 - iii. **Output 3. Women's economic empowerment promoted through nutrition-sensitive value chains and income generation enterprises.** This output targeted women's acumen in business development and economic sustainability. The women's groups, amounting to 2 000 women, were also supported with value chain agroprocessing equipment (a groundnut paste processing machine) and basic training on business skills to benefit the women's economic empowerment groups.
 - iv. **Output 4. Capacity to manage natural resources-related conflicts at the community level strengthened.** The project envisioned an empowered community-based NRM committee that effectively addresses concerns, such as setting up bylaws that will be adhered to by the whole community. According to the baseline report (FAO, 2022), the project targeted up to ten NRM committees in total. The aim was to strengthen local institutions and communities on sustainable NRM and peacebuilding, and to strengthen the communal tenure system and land access of vulnerable groups.

19. *Project implementation locations:* the project was implemented in Wau and Torit Counties (see Figure 4), where FAO applied a variety of activities.

Figure 4. Project implementation areas of Wau and Torit Counties



Notes: The final boundary between Sudan and South Sudan has not been determined. The final status of the Abyei area has not been determined.

Source: FAO. 2021. *Improving resilient livelihoods through food and nutrition security of vulnerable communities, especially women-headed households in Wau and Torit Counties of South Sudan – Project document*. Rome.

20. *Main activities implemented:* in both locations, the project implemented women's economic empowerment and youth group initiatives. This involved trainings on demonstration gardens, nutrition and diet, which were then linked to market sales and savings schemes. Activities targeted female-headed households, strengthened vegetable and crop sales, developed nutrition-sensitive value chains, and provided technical training on value addition, marketing, and sustainable agriculture practices. Efforts were guided by the 2022 baseline study (FAO, 2022) and aligned with FAO's strategic priorities for resilience building and sustainable food systems.
21. *Strategic alignment:* the project aligned with strategic priorities in the 2023–2025 FAO Country Programming Framework for South Sudan (FAO, 2023c) that took an agrifood systems approach.¹ This framework focused on strengthening evidence-based policies, institutional frameworks and strategic approaches for agriculture, fisheries, forestry, and food and nutrition security. Additionally, it focused on building the capacities of farmer organizations and providing institutional support, which were adopted in the project. In

¹ The previous Country Programming Framework was from 2018 to 2021.

relation to the FAO Programme Priority Areas, the project aligned with Better Life 3 on agriculture and food emergencies, and Better Life 4 on resilient agrifood systems.

22. *Human resources:* FAO had a team leader for the project who led the Project Management Unit and was then supported by FAO South Sudan's multidisciplinary core team. This aspect covered technical fields such as animal health, crop production, NRM, water resources, nutrition, value chains, and operations.
23. *Key partners of the project* included: relevant South Sudanese line ministries (Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, Ministry of Land, Housing and Urban Development, Land Commission); implementing partners such as World Concern, AVSI, United Nations agencies and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) through the OTP centres and schools; local authorities; and community leaders. A theory of change was detailed as part of the project document and logframe, and underscored that high food insecurity and malnutrition in South Sudan stem from: i) limited and unstable access to agricultural resources (land, inputs, markets); ii) degraded infrastructure and services; iii) declining livelihoods and incomes, especially for female-headed households due to conflict-driven demographic shifts; and iv) resource-based conflict and weak governance. The core logic is that the project needed to address immediate constraints to production, nutrition and economic participation by providing inputs, training and technologies. It needed to strengthen adaptive and absorptive capacities through diversified livelihoods, nutrition-sensitive agriculture, women's empowerment, and local conflict resolution mechanisms. It also needed to create enabling conditions for equitable resource access, especially among women, returnees and internally displaced persons. These combined interventions lead to improved food availability, dietary diversity, income and peaceful resource management. Ultimately, household resilience is built, which then reduces reliance on aid and vulnerability to shocks.
24. *Project approach:* core to implementation was to have an integrated approach and an ability to address food production, nutrition, gender empowerment and peacebuilding while tackling multiple vulnerability drivers. Also central to this approach is a strong emphasis on female-headed households and reducing the triple work burden on women. Key in the project is also the recognition that natural resources disputes are a root cause of instability and therefore demand local mediation mechanisms.

1.4 Scope and objective of the evaluation

25. The scope of the evaluation covered all activities and outputs that had been implemented from 1 December 2021 to 30 November 2024, as well as the outcomes it sought to achieve in Wau and Torit Counties.
26. The objective of the evaluation was to assess the results of the project in the targeted areas and the sustainability of these results. To do so, it looked into the effectiveness, relevance, efficiency and impact of the project in achieving its intended objectives. The evaluation also looked into key lessons learned for programming aspects, especially by looking at a range of thematic areas of the project.

1.5 Structure of the report

27. Following this introduction, Section 2 presents an overview of the methodology of this evaluation. Section 3 presents the main findings for the two main questions that this evaluation answered. Section 4 presents the conclusions and recommendations, which is then followed by the bibliography. The report ends with the following appendices:
- i. Appendix 1. People interviewed
 - ii. Appendix 2. Evaluation matrix
 - iii. Appendix 3. Field visit itinerary for Wau and Torit

2. Methodology

2.1 Questions

28. The evaluation focused on two broad key questions.
- i. *Evaluation question 1. What have been the results of the project in the targeted areas, and how sustainable are these results?* The results of the project in Wau and Torit were assessed based on the outlined project outcomes with a special focus on nutrition-related outcomes, biodiversity contributions and the effectiveness of the project's multisector approach.
 - ii. *Evaluation question 2. What are the key lessons learned that can feed into FAO South Sudan's future programming?* The evaluation extracted lessons learned from implementation and identified best practices to support women and youth in vulnerable and impoverished households in Wau and Torit.
29. These two overarching questions aimed to provide details on the results. They also aimed to cover, in a cross-cutting manner, key evaluation criteria such as relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability. These were addressed in the interviews.

2.2 Data sources and analyses

30. This evaluation used a mixed methods approach by using different methods independently of each other to collect qualitative and quantitative data. Mainly, however, it was based on qualitative data.
31. Qualitative data were collected using two methods.
- i. Primary data were collected from stakeholders, either through in-person interviews or FGDs, with FAO staff, implementing partners (World Concern, AVSI), beneficiaries and government officials. A semi-structured interview guide was used, with open-ended questionnaires that guided the interviews. This aimed to obtain data by engaging either individually or with people in groups who bring different perspectives, insights and knowledge. On average, the interviews took from 60 to 90 minutes to complete.
 - ii. Secondary data were compiled from document reviews. This included project documents, monitoring and evaluation data, project inception reports, project assessment reports, and other reports and documents found through external sources.
32. Limited quantitative data were collected. This aspect, however, was secondary in nature and provided by the project. The evaluation per se did not collect any quantitative data.
33. The data analysis techniques included: i) descriptive statistics referring to data studies done by the project in the areas of nutrition and NRM for Wau and Torit; ii) qualitative content analysis by identifying themes and patterns in the qualitative data obtained from interviews and open-ended responses to the questions in the FGDs; and iii) an analysis of the theory of change by reviewing the underlying assumptions for the project, and how and why an intervention would lead to the defined project outcomes given all the activities and outputs

implemented from 1 December 2021 to 30 November 2024 – as well as the outcomes it sought to achieve in Wau and Torit.

2.3 Limitations

34. The evaluation encountered two main limitations.
 - i. The Sida closed its operations in South Sudan, and this had implications for the overall project follow up of the evaluation. No members followed the project in its entirety due to responsibility changes and high staff rotation. During this evaluation, the team could not obtain much information from Sida since there were no personnel to interview. Only one former Sida staff member was available as the team had moved on to other assignments. The Sida colleagues were very cooperative and supportive. However, there was a missed opportunity in bringing the lessons of this project to other interventions in the country. Relations have been made with the FAO Regional Office for Africa to share the experience and lessons from this project.
 - ii. The project collaborated with UNICEF on nutrition-related implementation at the OTP centres. However, it was difficult to obtain UNICEF staff views since they too had closed their field office in Torit. There were no available staff members who had been involved in these activities.
35. The evaluation timeline was extended to mitigate some of these challenges. The report took longer to complete, and this allowed for a more conclusive analysis of the evaluation data.

3. Findings

3.1 Evaluation question 1. Results

3.1.1 Project design and appropriateness

Finding 1. The project applied a rural, community-based approach. This was guided by a 2022 baseline study (FAO, 2022) in order to design inclusive, resilience-focused interventions that aligned with FAO's strategic priorities. In turn, this aimed to strengthen women's economic empowerment, sustainable agriculture and nutrition-sensitive value chains in Wau and Torit.

36. FAO applied a rural, community-based approach to the project design. This approach focused on engaging and empowering local communities to address their own needs. Key aspects included the active involvement of households in a range of activities that encouraged local ownership, ensured inclusivity, and focused on capacity building and long-term impact. Interconnected issues such as health, education and agriculture were covered with a holistic and integrated approach. For example, the project aligned with community needs by tailoring activities to address the different stages of community recovery: emergency response and resilience building to move female-headed households towards sustained production. This involved trainings on kitchen gardens and demonstration farms, plus nutrition and diet knowledge. An example from the evaluation field visit to Wau showed how the women's economic empowerment and youth groups had planned different activities to interconnect with the skills gained through the various demonstration garden training sessions. Then, as reported in the FGDs, this was linked to other activities that supported them in selling their market produce and allowed them to learn skills that could help them put some money into savings.
37. The project's May 2022 baseline report (FAO, 2022) provided an assessment of the resilience capacities of the most vulnerable households in Wau and Torit, with a focus on those led by women. It evaluated critical aspects such as: access to essential services and infrastructure; adaptive capabilities; income generation opportunities; social safety nets (both formal and informal); social networks; assets (productive and non-productive); and vulnerability to shocks. This helped the programme team develop an understanding of the target population's profiles and needs concerning resilience to food insecurity. For example, when determining household income sources in the project areas, it was found that 57 percent was earned from crop sales and 55 percent from vegetable sales. In turn, this finding helped the programme focus on: strengthening women's economic empowerment groups that work on vegetable and crop sales; developing nutrition-sensitive food value chains; and supporting income generation enterprises through technical skills development and training on value addition (processing, packaging, labelling) and marketing for vegetable and crop sales.

3.1.2 Gender focus

Finding 2. The project had a strong focus on women. Indeed, it supported gender equality and social inclusion through activities that encouraged the empowerment of women. This involved control over livestock, land access and financial tools. This aspect also promoted their active participation in community decision-making processes and leadership roles through the NRM committees and the VSLAs. Men engaged as "male champions" by challenging cultural norms.

38. The project had a strong focus on women (70 percent of beneficiaries) and youth (25 percent). It aimed to enhance the self-sufficiency and food security of these two targeted populations through activities that had a gender-sensitive approach. For example, the demonstration gardens at the OTP centre in Wau were an effective way to focus on malnutrition. These taught how to grow and prepare nutrient-rich foods and reinforce dietary practices that support children’s nutrition. This aspect also helped with behaviour change among mothers by supporting them in considering nutritional needs, building up skills and community engagement, and promoting local food production.

Figure 5. The OTP women’s group members at a demonstration garden in Wau



39. Based on interviews and the FGDs, an observable result of the project’s intervention was that women gained control over some agricultural tools and livestock. In fact, these were not the normal cultural roles in the targeted locations. In most of the communities visited by the Evaluation Team, women had limited or no ownership of animals. However, they received goats and chickens due to the project’s intervention. This contributed to improved household nutrition and income diversification. Additionally, in Wau, the Evaluation Team observed that beneficiary women’s groups accessed community land for farming. Evidence from a June 2023 Wau County Women’s Dialogue (FAO, 2023a) further confirms that women actively participated in advocacy sessions that focused on land rights. Some were engaged in the NRM committees. This contributed to local decision-making processes on land use, NRM and conflict resolution. The NRM committee composition also ensured women and youth representation, which allowed them to share their views on NRM matters (FAO, 2023a). This highlighted key challenges, such as limited access to land information, financial barriers to land ownership, and gender-based discrimination in land inheritance.
40. Under the project, two gender safety assessments were conducted in Torit and Wau in Quarter 3 of 2024. This was done to identify risks and gender gaps, and contribute factors to gender-based violence (GBV) and inequalities. In addition, monthly safety audits were carried out during the project’s duration to monitor GBV and safety risks faced by women. While the project did not actually review the success of these, their inclusion in the activities

is commendable. In addition, training and local radio programmes were also integrated into the broader efforts on gender.

41. Although the project had a gender marker of G2B, which implied that women were the main beneficiaries of the project, it did not completely sideline men. From the interviews conducted, the Evaluation Team was informed about the 100 men in Wau and 49 men in Torit who were trained as male champions to advocate for gender equality and address GBV. They also participated in community dialogues on gender issues. The male champions were engaged mostly as volunteers, who played a role in addressing gender-related issues at the community level by facilitating discussions with households and the broader community. The Evaluation Team observed some positive shifts in attitudes towards women's rights during the FGDs, which had a good number of women's and girls' participation as community members. Regardless, resistance remained in some areas due to cultural norms. Based on KII discussions with the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare in Torit, youth who benefited from the project intervention became "youth ambassadors." They encouraged other youth to participate in project activities and even mentored each other on how to utilize money received to reinvest in other self-sustaining businesses. For example, some youth managed to buy motorbikes for a transport business.

3.1.3 Approach

Finding 3. The project implemented a nutrition-sensitive approach. This focused on community-led agriculture, nutrition education and resilience building interventions to combat malnutrition. In particular, this was done through kitchen gardening, livestock distribution and cooking demonstrations. A study found that the project resilience package significantly reduced malnutrition relapse rates in Wau and Torit by improving dietary diversity, food security and overall nutrition, with lower relapse rates compared to national averages.

42. The project took a nutrition-sensitive approach throughout project implementation. For example, based on interviews with AVSI stakeholders, most of the mothers at the Torit hospital OTP centre received training in kitchen gardening, nutrition and maternal health, with notable success in preventing malnutrition relapses and improving the overall health of mothers and children. During site visits in Wau and Torit, the Evaluation Team took note from the FGDs on how agriculture and nutrition clubs and kitchen gardens in various, targeted primary schools allowed children to carry their learning into households. It was further verified that some of the women who received food and nutrition skills at the OTP centres extended their knowledge to their homes (see Box 1).
43. Additionally, some of the beneficiaries who obtained goats and chickens enhanced their income and nutrition opportunities. Mothers obtained goat milk, which supplemented the diet needs for the malnourished children. From vegetable gardens, women sold the surplus vegetables and contributed to household income. The cooking demonstrations that had been planned as additional activities under the project further enhanced the mothers' knowledge of dietary diversity.
44. Furthermore, it was observed during the evaluation mission that the beneficiaries acknowledged a shift from emergency (treatment of malnutrition) to resilience building interventions (prevention of malnutrition through a focus on nutritional diet needs), with noted improvement in nutritional practices among targeted groups. This was found to be important since it validates the project's approach and demonstrates that the project intervention went beyond the inputs and training of nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

45. While direct causality cannot be claimed by the project with the available data, there were improved nutritional outcomes for lactating mothers and children – with most registered mothers discharged from the OTPs. Reference to FAO’s November 2024 malnutrition relapse study (see Box 1) confirms the projects’ impact on reducing relapse rates of acute malnutrition. The study found a total relapse prevalence of 10.2 percent among children at ages from 6 to 59 months in the project areas, which was much lower than the national estimate of 47 percent ($p < 0.001$) and the county-level average of 35 percent ($p < 0.001$) in Wau and Torit. This finding triangulates the evaluation results obtained through qualitative feedback from the FGDs, which confirms that the beneficiaries recognized the shift from the treatment of malnutrition to prevention.
46. The study conducted under the project to evaluate the impact of its resilience package on preventing malnutrition relapse among children at ages from 6 to 59 months in Wau and Torit (see Box 1) found the following:
 - i. *Relapse prevalence*: the overall relapse rate for acute malnutrition in the intervention areas was 10.2 percent, which was significantly lower than the national average of 47 percent. Children in households that received the project’s resilience package were less likely to relapse (8.9 percent) compared to non-beneficiary households (12.9 percent).
 - ii. *Protective factors*: access to the resilience package, including small ruminants, seeds, tools and training on kitchen gardening, played a role in reducing relapse rates. Consumption of vitamin A-rich vegetables and fruits and the provision of deworming services further supported children’s recovery.
 - iii. *Dietary diversity*: only 28 percent of children consumed diets with five or more food groups. However, households with access to project-supported kitchen gardens demonstrated improved dietary diversity and food security.
47. The study concluded that the project’s resilience package significantly reduced malnutrition relapse rates in Wau and Torit by addressing the underlying drivers of food insecurity and poor nutrition. It also highlighted the importance of multisectoral interventions through FAO and UNICEF. This involved nutrition-sensitive agriculture, community education and health services in sustaining long-term recovery from acute malnutrition.

Box 1. Project study area: preventing malnutrition relapse through resilience in Wau County

Wau County has long grappled with acute malnutrition. This is compounded by food insecurity, limited healthcare access and economic instability (IPC, 2024a). To address these challenges, the project implemented a resilience package to reduce malnutrition relapse among young children. This case study, based on a KII during the evaluation mission in Wau, highlights the experience of Grace Ali Dafur, mother, and her child, who benefited from the project’s interventions.

Background Grace, a 32-year-old mother of three, resides in a remote village (Ngwalima Boma) in Wau County. She gave birth, and the child became malnourished due to a lack of sufficient breast milk. She could not afford to buy milk for the infant. Her child was treated for severe acute malnutrition at a UNICEF-supported nutrition OTP centre. However, the child’s health remained fragile due to inadequate food diversity and frequent illnesses. Like many households in the region, Grace’s family relied primarily on sorghum and occasional vegetables, with limited access to nutrient-rich foods.

Intervention Through the project's resilience package, Grace's household received a comprehensive set of interventions. The first involved agricultural support, specifically seeds and tools to establish a kitchen garden and training on nutrition-sensitive agriculture through the demonstration gardens at the OTP centre. She also consumed the food produced at the demonstration garden, which helped to increase her breast milk. The second involved nutrition education, especially practical demonstrations on food preparation, processing and preservation to promote a balanced diet. The third involved small livestock distribution. Grace was given three goats and four chickens to diversify her family's diet with milk and eggs. She could also provide additional income through the sale of chickens. She has gone from four to 14 chickens. The fourth involved community awareness, such as workshops on the importance of integrating vitamin A-rich vegetables and pulses into meals. The fifth involved mother-to-mother support. The women who benefited from the project shared their experience with other women on the nutritional skills and caring of children with malnutrition cases.

Outcomes According to the views presented by Grace, the project intervention resulted in improvements for her child and family.

- i. *Reduction in relapse risk:* based on the interview, the health of Grace's child improved and avoided malnutrition relapse by benefiting from a more diverse diet that included goat milk, eggs and home-grown vegetables.
- ii. *Improved dietary diversity:* the household's dietary diversity score increased from 3.2 to 5.1 (IPC, 2024a) with regular consumption of vitamin A-rich foods.
- iii. *Economic resilience:* by selling surplus vegetables, chicken and goat milk, Grace earned additional income. This enabled her to purchase other essential foods, which benefitted the household.
- iv. *Knowledge empowerment:* Grace became an advocate for nutrition-sensitive agriculture by encouraging other mothers in her community to establish kitchen gardens. She shared her new skill with her community group, which is now farming vegetables such as kale, eggplant and okra

Conclusion

Grace's story demonstrated the transformative potential of the resilience package in preventing malnutrition relapse. Based on the Evaluation Team's discussion with Grace, the intervention not only improved her family's nutritional status but also enhanced their economic resilience. Such multisectoral approaches are critical in addressing the underlying causes of malnutrition in vulnerable communities.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Finding 4. The project demonstrated its ability to develop synergies through its procurement and ensured that the recipients got seeds, tools and livestock from the FAO Emergency Livelihoods Response Programme. This allowed for a more effective intervention. Nevertheless, procurement involved a number of challenges due to process delays.

48. The evaluation confirmed that the project benefitted from synergies with FAO's Emergency and Livelihoods Response Programme (FAO, 2021), which supplied additional crop seeds and agricultural tools that had not been budgeted under the project. This integration reinforced the project's nutrition-sensitive agriculture objectives. The following were distributed.

- i. Based on documentary evidence (FAO, 2023b), distribution records verified the quantities and types of seeds and tools provided to 1 663 female-headed households in Torit as: 5 220 kg of maize; 6 160 kg of sorghum; 2 222 kg of sesame; 6 701 kg of cowpeas; 631 sachets of carrot, 20 g each; 631 sachets of onions; 631 sachets of green pepper (20 g); 16 sachets of okra (20 g); and 1 647 spades.
- ii. Based on the FGDs in Wau, the beneficiaries confirmed receipt of vegetables and seeds, plus other agricultural inputs that were distributed. These were used in their kitchen gardens and at demonstration plots.

49. The project, however, faced several challenges that negatively impacted project activities. For example, in Torit, the evaluation noted that delays in goat distribution resulted in only 510 out of 1 000 targeted beneficiaries receiving livestock within the project timeline. The initial intent was to distribute two goats, but most of the beneficiaries received one or none at all. These goats were unavailable locally and had to be sourced from other regions (the goats distributed in Torit were procured from Kapoeta), which increased the costs and delays. Similar delays were also felt through the distribution of inputs, with lesser quantities being procured due to price increases from inflation and logistical challenges. Additionally, underbudgeting in the project design resulted in the procurement of smaller quantities than planned. This was due to changes in market prices (see Table 1) (FAO, 2023b).

Table 1. FAO project report showing differences between items planned and procured

| Item | Planned | Procured |
|-----------------------|---------|----------|
| Ox ploughs | 2 250 | 159 |
| Donkey ploughs | - | 240 |
| Power tiller | - | 7 |
| Tarpaulin | 18 000 | 1 150 |
| Watering cans | 8 000 | 4 000 |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

50. Delays in the distribution of resources caused dissatisfaction among the beneficiaries, as described through the FGDs in Torit. In addition, the evaluation noted that due to the delay in the disbursement of some project items, such as in Wau, the sorghum threshers were delivered late. As a result, the beneficiaries did not receive training on how to use the equipment provided. This was a complementary activity that had been planned but did not take place.

Finding 5. The project promoted sustainable agriculture through trainings on climate-smart practices, good agricultural practices and integrated pest management. This was supported by demonstration gardens, tools and seeds to encourage home adoption. Youth and producer groups implemented drought-resistant crops, fruit tree planting and dry season irrigation. This improved nutrition, reforestation and food security. Spillover effects were noted at the community level with an interest in the techniques applied.

51. The project promoted sustainable agricultural practices in its activities, such as climate-smart agriculture and agroecology. This aspect introduced innovative farming techniques and technologies, and encouraged sustainable NRM. Training initiatives on climate-smart agriculture, good agricultural practices and integrated pest management were applied throughout project implementation. This aimed to increase agricultural productivity and resilience. Improved agriculture practices were also shared through demonstration gardens, which ensured that the beneficiaries practiced their knowledge and skills at their homes. This encouraged them to set up kitchen gardens and apply sustainable farming practices, which were supported by the tools and seeds provided by the project.
52. Long-term impact could not be measured by the evaluation. However, during field visits, the Evaluation Team noted how youth groups, who were introduced to drought-resistant crop varieties such as cassava and sweet potato, were utilizing them at their plots. The beneficiary youth groups were also engaged in fruit tree planting initiatives that have long-term environmental sustainability implications, as the areas have suffered from many trees being cut for charcoal.

Figure 6. Improved drought-resistant cassava variety planted by a youth group in Wau County



3.1.4 Training

Finding 6. Training and capacity building faced challenges in some locations due to trainer selection and delivery quality, and some introduced technologies were not always appropriate or sustainably maintained. These challenges could have been mitigated through stronger project design, including clearer trainer criteria, better contextual analysis of technologies, and provisions for upkeep.

53. In discussion with the beneficiaries, particularly in Torit, the Evaluation Team noted mixed views regarding the training provided on agricultural tools and seeds. While participants appreciated the guidance, they highlighted limitations to the short-term training (mostly one day) delivered by locally trained facilitators (training of trainers). Some beneficiaries perceived these local facilitators as less credible compared to external or project-affiliated trainers, which, at times, reduced acceptance and uptake of the training content.
54. Another aspect that limited the effectiveness of the applied skill building approach, particularly for complex tasks such as managing the VSLAs, was the literacy level of participants. For example, some women in the savings groups in Torit struggled to maintain accurate records because they lacked basic literacy skills. This made group management challenging. In the FGDs, participants mentioned how they normally solicited the support of youth in the area to help with their documentation.
55. At the beginning of the project, the evaluation found limitations in the project identification about certain smart agricultural technologies, like the ox or donkey plough. When these

technologies were introduced to the communities, the evaluation found out that the project had faced a lot of resistance due to cultural preference and resource availability issues. This impacted adoption of the technology. This was noted especially in Wau: some of the communities did not utilize the provided ploughs. These communities refrained from keeping cows in their areas due to the conflict-related nature attached to cattle and farmland issues that they had experienced. Irrespective of the cattle, still – very few had donkeys. As a result of this limitation on cultural adaptation, proper training on the use of these ploughs had yet to be done by the time the evaluation was conducted in the field.

56. Irrespective of these findings, it was noted during the evaluation that some beneficiaries had limited capacities in being self-sufficient. Indeed, external resources such as seeds and tools were still required. This may have been compounded by a lack of proper training on the maintenance of the equipment provided at the community level, since any breakdown of the tools make the tools redundant or force the community to look for external support to address the issue.

Finding 7. The VSLAs were well received. However, results were mixed depending on literacy levels and community willingness. The effects of the financial depreciation that the currency in South Sudan experienced during project implementation were also a factor.

57. The VSLAs are community-based financial groups designed to provide members, often in rural or underserved areas, with access to savings and credit facilities. They are self-managed and operate on principles of trust, transparency and accountability (CARE, 2017). Through the FGDs, the Evaluation Team spoke with various participants who confirmed that they had gained financial independence through the VSLAs and other small business trainings, such as groundnut paste processing and marketing.
58. The VSLAs were underutilized by some women's groups. Regardless, they enabled participating women to save and reinvest funds. This highlights the potential for improved financial literacy in future projects. From the field visit in Torit, some youth groups showed interest in developing youth-led VSLAs due to the benefits witnessed in the women's groups. The formation of the VSLAs enabled beneficiaries to save and access funds for emergencies or business investments.
59. Several VSLA women's groups reported exemplary performance due to the support they received. Some women have already bought income generating assets. Others have generated substantial group income (FAO, 2023b) by managing their agroprocessing businesses (paste machine) and servicing other women's small businesses in the form of loans in Wau. Youth groups learned how to use the solar-powered irrigation tool. This encouraged them to farm large fields, which increases crop production.
60. Similarly, through the VSLAs, female beneficiaries mentioned having gained access to finance their businesses and savings. For example, through a successful VSLA in Wau, a woman managed to buy a motorbike that she uses to facilitate the transport of produce from the farming areas to the market. At the same time, this supplements household income due to its logistical function. Some husbands even support their wives to save more through the VSLA after having seen its positive impact at the family level. The husbands also give their wives money for savings.

Finding 8. The project improved land rights for women and sustainable resources management by building the capacity of the NRM and peace committees to mediate conflicts, enforce bylaws

and promote inclusive decision-making. It did so by empowering communities through self-reliance trainings, awareness campaigns and advocacy.

61. The project's capacity building support to the NRM and peace committees enabled successful mediation. This addressed issues like livestock destroying gardens and intercommunal conflict. Significant to this was member composition with representatives from the community: chief; selected community elders; women; and youth representatives. These institutions have been recognized at the community level and offer a platform for community members to address issues collectively. For example, in Torit, the NRM committee successfully passed local bylaws related to animal-farm conflict and destruction.
62. The project successfully emphasized building self-reliance of beneficiaries through community-based trainings, such as the construction of fuel-efficient stoves and promoting better cooking practices. Some of the women, having gained experience, were able to construct fuel-efficient stoves for other women at a small fee. The youth crop production group received training on sustainable land use practices, such as the use of organic manure. This focused on diversified sustainable food production.
63. The project ensured that significant efforts were made to raise community awareness about the importance of the various project interventions, especially those related to nutrition. Indeed, it aimed to shift mindsets towards self-reliance and sustainable practices. FAO conducted radio programmes in local languages to support nutrition awareness campaigns through a programme: *Giza ta mara, Haak ta Mara* (Women's Nutrition, Women's Rights in Juba Arabic). This provided the audience with information on women's nutrition and land rights (FAO, 2023b). Advocacy, awareness and dialogue sessions on land allocation between female leaders and the government, especially regarding women's land rights, were among the documented positive results. The state government in Western Bahr el Ghazal assisted and supported land allocation to women in Wau County (FAO, 2023b). In Besselia Payam, 30 female-headed households moved out of the Wau Protection of Civilians camp and got land allocated to them by the local authority at the boma level. They used the land for farming and building their homes. Finally, in Masna boma in Wau South, 25 single female-headed households reclaimed their land and settled in Aweil Jedid boma (FAO, 2023b).
64. By empowering community leaders, peacebuilding volunteers and male champions, the project established structures to address grassroots issues beyond its duration. The NRM committees played a pivotal role in fostering community cohesion by developing and implementing bylaws with active community input. These bylaws addressed common sources of conflict, such as livestock causing crop damage, by introducing penalties and promoting accountability. This approach not only mitigated disputes but also encouraged community-wide adherence and cooperation. This ensured a harmonious and productive environment. In fact, this capacity building component created a foundation for NRM and resolving conflicts, leaving the community better equipped to handle challenges independently in the future.

3.1.5 Targeting

Finding 9. Socioeconomic diversity, land access limitations and overly ambitious targeting created challenges in beneficiary selection and resource allocation. This reduced intervention sustainability and highlighted the need for clearer criteria and context-specific approaches.

65. The socioeconomic diversity among beneficiaries and intersectional policies affected the selection process and posed challenges, particularly in urban areas where access to land for crop production or animal rearing is limited. For instance, during the evaluation mission, a women’s group in Torit highlighted difficulties in securing land for agricultural activities, primarily because they were not native to the area. Women who had been allocated land temporarily found themselves investing significant effort in clearing it, only for the owners to reclaim it before they could utilize it. This practice not only hindered agricultural production for consumption and sale but also demoralized the women, further exacerbating their challenges. In Wau, delays in defining clear beneficiary criteria resulted in slower implementation timelines. Additionally, overlaps in activities such as school garden programmes and cash for work initiatives created redundancies. This is because multiple organizations targeted the same beneficiaries and locations, leading to resource competition. To address these challenges, clearer beneficiary definitions and context-specific interventions are recommended. These measures would ensure equitable resource allocation, reduce redundancy, and enhance the efficiency and sustainability of project outcomes.
66. In Torit, it was found that many VSLA members could not consistently save due to unreliable income and competing household needs. This led to the merging of three groups into one in order to form stronger functioning units. While the restructuring was adaptive, it signals initial targeting or economic viability issues among the poorest households. Similarly, in Torit, only 510 out of 1 000 targeted women received small ruminants due to a shortage of animals. High prices and limited vendor capacity show how targeting was more ambitious than feasible under existing market and budget constraints.

3.2 Evaluation question 2. Lessons learned

Finding 10. The project effectively operationalized a rural, community-based approach by embedding participatory, local interventions within a broader multifaceted strategy. This achieved strong community ownership and relevance. However, clearer articulation and linkage between community-level actions and higher-level systemic reforms would have strengthened coherence, scalability and long-term sustainability.

67. The rural, community-based approach, as adopted by FAO (Cleary, 2003), emphasizes the active participation of rural communities in planning, implementing and managing development projects that address their specific needs and priorities. This approach also recognizes the local knowledge and vested interests in sustainable development. It fostered a bottom-up process for the cultural, environmental and socioeconomic contexts implemented by the local communities. In Wau and Torit, the project worked directly with smallholder farmers and vulnerable households. This prioritized local participation and ownership at the community and subnational levels.

Box 2. Number of studies conducted by the project

The project included several, distinct studies and assessments that informed and guided its implementation.

- i. Gender assessments: conducted in Torit (April 2022) and Wau (May 2022) to identify gender-related risks, GBV factors and opportunities for women. Follow-up assessments in July and August 2024 evaluated the project's impact on gender equality and empowerment.
- ii. Monthly safety audits: the project conducted regular monthly GBV and safety audits in both counties throughout the project’s duration to monitor risks and adapt safety measures.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| iii. | Nutrition assessment: conducted in May 2022 in both Wau and Torit to diagnose malnutrition drivers and select suitable nutrition-sensitive commodities. |
| iv. | Nutrition-sensitive value chain assessment: implemented from April to October 2023 to analyse dietary gaps, malnutrition causes, and opportunities for agroprocessing and value addition. |
| v. | Natural resources-based conflict management capacity needs assessment: conducted in March (Wau) and April 2022 (Torit) to identify conflict hotspots and assess existing mechanisms like NRM and peace committees. |
| vi. | Community-based disaster risk reduction planning: participatory risk mapping and development of community-managed disaster risk reduction action plans by NRM committees in 2022. |
| vii. | Media outreach feedback assessment (implied): while not labelled a formal assessment, audience reach and language feedback were monitored for radio programmes on women's nutrition and land rights. |
| viii. | Land tenure and gender-sensitive land access dialogues: supported by studies of customary versus statutory land rights, leading to training and land allocation planning dialogues in 2023 and 2024. |
| ix. | Seed preservation and post-harvest management study: through training and feedback, FAO monitored the adoption and effectiveness of hermetic storage bags and seed saving techniques. |
| x. | Endline evaluation, including measuring the resilience capacity index and the household dietary diversity score to assess the final results. |

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

68. FAO's implementation was deeply participatory. It involved community members at every stage – from assessment and design to execution and monitoring – with a strong focus on inclusivity, responsiveness and empowerment. It did so in various ways.

- i. *Community involvement in planning*: this took place through a wide range of activities. For example, targeted households and communities were involved in selecting demonstration sites for farming and training. Monthly FGDs and observational safety audits included women and girls directly, which informed adaptive safety measures.
- ii. *Group-based approach*: FAO organized women and youth into various women's economic empowerment groups, youth groups, VSLAs and NRM committees. This ensured that beneficiaries were not just recipients but active agents in the process.
- iii. *Community feedback mechanisms*: radio programmes invited community feedback and were in local languages (Acholi, Lotuko and Simple Arabic). A restructuring of VSLA groups in response to savings challenges came from monitoring and community discussions, which reflected adaptive and responsive programming.
- iv. *Ownership and capacity building*: by working through group structures and emphasizing knowledge transfer, FAO fostered ownership and built local capacity that can outlast the project's lifecycle.
- v. *Adapting to local contexts*: training sessions were local, hands on and considered literacy levels. Women participated in demonstration gardens, tool operations and nutrition training, which leveraged local knowledge and the context. Further, this built on local capacities. Existing local resources were utilized to enhance project effectiveness and community ownership.

69. In project documents and reports, the Evaluation Team observed that the terms rural, community based approach and multifaceted approach were used interchangeably without a clear conceptual distinction. While the multifaceted approach is intended to

operate at multiple levels and pursue system-wide change – through policy reforms, market development and institutional capacity building – this differentiation was not consistently articulated at the design and reporting stages. As a result, the linkages between community-level interventions and higher-level advocacy or structural reforms were not always explicit. Clearer articulation of these complementary approaches would have strengthened coherence, enhanced synergies across intervention levels, and supported more sustainable outcomes.

70. Against this backdrop, the evaluation found that the project provided a concrete example of how a rural, community-based approach can be integrated effectively within a broader multifaceted strategy. Locally relevant activities were designed through direct engagement with communities, which ensured responsiveness to grassroots needs. These interventions were then embedded within a strategic framework that aligned with national priorities, market systems and global development goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Importantly, within the broader FAO South Sudan programme, this USD 6.27 million project explicitly operationalized the rural, community-based methodology at scale. This suggests a missed opportunity for wider replication and that future programming could benefit from more systematically scaling up and institutionalizing this integrated model to maximize impact and alignment.

Finding 11. The project leveraged its collaborative measures to build synergies for success. The evaluation found several layers of coordination employed within the project: state government institutions; community leaders; local government; and other key stakeholders and organizations. They engaged at various levels throughout project implementation.

71. FAO proposed to work closely with a range of institutions in order to build complementarities and synergies at the programme level in the intervention areas. For example, the selected OTP sites were the same as those set up by UNICEF. This provided complementary support in addressing nutrition, diet and prevention measures for malnutrition. FAO worked with partners to align project activities. This included Save the Children and UNICEF, which provided complementary support and activities – especially in the project intervention area of food and nutrition and malnutrition prevention. They also bolstered the project’s mother-to-mother support groups at the OTP sites.
72. Further, AVSI and World Concern were two implementing partners that executed different project components in Wau and Torit. These partnerships were instrumental in engaging beneficiaries, delivering targeted interventions and fostering community resilience. For example, AVSI promoted sustainable land management techniques, such as crop rotation, agroforestry and soil conservation in Torit. World Concern supported efforts to diversify livelihoods through small business trainings and income generation activities.
73. Close relations were developed with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Peace Building in Wau and Torit. They worked hand-in-hand to implement different aspects of the project in the respective locations. Based on key stakeholder interviews in the field, the evaluation found that overall collaboration between the project and the government ministries at the state and county levels was good. This included external organizations, which complemented the project’s activities and increased overall resource efficiency for the project. For example, government officials from the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare participated in discussions with community members. In Wau, the Veterinary Department reported that through collaboration with the Ministry of Livestock and

Fisheries, the project was able to select and inoculate the goats provided, plus train beneficiaries on animal health and management. Additionally, it was noted that the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare played a critical role in supporting and guiding the project from beneficiary selection to implementation. For example, in Torit, the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare seconded two of its staff to support the project. The FAO project team used this to the advantage of the project. In Wau, the implementing partner had a working relation with the Cooperative Bank. It used this opportunity to train the VSLA project beneficiaries on banking and their funds. This built on their collaborative synergies. The restructuring of VSLA groups in response to savings challenges came from monitoring and community discussions, which reflected adaptive and responsive programming.

74. Community leaders played a pivotal role in mobilizing beneficiaries and raising awareness about the project's goals and activities. In the remote parts of Wau, it was necessary to obtain initial security clearance and notify the community leaders of the area about the intended project activities. Informing them and obtaining their approval was necessary. This is because they would then sensitize the community members about the benefits of the project intervention. The community leaders who were part of the NRM committees worked together with other leaders in the area to address disputes at the community level, such as livestock encroachment on gardens. This ensured a smooth implementation of project activities.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

4.1 Conclusions

Conclusion 1. The rural, community-based approach proved highly effective in strengthening resilience, food security and self-sufficiency at the homestead level (see Findings 1, 4, 5, 7, 9 and 10).

75. The project had a significant impact at the household level, particularly in addressing vulnerabilities and fostering stability in targeted communities. By balancing immediate relief with long-term development, it supported families' food security and nutrition needs while investing in skills, tools and systems that enabled them to build back better. The approach's holistic nature of addressing interconnected needs in agriculture, nutrition and community governance proved especially effective in enhancing economic stability and self-sufficiency among vulnerable populations.
76. Grounded in a 2022 baseline study (FAO, 2022) and designed through active community participation, the project ensured that interventions reflected local realities. Women, youth and other community members engaged in demonstration gardens, the VSLAs and the NRM committees, gaining both practical skills and leadership opportunities. This combination of specific technical support, inclusive structures and integrated livelihoods made the approach a powerful driver of sustainable change – one that FAO should replicate widely across its South Sudan programme portfolio.

Conclusion 2. A gender-sensitive approach substantially advanced women's economic empowerment and leadership in community governance (see Findings 2, 6, 7 and 8).

77. By combining targeted training, resource provision and leadership opportunities, the project enabled women to take on new roles in agriculture, NRM and local decision-making. Women-led dialogues, notably in Wau, created structured spaces to advocate for land rights. At the same time, the inclusion of male champions challenged entrenched cultural norms. These measures enhanced women's capacity to influence policies and manage resources. This created momentum for broader gender equality in rural communities.
78. Significant progress was made, yet challenges remain – especially in urban areas and among women with limited land access or unstable incomes. By building on the successful elements of this project, FAO can strengthen future initiatives. It can expand women-led dialogue platforms, ensure equitable access to resources, and embed gender-sensitive practices throughout all stages of project design, implementation and evaluation. Such measures would further consolidate women's economic independence and leadership within community governance structures.

Conclusion 3. The nutrition-sensitive resilience package significantly reduced malnutrition relapse rates by addressing both dietary diversity and underlying vulnerabilities (see Findings 3 and 5).

79. Through an integrated package of kitchen gardens, cooking demonstrations, restocking and community-led nutrition education, the project achieved relapse rates of acute malnutrition in Wau and Torit that were far below the national averages. These interventions improved household diets with more vitamin A-rich foods, strengthened breastfeeding practices, and generated supplementary income through the sale of surplus produce.

80. The approach was reinforced by school agriculture clubs, mother-to-mother networks, and close coordination with partners such as Save the Children and UNICEF. This ensured that nutrition awareness and skills go beyond the direct beneficiaries. By combining immediate nutritional support with sustainable food production, the package effectively transitioned communities from emergency response to long-term resilience. This offers a model that can be adapted and scaled within FAO's broader South Sudan portfolio.

4.2 Recommendations

81. Based on these conclusions, the Evaluation Team offers the following recommendations for FAO and its partners. These suggestions aim to build on successes while identifying opportunities for improvement. They are presented to encourage further reflection and inform the design and implementation of FAO's future initiatives.

Recommendation 1. Streamline a rural, community-based approach in more projects of the FAO South Sudan programme portfolio.

82. FAO should scale up and systematically integrate the rural, community-based approach across its South Sudan programme portfolio. It should do so as much as possible by building on its proven effectiveness in enhancing food security, economic stability and self-sufficiency. At the same time, it should balance immediate relief with long-term, holistic development that addresses interconnected needs in agriculture, nutrition and community governance.

Recommendation 2. Integrate gender-sensitive approaches throughout the FAO South Sudan programme and expand successful women's empowerment initiatives.

83. FAO should systematically integrate gender-sensitive approaches into all phases of project design, implementation and evaluation by expanding successful women's empowerment initiatives. This includes women-led land rights dialogues, leadership through the NRM committees and targeted resource access. This would address systemic barriers and strengthen women's economic independence and participation in community governance.

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Appendix 1. People interviewed

| Last name | First name | Institution | Title |
|-----------------|------------|--|---|
| Anthony | Angelina | Ministry of Peace Building | Director General |
| Barnardo | Sebit | Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security | Director General |
| Daniel | Ann | Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare | Director General |
| Dominica | Idwa | Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare | Director General |
| Ibrahim | Sami | Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries | Director General |
| Inyani | Philip | AVSI | Project Manager |
| Joseph | Elia | World Concern | FSL Project Officer |
| Mark Peter Luba | Kenyi | FAO | Gender Specialist |
| Sabasio | Anastasia | Ministry of Health | Director General Department of Nutrition |
| Dzvurumi | Felix | FAO | Head of Programmes |
| Longong | Julius | FAO | Deputy Head of Office |
| Madsen | Mia | Former Sida Staff | |
| Paluku | Christol | FAO | Land Tenure Specialist |
| San | Christine | FAO | Gender Specialist |
| Swokiri | James | FAO | Deputy Head of Office |
| Wathome | Abigail | FAO | Project Manager |

Appendix 2. Evaluation matrix

| Evaluation criteria | Evaluation questions | Data source | Data collection method |
|---|--|---|---|
| Relevance | To what extent did the project address the needs of vulnerable communities, especially female-headed households in Wau and Torit Counties of South Sudan? | Project documents, interviews, field visits, document review | KIIs, FGDs, survey form, field visits |
| Effectiveness | What were the results achieved by the project in improving resilient livelihoods through food and nutrition security? | Project reports, beneficiary interviews, government official interviews | Project document reviews, KIIs, FGDs, government official interviews, survey form |
| Efficiency | How efficiently were the resources (training, tools, etc.) utilized in implementing the project? | Project assessments, reports | Document review, interviews |
| Sustainability | Have the project beneficiaries acquired the skills and tools needed to maintain and grow their enterprises independently after the end of the project? Were there any noted changes in terms of resilience and livelihoods of direct beneficiaries as a result of the project intervention? | Project sustainability plans, stakeholder interviews | Document review, KIIs, stakeholder interviews, survey form |
| Gender equality and social inclusion | Did the project in any way affect the social and cultural norms regarding women's roles in agriculture and business? Did men play any particular role in supporting the project? | Beneficiary interviews, project studies in nutrition and NRM | FGDs, structured interviews, observations, survey form |
| Stakeholder engagement | How engaged were community leaders, the local government and other key stakeholders throughout project implementation? | Project reports, beneficiary interviews, government official interviews | Project document reviews, KIIs, FGDs, government official interviews, survey form |
| Lessons learned | Were there any lessons learned from the project (from design to implementation to results) to improve future endeavours? | Project reports, beneficiary interviews, government official interviews | Project document reviews, KIIs, FGDs, government official interviews, survey form |

Appendix 3. Field visit itinerary in Wau and Torit Counties

Wau evaluation field mission from 14 to 21 October 2024

| Day | Activity | Time | Location |
|--|--|---|--|
| Monday 14 October 2024 | Arrival in Wau | 10.55 | Wau |
| | Check in, accommodation | 11.00–11.30 | Hotel in Wau |
| | Meeting with field staff: project focal point and technical specialists | 11.30–12.30 | FAO Country Office |
| | Security briefing | 14.15–15.00 | United Nations Department of Safety and Security |
| | Interview with World Concern | 15.00–17.00 | Implementing partner office in Wau |
| Tuesday 15 October 2024 | Meeting with the Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare | 09.00–13.00 | Wau |
| | Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security | 14.00–16.00 | Wau |
| Wednesday 16 October 2024 | Meeting, FGDs or KIIs with beneficiary group supported by implementing partners in OTP Women leaders or groups, youth leaders or groups Health facility OTP in charge | 09.00–11.00 (GP1) 11.00–13.00 (GP2) 14.00–16.00 (GP3) | Wau South, site location health facility |
| Thursday 17 October 2024 | FGDs or KIIs with beneficiary group supported by either of the implementing partners in OTP Women leaders or groups, youth leaders or groups Health facility OTP in charge | 09.00–11.00 (GP1) 11.00–13.00 (GP2) 14.00–16.00 (GP3) | Wau Baggari, site location health facility |
| Friday 18 October 2024 | Meeting, FGDs or KIIs with beneficiary group supported by implementing partners in NRM Women leaders or groups, youth leaders or groups Saint Michael's School | 09.00–11.00 (GP1) 11.00–13.00 (GP2) 14.00–16.00 (GP3) | Wau Baggari, site location health facility |
| Saturday 19 October 2024 | Meeting, FGDs or KIIs with beneficiary group supported by implementing partners in NRM Women leaders or groups, youth leaders or groups Head of teachers | 09.00–11.00 (GP1) 11.00–13.00 (GP2) 14.00–16.00 (GP3) | Wau North, site location health facility |
| Sunday 20 October 2024 | | | |
| Monday 21 October 2024 | Debriefing, FAO Head of Country Office and Sida project focal point Travel back to Juba | 08.30–09.30 | FAO Wau Office |

Torit evaluation field mission from 23 to 28 October 2024

| Day | Activity | Time | Location |
|--------------------------------------|--|----------------------------|---|
| Wednesday 23 October 2024 | Arrival in Torit | 10.55 | Torit |
| | Check in, accommodation | 11.00–11.30 | Hotel in Torit |
| | Meeting with field staff: project focal point and technical specialists | 11.30–12.30 | FAO Country Office |
| | Security briefing | 14.15–15.00 | United Nations Department of Safety and Security |
| | KII implementing partner: AVSI | 15.00–17:00 | Implementing partner office in Torit |
| Thursday 24 October 2024 | Meeting with local authority, Deputy Director General, Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security | 09.00–14.00 | Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Environment and Forestry |
| | Meeting with Director General, Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare | 09.50–10.30 | Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare |
| | Meeting with Director General, Ministry of Peace Building | 10.40–11.15 | Peace Building Office |
| | Meeting with road engineer | 11.30–12.00 | Ministry of Roads and Bridges |
| | Lunch | 12.10–13.10 | |
| | Meeting with Director General, Nutrition | 13.15–13.40 | Nutrition Office |
| | Meeting with Nutrition Officer | 13.50–14.20 | Save the Children Office |
| | Meeting with FAO deputy head of field office | 14.35–15.20 | FAO Country Office |
| | Meeting with project focal point | 15.25–16.30 | FAO Country Office |
| Friday 25 October 2024 | Interaction with club members, agriculture club teacher, Saint Theresa Primary School | 08.30–09.20 10.40–11.40 | Saint Theresa Primary School |
| | Interaction with club members, agriculture club teacher, Torit West Primary School | 09.35–10.25 | Torit West Primary School |
| | Interaction with OTP beneficiaries, Torit Hospital | 10.40–11.40 | Torit Hospital |
| | Interaction with OTP focal point, Torit Hospital | 11.50–12.10 | |
| | Lunch break | 12.15–13.00 | |
| | Meeting with women’s economic empowerment, VSLA groups and NRM committees | 13.15–14.30 | Ilihum |
| | Meeting with NRM committee | | Ilihum |
| Saturday 26 October 2024 | Filed visit to Kudo Payam, meeting with OTP focal point | 09.00–09.20 | Kudo payam – Offiri boma OTP |
| | Interaction with OTP beneficiaries | 09.20–10.00 | Offiri OTP |
| | Interaction with women’s economic empowerment, VSLA groups | 10.00–11.30 | Offiri OTP |
| | Interaction with youth groups | 12.00–13.00 | Offiri OTP |
| Sunday 27 October 2024 | | | |
| Monday 28 October 2024 | Debriefing FAO head of field office and Sida project focal point | 08.30–09.30 | FAO Torit Office |
| | Travel back to Juba | To be confirmed | |

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