

SUMMARY REPORT

Evaluation of the UNICEF Response to the South Sudan Humanitarian Crisis (2016-2019)

Part 2: Emergency Education, Child Protection and related issues



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BACKGROUND TO THE EVALUATION

1. This evaluation was commissioned by the UNICEF Evaluation Office at its headquarters in New York, in consultation with the South Sudan Country Office (SSCO) and the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO). It constitutes the second part of a two-part evaluation. Part One considered the UNICEF Level 3 (L3) response to the crisis in South Sudan in the period 2016-2018, focusing on the 'child survival' sectors (water, sanitation and hygiene, health, nutrition). This Part Two of the evaluation focuses on the emergency-related child protection and education elements of the UNICEF programme, and brings the overall programme analysis up to the end of 2019. As with Part One, Part Two of the evaluation is intended to fulfil both accountability and learning purposes. It provides an evaluative account of the relevant areas of the UNICEF programme, highlights the main conclusions and lessons arising for UNICEF over this period, and provides recommendations for the conduct of the future programme.

TIMEFRAME, PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

2. The evaluation was originally expected to cover the period 2016 to early 2019. However, given various interruptions to the process (including most recently those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic), it was agreed to extend the analysis to the end of 2019 and to include an updated review of the child survival sectors. While some reference is made to the current context in South Sudan (to late 2020), and the recommendations take account of that context, the evaluative

component covers the UNICEF programme from early 2016 to the end of 2019. The evaluation followed a modified version of the original the terms of reference, revised to reflect the passage of time since it was commissioned. It is based on a review of documents and relevant literature, informant interviews and site visits conducted during a field missions in late 2018 and early 2019; subsequent extended consultation with the relevant sections and other staff in the SSCO and the ESARO office in Nairobi; and feedback obtained from partners and donors through interviews in Juba.

SOUTH SUDAN CONTEXT

3. The period from 2016 marked the **re-emergence of widespread conflict** in South Sudan, with disastrous consequences for the security and welfare of the civilian population. The displacement (internal and external) of around one in three South Sudanese has separated families from their homes, land, livelihoods and community networks. Around 1.6 million remain internally displaced, while 2.2 million are refugees in surrounding countries. Levels of food insecurity grew to critical levels over the evaluation period, at times tipping into famine conditions. Economic collapse and price inflation have made it hard for families to meet their basic needs, and fear of violence has constrained freedom of movement and action. Many families have been forced to live for years in camps. Periodic natural disasters, including major flooding in 2019 and 2020, have compounded the conflict-related crisis, as more recently has the COVID-19 epidemic. Basic government services have remained severely under-re-

sourced and related infrastructure (including schools and health facilities) has been badly damaged by conflict and looting. The period following the **renewed peace** process in 2018, leading up to the formation of a coalition government in 2020, **held the prospect of greater stability and security. Yet this has not materialized**, and access to services continues to be eroded. The distinction between ‘emergency’ needs and regular needs is not a clear one in this context, given the combined effects of short-term instability and of long-term institutional and developmental deficits on lives, livelihoods and services.

4. Children have been particularly vulnerable through this period, facing multiple threats to their security, health and welfare. Despite the intermittent peace process, **the safety and security of children** in South Sudan deteriorated consistently between the start of the civil war in 2013 and the end of 2019. Women and girls have been disproportionately affected by violence and rights abuse, and incidents of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, while greatly under-reported, are known to be widespread. Boys too have been highly vulnerable. By the end of 2019, over 19,000 children (boys and girls) were thought to have been associated with armed actors, while many more were unaccompanied, separated or missing. The mental health and psychosocial wellbeing of children and their families have all suffered as a result, with only limited support services available to them. Meanwhile, landmines and explosive remnants of war continue to kill and injure civilians, including children. South Sudan has rightly been labelled a ‘protection crisis’ over the evaluation period.

5. Even before the current crisis, South Sudan suffered from a **massive educational deficit** that pre-dates its independence in 2011. By 2014 the net enrolment rate stood at just 41 per cent (35 per cent for girls) and primary completion rates are amongst the lowest in the world. Most primary school children attending school do not achieve foundational literacy, numeracy and life skills. **The conflict-related crisis post-2016 exacerbated an already very damaging situation.** Children have been affected both directly and indirectly by the impact of conflict on schools and other learning spaces (a situation now compounded by the COVID-19-related school closures in 2020). Hundreds of thousands of displaced children have had to be taught in temporary learning facilities by volunteer teachers. The quality of education is a matter of major concern both in these and mainstream (government-run) schools, with many teachers themselves lacking basic education. Lack of funds to pay teachers is one of the main constraints here.

6. The other major threats to children’s well-being relate to **nutrition, health and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH)**, as detailed in Part One of the evaluation.

7. Underlying all of this has been the **fundamentally insecure and unstable environment** resulting from conflict and insecurity, political instability and economic breakdown. That instability severely limited the delivery of government services in opposition-held areas during the conflict and has created **an extremely challenging operating environment** for agencies seeking to provide essential services. Securing safe access has been an ongoing challenge, compounded in 2020 by the COVID-19 situation

as well as by renewed floods. The political settlement and uneasy peace that accompanies it has not resolved many of the underlying causes of instability, and limited access has remained a major constraint on essential service delivery. Throughout 2020, local insecurity and conflict remained a reality for many, and this coupled with lack of services has prevented mass return of displaced people and refugees. But more than any other factor over the past two years, the economic collapse triggered by the loss of oil revenue to the government and the inflation that followed increases in the money supply have had a dramatic impact both nationally and at local and household levels. Lack of government funding to social services has led to a high level of dependence on United Nations agencies and their partners using international funds to provide routine as well as emergency services. Most recently, the COVID-19 epidemic and particularly the measures taken to control it (notably school closures and the suspension of measles vaccination programmes) have had a major impact on children's well-being and this is likely to worsen. Yet for most South Sudanese, at this point, COVID itself is just one among many adverse factors with which they have to contend. The overall humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate through 2020, so that **the need for emergency services remains high and growing** – while the need for more concerted efforts on prevention and resilience building is correspondingly great.

UNICEF ROLE AND STRATEGY IN SOUTH SUDAN

8. The development aspirations of the years following South Sudan's independence in 2011 had largely evaporated by 2016. The

UNICEF programme since 2016 has been dominated by its emergency response to the crisis, as reflected in both the 2016-2018 and the 2019-2021 country programme documents (CPDs). Although the crisis response was re-classified from L3 to Level 2 (L2) in 2018, this related more to the organization's own capacities to manage the response in country and region rather than to the severity of the crisis itself. Over the latter part of the evaluation period, as the peace process has evolved, there has been a **broadening of the strategy** from predominantly responsive towards more preventive and resilience-oriented approaches – something that is reflected in the 2019-2021 CPD. This has been accompanied by greater efforts to plan for transition from humanitarian to more sustainable developmental approaches, and hence from a 'substitution' toward a more 'auxiliary' role for UNICEF. The protracted nature of the crisis – and the potential for enduring peace and stability – seems to demand such a transition. Yet it remains unclear what the end point of that transition may be, or what more sustainable approaches may be viable in practice. It sometimes appears that UNICEF and others are trying to build bridges across a river whose far bank they cannot yet see.

9. UNICEF has faced major **strategic challenges** in South Sudan. The protracted and multi-faceted crisis of the past few years has created acute vulnerabilities and support needs for millions of children. Yet the national and local governmental institutions and systems that would normally be expected to address those needs and to protect children have been (largely) weak or absent, and civil society has had only very limited capacity to provide substitutory services. As a result, direct support to large-scale emergency service delivery – mainly



medium and longer term, the added value of UNICEF must be judged in terms of its support to building effective and resilient systems, institutions and capacities for children as much as in terms of enabling quality service delivery. Yet doing so presents an immense strategic and programmatic challenge for UNICEF and its partners, and one which (largely for reasons beyond its control) it has to date been able to address only to a limited extent. It is important to reiterate the sovereign responsibility of the Government of South Sudan for the safety and welfare of the population, and its role as primary duty-bearer for upholding the rights of children. UNICEF must continue to reinforce that sense of responsibility as well as providing support to the institutions on which its fulfilment depends.

through non-governmental partners – has constituted a clear strategic priority for UNICEF over the evaluation period. But the system-strengthening and capacity-building agenda that is the necessary complement to direct service delivery (and crucial to the localization agenda) has only fragile foundations to build on, both in terms of governmental systems and civil society capacity. Donor support to this agenda, and particularly to government system strengthening, has been constrained by lack of trust and by scepticism about political will and the potential for progress.

10. Any assessment of UNICEF work in this context has to recognize this **dual challenge**: the need to address the immediate and acute needs of millions of children while helping to build the systems and capacities needed to do so on a sustainable basis. That challenge exists both within and beyond the humanitarian agenda. In the

UNICEF CRISIS RESPONSE – GENERAL AND CROSS-CUTTING CONCLUSIONS

11. The evaluation found that **the overall UNICEF response to immediate priority needs for children** – the main focus of this evaluation – **has been both appropriate and largely effective** over the evaluation period. The evaluation found that UNICEF and its partners had been able to deliver essential services to a substantial proportion of the population in most need, within the constraints of the insecure context, limited access and significant funding deficits (particularly in 2019). The organization deserves great credit for its efforts in this regard, which have often been crucial to the well-being and life chances of those it has reached. This has been true in the sectors that were the main focus of this evaluation – education and child protection – as well as in the ‘child survival’ sectors of WASH, health and nutrition. **It must however be**

recognized that a high proportion of children in need of emergency assistance (well over 50 per cent in most sectors) have remained without support. Although UNICEF has done its best to target areas and groups of children with the highest priority needs, this has not always been possible in the prevailing context.

12. Delivering its own programme has been the dominant feature of UNICEF work in South Sudan over the evaluation period. Its role as an **advocate for children** has been less prominent. While it has defined an advocacy plan and targets, the implementation of that plan appears lacking. UNICEF should remember that delivering its own programme forms only a part of its responsibilities, and that its mandate as the leading international agency for children means that it has a responsibility to speak consistently on child rights, and in particular to highlight major threats to children's security and welfare. This responsibility extends beyond the formal United Nations Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism. While funding of the UNICEF programme is clearly an important advocacy goal, more consistent communication and advocacy beyond that agenda is needed.
13. On the application of the '**centrality of protection' principle** and the mainstreaming of protection concerns throughout its programme, UNICEF (in common with many other agencies) appears to have made little progress. The evaluation found that staff see protection almost exclusively in terms of child protection, but it is important to locate this within a wider protection framework. Although elements of the 'do no harm' principle were found in much of the UNICEF programme in South Sudan (see Part One of the evaluation), the evaluators

conclude that UNICEF and its partners could do more to ensure that families can access the services they provides in safety and dignity. More fundamentally, the UNICEF approach could be better grounded in an understanding of the wider security context and people's response to that context.

14. UNICEF has done well to build a portfolio of **civil society partnerships** to enable its emergency programme to cover both conflict-affected and more stable areas over time. It has found a pragmatic balance between international, national and local implementing partnerships alongside ongoing partnerships with government and United Nations bodies. Although the quality of services has been variable, this approach has substantially paid off in terms of programme delivery and, to a lesser extent, in terms of building local and national capacity. However, given the high level of dependency of smaller agencies on UNICEF financial and technical support, and the volatility of funding flows to South Sudan, this is also a **very fragile set of arrangements**. Gaps or delays in funding such as occurred in 2019, as well impacting vital services for children, are extremely damaging for smaller civil society organizations. Staff and technical know-how are lost, and the loss of local capacity makes sustainability and local ownership harder to achieve.
UNICEF could help reduce this fragility by streamlining and speeding up its partnership agreement process, changing its approach to risk management and agreeing multi-year partnerships wherever possible. It could also do more to acknowledge the primary service delivery role of its partners, recognizing its own role as being essentially an enabling rather than an implementing one. Beyond being a source of funding for partners (it is often perceived as a 'donor'),



the UNICEF role in providing technical support and capacity-building to civil society is essential in its own right and is widely appreciated by partners.

15. Maximizing the synergies between the different sectors in which UNICEF works is rightly thought to be essential to an effective response. Yet although UNICEF has made efforts to build an **integrated programme**, the evaluators concluded that the multi-sectoral model of programming is not yet ‘natural’ within the organization. Sectors are siloed, not least because of the UNICEF administrative and financial processes, and multi-sectoral programming is not incentivized. Nor does the partner contracting process encourage such integrated approaches. While the coherence of the UNICEF programme (and of the United Nations response as a whole) has improved over the evaluation period, the essential interconnections between sectors are not yet as strong as they should be. Given its cross-sector portfolio, UNICEF should provide leadership in this area.

16. While some progress has been made over the evaluation period with regard to **data-gathering and monitoring**, much re-

mains to be done – both on contextual and programme-related data. UNICEF should continue to work with government and others to increase the availability and reliability of outcome data, notably with regard to educational outcomes for girls and boys. Filling needs assessment and data gaps in areas like gender-based violence, children associated with armed forces and groups (CAAFAG) and other areas of child protection should be a matter of renewed effort and should involve more regular use of (sensitively conducted) surveys and focus group discussions. UNICEF must ensure proper monitoring, reporting and information management for its work on child protection, which has been deficient both from a management and accountability perspective. This has significantly affected the evaluability of this area of UNICEF work.

UNICEF PROGRAMME RESPONSE – EDUCATION

17. UNICEF did well to expand its education work over the evaluation period in the face of evolving needs and new opportunities, although **progress has stalled** more re-

cently (2019/20) – and the COVID-19 crisis, coupled with lack of funding (government or donor) for teacher salaries and erosion of the value of teacher incentives now threatens to reverse the gains made. The evaluation found that the UNICEF education programme has been grounded in regular assessment and has responded to priority needs as far the situation and access has allowed. The response rightly focused on providing **emergency education in the most conflict-affected states**, with priority given to areas in which the number of out of school children was highest. The integrated rapid response mechanism (IRRM) was used effectively as a last resort in supporting education in areas that were otherwise very hard to reach, although the sustainability of its interventions remains uncertain.

In this context, it must be recognized that the **scale of the internationally-funded programme** (i.e. that of UNICEF and other cluster members) **remains insufficient to cover the emergency education needs**: UNICEF addressed 30 per cent of the assessed education needs in 2016, 24 per cent in 2017, 30 per cent in 2018 and 26 per cent in 2019. Moreover, inclusion of some of the most vulnerable – including children with disabilities, pastoralist children, over-age students and girls facing early marriage – is addressed only to a limited extent.

18. Overall, the UNICEF emergency education programme has achieved **substantial results** throughout the evaluation period, within the limitations noted here. This is particularly true with regard to access to education (enrolment and retention) for internally displaced persons in protection of civilians sites and hosted in communities; establishing safe education facilities (temporary learning spaces); provision of essential education materials; teacher train-

ing; and community mobilization. However, despite all efforts, **serious questions remain over the quality of teaching – and therefore about educational outcomes for children**. Many teachers themselves have only limited education and limited literacy. Short duration training and limited follow-up and supervision are in themselves not sufficient to produce the desired change in teaching quality. Crucially, **until the payment of teacher salaries and incentives is put on a more sustainable footing, progress on this issue is likely to remain severely limited**.

UNICEF PROGRAMME RESPONSE – CHILD PROTECTION

19. Part One of the evaluation noted that the gap between **vulnerabilities and the ability of humanitarian agencies to reduce them has been more apparent in relation to child protection than any other agenda**. This remains true. The child protection in emergency response was rightly focused on enabling critical child protection services: delivering family tracing and reunification services for unaccompanied and separated children, comprehensive case management services for children victims of abuse, gender-based violence prevention and response, psychosocial support (PSS), release and reintegration of CAAFAG, and awareness-raising on the risk of landmines and explosive remnants of war.
20. Within its limits, the UNICEF child protection programme was found to be **highly relevant** to the most critical vulnerabilities and protection needs of children, and to have made a significant contribution to reducing children's exposure to the related threats. The capacity development effort toward local partners (through

training and technical guidance) has been particularly appropriate and necessary. The **challenge for the child protection programme is partly one of scale and consistency of coverage**. The UNICEF programme has suffered from severe funding shortages in the latter part of the evaluation period. Some of the elements of the programme in which UNICEF has most obviously added value – notably the gender-based violence, CAAFAG and PSS programmes – have been cut back. This appears to the evaluators to be a major retrograde step, and one that UNICEF should try by all means to reverse.

21. The child protection response could be strengthened in other ways, particularly through better integrated programming: while child protection elements are well integrated in the education programme, they are much less so in other sectors. Beyond this, UNICEF lacks an overall child protection mainstreaming strategy, i.e. a way of building a child protection perspective into all areas of the programme. It needs to find a way of doing so, along with a more general protection perspective.

UNICEF PROGRAMME RESPONSE – WASH, NUTRITION AND HEALTH

22. In 2019, UNICEF made some progress on system-strengthening, community engagement, and building partnerships for sustainable **WASH**. Yet despite the extent of continuing WASH needs, UNICEF results showed a major drop-off in ‘safe water’ results achievement in 2018 and 2019. This appears to be related to **lack of available funding** as much as to access and other challenges, and it represents a **major set-**

back. The COVID-19 pandemic is reported to have placed additional constraints on the programme in 2020. WASH in schools remains a priority area for collaboration and scale-up, particularly given its crucial links to health and nutrition (including school feeding programmes), and its significance for girls’ attendance at school.

23. With regard to **health**, UNICEF and its partners have achieved significant **vaccination results**, but they have struggled to maintain vaccination coverage in areas affected by conflict and other humanitarian crises. Together with its WASH work, UNICEF preventive work on vaccination and distribution of treated bed nets – together with related community mobilization and health promotion – provides an essential public health contribution. On the curative side, UNICEF has been able to expand the number of child health consultations and its treatment of children with severe acute malnutrition (SAM) remains crucial.
24. Despite an apparent improvement over the years since 2010, the **nutrition** situation remained critical by the end of 2019 – particularly for children under five and pregnant or breastfeeding women. UNICEF and its partners have done well to maintain their treatment programme for children with SAM over the evaluation period. UNICEF has also significantly expanded provision of counselling on appropriate infant and young child feeding and helped to maintain high levels (69 per cent) of exclusive breastfeeding – although the quality of counselling services appears to be a significant constraint on progress in this area. More broadly, its work in partnership with the World Food Programme, the Food and Agricultural Organization, the Ministry of Health and a

range of other partners on nutrition-related resilience is an important contribution to the prevention and preparedness agenda.

Summary of recommendations

25. The evaluation makes a number of recommendations. In summary, these are as follows:

Recommendation 1: Education

UNICEF should thoroughly review its strategy and planning on education in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. It should work with the government (and specifically MoGEI) to forge stronger policy and planning links between emergency education interventions and the mainstream education system. It should work to strengthen inclusion in education for the most vulnerable, and to strengthen inter-sectoral links between education, nutrition, health and WASH. And it should continue to promote a localization agenda for EiE, including investment in CSO capacities and education support partnerships with local authorities.

Recommendation 2: Child protection

UNICEF child protection work in South Sudan can be strengthened in a number of ways. A child protection perspective needs to be mainstreamed across its whole programme, and specific CP elements should be integrated into UNICEF work on nutrition, health and WASH (as they are with education) as part of an integrated multi-sectoral approach. Funding should be sought as a matter of priority for continuing work on gender-based violence, PSS and CAAFAG, where UNICEF has shown it can make a unique and effective contribution. Finally, UNICEF should be more prepared to use its mandate to pursue high-level advocacy for South Sudanese children.

Recommendation 3: Centrality of protection

Application of this principle is the responsibility of all UNICEF sections. UNICEF needs to ground its field programme more clearly in an analysis of the evolving security situation as it bears on the security of children and their families, their decisions and the choices available to them. More regular perception surveys (conducted by UNICEF or others) could provide a substantial basis for this analysis. In order to better ensure that families can access its services safely and in dignity, an explicit safety review should be part of both the project approval and routine monitoring processes for the relevant services.

Recommendation 4: Partnerships

UNICEF should review its partnership agreement processes with a view to streamlining the process and avoiding damaging gaps in the funding pipeline to partners. It should also change its approach to risk management in its implementing partnerships, adopting a more 'downstream' focus involving closer mentoring, oversight and quality control. The time of specialist staff in the Juba country office should be freed up from some of the current contract-related process to focus on providing technical support and mentoring to field offices and partners. UNICEF should as far as possible increase capacity-building support to local and national CSO partners and try to secure predictable multi-year funding. It should also foster local collaborative arrangements between CSOs and local government.

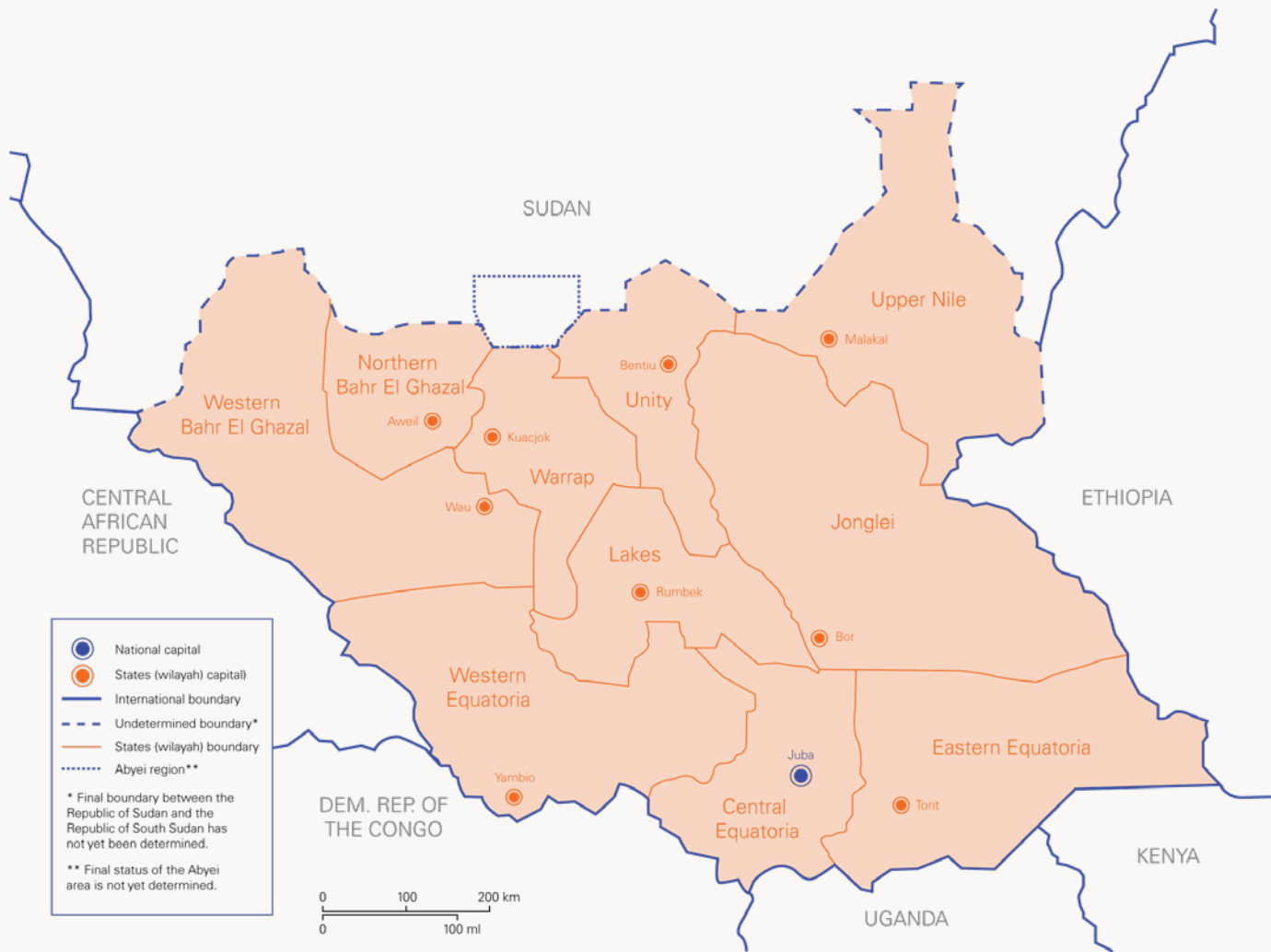
Recommendation 5: Data and monitoring

UNICEF should continue to work with government and others to increase the availability and reliability of outcome data, notably with regard to educational outcomes for girls and boys. Filling needs assessment and data gaps in areas

like gender-based violence, CAAFAG and other areas of child protection should be a matter of renewed effort and should involve more regular use of (sensitively conducted) surveys and focus group discussions. UNICEF must ensure proper monitoring, reporting and information management for its work on child protection, which has been deficient both from a management and accountability perspective. Inconsist-

encies and gaps in the data and reporting have significantly affected the evaluability of this area of UNICEF work. The SSCO should also strengthen its data quality assurance processes to prevent a recurrence. It is suggested that to achieve improvements in this area, dedicated support may be required for the child protection section in the form of an information management officer.

Map of South Sudan



Source: United Nations

