JOINT - RAPID LIVELIHOODS ASSESSMENT REPORT

RENK UPPER NILE STATE

JAN-FEB 2026

Partners:

UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

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acted

The Community Engagement Network (CEN)

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Contents

OVERVIEW

As part of the Local integration and resilience initiate in Renk to support Renk county in encouraging the returnee population settled in Abukadra site, who were settled in the site in December 2025, after prolonged stay in transit center. The assessment aimed at gathering information on the kind of livelihoods assistance the newly settled returnees and host community members would prefer as part of the recovery and resilience building is concerned. As part of this initiative, a Rapid Livelihoods Assessment was conducted in Mid-January – Mid February 2026, through the inter-agency collaboration. The objective of the assessment was to gather actionable data and findings at the Abukadra host community to gain a better understanding of the livelihoods initiatives and preference for the returnees and host community. This information is crucial for identifying potential economic programming for resilience and recovery initiatives for returnees, refugees and host community settled in Abukadra.

METHODOLOGY

This Assessment utilized both Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and Key Informant Interviews (KII) method data collection approach. These FGD and KII were conducted with individuals at the Household level and through group discussion with men, women, and youths.

- **141 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** capturing household-level economic data.
- **33 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** representing host and integrated communities, including youth and women groups.

Data Collection tools: The tools used for data collection comprised of kobo collect supported by enumerators.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

FGD participants: A total of **495 participants** participated in the FGD sessions. Among them.

- **18 female groups comprising of 270 participants**
- **12 male groups comprising of 180 participants**
- **3 mixed groups of 45 participants participated in the FGDs**.

In overall **55 percent** of the participants were female, indicating a strong representation that ensures a gender-specific livelihood challenges and coping strategies are adequately reflected in the findings. Given women's central role in household food security and informal economic activities, their perspectives are particularly critical.

Key Informant Interviews (KII)

- A total of **141 individuals** participated in KII at the Household levels. Overall, **59 percent** were **female** headed households reflecting a strong female representation.
- **37 percent** were respondents from the host community, while **63 percent** were majority hailed from the integrated community.

Demographics

Education background: 50 percent of the respondents had completed only primary-level education followed by secondary education **(20 percent),** tertiary education **(10 percent),** and post-graduate studies **(3 percent)** while the rest had no literacy education whatsoever.

53 per cent were currently engaged in some form of livelihood activity.

Overall, the data indicates a relatively low attainment of higher education, suggesting that interventions requiring advanced technical skills may need to include foundational training components.

Vulnerability Profile

- **21 per cent** of the respondents reported living with disabilities.
- Participants from 7 FGD groups were observed to be people with specific needs, highlighting additional layers of vulnerability, including restricted access to labor-intensive activities and increased dependency ratios within households.

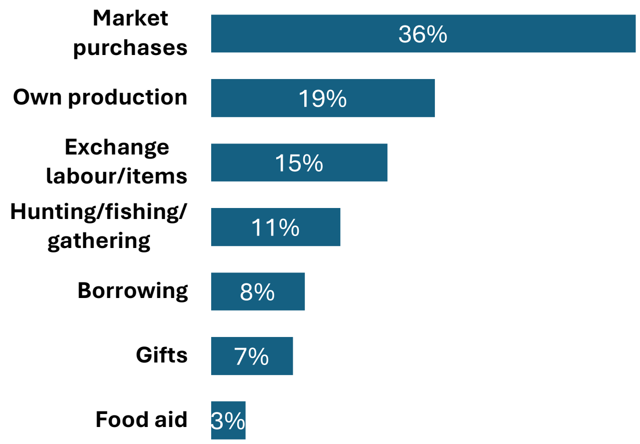
Although 19 groups reported engagement in livelihoods, this does not necessarily indicate income sufficiency, the demographic profile indicates a community with limited formal education, constrained economic opportunities, and moderate-to-high vulnerability exposure.

KEY FINDINGS: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Food Security & Food Sources

1.1 Current Food Sources

The heavy dependence on market purchases (36%) highlights a strong reliance on local markets for food access. In situations characterized by inflation, fluctuating prices, or supply chain disruptions, this dependence significantly increases households' exposure to acute food insecurity.



Own food production represents only 19%, indicating low levels of agricultural self-sufficiency. This limited contribution is likely driven by structural barriers such as restricted access to land, inadequate water supply, and insufficient agricultural inputs, all of which constrain productive capacity.

Reliance on exchange labour (15%), borrowing (8%), and gifts (7%) reflect stress-based coping mechanisms rather than stable or sustainable food access pathways. Similarly, hunting, fishing, and gathering (11%) serve primarily as supplementary survival strategies, particularly during lean seasons when other food sources are constrained.

The minimal reliance on food assistance (3%) may point to limited humanitarian coverage rather than improved household resilience. Overall, food access in the area remains precarious and highly susceptible to economic shocks and market instability.

Perception of the expected changes in Food Sources

The majority of respondents (19 out of 33 groups) indicated that they do not expect their sources of food to change in the short term. This reflects a prevailing perception of economic stagnation rather than prospects for recovery or improvement. The limited optimism expressed by participants likely stems from ongoing structural constraints that continue to hinder livelihood growth and diversification.

2. Youth Livelihood Situation

2.1 Youth Engagement in livelihood activities

58% of groups say Youths are unempowered

Only **12 of the FGD groups** reported that youth are engaged in livelihood activities, with participation equally divided between seasonal and year-round work. In contrast, **19 groups** stated that youth are not engaged in any meaningful economic activity, highlighting a high level of youth underemployment. This situation presents a considerable risk of prolonged economic dependency, increased social frustration, and the likelihood of negative coping mechanisms emerging among young people in Renk.

2.2 Access to Productive Resources

Out of the 33 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs);

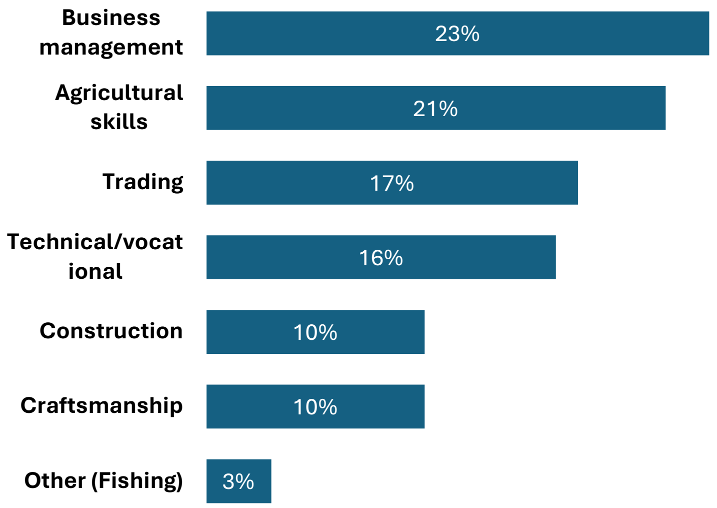
88% of the groups lack access to start up kits

- **8 groups (24%)** reported access to land.
- **9 groups (27%)** indicated access to tools or basic equipment.
- **Only 4 groups (12%)** reported access to start-up capital, highlighting extremely limited financial inclusion.
- **6 groups (18%)** mentioned access to training institutions or skills development opportunities.

These percentages clearly demonstrate that the majority of youth and households lack access to the foundational assets required for entrepreneurship and agricultural engagement. With nearly **88% of groups lacking access to start-up capital,** financial constraints stand out as the most critical structural bottleneck. Limited land access **(76% without),** inadequate tools **(73% without)**, and weak training access **(82% without)** further compound the challenge.

3. Training Demand Analysis

3.1 General Training Interest

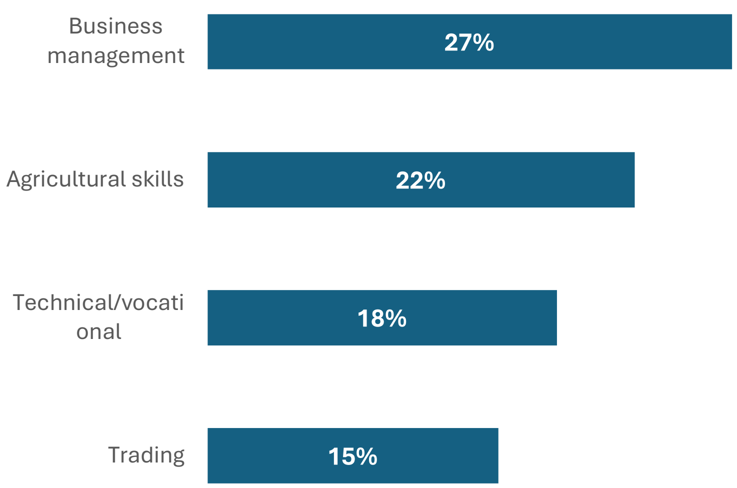


Participants highlighted more interest in training on business management (23%) and agricultural skills (21%) reflecting a strong entrepreneurial mindset within the community. Rather than relying solely on assistance, many households are seeking opportunities to build their capacity and strengthen self-reliance.

The expressed demand for vocational and technical skills (16%) further highlights the desire to diversify income sources beyond agriculture and expand into other productive sectors.

Overall, these trends demonstrate a clear aspiration toward economic transformation and sustainable livelihoods, rather than a continued dependence on survival-oriented coping strategies.

4.2 Youth-Specific Interests

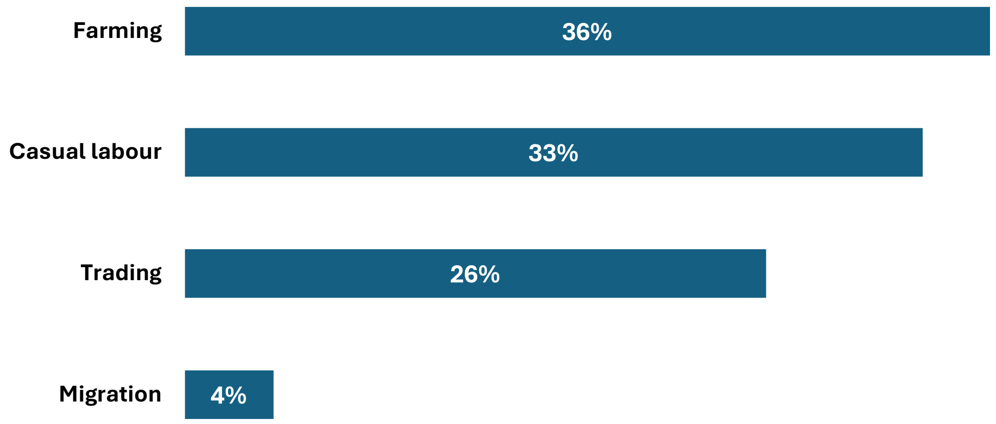


Youth respondents demonstrated a particularly strong interest in **business management training (27%)**, followed by **agricultural skills development (22%)** and **technical or vocational training (18%).** This distribution of preferences reflects a clear shift away from purely subsistence-oriented activities toward entrepreneurship, enterprise development, and market-linked income opportunities. Rather than viewing agriculture solely as a survival mechanism, young people increasingly see it as a potential business pathway when combined with improved skills, innovation, and access to markets.

The emphasis on business management indicates that youth are not only interested in employment but in understanding how to start, manage, and grow sustainable enterprises. Similarly, interest in technical training suggests readiness to diversify into skilled trades that can generate higher and more stable returns compared to casual labour.

The youth specific findings highlight an important strategic window which informs how youth in Abukadra are motivated, aspirational, and open to economic transformation. However, without structured, youth-focused programming such as enterprise incubation, access to start-up capital, mentorship, and market linkages this potential may remain untapped. Targeted investment in youth economic empowerment could therefore serve as both a resilience-building measure and a preventive strategy against long-term unemployment, social frustration, and negative coping mechanisms.

5. Youth Livelihood Activities



Youth livelihood engagement in Abukadra community remains largely concentrated in low-skill and low-income activities. **Farming accounts for 36 per cent** of youth engagement, while **casual labour represents 33 per cent**, reflecting a strong reliance on subsistence and informal work that offers limited and unstable returns. According to the respondents, these activities are often seasonal and highly vulnerable to climate shocks, market fluctuations, and reduced labour demand, which further constrains income stability and long-term economic progression. **Trading, reported by 26 per cent** of groups, provides some level of diversification; however, most of these activities remain small-scale, with limited capital, weak market linkages, and low profit margins that restrict opportunities for growth and expansion.

The very low level of migration **(4 per cent)** mainly informed of restricted mobility due to financial constraints, insecurity, or limited access to external employment opportunities. In addition, others highlighted challenges faced in navigating migration pathways or the absence of social networks and resources required to seek livelihoods outside Abukadra or Renk town in general. These finding suggested that most young people remain confined to local economies that are already overstretched and unable to absorb the growing labour force.

Furthermore, the low rate of sectoral transition, with only seven FGDs reporting any shifts in livelihood activities, points to slow economic transformation and limited upward mobility. This stagnation highlights structural barriers such as lack of access to skills training, capital, technology, and information, which continue to prevent youth from transitioning into more productive and resilient sectors. Without targeted investment in youth-focused economic programming, including entrepreneurship support, vocational training, and access to finance, there is a risk that this pattern of underemployment will persist, increasing vulnerability, frustration, and reliance on negative coping strategies.

Gender Economic Disparities among Youth

- The findings show that a majority of respondents **(17 out of 33 groups – 52%)** perceive that young men have greater access to economic opportunities compared to young women. Only 7 groups indicated that young women have better or equal opportunities, while 4 groups believed that both young men and women have equal access. This pattern highlights persistent structural gender inequality within the local economy.

- These disparities are largely linked to unequal access to productive assets such as land, capital, and decision-making platforms. Young women often face restrictions in owning or controlling resources, limiting their ability to engage in entrepreneurship or expand agricultural activities.

- In addition, caregiving responsibilities, including childcare and household duties, significantly reduce women's time and mobility, further constraining their participation in income-generating activities. Cultural norms and social expectations also limit women's engagement in certain sectors, particularly those that require travel, networking, or interaction in public spaces.

- Addressing these gender gaps is essential for inclusive and sustainable livelihood programming. Strengthening women's access to finance, skills, land, and markets would not only improve gender equality but also enhance overall household resilience and food security outcomes.

7. Impact of Conflict and Climate Shocks

- The analysis indicates that both conflict and climate-related shocks are overwhelmingly perceived as reducing economic opportunities, with 21 groups reporting negative impacts such as loss of assets, reduced agricultural production, and disruption of local markets.
- Nine groups reported that these shocks have also forced households, particularly youth, to migrate in search of alternative income sources. This migration is often distress-driven rather than strategic, exposing young people to protection risks and unstable livelihoods.
- Only one group perceived any positive or transformative opportunities arising from these shocks, underscoring the limited adaptive capacity of communities in the current context.
- These findings demonstrate that shocks in Renk are predominantly destructive rather than transformative. Livelihood systems remain highly vulnerable to both climate variability and conflict-related disruptions, reinforcing cycles of economic fragility and dependence on humanitarian support.

8. Employment Barriers

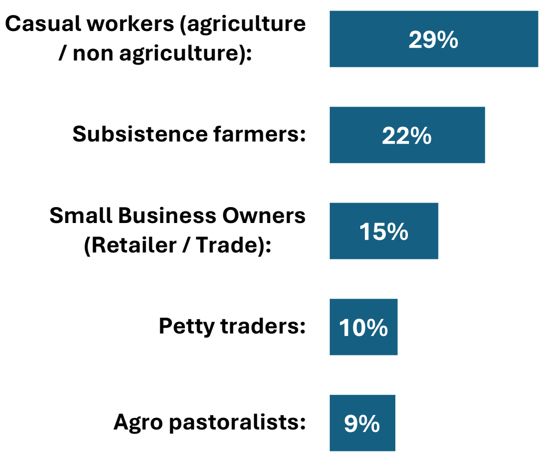
- Limited access to capital and productive resources, including land, start-up kits, and financial services, was identified as the most significant barrier to employment, with 13 groups highlighting this challenge. This reflects widespread financial exclusion and restricted opportunities for entrepreneurship and business expansion.
- A further 12 groups emphasized the lack of technical, vocational, and business skills as a key constraint. This skills gap reduces employability and productivity, particularly for youth who have limited exposure to formal training systems.
- Seven groups also reported lack of information on available opportunities, training, or market trends, which restricts access to employment and livelihood initiatives.
- Overall, these findings confirm that both financial capital and human capital gaps are major structural barriers limiting job creation, economic diversification, and self-reliance in the area.

9. Agricultural Constraints

- Agricultural productivity in the area is mainly constrained by water shortages (20%), which significantly affect crop production and increase vulnerability to climate variability. Limited access to irrigation and water harvesting technologies further compounds this challenge.

- Poor-quality seeds (19%) and high prevalence of pests and diseases (19%) were also identified as major factors reducing yields and discouraging investment in farming. These constraints highlight the need for improved agricultural inputs and extension services.
- Financial limitations, particularly lack of capital (15%), restrict farmers' ability to purchase inputs, adopt improved technologies, or scale up production. In addition, limited market access (13%) reduces profitability and discourages surplus production, as farmers struggle to transport and sell their produce.
- Climate variability (13%), including unpredictable rainfall and extreme weather events, further affects agricultural stability and increases production risks.
- These interconnected challenges indicate systemic weaknesses within the agricultural value chain, underscoring the need for integrated interventions that combine climate-smart agriculture, input support, irrigation, financial access, and market linkages to build resilience and improve productivity.

10. Main sources of Livelihood



Casual labour represents the primary source of income for **29 per cent** of households, encompassing both **agricultural and non-agricultural** activities. This heavy reliance on daily or temporary work highlights the predominance of unstable and unpredictable income streams, leaving households highly exposed to market fluctuations and seasonal disruptions.

Subsistence farming follows at **22 per cent,** reflecting continued dependence on small-scale agricultural production primarily aimed at household consumption rather than commercial gain. Small business activities account for **15 per cent**, indicating a modest level of entrepreneurship and self-employment, though largely concentrated in micro-scale trade with limited capital and growth potential.

Additional livelihood sources include petty trade **(10 per cent)** and agro-pastoralism **(9 per cent),** both of which provide supplementary income but remain vulnerable to climate variability and market instability. Participation in cooperatives **(5 per cent)** and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) **(4 per cent**) remains relatively low, suggesting limited access to structured financial inclusion mechanisms. Only **3 per cent** of respondents reported salaried employment, underscoring the scarcity of formal job opportunities, while **4 per cent** rely on other minor income-generating activities.

Overall, the livelihood landscape is characterized by informality, limited diversification, and high exposure to economic and environmental shocks, reinforcing the need for more stable and resilient income pathways.

11. Agricultural Livelihoods and Sector Dynamics

Crop farming remains the dominant livelihood activity, engaging **27 per cent** of respondents. However, a slight preference deficit **(25 per cent preference compared to 27 per cent current engagement)** suggests that many households may be involved in crop production out of necessity rather than genuine economic preference. This could be influenced by traditional practices, limited alternatives, or restricted access to diversified income opportunities.

In contrast, several sectors demonstrate positive preference gaps, indicating unmet demand and potential for expansion. Fishing shows a **3 per cent** positive gap **(15 per cent current engagement versus 18 per cent preference)**, while poultry presents a **2 per cent** positive gap **(9 per cent versus 11 per cent).** Petty trade also reflects modest growth potential with a **1 per cent** positive gap **(13 per cent versus 14 per cent).** These trends suggest that, with appropriate investment in inputs, skills, and market access, these sectors could absorb more labour and contribute to income diversification.

Vegetable production and **livestock rearing** show near balance between current engagement and preference **(+1 per cent each),** indicating steady interest with room for moderate growth. Manual labour, however, reflects a negative preference gap **(20 per cent** engagement compared to **18 per cent preference**), reinforcing its role as a distress-driven activity rather than a preferred livelihood pathway. Agro-processing **(–1 per cent)** and handicrafts **(–1 per cent)** also show slight negative gaps, likely reflecting barriers such as limited capital, technical skills, or access to markets.

Strong Growth Potential (High Positive Gaps):

- **Fishing (+3%)**
- **Poultry (+2%)**

These livelihoods interventions present the most immediate opportunities for targeted early recovery investment.

Moderate Expansion Potential:

- Vegetable production (+1%)
- Livestock rearing (+1%)
- Petty trade (+1%)

With appropriate capital injection, input support, and technical training, these sectors could scale sustainably.

Distress livelihoods interventions

- Manual labour (–2%)
- Crop farming (–2%)
- Agro-processing (–1%)
- Handicrafts (–1%)

Negative gaps suggest either over-reliance due to lack of alternatives or limited market attractiveness and growth barriers.

12. Coping Mechanisms

- The data reflects alarming levels of **food stress.** A near-universal **97 per cent** of respondents reported reducing meal consumption, signalling severe household food insecurity.
- **76 per cent** rely on **casual labour** to secure food, while **73 per cent** prioritize feeding children over adults, reflecting crisis-level decision-making within households.
- **Borrowing food (55 per cent)** and purchasing on **credit (52 per cent)** are common coping strategies, indicating dependency on informal support systems and market debt.
- The **sale of assets (36 per cent),** including productive resources, is particularly concerning, as it erodes future earning potential and weakens long-term resilience.

Collectively, these patterns strongly suggest that many households are operating within Stressed to Crisis food security categories, with diminishing capacity to absorb further shocks.

13. Requested Livelihood Support

Community demand an emphasizes productive investment rather than short-term relief. The highest priority needs identified include:

- Agricultural inputs (82%)
- Small business start-up kits (75%)
- Access to land (70%)
- Cash grants (69%)

These priorities reflect a strong desire for sustainable income-generating opportunities. Households are seeking support that enhances productivity, builds assets, and promotes self-reliance rather than dependency on consumption-based assistance.

FINDINGS KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

1. Income and Livelihood Status

Out of the 141 respondents, 80 reported being engaged in some form of employment, while 61 were not involved in any income-generating activity. However, employment largely consists of informal and unstable work. Daily wage labour remains the dominant income source, with 58 individuals relying on short-term daily earnings.

Only 14 respondents reported earning a regular monthly income, underscoring the scarcity of formal employment opportunities in the area.

Income sufficiency remains a major concern:

- 94 respondents reported that their income is insufficient to meet basic needs.
- 10 indicated partial sufficiency.
- Only 37 reported being able to meet household needs adequately.

These findings confirm widespread income insecurity and limited financial resilience among households.

2. Skills and Training

Access to vocational and business training remains extremely limited. A total of 101 respondents have never received any form of vocational or business training.

Among the 41 respondents who had received training:

- 30 acquired agricultural skills,
- 15 received business management training,
- 11 gained technical or vocational skills.

When asked about the most useful skills for earning a living in Renk:

- Farming (40%) ranked highest,
- Trading (31%) followed,
- Craftsmanship (13%) and construction (10%) were also mentioned.

Despite clear demand, 98 respondents reported that no training opportunities are currently available in the community. This represents a significant capacity-building gap and a missed opportunity to improve employability and productivity.

3. Access to Resources

Access to productive assets remains severely constrained:

- 43% reported access to land.
- Only 13% had access to tools or equipment.
- Just 9% had access to start-up capital.
- 35% reported having no access to any productive resources.

Lack of capital was cited by 66% of respondents as the primary barrier to work. These findings indicate that even when individuals have willingness and interest to engage in livelihoods, structural financial barriers prevent them from starting or expanding income-generating activities.

4. Agricultural Production and Constraints

Agriculture remains central to livelihoods, with 96 respondents intending to cultivate during the dry season. However, productivity is significantly constrained by:

- Water scarcity (24%),
- Poor-quality seeds (21%),
- Pests and diseases (18%),
- Lack of capital (14%),
- Climate variability (11%).

While agriculture presents strong potential, it remains highly vulnerable to environmental shocks, inadequate inputs, and financial limitations. Addressing these constraints is essential to unlock agricultural productivity and improve food security.

5. Key Barriers to Employment and Sustainability

The main barriers to securing and sustaining livelihoods are structural and financial:

- Lack of start-up kits and capital (23%),
- Lack of skills (21%),
- Limited market access (14%),
- Lack of documentation (11%),

- Inaccessibility of land (11%),
- Lack of information (10%),
- Limited mobility (8%).

These findings confirm that both financial capital and human capital deficits are significantly limiting employment creation and economic growth.

6. Existing Livelihood Structure

The livelihood structure in Renk is largely informal and fragile:

- Casual labour (26%) forms the largest group.
- Subsistence farming (19%) remains a key survival strategy.
- Small business owners (18%) indicate modest entrepreneurship.
- Petty traders (9%) and agro-pastoralists (8%) form smaller segments.

Only a very small proportion are engaged in stable, salaried employment. This structure reflects dependence on short-term income streams with limited social protection or stability.

7. Agricultural Opportunity Gap Analysis

Crop farming remains dominant (23% engaged; 24% preferred), indicating sustained interest.

Stable sectors include:

- Vegetable production (19% vs 18% preference),
- Fishing (19% vs 19%),
- Livestock rearing (7% vs 7%),
- Handicrafts (11% vs 11%).

Emerging growth sectors:

- Agro-processing (5% current vs 7% preferred),
- Petty trade (7% vs 8%).

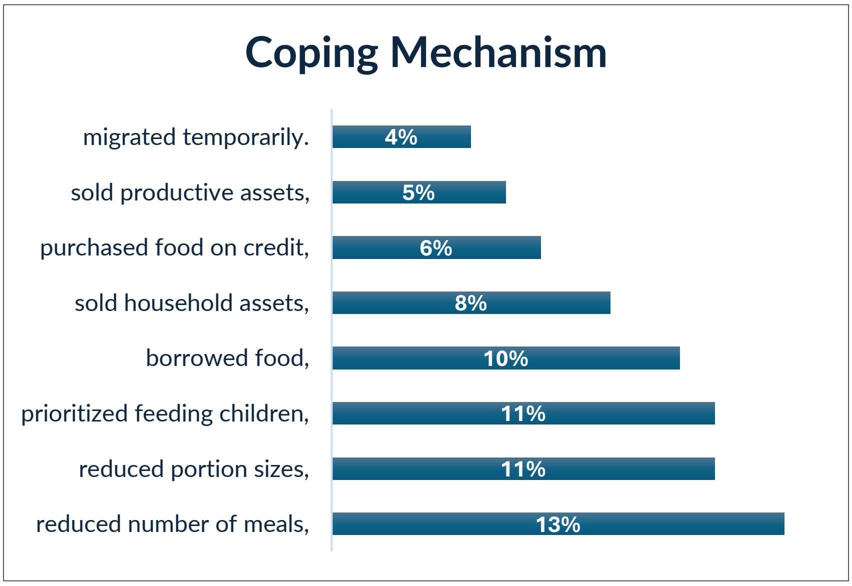
Distress activity:

- Manual labour (22% engaged vs 16% preferred), suggesting it is undertaken out of necessity rather than preference.

These patterns highlight opportunities for diversification, particularly in agro-processing and small business sectors.

8. Coping Mechanisms

Households are adopting stress and crisis coping strategies:



The data shows several coping strategies adopted by households, including a 13% reduction in the number of meals, an 11% decrease in portion sizes, and another 11% prioritizing food for children. Additionally, 10% borrowed food, 6% purchased food on credit, 8% sold household assets, 5% sold productive assets, and 4% temporarily migrated. The sale of productive assets is particularly alarming, as it weakens long-term recovery prospects. Overall, these patterns reflect increasing food insecurity and growing stress on household livelihoods.

9. Climate Impact

A total of 91 respondents reported that climate variability directly affects their livelihoods. Water shortages and unpredictable weather patterns are undermining agricultural production, reinforcing the need for climate-resilient programming.

10. Priority Livelihood Support Needs

Top community priorities include:

Participants highlighted agricultural inputs as their top livelihood priority, particularly requesting farming toolkits and support to enhance agricultural production. Other frequently mentioned needs included cash or start-up grants to initiate small businesses, as well as skills training for both skilled and unskilled individuals engaged in various livelihood activities. Additional priorities included access to land for cultivation, youth training opportunities, and tools to support livestock keeping.

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

According to majority of the respondents, livelihoods interventions are largely informal, unstable, and highly exposed to climate variability and market shocks. Most households depend on casual labor and subsistence agriculture, with widespread income insecurity. Structural barriers including limited access to capital, inadequate skills, weak market linkages, and restricted land access significantly constrain economic mobility. Youth unemployment and gender disparities further deepen vulnerability, while negative coping strategies such as asset sales and reduced food consumption signal deteriorating resilience.

Although agriculture remains the backbone of livelihoods, it is constrained by environmental challenges, financial limitations, and systemic gaps. However, there is emerging potential in agro-processing, poultry, livestock, small businesses, and skilled trades. With targeted investment and coordinated support, these sectors could drive diversification and sustainable economic recovery.

Strategic Way Forward

- **Short-term priorities** should focus on immediate livelihood recovery through agricultural input distribution, seasonal support, cash-based interventions, and business start-up grants.
- **Medium-term strategies** should strengthen vocational and business skills, expand irrigation and climate-resilient farming, and develop livestock and poultry value chains.
- **Long-term programming** should prioritize a secure land access systems, financial inclusion (including VSLAs and microfinance), youth enterprise incubation, and climate-smart agriculture.
- **A phased,** integrated approach is essential to transition households from crisis-level coping toward resilient, diversified, and sustainable livelihoods.

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