



Humanitarian Support for Displaced Populations: A Comparative Study of Counties of Rubkona, South Sudan, and Turkana, Kenya

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Abstract

Humanitarian support is anchored on the philosophy of saving lives and alleviating human suffering. However, targeted efforts towards sustainable livelihoods of the assisted communities remain a missed target. Priority has been on short-term relief measures focused on immediate life-saving needs, while neglecting long-term recovery, resilience-building, and livelihood sustainability. Integrating development programming anchored on annals of resilience, and sustainability, therefore remains unfulfilled. Authors opine that such initiatives within displaced populations' contexts need to be aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth) to underscore the integration of livelihoods support into humanitarian programmes. Humanitarian support theory, a composite framework that informs the design and delivery of humanitarian support in crisis settings, forms the conceptual underpinning. A pragmatist mixed-methods approach, known for enhancing the explanatory power of findings by triangulating quantitative and qualitative data, was employed. A sampling strategy blended out of census, random, and purposive sampling was deployed and a sample size of 400 was picked. Generally, health services were ranked best by both study sites on account of the humanitarian support for displaced populations, averaged at 93%. Cash support and vocational training were rated poorly, signaling inadequacy of these humanitarian supports across both counties. Ironically, these could have improved the endowment of displaced populations and the sustainability of the humanitarian support. The study recommends the programming of humanitarian support packages to address this inadequacy for the sustainability of the livelihoods of the displaced populations.

Introduction

Humanitarian support is grounded in the philosophy of saving lives and alleviating human suffering in a dignified manner, particularly among displaced populations (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2019; 2023). Making such efforts effective and targeting sustainable livelihoods for the assisted communities, especially among displaced populations, remains a key target that is often missed.



According to the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (2020), poorly designed humanitarian responses can exacerbate existing inequalities, foster dependency, distort local markets, and even prolong conflicts; hence, the need for advocacy to integrate humanitarian efforts with development programming, anchored in the principles of resilience and sustainability. Severe flooding in 2020, 2021, and 2022 resulted in widespread displacement and the disruption of essential services in disaster-prone areas of Rubkona County, South Sudan, and Turkana County, Kenya (Relief Web, 2022). Their proximity to rivers and lakes increases their geographical exposure and susceptibility to environmental risks, including widespread displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and the collapse of essential services such as health, education, and sanitation (Balgah et al., 2023; WHO, 2022; World Bank, 2021a, 2021b). The outcome is an undermined 'build back better' initiative; hence, the deliberate need for interventions that target achieving sustainable livelihoods. This assertion is supported by the findings of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) (2021) and the UNDP (2020), which indicate that humanitarian interventions have largely prioritised short-term relief measures focused on immediate life-saving needs, while neglecting the equally critical aspects of long-term recovery, resilience-building, and livelihood sustainability. Furthermore, existing initiatives have often failed to address underlying systemic issues such as poor infrastructure, weak disaster preparedness, and limited community adaptive capacity, which are essential for building resilience and achieving sustainable recovery (Finucane, 2020; UNDP, 2020).

Globally, there is a paradigm shift in the nature and extent of humanitarian support catalysed by prolonged displacements from both natural and human-induced disasters (African Union, 2009; Jeremie, 2012), together with involvement of numerous actors Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (Hilhorst et al., 2022). It's being packaged in a manner that focuses beyond immediate relief, with a growing emphasis on fostering sustainable livelihoods for displaced populations (Levine & Spencer, 2020; Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), 2021). This shift reflects the understanding that displacement often extends over long periods, necessitating durable solutions that go beyond meeting urgent needs. These solutions should be anchored in development-oriented approaches, integrating livelihood programmes into humanitarian interventions (Balgah et al., 2023; Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 2021a). According to Brown et al., (2022), International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2021; 2022), and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2020a), key strategies to assist the displaced populations include vocational training and skills development to equip displaced populations for the labour market, cash transfer and microfinance initiatives to support entrepreneurship, and improved access to the land and resources for agricultural production. While the context is displaced populations, authors opine that initiatives by humanitarian actors need to be aligned with United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere) and Goal 8 (decent work and economic growth) and underscoring the integration of livelihoods support into humanitarian programmes (Tanner & Bahadur, 2019; IOM, 2022).

According to UNHCR (2020b), Turkana County hosts a significant number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially in the Kakuma Refugee Camp. This region suffers from prolonged drought, flood and poverty, making livelihood support vital for both displaced populations and the host community (Opiyo et al., 2015; Merttens et al., 2017). Humanitarian support in Turkana focuses on livestock and pastoralist programmes aimed at improving livestock health, access to markets, and water availability. Cash-for-work programmes enable displaced individuals to earn money by participating in community development projects, such as infrastructure building (Finucane, 2020). Additionally, the Kalobeyei Integrated Social and Economic Development Programmes (KISEDPP) promote refugee self-reliance by encouraging farming and other income-generating activities alongside local communities (IRC, 2021). Studies by the Citaristi (2022) and



ReliefWeb (2022) have asserted that Rubkona County in South Sudan is heavily impacted by displacement due to floods, conflict, and instability. Many IDPs in Rubkona live in the Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites, which are set up by the UN for temporary shelter. Humanitarian efforts here are increasingly shifting from emergency support to sustainable livelihood support (Ogunfemi, 2020). These IDPs resume small-scale farming activities and support the fishing sector, which is vital for food and income generation around the Nile River (UNDP, 2020; Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 2021a). The study assessed the nature of humanitarian support on the sustainable livelihoods of displaced populations in the Counties of Rubkona, South Sudan, and Turkana, Kenya.

The extent of humanitarian support for the sustainable livelihoods of displaced populations has evolved to encompass essential services, while promoting self-reliance and resilience (Barnett, 2011; Overseas Development Institute (ODI), 2020, 2021a, 2021b). To enhance coordination and effectiveness in the delivery of support across various sectors, humanitarian assistance has been organised into cluster systems, each designed to focus on a specific area of intervention to address diverse needs (IASC, 2015; Anjete, 2023). The Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL) cluster, for instance, provides emergency food support and promotes agricultural recovery to combat hunger. In contrast, the health cluster addresses urgent healthcare needs by delivering medical supplies, disease prevention programmes, and essential health services. Regarding the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) cluster, access to clean drinking water and sanitation facilities, which are crucial for preventing disease outbreaks, is encouraged. Meanwhile, the shelter and non-food items (NFI) cluster supplies emergency housing and materials for rebuilding homes and infrastructure. There is also an education cluster that seeks to restore access to schooling, creating safe spaces for learning to help children regain normalcy during crises (IASC, 2015; WASH, 2017; Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), 2020). Weishaupt (2020) posit that achieving long-term recovery and resilience among displaced populations relies fundamentally on the sustainability of these interventions and the active involvement of affected communities. Similarly, Hawkin et al. (2021) noted that rigorous assessment, continuous monitoring, and impact evaluation are essential for evaluating program effectiveness and maintaining accountability in humanitarian operations. The study assessed the extent of humanitarian support on the sustainable livelihoods of displaced populations in the Counties of Rubkona, South Sudan, and Turkana, Kenya.

Conceptual framework

This study grounded its conceptual framework in humanitarian support theory, a comprehensive framework that informs the design and delivery of humanitarian support in crisis settings. Its origin is attributed to Henry Dunant (1863) but as a theory it has evolved and been shaped through institutional practices of organisations within the humanitarian ecosystems notably International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Geneva Conventions, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), and Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP), which have contributed significantly to its development (Barnett, 2011; Hilhorst et al., 2021). From scholarly perspectives, evolving scholarly works of Mary Anderson, Michael Barnett, Hugo Slim, and David Rieff are particularly laudable (Schweitzer, 2004; Barnett & Weiss, 2008; Jeremie, 2012). It emphasises the dual goals of meeting immediate needs and fostering pathways for long-term recovery and sustainable development, premised on humanitarian principles such as empathy, accountability, community participation, sustainability, and self-reliance to ensure that humanitarian responses are both context-sensitive and impact-driven (Slim, 2016; UNOCHA, 2021). These principles formed the foundation for assessing the nature and extent of various forms of humanitarian support, including emergency relief, livelihood programmes, and protection services, in the context of achieving sustainable livelihoods. By embedding urgency with long-term planning and rights-based approaches, along with capacity-building, Humanitarian Support Theory provides



a conceptual underpinning for analysing how interventions can support recovery and resilience among crisis-affected populations (Barnett, 2013; UNHCR, 2022).

Materials and methods

Research design

The study employed a pragmatist mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to explore the multifaceted realities faced by displaced populations in Counties of Rubkona, South Sudan, and Turkana, Kenya (Jawuoro & Ombachi, 2025). According to Creswell (2018), mixed-methods research enhances the explanatory power of findings by triangulating quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding.

Study area

This comparative study was conducted among displaced populations in the Counties of Rubkona, South Sudan, and Turkana, Kenya. Turkana County is located between a Latitude of 3.2° or 3° 12' North and a longitude of 35.4667° or 35° 28' East. In contrast, Rubkona County is located between Latitudes 9°16'48.54" North and Longitudes 29° 46' 48.87"E. The rationale for the study area is informed by its unique and pressing humanitarian challenges. Both regions are highly vulnerable to both natural and human-induced disasters (Canton, 2021). These disasters have severe impacts on local communities that are perennially displaced and spend most of their lives in IDPs, with consequent loss of livelihoods and increased reliance on humanitarian support (World Bank, 2019).

Sampling strategy

A blend of census, random and purposive sampling was deployed as the sampling strategy for the study. From the total displaced populations of 437,129, a sample size of 400 respondents was calculated using the sample determination formula described by Althubaiti (2023).

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the level of precision set at 0.05. However, 392 households were reached, representing a response rate of 98% which the authors opine was sufficient for the study. According to Jawuoro and Ombachi (2025), response rates in forced migration research are often lower due to several factors, including mobility, trauma, legal insecurities, and language barriers. Validity and reliability were ensured through the adequacy of the sample, expert input on the instruments, the use of the triangulation technique, corroboration of findings, and Cronbach's reliability analysis, consistent with assertions by Nabiswa (2025) and Babbie (2015).

Table 1: Sample size distribution of respondents in Turkana County

Sub-county	Ward	Estimated HHs	Sample Size
Turkana West	Kalobeyei	7,230	32
	Kakuma	26,122	27
Turkana Central	Kanamkemer	10,063	27
	Lodwar Township	7,080	27
Turkana South	Katilu	8,055	42
	Lokichar	12,479	53
Total		71,029	208

Source: Authors, 2025; Legend: HHs means Households



Table 2: Sample size distribution of respondents in Rubkona County

Payams	Payam	Estimated HHs	Sample Size
Rubkona	Rubkona	2,873	70
Bentiu	Bentiu	5,935	67
Budaang	Budaang	957	47
Total		9,765	184

Source: Authors, 2025; Legend: HHs means Households

Data collection

A data collection strategy for the study entailed both primary and secondary sources to ensure accuracy, depth, and relevance. Primary data were directly gathered from key informants (KIs), focus groups (FGs), and household heads (HHs), as well as through direct observations of the study area contexts. Meanwhile, secondary data were sourced from existing literature, including academic journals, newspapers and previous records from recognised institutions. Data collection tools were also standardised and piloted against 40 (10%) of the sample of 400, consistent with the assertion by Creswell and Poth (2019). Three experts specialising in addressing displaced populations were approached to review the tools before their rollout. Approvals were obtained from the university and the respective agencies responsible for research approvals in Kenya and South Sudan. Confidentiality for the participants was also assured.

Data analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics and subsequently triangulated through focus group discussions and Key Informant Interviews.

Results and discussion

Patterns of humanitarian support provision

As indicated in Table 3, a total of 332 (85%) households reported receiving food assistance, with 161 (87%) from Rubkona County, South Sudan, and 171 (82%) from Turkana County, Kenya. As for Shelter assistance, an aggregate total of 288 (73%) households, being 135 (73%) in Rubkona and 153 (74%) in Turkana, reported having been provided for with shelter. These findings highlight distinct patterns in the distribution and impact of humanitarian assistance across the two countries. Food and shelter support are the most consistently provided services and stood out on the listing of the nature of humanitarian support received by displaced populations in Rubkona and Turkana Counties. This reflects their critical importance in emergency and recovery contexts, which is corroborated by studies by Hilhorst et al. (2022) and Slim (2016).



Table 3: Nature of Humanitarian Support received by Displaced Populations in Rubkona and Turkana Counties

Humanitarian Support received	Nature	Rubkona County, S.Sudan			Turkana County, Kenya		
		Freq. (N=184)	%	Rank	Freq. (N=208)	%	Rank
Food	Not Provided	23	13		37	18	
	Provided	161	87	4	171	82	2
Cash Support	Not Provided	155	84		150	72	
	Provided	29	16	6	58	28	6
Shelter Support	Not Provided	49	27		55	26	
	Provided	135	73	5	153	74	5
Education	Not Provided	12	7		49	24	
	Provided	172	93	3	159	76	4
Health Services	Not Provided	0	0		21	10	
	Provided	184	100	1	187	90	1
WASH	Not Provided	2	1		47	23	
	Provided	182	99	2	161	77	3
Vocational Training	Not Provided	174	95		158	76	
	Provided	10	5	7	50	24	7

Source: Field data; 2025; N = 392

Health service access was reported to have been provided for by an aggregate of 371 (95%) households, being 184 (100%) in Rubkona and 187 (90%) in Turkana Counties. Only 21(10%) households in Turkana County reported lacking access to health services. The higher coverage in Rubkona reflects more substantial health system presence, as corroborated by REACH (2022), which attributes this to the presence of emergency health actors and mobile clinics in Unity State. Equally, WASH services were received by a majority of households, being an aggregate of 343 (87%) households: 182 (99%) in Rubkona and 161 (77%) in Turkana Counties. This is in contrast to only 49 (13%) households across the two Counties who reported not receiving WASH support: 2 (1%) in Rubkona and 47 (23%) in Turkana. This disparity highlights a broader WASH service gap in Turkana, aligning with WASH Cluster assessments that underscore the limited infrastructure and humanitarian presence in remote areas.

Cash support and Vocational training remain limited across both Counties, particularly in Rubkona. This disparity indicates possible constraints related to policy, logistics, or funding that hinder the deployment of cash-based interventions. Focus group discussions (FGDs) confirmed this finding; one female participant from Kalobeyei ward in Turkana remarked, “I have received cash; however, the amount was not enough.” This aligns with the UNHCR (2021) and ODI (2018) reports, which highlight the inadequacy of cash transfer values and the need for complementary support to ensure dignity and effectiveness. Additionally, this reflects a broader trend noted by IRC (2021) and Brown et al. (2022) where vocational training, among other self-reliance packages, remains underfunded and inconsistently implemented in humanitarian programs. The limited cash assistance in both Counties highlights an area where humanitarian actors may need to expand their efforts, particularly in Rubkona, where cash-based assistance reached only 16% of respondents, which is almost twice as low as in Turkana County.

During the FGDs in Rubkona and Turkana Counties, both groups said:

We have received food assistance, shelter assistance and education. One Female member from Kalobeyei wards said, I have received cash; however, the amount was not enough.

The feedback from FGD participants is corroborated by UNCHR reports, which indicate that cash assistance, although useful, is often deemed insufficient (UNHCR, 2021). Research by ODI and REACH confirms recurring gaps in cash-based support for displaced populations. This highlights the need for adjusted transfer values or complementary support to ensure adequacy and dignity (ODI, 2018).



Plate 1: Female FGD in Kalobeyei ward

Extent of humanitarian support provision

Regarding the extent of humanitarian support received by displaced populations in Rubkona and Turkana Counties, the results are as shown in Table 4. A total of 183 (99%) households out of 184 in Rubkona County reported receiving food assistance. This indicates that food assistance in Rubkona is regular, mainly, and consistent with minimal variation in delivery frequency. In Turkana County, a total of 32 (15%) households reported receiving food on a monthly basis, 23 (11%) households reported receiving it quarterly, while 112 (54%) households reported receiving it only occasionally. Additionally, 4 (2%) households reported receiving food on a weekly basis while 37 (18%) reported not receiving any food assistance at all. This finding is corroborated by a study by Ponthiawala (2015) on food and shelter standards in humanitarian action, which emphasises that food security and shelter should always be prioritised because most disasters have both adverse short-term and long-term effects on food security and shelter, requiring humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, UNHCR (2020) and Resilience and Empowerment African Community Health (REACH) (2021) noted that the erratic nature of general food distributions in Unity State, specifically in Rubkona County, was due to access constraints and insecurity.

Additionally, their joint assessments revealed that food rations often felt short of the minimum caloric requirements, especially in Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites and surrounding settlements. Studies based on WFP's Kenya Annual Country Reports of 2022 and 2023 (Citaristi, 2022; 2023) and Kalobeyei Settlement Needs Assessment (Resilient and Empowerment African Community Health (REACH), 2020) confirmed that most host community members receive food quarterly, while only a small subset such as pregnant mothers or persons with disabilities benefit from weekly distributions. Overall, the comparison highlights that Rubkona County benefited from more consistent and predictable food assistance, primarily on a monthly schedule. In contrast, Turkana County's assistance is more sporadic, with most beneficiaries receiving support only occasionally rather than on a fixed schedule.



In KIs conducted with chiefs from Kalobeyei, Kakuma, Lodwar, and Lokichar wards in Turkana County, it was confirmed that the proportion of the population receiving monthly food assistance was relatively low. The majority of people received food either occasionally or every quarter. A small percentage of individuals with specific vulnerabilities or special conditions received weekly food assistance. One key informant noted,

Climate change and global conflicts that seem to escalate have made supplies for food and even shelter materials extremely complex, and predicting supply schedules is now a nightmare for officers heading humanitarian organisations.

Table 4: Extent of Humanitarian Support Received by Displaced Populations in Rubkona and Turkana Counties
Source: Field Data; 2025; N=392

Humanitarian Support received	Extent	Rubkona			Turkana		
		Freq. (N=184)	%	Rank	Freq. (N=208)	%	Rank
Food	weekly	23	12	1	4	2	5
	monthly	142	77		32	15	
	Quarterly	18	10		23	11	
	occasionally	1	1		112	54	
	Not received	0	0		37	18	
Cash Assistance	weekly	0	0	6	2	1	6
	monthly	4	2		23	11	
	Quarterly	0	0		7	3	
	occasionally	25	14		26	13	
	Not received	155	84		150	72	
Shelter Assistance	Regularly	65	35	5	95	46	4
	occasionally	70	38		58	28	
	Not received	49	27		55	26	
Education	Regularly	159	86	4	153	74	2
	occasionally	13	7		6	3	
	Not received	12	7		49	23	
Health Services	Regularly	181	98	2	175	84	1
	occasionally	3	2		12	6	
	Not received	0	0		21	10	
WASH	Regularly	175	95	3	137	66	3
	occasionally	7	4		24	12	
	Not received	2	1		47	22	
Vocational Training	Regularly	0	0	7	0	0	7
	occasionally	10	5		50	24	
	Not received	174	95		158	76	

Conclusion

Generally, health services were ranked best due to both the nature and extent of the humanitarian assistance. Respondents rated it highly, although there was a slight variation in the Counties of Rubkona, South Sudan, and Turkana, Kenya. Cash support and Vocational training were rated poorly, signalling inadequacy of these humanitarian supports across both countries. This disparity suggests possible constraints related to policy, logistics, or funding that hinder the deployment of cash-based interventions; yet, ironically, these could have improved the endowment of displaced populations and boosted the sustainability of humanitarian support.



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