



Opportunities and Challenges in Humanitarian Support for Livelihoods among Displaced Populations in Rubkona County, South Sudan, and Turkana County, Kenya

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Abstract

Humanitarian support plays a critical role in addressing the challenges posed by disasters and conflict, which disrupt the livelihoods of affected communities. Humanitarian support refers here to assistance that addresses immediate needs and reduces vulnerability, including food, cash, shelter and non-food items, education, health and WASH, skills development and livelihood assistance. Such interventions face constraints but may also create opportunities for improved approaches. This study analysed the opportunities and challenges associated with humanitarian support in promoting sustainable livelihoods among displaced populations in Rubkona County, South Sudan, and Turkana County, Kenya. Humanitarian Support Theory provided the conceptual underpinning. Adopting a pragmatist philosophy and a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design, a cross-sectional household survey was combined with key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observation, collected concurrently between December 2024 and January 2025, analysed separately and integrated during interpretation to identify convergence, complementarity and divergence. Sampling combined purposive, random and complete enumeration procedures at different stages, giving a planned sample of 400 households and 392 valid responses. Results are reported separately for Rubkona ($n = 184$) and Turkana ($n = 208$); no pooled estimates are presented. In Rubkona the three most frequently reported challenges were insufficient support (86%), delays or disruptions in assistance (78%) and limited choice in the type of support provided (60%); the corresponding figures in Turkana were 61%, 48% and 50%. Skills development was the most preferred livelihood option in Rubkona (69%) and Turkana (49%), while resource-sharing carried greater weight in Turkana. These differences indicate that humanitarian livelihood programming should be context-responsive rather than assuming uniform priorities across displaced populations.

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Introduction

Humanitarian support comprises the actions and services aimed at saving lives, alleviating suffering and ensuring that affected populations, particularly displaced populations, receive assistance in a dignified manner (IASC, 2019). Over recent decades it has shifted from short-term relief towards an integrated approach encompassing risk reduction, emergency response, community empowerment, infrastructure development, capacity building and advocacy (Chuil & Makhanu, 2025). Chuil and Makhanu (2025) drew on the same fieldwork conducted in Rubkona County, South Sudan, and Turkana County, Kenya, and involved the same respondents. The present study extends that work by examining how humanitarian support relates to sustainable livelihoods through a comparative analysis of assistance, livelihood opportunities, challenges and preferences across the two sites. It is guided primarily by Humanitarian Support Theory, with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework and a systems perspective used as supporting interpretive lenses.

This shift has produced both difficulties and openings. Poorly designed assistance, combined with long-standing vulnerability shaped by colonial legacies, environmental fragility, governance weaknesses, persistent poverty, climate-related disaster, conflict and displacement, continues to affect large parts of the continent (ALNAP, 2020c; Chuil & Makhanu, 2025), deepening inequality, fostering dependency, distorting local markets and at times prolonging conflict (Overseas Development Institute [ODI], 2020a; OCHA, 2020a; ALNAP, 2020b). Advocacy for integrating humanitarian and development programming to build resilience has grown, yet empirical evidence on the resulting challenges and opportunities remains limited, particularly evidence comparing distinct displacement settings. Resilience here refers to the capacity of households and communities to anticipate, withstand, adapt to and recover from shocks. This study analysed the opportunities and challenges associated with humanitarian support in promoting sustainable livelihoods among displaced populations in Rubkona County, South Sudan, and Turkana County, Kenya.

Opportunities for Sustainable Livelihoods among Displaced Populations

Humanitarian support offers several routes through which displaced populations may rebuild sustainable livelihoods. Sustainable livelihoods refer to households' ability to secure adequate and lasting means of living through access to livelihood assets, opportunities and strategies. Evaluations of programmes such as the Hunger Safety Net Programme and the Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters project report gains in resilience and food security (Merttens et al., 2017; Ochieng et al., 2018), while regional bodies including the African Union and the African Development Bank have strengthened resource mobilisation and coordinated response (ALNAP, 2020a). Assistance directed at refugees and internally displaced persons increasingly emphasises self-reliance through skills, training and capital (IRC, 2021a, 2021b), and the graduation approach developed by UNHCR and the World Bank seeks to move refugees from reliance on assistance towards independent livelihoods while reducing long-term cost (World Bank, 2019). Self-reliance refers to the ability of individuals or households to meet essential needs with reduced dependence on external assistance; dependency refers to prolonged or increased reliance on assistance where that capacity is limited. Substantial obstacles nonetheless remain to livelihoods that deliver long-term economic stability (UNHCR, 2018).

Across Africa, livelihood-oriented programming has shown potential for displaced and host populations alike. In Uganda, refugees operate small businesses and supply labour that contributes to local development (World Bank, 2020a, 2021b), and inclusive economic activity supports coexistence between the two groups (World Bank, 2019). Frameworks such as the New Way of Working aim to improve humanitarian-development coordination in support of longer-term resilience (OCHA, 2020a). In both Turkana and Rubkona, aligning assistance with existing local assets, livestock, fishing, agriculture and petty trade, offers a practical route to stronger



livelihoods (Kandagor, 2005; World Bank, 2021a). Livestock health services in pastoral areas, fishing equipment for riverine and lakeside populations, and agricultural training where water is accessible can build on established practice (FAO, 2018), while seasonal water bodies in both counties support fishing as a supplementary source of food and income. Approaches of this kind can diversify local economies and reduce long-term dependency on assistance (OCHA, 2017, 2022).

Humanitarian support also faces substantial constraints. Displaced populations commonly encounter legal restrictions on employment, limited market access, and educational or linguistic barriers to economic integration, where integration refers to the extent to which displaced and host populations participate in shared social, economic, institutional and livelihood systems. Many host states restrict refugees' right to work, producing high unemployment or underemployment and weakening self-reliance (UNHCR, 2018). Funding has not kept pace with need: of approximately USD 29.6 billion requested for Africa in 2020, roughly half was secured (OCHA, 2020a), and shortfalls of this scale push agencies towards emergency response at the expense of sustained livelihood investment (OCHA, 2022). Insecurity compounds the problem, with humanitarian personnel in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan and Somalia exposed to violence and abduction (Bastagli et al., 2019; Stoddard et al., 2020), while remoteness, weak infrastructure and bureaucratic delay slow the implementation of longer-term programmes (Smith & Karanja, 2020).

Kenya's arid and semi-arid counties present distinct constraints. Refugees and internally displaced persons face legal barriers to employment and restricted access to land and water, limiting agricultural and pastoral activity, and the Kakuma and Dadaab camps sit in resource-scarce areas with minimal infrastructure (UNHCR, 2018). Camp residents therefore remain heavily dependent on assistance because movement and employment restrictions constrain self-reliance (Betts et al., 2017). In Turkana, one of Kenya's most drought-prone counties and host to Kakuma, recurrent drought, limited arable land and scarce water restrict agriculture, fishing and pastoralism; remoteness limits market access; and pressure on scarce resources periodically generates tension between refugees and host communities (World Bank, 2019; UNHCR, 2018). In South Sudan, decades of conflict and political instability have disrupted livelihoods and deepened reliance on assistance. In conflict-affected areas such as Rubkona, food insecurity, weak infrastructure and limited access to essential services predominate, and while food assistance is often a lifeline, sustained dependence impedes the transition to durable livelihoods (Maxwell et al., 2008).

Humanitarian Support Theory

Humanitarian Support Theory provided the study's conceptual foundation. Its origins are attributed to Henry Dunant (1863), but as a framework it has been shaped by the institutional practice of the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Geneva Conventions, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (Barnett, 2011; ALNAP, 2022). It emphasises the dual goals of meeting immediate need and opening pathways to longer-term recovery, premised on the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, alongside broader commitments to accountability, community participation and sustainability, with self-reliance understood as an intended livelihood and programme outcome rather than a principle. These commitments are intended to keep responses context-sensitive and impact-driven (Slim, 2016; OCHA, 2022; Chuil & Makhanu, 2025).

The theory assumes that humanitarian assistance improves livelihood outcomes when it is accessible, timely, well targeted, adequate and linked to opportunities that strengthen household capacities and assets. Conversely, delayed, inadequate, poorly targeted or predominantly short-term assistance yields limited effect and may sustain vulnerability and dependence. These



propositions guided the assessment of food, cash, shelter and non-food items, education, health and WASH, skills development and livelihood support, including their accessibility, timeliness, targeting, adequacy and perceived contribution to livelihood opportunities.

The theory informed both the interpretation of the survey results and the explanation of qualitative evidence on access to productive resources, income-generating activity, market opportunities, skills development, resource-sharing and continued dependence on humanitarian assistance. Respondents' stated livelihood preferences, such as prioritising skills development, market access or resource-sharing, were interpreted throughout as measures of perceived priority or demand, not as evidence of programme effectiveness.

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional household survey formed the quantitative strand of a concurrent embedded mixed-methods design. The target population comprised displaced populations in Rubkona County, South Sudan, and Turkana County, Kenya, who met the study's eligibility criteria. The population figures presented in Tables 1a and 1b derive from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019 census (KNBS, 2019) and the South Sudan 2008 census (Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation [SSCCSE], 2010) respectively. These are general resident population figures and were used only as reference figures for sample size estimation and contextual description; they were not treated as estimates of the number of displaced persons, nor as a complete enumeration of households eligible for humanitarian assistance. Because sample size estimation rested on general-population figures rather than a displacement-specific sampling frame, the 392 sampled households cannot be claimed to represent statistically the displaced population of either county, and this qualifies the interpretation of all findings reported below.

General census figures were used because no single, contemporaneous, displacement-specific population figure covers both study areas and corresponds precisely to the study's eligibility criteria. Displacement is dynamic, shifting with return, secondary displacement, relocation, mobility and changes in assistance coverage, so the censuses provided the most consistent officially recognised benchmarks available for the two areas. The two frames are, however, of different vintage: the Rubkona frame rests on the 2008 census and the Turkana frame on the 2019 census, an eleven-year difference in reference date that limits the direct comparability of the population denominators. The censuses were therefore treated as sampling reference frames rather than current population estimates, and the study maintained throughout a distinction between these general-population figures and the operational study population defined by the inclusion criteria.

Rubkona and Turkana were purposively selected for their recurrent exposure to disaster and displacement, flooding in Rubkona and drought in Turkana. Within each county, sampling proceeded in stages. Study locations were identified according to administrative and displacement context, and key informants were purposively selected for their knowledge of humanitarian assistance and livelihood conditions. Eligible households within the selected locations were then identified and listed by complete enumeration to establish the sampling frame, and households were randomly selected from these lists to obtain the required survey sample. Where more than one eligible household member was available, a single respondent was chosen using a predetermined household selection procedure. The survey therefore combined purposive selection of key informants, complete enumeration of eligible units at the listing stage, and random selection of households.

The survey targeted household heads and adults aged 18 years and above who had experienced displacement associated with the relevant crises and had received humanitarian support. Key informants were purposively drawn from stakeholders with direct knowledge of humanitarian support to displaced populations, including government officials, traditional leaders, NGOs and



INGOs. This eligibility criterion excluded displaced households that had received no humanitarian assistance, which introduces a potential selection limitation: households outside the assistance system were not captured, so findings on the coverage and adequacy of humanitarian support should be read as applying to recipients rather than to the displaced population as a whole.

Sample size was determined from the population reference figures following Althubaiti (2023), who notes that determination should account for study design, statistical analysis, desired precision, confidence level, population size and practical considerations. Using a population reference figure of 437,427, comprising 369,511 for Turkana and 67,916 for Rubkona, and a margin of error of 0.05, Yamane's formula gave a planned sample of approximately 400 households.

A total of 392 valid household responses was obtained, representing a 98% achievement rate against the planned sample of 400. This figure is the proportion of the planned sample successfully completed and is not a response rate, which would require the number of eligible households approached; response rates in forced migration research are frequently depressed by mobility, trauma, legal insecurity and language barriers (Jawuoro & Ombachi, 2025). Validity was addressed through expert review of the data-collection instruments to ensure that items were relevant, clear and aligned with the study objectives. Reliability was supported through pre-testing, refinement of ambiguous items, standardised administration, triangulation across household questionnaires, KIIs, FGDs, observation and document review, and consistency in coding and analysis. Cronbach's alpha is not reported: the household questionnaire consisted predominantly of binary, categorical and preference-based items rather than a single multi-item psychometric scale, so no questionnaire-wide internal-consistency coefficient, scale or item count was applicable.

$$(n=N/[1+N(e)^2]),$$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size
- e = margin of error (0.05 for 5%)

$$n = \frac{437129}{1 + 437129(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{437129}{1 + 437129(0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{437129}{1 + 1092.8225}$$

$$n = \frac{437129}{1093.8225}$$

$$n = 399.7 = 400$$

Because the allocation of the achieved sample across the two study sites was not proportional to the household frame, no pooled estimates are presented; results are reported separately for Rubkona (n = 184) and Turkana (n = 208) throughout the paper.



Table 1a: Target Population in Turkana

Sub-county	Ward	Male	Female	HHs	Pop KNBS 2019
Turkana West	Kakuma	67,297	62,247	26,122	129,544
	Kalobeyei	17,752	17,759	7,230	35,511
Turkana South	Katilu	24,886	25,422	8,055	50,308
	Lokichar	40,091	36,842	12,479	76,933
Turkana Central	Kanamkemer	22,858	23,745	10,063	46,603
	Lodwar Township	15,793	14,819	7,080	30,612
Total		188,677	180,834	71,029	369,511

Source: KNBS 2019

Table 1b: Target Population in Rubkona

Payams	Bomas	Male	Female	HHs	Total Pop SSNBS 2008
Rubkona	Rubkona	7,320	6,510	2,773	13,830
	Pakur	3,217	2,956	1100	6,173
Bentiu	Bentiu	16,866	15,090	3,482	31,956
	Biemruok	5,140	4,532	2,453	9,672
Budaang	Budaang	1,831	1,051	607	2,882
	Rotriak	1,390	2,013	350	3,403
Total		35,764	32,152	10,765	67,916

Source: SSNBS, 2008

Table 2a: 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

Table 2b: Sample size distribution of respondents in Rubkona County

Payams	Bomas	Estimated HHs	Sample Size
Rubkona	Rubkona	2,773	35
	Pakur	1100	35
Bentiu	Bentiu	3482	37
	Biemruok	2453	30
Budaang	Budaang	607	27
	Rotriak	350	20
Total		10,765	184

Source: Authors, 2025

Primary data were collected from household heads, key informants and focus groups, together with direct observation of study-area conditions; secondary data were drawn from academic literature and records of recognised institutions. Instruments comprised a structured household questionnaire, FGD and KII guides, and an observation checklist. Qualitative data from 18 KIIs, nine in each county, and 12 FGDs, six in each county with 8 to 12 participants per group, were analysed thematically using a hybrid deductive-inductive coding approach. Codes were derived from the study objectives and from emerging responses, and the codebook was refined during analysis. The researcher conducted the coding, reviewed inconsistencies, and retained divergent



and negative cases so that variation in participants' accounts was preserved. The resulting themes were used to explain the opportunities, constraints and contextual factors surrounding the quantitative findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout to protect participants' rights, dignity, privacy and confidentiality. The study received ethical approval from the Directorate of Postgraduate Studies at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, a research permit from NACOSTI in Kenya, and administrative permissions in both study areas; local leaders and community representatives were consulted to ensure cultural appropriateness. Before each interview or discussion, participants were informed of the study's purpose, their expected involvement, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to decline any question or withdraw without consequence, and informed consent was obtained in languages they understood, with translation support where necessary. Participants were assured that their participation and responses would not affect their access to humanitarian assistance or other services. Confidentiality was maintained by omitting names and assigning codes to KIIs and FGDs, and FGD participants were asked not to disclose identifying information. Given the conflict- and displacement-affected setting, the researcher avoided unnecessary probing into potentially distressing experiences and allowed participants to discontinue at any point. Where distress or protection concerns arose, participants were informed of available safeguarding and referral mechanisms and, with their consent, referred to appropriate services. All data were securely managed and used solely for the purposes of the study.

Before each interview or discussion, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their expected involvement, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time without consequences. Informed consent was obtained prior to data-collection. Participants were assured that their participation and responses would not affect their access to humanitarian assistance or other services. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding participants' names and assigning codes to KIIs and FGDs when reporting the findings. Interviews and discussions were conducted in appropriate local languages, with translation support provided where necessary. FGD participants were also encouraged not to disclose personal identifying information during group discussions. Given the conflict- and displacement-affected context, the researcher avoided unnecessary probing into potentially distressing experiences and allowed participants to discontinue their participation if they felt uncomfortable. Where distress or protection concerns arose, participants were informed of available safeguarding or referral mechanisms and, with their consent, referred to appropriate support services. All qualitative data were securely managed and used solely for the purposes of the study.

Results and Discussion

Respondents were asked to identify the challenges they experienced in accessing humanitarian support. The item permitted multiple responses, so percentages are not expected to sum to 100%, and the denominator for each site is the number of valid respondents in that site: Rubkona (n = 184) and Turkana (n = 208). The findings are summarised in Figure 1.

In Rubkona, insufficient support for everyone was the most frequently reported challenge, cited by 159 respondents (86%), followed by delays or disruptions in receiving support, 143 (78%), and limited choice in the types of support provided, 110 (60%); a further 10 respondents (5%) identified other challenges. Turkana showed the same ordering at lower magnitudes for the first two: insufficient support for everyone was reported by 126 respondents (61%), delays or disruptions by 100 (48%) and limited choice by 103 (50%), with one respondent citing another challenge. Qualitative accounts in both counties centred on perceived inequity in distribution, delay, and



limited participation in planning. Unequal access was said to create friction between recipients and non-recipients, as one key informant explained: “During distribution, there are always tensions between those who receive aid and those who don't, which causes disputes in the community.” (KII 3)

Focus group participants added that some host community members regarded assistance as unfairly favouring displaced populations: “People from the host community think the humanitarian support was unfairly given to displaced people, like their own resources are being taken.” (FGD 2, Participant 4). Delay and exclusion from planning were raised repeatedly, one key informant observing simply that “the assistance often comes late” (KII 8), and a focus group participant noting: “Since we are not part of the planning or consulted, we just have to accept whatever is given.” (FGD 1, Participant 6)

The convergence of key informant and focus group accounts indicates that perceived inequity, delay and limited participation were widely experienced rather than isolated concerns, and that they affected the acceptance of humanitarian interventions.

Read through Humanitarian Support Theory, these patterns indicate that delayed, poorly targeted and insufficiently participatory assistance weakened effectiveness, whereas livelihood-oriented support such as skills development and market access strengthened pathways towards self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods.

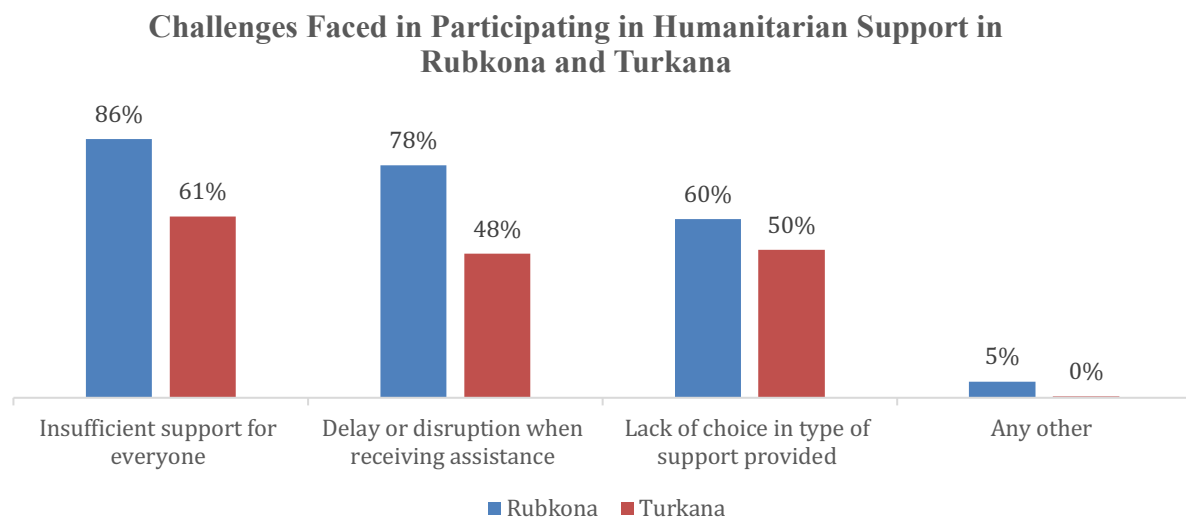


Figure 1: Challenges encountered in accessing humanitarian support in Rubkona and Turkana. Source: Field data, 2025; Rubkona (n = 184), Turkana (n = 208).

The findings are consistent with Malkki (2015), who argues that humanitarian interventions in conflict settings frequently fail to address the full complexity of affected populations' needs, generating frustration and disputes over distribution, and with Rouw (2018), who shows how governance, resource allocation and local power dynamics in South Sudan intensify conflict around assistance. Where host communities are not accounted for in distribution, assistance may be read as a diversion of local resources, which itself becomes a source of grievance. The results also indicate that skills development, market access and resource-sharing represent the principal openings for strengthening livelihoods across both counties: skills development broadens the range of income-generating activity available to households, market access supports sales,



procurement and participation in local economies (FAO, 2016), and resource-sharing arrangements allow households and communities to use available assets more efficiently.

These findings point to a need for assistance that is equitably allocated, responsive to community need, timely and informed by affected populations; without this, interventions risk entrenching division and eroding the trust on which delivery depends. The study then assessed the opportunities that could be derived from existing livelihood options available to displaced populations in the two counties, summarised in Figure 2.

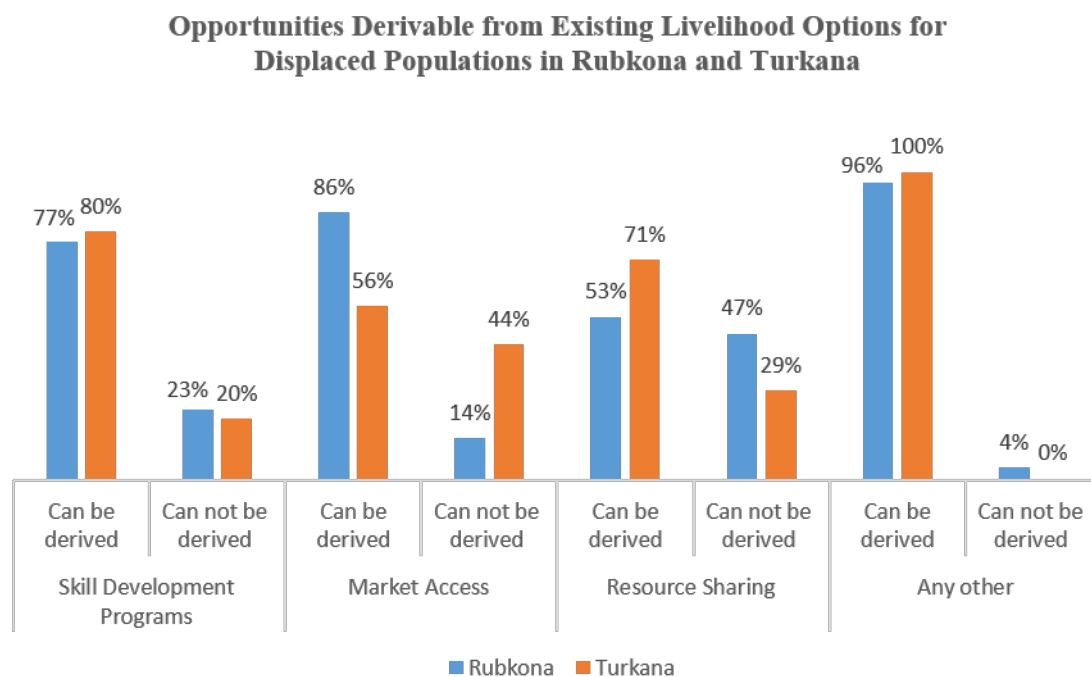


Figure 2: Opportunities derivable from existing livelihood options for displaced populations in Rubkona and Turkana.

Source: Field data; 2025; N = Rubkona (n = 184) and Turkana (n = 208)

In Rubkona, 142 respondents (77%) considered that skills development programmes could be derived from the current context and 159 (86%) that market access could be enhanced through targeted intervention. Views on resource-sharing were divided: 97 respondents (53%) saw it as a livelihood-enhancing opportunity and 87 (47%) did not, a split plausibly shaped by competition over limited resources and existing community tensions. A further 177 respondents (96%) considered that opportunities beyond the predefined categories could be identified. Turkana showed a comparable pattern with contextual differences: skills development was endorsed by 167 respondents (80%), market access by 117 (56%), and resource-sharing by 148 (71%) against 60 (29%) who did not, indicating stronger acceptance of communal resource management than in Rubkona; 207 respondents (99.5%) supported identifying additional livelihood options. These responses indicate that respondents recognised livelihood possibilities beyond those specified in the questionnaire. They should not, however, be read as evidence of dissatisfaction with predetermined humanitarian aid packages, since the survey item did not measure satisfaction with programming.

Focus group discussions in both counties elaborated on these priorities.



In Rubkona, male participants emphasised training and trade. One stated: “We need vocational training, especially for the youth, so that they can learn skills and start their small businesses.” Another identified market access as the binding constraint, noting that better access would allow people to sell what they produce and buy what they need more easily. These accounts align with evidence that diversified livelihood opportunities build resilience in conflict-affected settings (IRC, 2021a, 2021b) and that proximity to markets improves income generation (FAO, 2018).

Female participants in Rubkona focused on market proximity: “If we had access to a market nearby, it would be easier for us to sell our goods and buy food or clothes.” Others described both selling and buying as difficult without a functioning market. This reflects findings that reliable market access increases women's economic empowerment and community contribution (Smith & Karanja, 2020).

In Turkana, male participants combined skills and transport constraints. One observed: “We need training in livelihoods. People want to work, but they don't have the skills.” Another explained that the market is too distant to reach even when he has goods to sell, and that transport would make a substantial difference. These accounts are consistent with evidence that poor infrastructure and limited vocational opportunity restrict adaptive capacity in Turkana (Smith & Karanja, 2020).

Female participants in Turkana prioritised training: “We need training, such as tailoring or other skills, so we can support our families.” Others described the difficulty of selling charcoal when viable markets are distant and unreachable without assistance. Their interest in vocational training corresponds with evidence that gender-sensitive skill-building helps women in drought-affected areas move towards non-agricultural livelihoods (World Bank, 2021b), while distance to markets reflects wider constraints on women's mobility and economic participation in pastoralist communities.

Taken together, these accounts indicate a need for context-specific, community-informed programming that draws on local capacity and remains responsive to emerging priorities, with particular attention to market systems in Turkana and to conflict-sensitive, equitable resource-sharing arrangements in Rubkona.

Respondents also reported their level of preference for each identified livelihood option. Because the options were presented as separate rating items rather than as a single mutually exclusive question, the findings are reported as preference levels rather than as a strict ranking of livelihood options, and are summarised in Figure 3.



Ranking Opportunities from Section 16a Based on Preferences

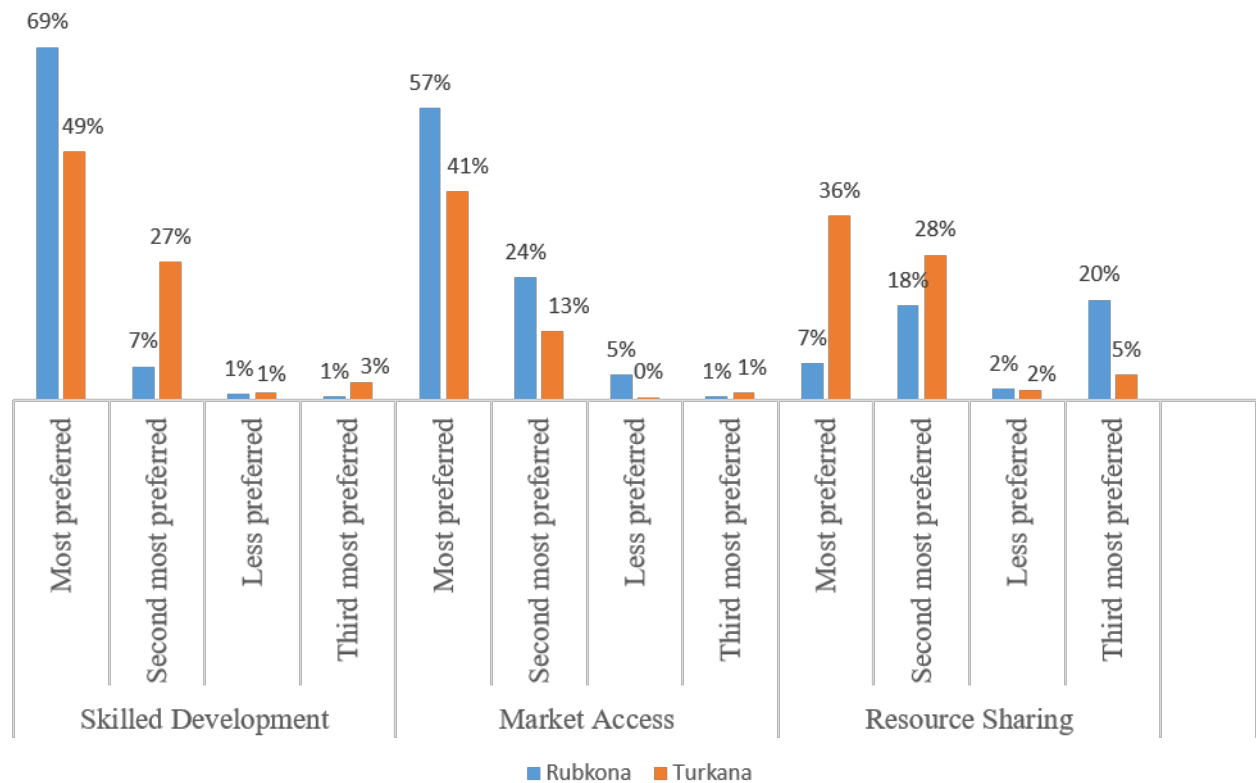


Figure 3: Reported livelihood opportunity preference levels.

Source: Field data; 2025; N = Rubkona (n = 184) and Turkana (n = 208)

Each option was rated independently, so the results do not constitute a forced ranking in which respondents were required to select only one option as first, second, third or least preferred. Responses for each option therefore do not necessarily sum to the full study-site sample, and the denominator for every percentage is the relevant site sample: Rubkona (n = 184) and Turkana (n = 208).

In Rubkona, skills development drew the highest proportion of most preferred responses, selected by 127 respondents (69.0%), with 12 (6.5%) placing it second, 1 (0.5%) third and 2 (1.1%) as less preferred. This indicates substantial interest in interventions that strengthen practical skills, employability, self-reliance and longer-term livelihood prospects.

Market access was also strongly preferred in Rubkona, identified as most preferred by 105 respondents (57.1%) and as second preference by 44 (23.9%), with 1 (0.5%) rating it third and 9 (4.9%) as less preferred, reflecting its role in trade, income generation and economic participation among displaced populations.

Resource-sharing attracted fewer most preferred responses in Rubkona, selected by 13 respondents (7.1%), with 34 (18.5%) placing it second, 36 (19.6%) third and 4 (2.2%) as less preferred. It therefore remained a relevant livelihood mechanism for a minority of respondents without being a leading priority.



In Turkana, skills development was again widely preferred, identified as most preferred by 101 respondents (48.6%), second by 56 (26.9%), third by 7 (3.4%) and less preferred by 3 (1.4%), demonstrating considerable interest in skills-based livelihood interventions.

Market access was identified as most preferred by 85 respondents (40.9%) in Turkana and as second preference by 28 (13.5%), with 3 (1.4%) rating it third and 1 (0.5%) as less preferred, indicating its continued relevance for trade, employment and income generation.

Resource-sharing drew markedly stronger preference in Turkana than in Rubkona, identified as most preferred by 75 respondents (36.1%) and as second preference by 59 (28.4%), with 10 (4.8%) rating it third and 4 (1.9%) as less preferred. This may reflect the importance of communal access to livelihood resources in pastoral and resource-dependent settings, including shared access to water and grazing. The interpretation is contextual, however, and should not be treated as a direct causal finding of the survey.

Overall, skills development and market access were important livelihood preferences at both sites, while resource-sharing was more frequently identified as a highly preferred option in Turkana than in Rubkona. Because preference levels were reported separately for each option, these patterns should be read as reported preferences rather than as a mutually exclusive ranking of the three livelihood options.

The qualitative findings from KIIs and FGDs showed both convergence and divergence with these patterns, across study sites and across participant groups.

Market access and skills development were identified as important priorities in most groups, while resource-sharing was given lower priority by some. A male FGD participant in Rubkona stated:

“Market access is our top priority, followed by skills development, with resource-sharing ranked last.” (FGD 1, Male Participant)

Key informants similarly emphasised market access and skills development as central to strengthening livelihood opportunities and household self-reliance, converging with the survey results. The prominence of market access corresponds with evidence that improved access to markets is a key enabler of economic recovery and livelihood sustainability in post-conflict and disaster-affected areas, offering immediate income-generating opportunities and access to essential goods (FAO, 2018).

Female participants in Rubkona placed skills development first, followed by market access, with resource-sharing last. This ordering reflects gender-specific constraints and aspirations in post-crisis recovery: women in fragile settings often favour vocational training because it supports autonomy and offers income pathways compatible with domestic responsibilities, while market access remains necessary to realise acquired skills (Betts et al., 2017).

In Turkana, household survey preferences differed from those expressed through collective male deliberation: male participants ranked resource-sharing first, followed by market access, while skills development ranked last. This divergence highlights the importance of combining household-level preferences with community-level consultation when designing livelihood interventions.

Placing resource-sharing first reflects the communal and pastoralist traditions of Turkana, where shared access to land, water and grazing is essential. This corresponds with evidence that cooperative use of natural resources underpins both social cohesion and environmental resilience in pastoralist systems, particularly during drought (Smith & Karanja, 2020).

Female participants in Turkana placed market access first, followed by skills development, with resource-sharing last, mirroring patterns identified by ODI (2021), whose work found that women in arid regions



value proximity to markets for household provisioning and for monetising small-scale goods such as firewood, beadwork and food products. Resource-sharing was placed lowest, plausibly because women typically hold less influence within communal resource governance structures.

Skills development and market access were therefore consistently prioritised across both counties, while resource-sharing carried greater weight in Turkana. This is consistent with the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, which emphasises strengthening livelihood assets, particularly human and financial capital, as the basis for sustainable livelihood strategies: skills development builds human capital, while improved market access enhances the capacity to convert livelihood resources into income. The greater salience of resource-sharing in Turkana reflects a systems perspective in which household and community well-being depends on interaction between social, economic and resource systems. The divergence between household-level preference and collective male deliberation in Turkana further reinforces the case for combining both sources of evidence when designing livelihood interventions.

Conclusion

Humanitarian support in Rubkona and Turkana faced persistent structural constraints while also presenting context-specific livelihood openings. Delay, perceived inequity, limited participation and insufficient coverage constrained the effectiveness of interventions at both sites, although the magnitude of each differed between them. Skills development, market access and locally appropriate resource-sharing mechanisms emerged as the principal pathways towards self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods, with resource-sharing carrying distinctly greater weight in Turkana.

Two limitations qualify these conclusions. Sample size estimation drew on general-population census figures of different vintage rather than a displacement-specific frame, so the findings cannot be taken as statistically representative of either county's displaced population, and the cross-site denominators are not directly comparable. Eligibility was also confined to households that had received humanitarian assistance, so the findings on coverage describe recipients rather than the displaced population as a whole. Subject to these qualifications, humanitarian and development programming should be participatory and context-responsive rather than assuming uniform priorities across displaced populations. Affected populations should participate in planning, implementation and evaluation, and livelihood support should combine vocational training, cash-based assistance, market linkage and equitable resource-sharing arrangements, remaining flexible to changing conditions and inclusive of youth, women, older persons and persons with disabilities.

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