

TURKANA COUNTY

CLIMATE CHANGE, FOOD SECURITY AND MENTAL HEALTH IN TURKANA: FINDINGS AND PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

Fact Sheet | October 2026

Turkana County faces interconnected challenges as drought, extreme heat and economic pressures threaten livelihoods, food security, nutrition and community well-being. Findings from the Visibilize4ClimateAction project show that 92% of surveyed households experienced a climatic shock in the past 12 months, while 97% were severely food insecure. Child wasting stood at 17%, above the World Health Organization's 15% threshold for very high wasting, and 56% of women of reproductive age were underweight. In addition, 64% of households had taken no action to prepare for future shocks.

Despite these challenges, opportunities exist to strengthen resilience. Turkana has comprehensive climate change policies and an action plan; and a rich but underused base of at least 37 crops, 17 food trees and 45 wild food species that could help improve diets and food availability. Priorities include strengthening early food assistance and preparedness, addressing child wasting and women's undernutrition, improving access to water and nutritious local foods, and integrating mental health into climate response and health services.

At a glance

97% of households are severely food insecure; 60% use crisis-level coping (n = 491 households)	92% of households experienced a climatic shock; severe drought (79%) and extreme heat (75%) lead (n = 491 households)	17% of children under 5 are wasted, above the 15% emergency threshold; underweight 22%, stunting 15% (n = 410 (stunting), 425 (underweight), 418 (wasting))
56% of women of reproductive age are underweight, BMI under 18.5 (N = 140)	64% of households did nothing to prepare for future shocks (n = 491 households)	0.3 Turkana has the lowest food production diversity (score 0.3) and only 5 months of adequate food a year

About Turkana and the data

The Visibilize4ClimateAction project, funded by Wellcome and led by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), aims to make visible how climate change affects the nutrition and mental health of vulnerable people in East African drylands so that climate policy and practice change at scale.

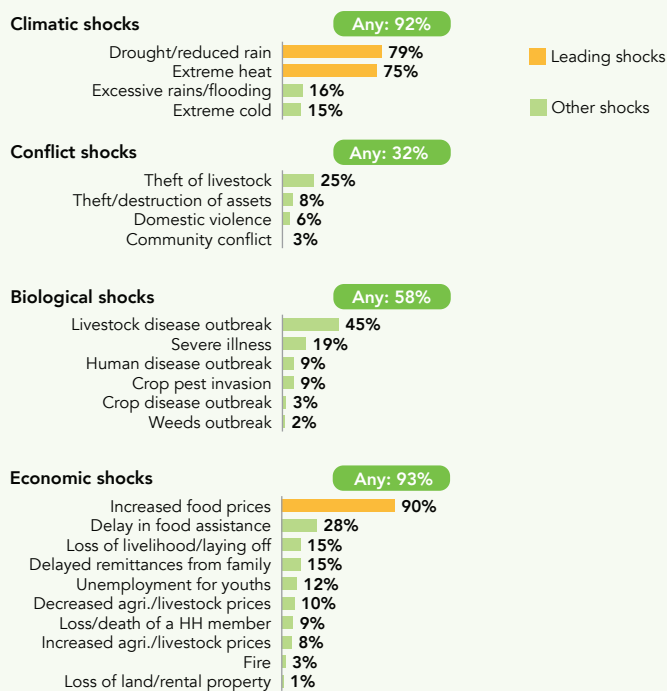
The findings presented here focus on Turkana Central and North, an arid, with semi-nomadic pastoralism and more petty trade than the other two project counties. 66% of household heads and 79% of caregivers have no formal schooling, and only 2% of households have water on their premises. The household survey covered **491 households with at least one child under 5** and their mothers, so the figures describe households with young children, not every household in the county. Data was collected in April and May 2025. Community voices come from **focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, oral history and 21 food tree portfolios** with an estimated 400 participants in 7 villages (Arutokora, Eperetet, Nablun, Lokirimo, Kiwanja Ndege, Nadunga and Ngakaoges) as well as **key informant interviews** with county officials, implementing partners, local CBOs and community leaders.

What we found

A. Drought, heat and high food prices strip pastoral households of food and income

- **92%** of households faced a climatic shock and **93%** an economic shock. Severe drought (79%) and extreme heat (75%) lead, and 90% reported higher food prices.
- Drought brought pasture loss (85%). Heavy rain damaged property (58%), killed livestock (58%) and brought disease outbreaks (44%).
- **65%** of households reported reducing food below survival levels; 63% bought on credit, 61% cut non-essential spending and 50% sold livestock. 28% reported delays in food assistance.
- **64%** did nothing to prepare for future shocks.

Fig 1. Shocks experienced in the last 12 months (N = 491)

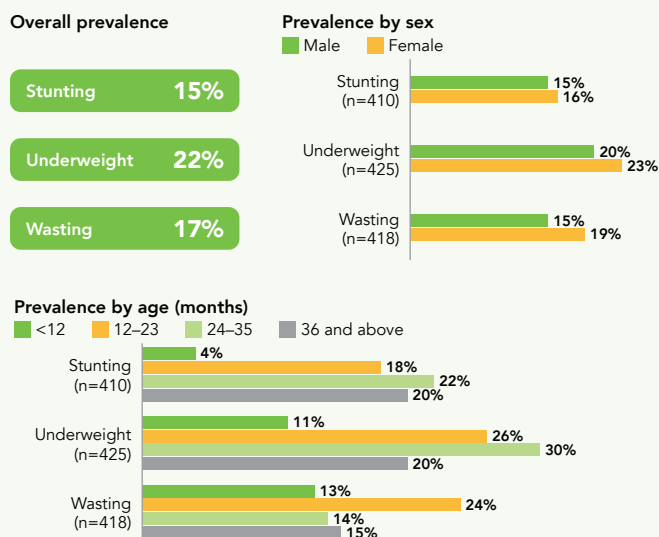


B. Urgent nutrition needs, and local foods and markets offer ways to improve diets

- **97%** of households are severely food insecure and 60% use crisis-level coping. Households rely on cereals (99%), oils (81%) and sugar (76%); only 38% eat vegetables, 38% milk and 11% fruit.
- Child wasting is **17%**, above the 15% WHO threshold for very high wasting; it is 19% in girls against 15% in boys and peaks at 24% at 12–23 months. Underweight is 22% and stunting 15% (n = 450).

- 56% of women of reproductive age are underweight, and 15% of pregnant women have a mid-upper arm circumference under 21 cm. Among children aged 6–23 months (n = 233), only 1% reach a minimum acceptable diet, 81.6% eat no fruit or vegetables and 64% have sweet drinks.
- Turkana has the lowest food production diversity (score 0.3) and **5 months of adequate food a year**. Only 2% of households grow trees, but 54% collect wild foods, and 97% walk to market. Higher production diversity and market access are linked to better diets.

Fig 2. Malnutrition levels for children under five



C. Screening rates are low and mental health support is largely absent

- Depression 18%, anxiety 10% and PTSD 9% among household heads and caregivers (n = 732); depression reaches 20% in caregivers under 25.
- In the Turkana model, the link between exhausting food-based coping strategies and poor mental health was **not statistically significant**.
- Mental health integration in policy is rated limited in Turkana.

D. An active county climate fund is a route to action, but mental health is missing from policy

- Turkana has a County Climate Change Act 2021, Climate Change Policy 2021 and Climate Change Action plan 2023–2027; and its County Climate Change Fund is **actively financing locally identified priorities**. Climate–agriculture integration is **strong**; nutrition integration and policy coordination are **moderate**; however mental health integration is **limited**.
- The establishment of the Turkana County Mental Health Council provides an institutional mechanism for strengthening attention to mental wellbeing and should be leveraged to enhance mental health policy integration.
- Turkana hosts at least 37 crops, 17 food trees and 45 wild food species, yet priorities favour exotic fruit trees over native species that fill lean-season gaps. Focus groups asked for training, quality seedlings and water pans to buffer droughts.
- Women and pastoralists face barriers to land, finance and services across the county.

Key indicators for Turkana

Indicator	Turkana (arid)
Households with any climatic shock in the past 12 months	92%
Households severely food insecure	97%
Households doing nothing to prepare for future shocks	64%
Households taking over 30 minutes to fetch water	64%
Children under 5: wasting / stunting / underweight (n = 450)	17% / 15% / 22%
Women of reproductive age underweight, BMI under 18.5 (n = 140)	56%
Women reaching minimum dietary diversity	13%
Depression / anxiety / PTSD (n = 732)	18% / 10% / 9%
Food production diversity score; months of adequate food	0.3; 5 months

What this means for Turkana

1. **Intervene before households reach crisis-level hunger.** With 97% severely food insecure and 28% reporting delayed food assistance, scale early food assistance, cash transfers and livestock insurance, and time them to drought alerts. (*Action for the County and national government.*)
2. **Treat and prevent wasting, and focus on women.** Target children aged 12–23 months and girls, and tackle undernutrition among women, 56% of whom are underweight. (*Action for the County health and nutrition teams.*)
3. **Improve young children's diets with local foods.** Only 1% of children aged 6–23 months reach a minimum acceptable diet. Promote native food trees and wild foods and strengthen market

access, both linked to better diets. (*Action for the County health, agriculture and livestock departments.*)

4. **Build mental health into response and services.** Mental health integration in policy is limited. Add psychosocial support to drought and flood response plans and screening to health services, even though measured rates are lower. (*Action for the County health department.*)
5. **Leverage the County Climate Change Fund for preparedness and water.** With 64% doing nothing to prepare and 64% taking over 30 minutes to fetch water, leverage climate funds for water and preparedness suited to pastoral livelihoods, with women included in decisions. (*Action for the County government and ward committees.*)

Partners



For more information

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Collaborators



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