

Strengthening Displacement Solutions Through Agricultural Investment:

Cross-Country Evidence

i. Context

In 2025, FAO DIEM collected data on forcibly displaced populations across 12 countries, covering 8,000 displaced households primarily in rural areas¹. The data confirms a consistent and policy-relevant finding: **agriculture remains central to livelihoods in displacement contexts**. Across internally displaced people (IDPs), returnees and refugees, agricultural livelihoods continue to underpin income generation, food access and resilience, even where access to land is severely constrained. Yet displacement disrupts land access, asset ownership and market participation. Without restoring agricultural productive capacity, emergency food needs persist, coping strategies intensify and returns fail to translate into durable solutions. FAO is uniquely positioned to address this nexus between displacement, agriculture and food security, linking life-saving response with durable solutions.

ii. Key Findings

1. Agriculture Remains Central to Livelihoods in Displacement Contexts

Displacement disrupts agriculture, but it does not erase it. While agricultural systems are interrupted, their structural importance for displaced households endures. Where current engagement in agriculture is low, pre-displacement reliance on agriculture was consistently high, indicating that displacement disrupts, but does not diminish, the importance of agricultural livelihoods.

Across multiple countries, agricultural engagement among displaced populations remains high:

- In Burkina Faso, 84% of IDPs were engaged in agriculture in the previous 12 months, compared to 97% of permanent residents.
- In Cameroon, engagement is nearly identical (68% of IDPs vs. 69% of permanent residents).
- In DRC, 54% of IDPs and 63% of returnees rely on agriculture, compared to 65% of permanent residents.
- In Nigeria, agricultural engagement among returnees reaches 99%, nearly equal to permanent residents (96%).

Where current engagement is lower, pre-displacement reliance was consistently high:

- In Mali, 93% of IDPs farmed before displacement; only 39% are currently engaged. Among those no longer farming, 71% cite lack of land access due to land being too expensive to buy or rent and scarcity.
- In Yemen, 46% of IDPs relied on agriculture before displacement, compared to 33% currently.
- In Chad, 42% of returnees were engaged in agriculture before displacement, yet only 8% are currently; 69% report losing access to land upon return.

¹ The geographical coverage, sample design and survey modality depends on the country.

- In Afghanistan, 45% of returnees farmed before displacement, but only 31% are currently engaged, compared to 98% of permanent residents.
- In Haiti, only 17% of IDPs report current agricultural engagement (vs. 51% of permanent residents), at least partially due to IDP's being concentrated in urban and peri-urban locations.

2. Agriculture Is a Major Income Source for Displaced Households

Across nearly all surveyed countries, agricultural activities rank among the top income sources for displaced households in the three months preceding the survey, whether through crop farming, livestock, or casual farm labour. Agriculture is not marginal income supplementation; it is a primary livelihood pillar in displacement settings.

Key examples:

- In Nigeria, 88% of returnees rely on crop farming as a main income source.
- In Burkina Faso, nearly one-third of IDPs depend on livestock.
- In Chad, 26% of refugees earn income through casual farm labour; among returnees, 18% rely on casual farm labour and 20% on agricultural trading. Aid constitutes a main income source for 47% of refugees and 29% of returnees, the highest rates observed across surveyed countries².
- Casual farm labour is also significant among IDPs in Nigeria (32%), Myanmar (23%), and Mali (17%).

Income diversification varies considerably:

- Only 37% of Nigerian returnees rely on a single income source.
- By contrast, 89% of IDPs in Haiti report relying on only one source of income, signalling high vulnerability to shocks.

3. Return Alone Does Not Lead to Recovery

The food security of returnees is not necessarily better than that of IDPs and refugees. Where returnees are supported, outcomes improve. Where they are not, vulnerability persists or worsens and displacement cycles often continue. Without livelihood assistance, return risks becoming a relocation of vulnerability rather than a pathway to durable solutions. Targeted assistance, particularly access to land and agricultural livelihoods can transform return into recovery.

DIEM data shows that return does not automatically improve food security outcomes. In several contexts:

- Returnees face comparable or worse food security outcomes than IDPs. In Sudan and DRC, returnees display worse food security outcomes than IDPs, with lower rates of acceptable Food Consumption Scores (FCS) and high reliance on livelihood coping strategies.

² This is partly explained by the survey's coverage in refugee camps and host communities where humanitarian aid is more concentrated and accessible.

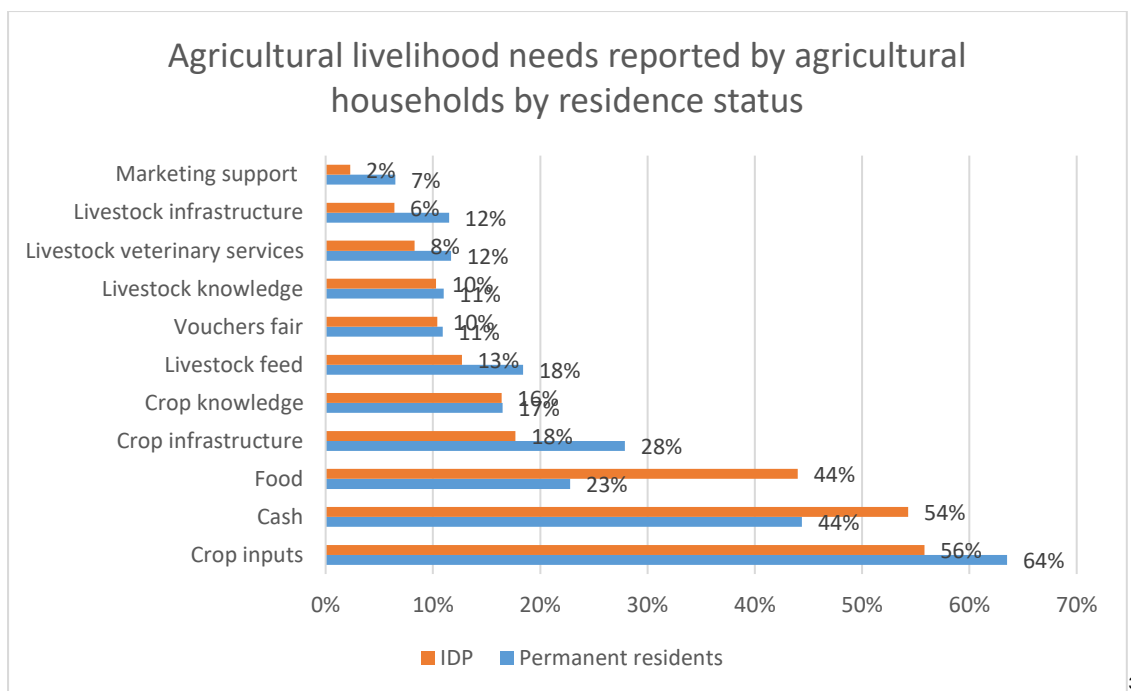
- In contrast, in Nigeria, returnees fare better than IDPs, a difference at least partially explained by assistance levels: 47% of agricultural returnees reported receiving aid, compared to 19% of permanent residents, despite similar reported need for assistance (90–92%).
- Land access is a barrier to livelihood re-establishment for returnees (e.g., 69% of returnees in Chad report loss of land access upon return).

4. Displaced Agricultural Households Prioritize Productive Support

Across contexts, displaced agricultural households consistently prioritize restoring agricultural productive capacity, often alongside or even above immediate food assistance. They seek not merely to meet short-term needs, but to plant, to harvest and to restore the livelihoods that sustained them before displacement.

- Crop inputs were the most frequently requested assistance needed by agricultural IDPs to support their livelihoods, above cash (54%) and immediate food assistance (44%).
- When grouped, food, cash and vouchers was requested by 76% of agricultural IDPs, compared to 56% of permanent agricultural residents, underscoring the heightened vulnerability of displaced populations and their more limited capacity to meet basic needs without external assistance.
- Crop production support (inputs, infrastructure, and knowledge) was requested by 59% of agricultural IDPs.
- Livestock production support (feed, veterinary services, infrastructure, and knowledge) was requested by 21% of agricultural IDPs, compared to 29% of permanent residents. These figures reflect the importance of livestock as both a productive asset and a safety net, particularly in contexts where crop farming is constrained by limited land access or insecurity.

While immediate food and cash assistance are urgently needed, the demand for crop inputs, livestock support and other agricultural assistance reflects a desire to move beyond short-term relief and towards rebuilding agricultural livelihoods. Interventions that restore productive capacity—seeds, tools, veterinary care, access to land— complemented with food and cash assistance, would address both immediate needs while building households’ resilience to food insecurity.



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5. Food Insecurity is High, and “Acceptable” Food Consumption May Mask Problematic Coping Strategies

Displaced populations are generally food insecure regardless of status. Even where diets appear adequate, households often achieve this only by depleting assets and resources through harmful coping strategies, a pattern visible across Haiti, Sudan and DRC, as well as among permanent residents in Cameroon, Myanmar, Yemen, and Nigeria. The Food Consumption Score alone underestimate vulnerability but coupled with coping strategy indicators illustrate that food consumption is often being maintained at the cost of long-term resilience and asset depletion.

- Across nearly every country surveyed, displaced people and returnees have lower rates of acceptable food consumption score (FCS) than permanent residents. The exception is for returnees in Nigeria, which may be partially explained by the fact that agricultural returnees in Nigeria received significantly more aid than permanent residents (47% vs 19%).
- The gap in FCS is largest in Burkina Faso and Myanmar, where displaced and returnee populations have roughly half the rate of acceptable diets compared to non-displaced households.
- In Haiti, Sudan and DRC, households show acceptable food consumption alongside high Livelihood Coping Strategy Index (LCSI) scores, indicating harmful coping mechanisms at play to maintain adequate levels of food consumption.
- In Cameroon, Yemen, Nigeria, Myanmar, Mali and Burkina Faso, many IDPs experience both poor food consumption and high use of harmful coping strategies, demonstrating high vulnerability to food insecurity and a compromised capacity to withstand future shocks.

³ Data comes from needs reported by agricultural households in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, DRC, Haiti, Myanmar, and Sudan.

- In Afghanistan, both returnees and permanent residents show poor food consumption combined with high coping, demonstrating that residence status alone does not determine food security outcomes and needs for emergency aid.

iii. Conclusion

Across 12 countries and 8,000 displaced households, the evidence is clear and consistent: agriculture remains the backbone of livelihoods in displacement contexts. Displacement disrupts access to land, assets and markets, but it does not diminish agriculture's structural importance for income generation, food access and resilience. Where engagement declines, it is driven not by loss of relevance, but by loss of access resources and land.

The data show that agriculture is not a marginal coping activity; it is a primary income source for IDPs, returnees and refugees alike. At the same time, return alone does not lead to recovery. Without targeted support to restore productive capacity, returnees often face food insecurity and resort to harmful coping strategies, risking asset depletion and continued cycles of displacement.

Displaced households consistently signal their intent to re-engage in agriculture when constraints are addressed. Strengthening access to land, inputs, livestock, markets and value chains is therefore not only a livelihood intervention, but a recovery strategy.

The cross-country evidence underscores a central conclusion: durable solutions to displacement cannot be achieved without restoring agricultural livelihoods. Investment in agriculture is not peripheral to displacement response, it is foundational to reducing food insecurity, rebuilding resilience and enabling sustainable return and local integration.