

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF FOOD AID PROGRAMS IN STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE AMONG PASTORALIST COMMUNITIES IN KAJIADO COUNTY



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ABSTRACT

Communities in the Kenya's arid lands experience chronic food insecurity due to repeated occurrences of drought and unstable livelihoods. As food aid becomes a repeated form of intervention, there has been debate about its overall effectiveness over the long term and as it relates to household resilience. This study investigates the role of food aid delivery to pastoralist households in Kajiado County on their resilience. The study was conducted between May to September 2024, with 45 participants, purposively selected including 25 household interviews, 12 focus group interviewees and 8 key informants (e.g., local leaders, aid workers, and government officials). The data were analyzed thematically with a focus on patterns in how people experience or understand food aid. Results indicate that 84% of respondents viewed food aid as vital for short-term survival during a period of drought. Yet only 12% connected it with improvement in long-term recovery or readiness for the next drought. About 64% of participants reported turning to reactive coping strategies such as charcoal production, beadwork, or informal labor when aid was delayed or insufficient. The data disclosed recurring concerns about inconsistency of supply, politicized distribution, and weak links between emergency relief and broader livelihood support. Food assistance was generally treated as a buffer, not a basis to build and attain sustainable resilience. The findings show while food aid satisfies immediate needs, it is insufficient in helping in long term adaptation strategies in the dryland economies. The study highlights a gap between emergency support services and community-defined paths to resilience.

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INTRODUCTION

In East Africa, particularly in dryland areas, drought is no longer merely an environmental disturbance it is a threat to the viability of pastoralist systems that depend on land, livestock, and social relations (Semplici & Campbell, 2023). These recurring climatic shocks extend beyond food insecurity; they threaten erasure of cultural identity, fracture intergenerational knowledge transition, and literally stretch traditional safety nets to the breaking point (Ofori et al., 2021; Tora et al., 2022). As droughts become more frequent and severe in scope and impact, food aid has been adopted as a common response tool (Barrett, 2021). There is the growing recognition that food aid, although an immediate response, represents a long-term vulnerability that has created a cycle of dependence rather than adaptation. The dilemma adapted given that it is strongest in Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) and among pastoralist communities, including the Maasai of Kajiado County, which have been provided with food assistance, typically after major livestock mortality or failed rains (Cherono & Recha, 2024). Despite decades of food aid support from external sources, many of these regions are still living with chronic fragility. Food assistance in these regions can displace traditional systems of risk pooling, while others suggest that food aid can reinforce those systems if it is delivered in consideration of local systems of governance and sovereignty (Ndiritu, 2021; Yala et al., 2020). These competing interpretations of the role of food assistance in pastoralist systems begs the question, can food assistance efforts be 'framed' in a way that can support pastoralist resilience, or are they invariably 'part of the package' causing local initiatives to become less viable and championing agency?

This study responds to that question by examining how food aid was distributed, perceived, and adapted in pastoralist communities in Kajiado County between 2020 and 2025. The aim is to assess whether these interventions

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improved household food security and whether they strengthened or undermined efforts toward livelihood diversification. Special attention is given to the real-world complexities of aid delivery including who receives support, who is left out, and how local actors navigate or reshape these interventions. The goal is not just to measure aid effectiveness, but to understand its interaction with existing cultural and survival systems.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: It begins with a literature review that discusses by design how resilience, aid, and pastoralist adaptation are theorized through the ethical and political economies of intervention; then the results section describes community understandings of aid, particularly where and how that aid is used, people are excluded, and local improvisation occurs; next, the discussion situates those findings in relation to wider debates on governance and resilience; and finally, the conclusion suggests implications for policy, and areas for further research especially for better convergence of aid with local regimes of knowledge and affordance for existing coping strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter utilizes Social-Ecological Resilience Theory and Political Ecology to provide the study's context. Social-Ecological Resilience Theory is based on the premise that people and environment are interrelated systems that are able to find new equilibrium after stress, and that systems can recover after being shocked (Kuhmonen, 2020). It can help explain the variety of responses of households when faced with a new disruption such as drought, suggests that communities deal with these disruptions by adopting appropriate strategies such as herd retention or income diversification. However, while resiliency provides some insight into the dynamic of local adaptation to stress, it misses an account of the political and institutional contexts which constrain who is getting assistance and how (Angeler et al., 2020). According to Stagner and Mulundano (2024) resilience is not just about ecological capacity or local knowledge but also embedded in governance systems and a history of marginalization

Political Ecology provides a greater depth of analysis regarding power, inequality, and institutional authority to fill this gap. Political Ecology is rooted in the writings of Blaikie and Watts and is elaborated upon through the writings of others, such as Sultana (2021). Political Ecology connects environmental vulnerabilities with the political and economic structures that constitute the decision-making processes involved when addressing food insecurity (Ajl, 2023). In a context like Kajiado County, land tenure, water access, and mobility are entangled with the power of donors, which makes Political Ecology useful in some ways to discuss who benefits from food aid (and to what extent) while also remaining vulnerable to shocks. Connecting Political Ecology with the Social-Ecological Resilience Theory enabled the research to look at both the local strategies communities used to cope with shocks, as well as the larger systems within which they operate, which shapes both their options and outcomes.

Even in the empirical sense, the connection between food aid and community resilience is one of the most contentious topics under debate in development practice, especially for fragile rural spaces that have been impacted by climate shocks. On one hand, humanitarian emergency food aid is often credited for preventing widespread hunger crises after periods of failed rains or livestock loss. However, while this effect is temporary and exists on a shorter-term basis, it can foster long-term dependence on food aid and stagnation in community ecosystems and local coping strategies. This raises a fundamental question: are these interventions offering a ladder out of crisis, or is the reality that they only delay the collapse?

A growing body of literature supports the idea that food aid can build resilience when combined with assets that enhance productive capacity, such as food-for-assets programs or conditional transfers. Olney et al. (2020) advanced this approach by coordinating efforts between the World Food Programme, its experts, and nutrition researchers to integrate food aid with maternal and child nutrition goals. Using a design-thinking approach, they developed harmonized theories of change, identified key nutrition entry points, and proposed rigorous evaluation methods. While the framework was conceptually strong, it assumed ideal implementation conditions that rarely exist in fragile, drought-prone areas. In such settings, hybrid interventions often become overloaded with expectations and strain local systems beyond capacity. Moreover, standardized models, however well-designed, risk inefficiency and loss of trust when they cannot adapt to shifting political, cultural, or logistical realities. Although Olney et al.'s model made a compelling theoretical case, its ability to address the complexity of real-world implementation remained underdeveloped.

On the other hand, Shisler et al. (2023) explored how, within the context of basic needs insecurity, North Carolina State University utilized asset-mapping workshops (community-based participatory research [CBPR] method) to engage with campus members around the issue of identifying and sharing resources. Participants identified many good short-term resources, such as food-pantry, emergency funds, etc., but also surface more complex and long-standing issues such as low pay, housing affordability and historic marginality experienced by historically marginalized students (e.g., low-income, weak ties, first in family students, etc.). The analysis of the evidence suggests that CBPR and asset-mapping approaches can help amplify under-represented student voices and shed light on structural issues that are often overlooked when assessing needs using traditional approaches. Nonetheless, the authors pointed to a situation that is a big challenge with asset-based approaches - continuity. Once the institution lost funding or oversight, or its importance waned, progress on these practices stalled or even reverted. This raises the question: can any time-bound, short-term access program make credible claims to reduce vulnerability in a forever vulnerable system?

Recent criticisms of resilience programs propose that "resilience" is a vocabulary word funded by donors to make it sound like they can use the word - and the word sometimes means: we are not making any significant strides in the process of building local capacity. Seeger et al. (2024) contend that resilience programs care so much for short-term outcomes that they disregard sustainability and structural support, in favor of short-term success. The authors address the role of communications and shared meanings relative to true recovery, but claim that all of this would be meaningless without ongoing sustained investment. Mosurska et al. (2023) similarly, demonstrate that aid narratives erase colonial histories

within partnerships and Indigenous voices, perpetuating and exacerbating dependency instead of supporting autonomy. Together, both case studies highlight a shared problem: without understanding the deeper impacts of measurable success, on agency and power, aid research would be understood wholly as an evaluation tool.

Longitudinal studies have provided insight into how food aid, while responding to immediate food insecurity, can undermine longer term resilience. Bowen et al. (2022) found that in rural contexts, low-income families relied on food systems that were often broken and fragile, and that, in some cases, food aid simply substituted (rather than built on) household coping strategies. Yiridomoh et al. (2021) illustrate that food transfers temporarily improved consumption among households experiencing seasonal droughts in Ghana, but this could not prevent drought-affected households from selling their productive assets to survive. Aid can have impacts which miss the point when it fails to address broader livelihood vulnerabilities. If emergency relief is not continuing aftershocks, then it is not risk management. The assumption that short-term assistance is a bridge to longer-term stability is worthy of interrogation, along with the ethical issues around aid that may transform harm into dependency or necessitate trade-offs.

To compound the issue, the structure and politics of an aid delivery mechanism often matter more than aid itself. For example, Herbert's (2024) research in Kerala shows how even decentralized, donor funded, community-based programs, such as *Jalanidhi*, continued to cement caste and gender inequalities despite commitment to community-based participation. Urwin et al. (2023) also assert that donor priorities and rigid monitoring can consistently counter local voices as accountable mechanisms become a test of grant compliance rather than participation. Their Grounded Accountability Model (GAM) provides a more systemic perspective, but ultimately rests on addressing local power dynamics and institutional resistance. These studies suggest that in addressing structural inequalities and local political dynamics, even well-intentioned forms of aid could potentially perpetuate the problems they are aiming to alleviate.

Regardless of these criticisms there are examples of what more effective aids models may look like. Shao and Wang (2022) in their investigation of Japanese aid to China, utilized a geographically and temporally weighted model (GTWR) to determine the economic impact of aid across time and space. The results of previous also demonstrated some negative overall effect, but again GTWR presented the situation more clearly by acknowledging that impact of aid changed depending on where the aid was sent and when it was received. While GTWR does motivate towards an ideal model of foreign aid, which recognizes that context and timing matter, the reality is that the study did not sufficiently account for all the political and institutional questions that mediate how approaches to aid are made possible and how they may be implemented. Moreover, without a consideration of deeper dynamics, even the most sophisticated of models risk simplifying reality into a basic economic tool, when it is plainly clear that aid is in fact a product of power, influence, and an asymmetrical relationship.

Dreher et al. (2021) argue a related point, specifying that predictable and regular transfers can help households with consumption smoothing and avoiding negative coping mechanisms in the short-term (such as child labor, or migration) especially where transfers are in the spirit of "cash-plus" models. The authors also find that in 138 developing countries, Chinese development finance has a modest effect on growth (in the next 2 years) in the promised support and development commitment. That is not to mention that Western donor effects were not setup to contrast against. Interestingly, the effects of US aid tended to be more successful in countries that were not also larger recipients of Chinese funding. However, overlapping aid in the same territory likely generates competition or fragmentation, hence the mixed results with existing models. Ultimately, notwithstanding the modest improvement in economic outcomes for households, these models, while promising with good evidence for consumption smoothing, are still the exception and rarely become the norm. They have also not recently scaled up. Scaling has not taken off due to political, donor competition and the absence of any shared conceptual framework, or indeed trusting partnership for long-term and coordinated donor action, in which to provide support.

Leading academics question the very premise of resilience as something that can be enabled through technical or projectized interventions. Visnovitz and Jenne (2021) attribute this to the political nature of aid and the contested governance process through which it occurs. The authors argue that competing narratives of legitimacy, sovereignty, or control always influence the provision of aid. In their reflections on the Fidesz governments in Hungary from 2010 to 2020, they showed how populist governments operationalize foreign policy. In this regard, aid relationships are used strategically to elevate national status and counter traditional alliances. By politicizing the channels of diplomacy in addressing foreign policy and confronting perceived parochial allies while seeking alternative partnerships, the leadership in Hungary created a new model for active engagement with the world, which routinely engaged foreign partnerships, as a tool for domestic legitimacy and global repositioning. This pattern illustrates a broader issue: external interventions that fail to address the power imbalances, including aid, in the local or national political context, are merely run the risk of reinforcing rather than overcoming power imbalances. Aid operates as means through which the recipient groups negotiate their identities, status, and/or authority, but moreover, aid can only be understood in context of local and national power relations. The current study is informed by this perspective as it argues the link between food aid and community resilience cannot be properly conceptualised without questioning the power relations and political dynamics at play, both of which shape and are shaped by aid. To be truly resilient, it says, is to do more than implement program design, but push back on the social injustices that led the need for aid in the first place.

Certainly, these issues are particularly salient in areas vulnerable to climate impacts such as Kajiado County in Kenya, where food aid is not supplementary, but forms the basis of household survival. Still, even in context, there remains highly contingent impacts from aid. In South Africa's Limpopo Province, for example, rural women have developed their own strategies concerning food security, such as crop diversification, and ecological knowledge. Nyahunda (2021) discusses the new resilience strategies that women developed, but underplays any impact by food aid as it relates to the overall outcome conditions. The study emphasized that food aid may be helpful if open to participation and in a timely manner, but

viewed food assistance as a background variable, and one that is not involved in a very integrated way in their livelihood context, weakening the relevance of this study to an area such as Kajiado, where food aid is integrated in a sense, as part of everyday life, and cannot be viewed as a supplementary external component.

A more compelling assessment about the role of aid is from Inman (2024) who discussed how multiple cultural resilience efforts are adjusting to increased external pressures, particularly regarding usefulness among pastoralist peoples such as the Himba. Inman reasoned nothing new in the sense of cultural transformation, but different in that it leans more to abandon as old traditional systems are under pressure from arts or expressivism, and from external aid and modern circumstances. The Himba are going through change without ongoing, culturally embedded support in the same way pastoralist communities in Namibia's Kunene Region experienced food aid where short-term shocks were cushioned, but longer-term self-reliance was undermined. The result was not just adaptation, but a protracted decay of one's traditional coping systems. This reflects a parallel trajectory to Kajiado, where similar environmental threats and pastoralist economies have created a growing risk of more structural dependency. In both cases of the Himba and Kajiado, aid that has no clear link to long term adaptation strategies, such as land care and re-investment, collective skill development, and cultural continuity, can be more detrimental than beneficial. The Himba are not merely adapting to modernity, they are being thrust into modernity mostly through systems that do not honour their value base and priorities. Without intentionality to align support with the lived experience of these communities for long-term resilience, well-meaning interventions among the Himba and others risk entrenching vulnerability, rather than reducing it.

Jackson and Piggott-McKellar (2021) present a powerful critique of climate adaptation in the Pacific Islands by examining how foreign aid fails on the basis that it never truly understands the beliefs and lived experiences of communities. Their study illustrated that the Bedamuni of Papua New Guinea and I-Kiribati experience environmental change through deeply ingrained religious and spiritual beliefs involving cosmologies, spirits, and Christianity, not science. Adaptation projects have followed externally driven technocratic models that do not acknowledge local ontologies in the design and delivery of projects. Therefore, it is not surprising that take-up of adaptation strategies is weak when the aid serves to disrupt indigenous knowledge systems that had allowed these communities to be resilient in confronting climate change impacts. In the instance of the Bedamuni, while food aid may assist people to cope with short-term crises such as floods, it promotes long-term dependency by displacing indigenous coping strategies. This study is not based on a formal theoretical basis, however it has an important message; aid that does not have its roots firmly placed in local world views and systems may provide limited assistance, while eroding capacity that it purports to build. This is a resemblance of larger structural failures in the way foreign aid has been organized, namely, the tendency to try to impose standardised solutions based on faceless and metric, financial, understandings of risks, change, sustainability and self-determination. This point can be emphasized here because it is not only about cultural sensitivity, but also highlights the systemic failures of many flawed approaches to foreign aid that continue to assume resilience is something built externally, rather than from within.

Omulo (2022) advances the thesis that aid, along with economic liberalization instead of protection for human rights, compromises and further entrenches repression and inequalities. Although Omulo's critique makes no mention of pastoralists in her discussion, she recognizes that support can be mobilized for elite purposes, given the absence of external conditionality, as she references failed states. This is important for our thinking and our work as researchers examining food aid because it signals, in our research, our policy, and our practice, that external interventions which do not account for local realities of justice and relations of power may, instead of being resolutely supportive, only replicate complicit forms of exclusion, deepening marginalization, legitimizing violent governance, and undermining local continuing agency in the long run.

Overall, the literature indicates ambiguous responses to food aid as research indicates food aid could provide support for resilience and self-determination or could serve to deepen vulnerability in relation to the agency of the aid delivery. Food aid can promote recovery and adaptation when it complements or integrates with local strategies, participatory approaches, and knowledge of local cultures. The literature concludes that the timing of aid and phases of aid are critical to the effectiveness of aid for the intended case. Any food aid implemented with a top-down, delayed, or disjointed approach could create dependency and/or harm local capacity. Therefore, there is little or no agreement upon what food aid must look like in establishing resilience as neither a conceptual framework nor a practical application. This study addresses that gap by aiming to understand the food aid intervention across the historical timeframe between 2020 and 2025 in Kajiado County while pastoralists were reeling from repeated droughts and sudden economic shocks in the East African Region. This research contributes to understanding the intervention's interactions with local coping strategies, governance structures, and cultural systems to weed out both detrimental and benevolent food aid for pastoralist livelihoods.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research explored the role of food aid in enhancing resilience among pastoralists in Kajiado County, Kenya. The study was carried out between May and September 2024, using a qualitative, interpretive research design, with the purpose of gaining insights into the experiences of the recipients of food aid in the face of successive climate-induced crises. Rather than documenting numerical measures of aid or nutritional outcomes, participants were asked about their understanding of food aid and how they negotiated and integrated food aid into their economic and social lives as pastoralists. The study sample included 25 household respondents, 12 participants in three focus group discussions (FGDs), and 8 key informants including local administrators, NGO field workers, and relief officers. Participants were sampled in a purposive manner based on representations of gender, livelihood roles and distance from food aid site. The sample size was guided by qualitative standards of information power (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020) so that the depth of understanding of the issue rather than increased sample size would provide a better understanding of the context. While the sample was limited and randomised for diversity, it was sufficient enough to reveal the range of trade-offs, moralistic tensions and perceptions of Kajiado's local

context that shaped people's everyday experience of aid. Kajiado's diverse food aid experience could then be interpreted while maintaining the depth of analysis.

The data analysis utilized Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. The lead researcher's manual coding was not one-dimensional, focusing on how people modified their assistance and renegotiated trade-offs and ideas of fairness. The themes emerging from these data were shared with an independent second coder to discuss their thematic aspects. Disagreement from this coder was handled via peer discussion. Thematic saturation was achieved across the data, however, we did not treat this as evidence of completeness in the analysis; rather, we saw thematic saturation as a marker of strong internal coherence in the sample. Following Hossain et al. (2024), we kept the minority and outlier voices, rather than discarding them for the sake of analytic closure. This decision facilitates a developing consensus that saturation should not be applied to flatten difference, especially in socially uneven or politically sensitive contexts (Steils, 2021).

This study adhered to strict ethical consideration. All participants provided informed consent (either verbal or written depending on literacy) and they were anonymized to protect their identities. However, given that this was a study based in a humanitarian context, it is possible that the participants perceived the researchers as being linked to aid providers, which may have led participants to censor criticisms or exaggerate feelings of gratitude afterwards. A local facilitator explained the independence of the researcher and that their participation as a participant in the study would not have implications for any future aid. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. These measures were helpful in reducing but not erasing the power asymmetries that characterize research in these contexts. The major context of long-term dependence on aid likely shaped the participants' openness in sharing their frustrations, disappointments, or feelings of unfairness, and this is a limitation that was accepted as part of the structural vulnerability that the research was embedded in.

RESULTS

This section presents the results of the qualitative study carried out in Kajiado County between May and September 2024. The study involved 45 participants from five villages which had been affected by drought, through semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (we engaged with 25 household members and 12 focus group participants and interviewed 8 key informants). While the results can't be statistically generalized, they show common themes based off of common lived experiences.

Participants reflected on food aid as having two main interpretations: the practical value of food aid as a life-saving intervention in times of drought and food aid as ineffective for longer-term recovery. Although not explicitly oppositional, these responses reflect a tension between short term relief and sustainable change in settings with food insecurity. Overall, the Participants stated that food aid played a necessary support for short term survival when food was scarce, specifically in times of peak drought periods, where 84% of, stated food assistance was mitigated starvation and provided households relief for immediate food shortage that would generally follow when herds of livestock failed, or markets collapsed. A male elder said:

"Without food relief, many people would die. This is not politics, this is just the reality."

Others acknowledged that food distributions were an essential form of support for children, elderly people, and pregnant women, but they also recognized that support has limits. Only 12% of respondents thought food aid meaningfully supported long-term recovery or resilience. A woman from the FGDs put it succinctly: *"When the food arrives, we eat. But when it ends, we go back to hunger. It helps us today, but not tomorrow."*

A further 64% of participants reported falling back on reactive coping strategies, charcoal burning, casual labor, beadwork, when food aid was delayed or insufficient. These were widely seen as harmful, short-term responses rather than pathways toward economic stability. A mother from Mashuuru sub-county said, *"We wait for the relief food, but when it delays, we go to the forest for charcoal. It's not a choice, it's survival."* Local officials echoed these concerns. As one assistant chief in Kajiado West observed, *"It is good, but it cannot carry us forward."*

These findings make it clear that food aid is both necessary and inadequate, necessary to prevent starvation, but inadequate for building resilience. As one county-level relief coordinator noted, *"We cannot stop giving food during emergencies, but we also can't ignore that every year we're feeding the same families."*

The recurring reliance on aid year after year raised concerns about stagnation. Rather than rejecting food aid, participants called for it to be repositioned within broader strategies that also promote self-reliance.

Table 1. Summary of Thematic Findings and Representative Quotes

Theme	Interpretation	Illustrative Quote
Food aid as essential for survival	Participants overwhelmingly emphasized the life-saving role of food aid during peak drought periods.	<i>"Without relief food, many would die. It's not politics, it's truth."</i>
Limited link to recovery or preparedness	Few respondents viewed food aid as helping them transition out of vulnerability.	<i>"It doesn't build anything. It just stops the worst."</i>
Reliance on coping strategies when food aid fails	Charcoal burning, beadwork, and casual labor were common fallback options.	<i>"We burn charcoal not because we want to, but because we must."</i>
Food aid seen as both vital and inadequate	Aid was necessary but not sufficient to prevent long-term hardship.	<i>"It's good, but it cannot carry us forward."</i>

Concerning the role of food aid in promoting livelihood diversification within pastoralist communities, participants were more divided, but not ambivalent. Among key informants, elders, and local leaders, food aid was widely regarded as critical for crisis survival, but its ability to facilitate meaningful shifts toward alternative livelihoods was considered minimal. Most respondents (71%) stated that food aid wasn't linked directly to any new income-generating practice. One youth in a FGD expressed this sentiment saying, *"It feeds the body, not the business."*

Although a small number of respondents (14%) admitted that the temporary food security afforded by the aid allowed them to participate in casual jobs or trade opportunities; they also generally suggested that these opportunities were short-lived and weren't formally connected to any programming. Only 10% of participants had encountered food aid initiatives that were part of broader packages, such as training, seed distribution, or start-up grants. In these instances, participants were more likely to describe a transition from basic survival to small-scale livelihood activities. A woman from Kajiado West reported,

"When we are full, we can think about other things, like selling milk or beads." Another added,

"Some organizations gave food, but also helped with seeds and training. This support helped some families start vegetable gardens and small businesses."

These experiences, however, were exceptions. Most participants expressed frustration with the absence of structured, integrated support models. A local leader said, *"If they gave goats instead of maize, maybe we would change."*

This evidence demonstrates that although food assistance is critical in sustaining pastoralist households during emergencies, it typically does not contribute to a material shift towards livelihood diversification, as it rarely has established links to training, resources, or enterprise support; while food assistance interventions are successful, the relationship between the intervention and longer-term adaptation goals, in other words, economic resilience in the targeted communities, is tenuous.

Table 2. Summary of Perceptions on Food Aid and Livelihood Diversification

Theme	Interpretation	Illustrative Quote
Minimal direct link to diversification	Participants did not associate food aid with long-term livelihood shifts.	<i>"It feeds the body, not the business."</i> Youth respondent, FGD
Food aid sometimes enables short-term stability	A few participants used the temporary relief to engage in small-scale trade or labor.	<i>"When we are full, we can think about other things, like selling milk or beads."</i> Female respondent
Missed opportunity to link aid with resilience	Many viewed food aid as a missed gateway to broader economic empowerment.	<i>"If they gave goats instead of maize, maybe we would change."</i> Local leader
Absence of integrated support models	No structured food-for-work or conditional schemes were reported in the study area.	<i>"We've heard of such programs, but not here."</i> NGO officer

DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the main trends identified in the findings in regard to the effects of targeted food aid interventions on household food security and alternative livelihoods for pastoralist(s) in Kajiado County. The evidence indicates that food aid is critical to survival at times of drought and/or economic shocks. Nevertheless, while food aid is critical at times of emergency, the evidence from the study revealed that food aid is ineffective at fostering long-term resilience and sustainable livelihoods. The discussion incorporates recent literature that can contextualize these findings and enables reflection on additional ramifications for policy and practice.

The food assistance between 2020 and 2025 was critical during the drought phases and food crisis. The food distribution clearly benefited many households to avoid hunger and most significantly during the once devastating periods when livestock deaths and low milk production could not return households to their primary food sources. Thus, food aid did what it was intended to do during times of crisis, help moving through the acute and immediate need for food. Certainly, Nyahunda (2021) shared similar themes when looking at food aid as a temporary safety net for rural populations subjected to environmental and economic stress.

Nevertheless, food aid's immediate contribution notwithstanding, failed to address ongoing structured solutions that addressed food insecurity. Many of them explained that food aid had its value to them in the short term, but did not tackle the causes of hunger. Food aid merely provided a cycle of temporary supports, and ultimately recurrent vulnerabilities when it ceased. This aligns with Inman et al.'s (2024) contention that aid responses only deal with the symptoms like, food shortages, but not the structural issues like climate shocks, the loss of grazing ground, poor market access, insecure land tenure, etc.

Respondents were very frustrated with visits from aid agencies, especially Kajiado women who pointed to delays in the aid, prior claims of bias, and variability in targeting. Vulnerable households were often walked past, while politically connected households received aid on multiple occasions. This is indicative of a larger problem in centralised systems of aid that Jackson and Piggott-McKellar (2021) argue are disconnected from local needs and are also prone to reproducing existing power relations. In Kajiado, it was often clan or party lines that determined the distribution, leaving already vulnerable households and female headed households far behind. These patterns were not new, they echoed long tolerated inequalities within both governmental apparatus and traditional institutions.

Even among this very broken system, there were some households that were able to contingency use food aid - some applied that support to probably managing to earn a few cents - petty trading, transport and/or temporary labour. But again, these were idiosyncratic experiences of resourcefulness - not outcomes prescribed by aid. This supports Shisler et al.'s (2023) assertion that food aid cannot be used to facilitate economic change unless it has the potential to viscously connect to mobility pathways like vocational education, asset support and access to finance. Women were often the key

facilitators of food aid within households, they were frontline workers looking after the survival of the household, but their role did not go as far as the design or governance of food aid, nor was there a bridge for them to convert this level of support into advantageous, long-term productive benefits given the barriers to new resources and assets, land, credit, and supporting market opportunities. As Bowen et al.'s (2022) indicate the potential role of aid in reproducing and further entrenching gendered inequalities without consciously and institutionally addressing them.

Politics influenced nearly every part of the process. Interviewees described how food aid was given out along clan lines or distributed through nontransparent, patronage-based networks. Omulo (2022) raises similar issues, and points out that most aid agencies ignored or underestimated how much local power relations influenced the outcome of distribution. In Kajiado, it meant food aid was frequently buttressing the very systems that kept vulnerable groups, particularly women and poor households, marginalized. Even when food aid helped households avoid starvation during rainfall failure or livestock loss, it did nothing to create new economic opportunities. Support was short-term and rarely tied to other developmental inputs like skills training or productive assets. In the words of an elder, "Food aid helps families survive drought, but does not provide the skills or resources to start creating better livelihoods." This is similar to Nyahunda (2021), who emphasized that food aid, without being linked to an overall strategy, could simply prolong dependency and not reduce it.

All in all, the results tell us that we need to think about food assistance as part of a resilience agenda rather than an emergency response in and of itself. Targeted food distributions will continue to play an important role in minimizing the impacts of emergent crises on livelihoods in the short-term. However, structural interventions that aim to disrupt chronic vulnerability should be involved as it connects with food assistance. Thus, programs should be developed that connect food assistance, with vocational training, micro-grants, and asset recovery support and business development services. In addition, the gendered barriers that are limiting women's access to market diversification must be dealt with, and this will require supporting women to gain access to resources like land, inputs and markets.

Overall, food support in Kajiado County helps communities cope during crisis times but is often viewed as failing to provide meaningful longer-term change. In order to be supportive of creating resilience and diversifying livelihoods, aid must work within a broader development lens, engage with the systemic inequalities that underline who receives help and how. Political Ecology offers us a useful space to think about these challenges, emphasizing the importance of empowering communities and reforming the institutions they engage with, so that food support is more equitable, effective, and rooted in their reality.

CONCLUSIONS

The research looked at food assistance to Maasai pastoralists living within Kajiado County, to determine if food aid creates long-term resilience or simply addressing short-term crisis relief demand. Food aid was, of course essential during drought periods, albeit hunger related to livestock loss was extreme; brining families beyond intervention level, but food assistance largely did not sustain or further constitute improvement in coping capacity, as such assistance almost always occurred in isolation of any other kind of contextual support, such as income opportunities, training, and productive assets. Using a Political Ecology lens, we could see how political processes and social relations of power, configured both the relevance and impacts of food assistance. Food assistance, rather than being situated to align with the priorities of the community, was used to promote the external agenda of delivery agents and created limitations on local agency and livelihood diversification. In conclusion, food assistance should not occur in isolation, instead food assistance work to embed food assistance into approaches driven entirely by the community which aim to address structural constraints and focus on developing long-term resilience. In practical terms, this means agricultural organizations should embed food assistance into community development plans and shift from imposed external solutions to equitable, locally driven approaches. The research had a narrow geographic focus and an inability to assess longer timeframes, but as such, suggested future research opportunities include regional comparative studies of food assistance, analyzing gendered dimensions, including male and female pastoralist intended and unintended impacts of food assistance, and extended studies focusing on shifts from dependency to eventually being self-sufficient.

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