



Policy brief 15th décembre 2025

Enhancing pastoral adaptation strategies in Wau and Jur River Counties, South Sudan: resilience to recurrent climate, economic and social shocks and crises

Pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities in Wau and Jur River Counties are adapting their livelihoods in response to climate change, conflict and economic instability, but face persistent structural and social constraints that limit resilience.

Éditeur SPARC

Par { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "Grace Njoroge", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/grace-njoroge" } } [Grace Njoroge](https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/grace-njoroge) { "@context": "https://schema.org", "author": { "@context": "https://schema.org", "@type": "Person", "name": "Nyuon Moses", "url": "https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/nyuon-moses" } } [Nyuon Moses](https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/about-us/contributors/authors/nyuon-moses)
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Pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities in Wau and Jur River Counties, South Sudan, face overlapping and recurrent shocks linked to climate change, armed conflict and economic instability. This policy brief presents findings from qualitative research conducted in 2023–2024, including key informant interviews and focus group discussions with community members and local leaders, to examine how households are adapting their livelihood strategies under conditions of prolonged crisis.

The research highlights drought as the most severe and immediate threat to livelihoods, undermining crop production and livestock health through erratic rainfall, rising temperatures, pests and disease. Climate pressures interact with weak agricultural and veterinary services, forcing households to adopt short-term coping strategies such as distress livestock sales, fishing, charcoal production and casual labour. While livestock mobility remains central to pastoral resilience, it also increases exposure to conflict over land and water, particularly between livestock keepers and crop cultivators.

Conflict was identified as a major driver of vulnerability, destroying assets, displacing households and reshaping gender roles. Community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, including the Marial Bayi Agreement, play an important role in managing tensions but have been weakened by political interference and limited institutional support. At the same time, severe economic volatility and high inflation have reduced purchasing power, increased reliance on cash-based livelihoods and driven migration in search of income.

Despite these challenges, households are diversifying their livelihoods in ways that reflect

both necessity and opportunity. Women and men are increasingly engaging in non-traditional roles, supported in some cases by NGO-led skills training, business development support and Village Savings and Loans Associations. However, gender inequalities persist in access to resources, decision-making and control over income.

In terms of more general lessons, building resilience in these places requires coordinated policy action to support inclusive conflict resolution, promote diversified and climate-resilient livelihoods, and strengthen gender and youth inclusion. Greater alignment between government, development partners and community institutions is essential to move beyond short-term coping and enable sustainable adaptation.

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