

POLICY BRIEF

ADAPTING THROUGH BRICOLAGE

Building resilience in Northeast Nigeria

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Key findings

- **Livelihood diversification or bricolage has become central to household resilience in Adamawa and Yobe**, with livelihood income sources blending traditional and innovative practices that generate distinct socioeconomic value. Pastoralist and farming households increasingly combine two to three income sources. Women are expanding into home-based and value-adding enterprises (e.g. food processing and tailoring), while youth are leading the uptake of new technologies, transport, and informal services.
- **Informal networks remain the primary engine of adaptation, even where formal support exists.** While NGO and government programmes have helped households scale activities, families continue to rely most on kinship ties, savings groups, markets, intergenerational learning, and peer mentorship to access knowledge, cash, and labour.
- **Structural barriers continue to limit equitable livelihoods opportunities.** Women and youth pastoralists, especially in remote areas, face persistent additional constraints including limited capital, insecure land tenure, restrictive social norms, and geographic isolation.
- **Resilience is strongest when individual effort, social networks and formal support align**, enabling households to bounce back faster and diversify livelihoods in the face of recurrent shocks.

A woman tending to her sheep – one of the new livelihood activities adopted by farming households in Yobe State, Nigeria.
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Introduction

Northeast Nigeria faces recurring and overlapping crises driven by environmental shocks, insecurity, and economic instability (Box 1). Pastoralist and farming households must continuously adapt to drought, flooding, pest outbreaks, violent conflict, and growing competition over land and water. In this context, the creative recombination of available resources, skills, and relationships – or *bricolage* (Box 2) – has become essential to both survival and long-term resilience.

This policy brief synthesises findings from qualitative research conducted in Adamawa and Yobe states. Responding to a growing need for localised evidence on how climate, conflict, and economic shocks are reshaping rural livelihoods in Northeast Nigeria, especially in underserved areas and among populations underrepresented in existing resilience research, it explores how communities respond to shocks and adopt new or modified livelihood strategies to cope with uncertainty. Particular attention is paid to women and youth, who are increasingly central to household resilience, and to the formal and informal networks that shape their

access to information, capital, and opportunities. This brief identifies strategies perceived as effective in building resilience, and offers practical guidance for development and humanitarian actors and policy-makers.

We discuss how pastoralist and farming communities adapt to the most common and challenging shocks, the factors that influence their choice of coping strategies, and the types of support that can help scale what works to enhance resilience. These insights offer an opportunity to design interventions that align with community priorities and existing adaptive systems.

Data was collected from 49 farmers and another 49 Fulani pastoralists through 14 focus group discussions. Additionally, 23 key informant interviews were conducted with representatives from government institutions (7), non-governmental organisations (7), and community leaders (9). The team also conducted 25 in-depth interviews with farmers and 32 with pastoralists. Women constituted 45% of the sample, while young respondents (under 30 years of age) comprised 30% of the total.

BOX 1. UNDERSTANDING THE SHOCK LANDSCAPE IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

Households across both Adamawa and Yobe states face a combination of environmental and conflict-related shocks that affect demographic groups in distinct ways:

- **Drought and erratic rainfall** are the most severe and widespread shocks. They reduce water and pasture, disrupt crop cycles, and lead to livestock deaths – especially affecting pastoralist women reliant on milk sales, and smallholder farmers.
- **Flooding**, particularly in Yobe, destroys farmland, homes, and grain stores, and contributes to disease outbreaks. Communities describe it as increasingly intense and frequent.
- **Conflict and insecurity**, including displacement from Boko Haram and local land disputes, have led to asset loss and disrupted livelihoods, particularly for pastoralists.
- **Economic hardship**, driven primarily by rising prices of food, basic goods, and agricultural inputs, has deepened food insecurity and constrained household coping strategies – particularly for youth facing limited job opportunities.
- **Livestock diseases** such as PPR (peste des petits ruminants) have caused major herd losses, reducing income and food access.
- **Emerging and secondary shocks**, including child malnutrition, water scarcity, and access to healthcare, were also mentioned, especially as consequences of larger shocks.

These shocks are often compound and sequential – with flood following drought, or disease striking displaced herds – leaving communities little time to recover.

While the literature points to drought and insecurity as key risks, primary data reinforces this and adds nuance, showing how shocks impact traditional livelihoods differently: shortening farming cycles, driving pastoralists to migrate farther, disrupting milk trade, and pushing women and youth into new income-generating roles.

Local strategies of adaptation: livelihood diversification and bricolage

Amid worsening shocks, farming and pastoralist households in Adamawa and Yobe are actively reshaping how they earn a living. Adaptation is not a singular event but an ongoing process of bricolage: combining existing skills, assets, and informal and formal support to create new, viable pathways. This process often blends traditional practices with new techniques and is driven not only by necessity but also by opportunity.

New livelihoods have emerged across the two states, with notable similarities. In both pastoralist and farming households, dry-season and irrigated farming have expanded rapidly. Respondents describe shifting from rainfed systems to irrigated farming, cultivating millet, rice, and legumes using solar pumps and improved seeds. This shift allows for more predictable income and greater control in the face of climate variability.

At the same time, entrepreneurial activity is surging, particularly among women and youth. Many women who once relied solely on selling milk have diversified into petty trade (selling condiments, grains, snacks, or cosmetics) and now engage in value-adding processing like grinding grains or extracting groundnut oil; more women are also running their own income-generating activities, and diversifying their products and expanding into new markets. Tailoring and sewing have emerged as important home-based livelihoods, especially for married and widowed women, providing a flexible way to earn income while managing household and childcare needs.

These microenterprises offer a steady source of income and are widely seen by women as ‘taking control of household needs’, particularly when male income is disrupted by shocks or migration.

We used to sell only milk. Now we process groundnuts, we trade condiments, and our children help with transport. This is how we adapt. (Female pastoralist, Adamawa)

Youth, for their part, especially young men, are leading the uptake of new technologies and services including solar irrigation support, managing point-of-sale kiosks, and providing local transport services with motorcycles and tricycles.

BOX 2. BRICOLAGE DEFINITION

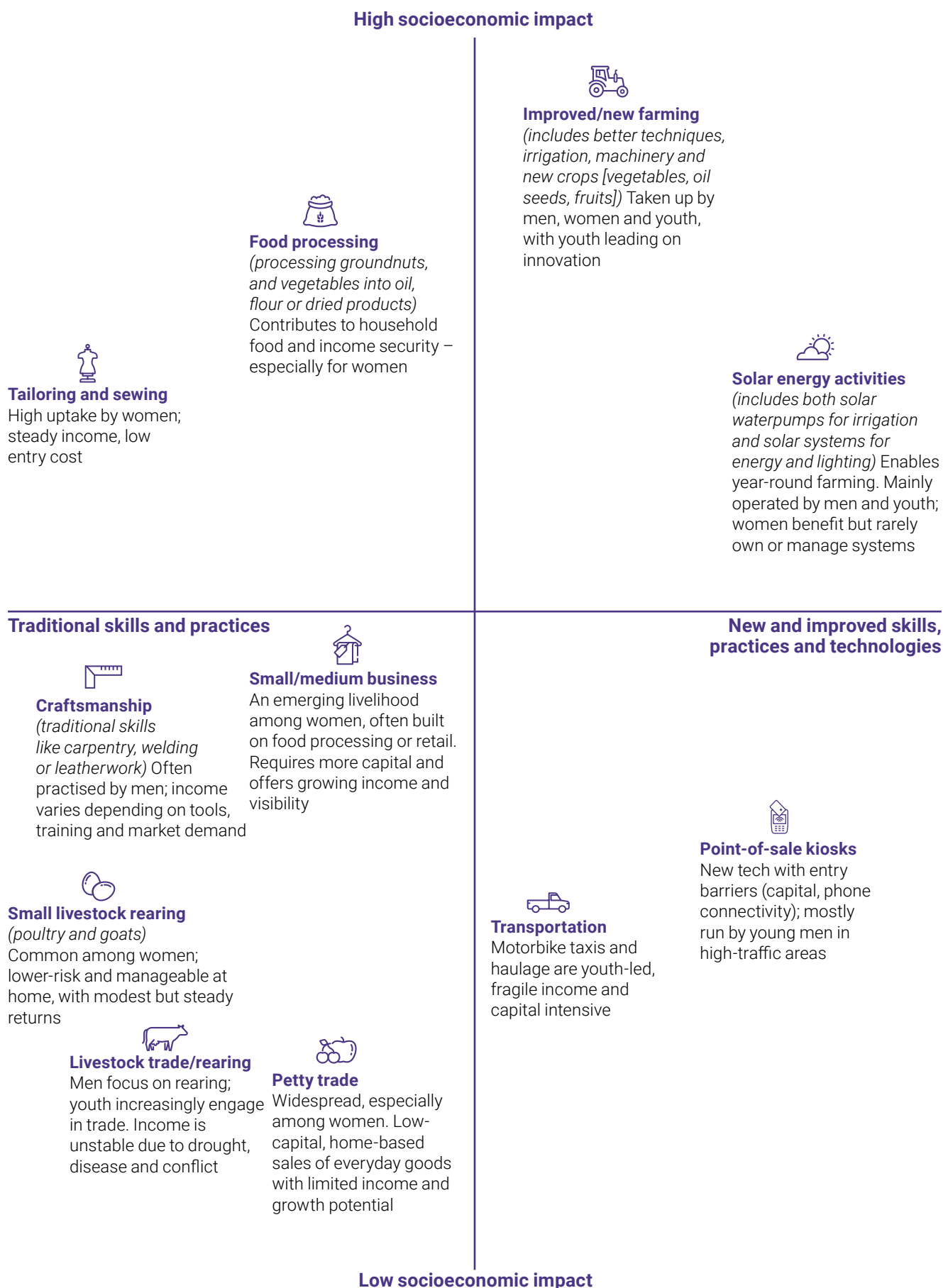
In this paper, *bricolage* refers to the way people adapt and construct new livelihoods by creatively combining what they have at hand – including traditional skills, improved practices, social ties, and occasional external support. Rather than following fixed plans, individuals ‘make do’ through trial, observation, and collaboration, blending local knowledge with new opportunities or combining traditional practices and skills with improved ones. This often involves applying familiar skills in new ways, layering in tools or techniques acquired through peers or NGOs, and mobilising small resources from household savings or group support. Drawing on global literature (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Mateus and Sarkar, 2024; Ogunleye, 2019), we use *bricolage* to describe this flexible, layered, and deeply contextual process of livelihood adaptation in resource-constrained settings.

In both states, young men were described as ‘bringing innovation’ into farming systems and serving as early adopters of improved techniques and commercial practices. Livestock trade, once dominated by older men, is now attracting younger participants who operate as middlemen or aggregators across local and regional markets.

To synthesise these patterns, Figure 1 maps key livelihood strategies across two dimensions: (1) the type of practices used – from traditional to improved or new practices, and (2) socioeconomic impact – from low to high. Here, socioeconomic impact refers not only to income, but also social visibility, perceived advancement, and influence within the community.

Some activities, like solar-powered irrigation or owning a kiosk, signal upward mobility and control over one’s future. Others remain low-profile or less publicly valued, even when essential to household survival. The upper quadrants of the figure reflect not just economic adaptation, but a kind of aspiration: people adopting practices they associate with growth, recognition, and modernity.

FIGURE 1. POSITIONING LOCAL LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES: TRADITION, INNOVATION, AND IMPACT



Source: Authors' own.

Technology plays an important role in this dynamic. Youth, especially, are integrating tools and services (such as solar systems, mobile kiosks, and digital payments) into everyday livelihood strategies. These technologies often require new skills, higher capital, and stronger market connections, but they also offer faster returns and greater visibility, reshaping how work is done.

Though constrained by limited capital, land and social norms, especially for women, livelihood diversification has become the new norm. Most households now combine two or three income sources, with women and youth central to sustaining household resilience.

This diversification also helps households manage different cash flow cycles. Petty trade and motorcycle services offer daily income; tailoring and food processing provide weekly returns; farming and livestock-rearing activities generate seasonal harvest income. People intentionally combine activities with different rhythms – pairing steady but low-income sources with more profitable but irregular ones. For example, many women combine petty trade and dry-season farming, while youth mix craftsmanship with transport. These layered strategies allow households to address short-term needs while also investing in long-term goals.

In terms of how the different actors gravitate towards these strategies, as the figure shows, women still tend to concentrate in traditional, lower-income livelihoods, such as petty trade, farming, tailoring, and food processing, where barriers to entry are low but returns can be modest. Youth, particularly young men, are increasingly engaging in higher-return but riskier ventures like transport, solar services, or small businesses, indicating distinct patterns in how groups navigate opportunity and constraint.

Transforming resilience: effects on households and community dynamics

As households diversify income sources, the ripple effects are reshaping gender roles, youth responsibilities, and local economies. Women are increasingly earning income through trade, food processing, and rainfed farming. These shifts are rebalancing household dynamics, particularly when men migrate or herds are lost.

Nowadays, all women want something to keep them busy and earn income.... We no longer depend only on our husbands.
(Female pastoralist, Yobe)

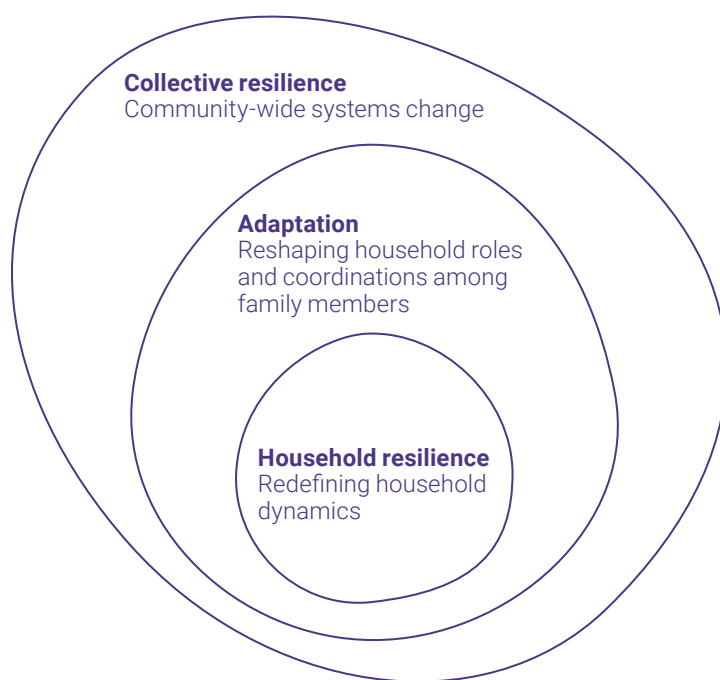
Women and youth have become central to household resilience. Roles are increasingly negotiated: women gain more financial autonomy and bargaining power, while youth lead on more innovative income-generation practices. But this change is not fully transformative: 42% of married men say the husband still leads decisions in new livelihoods, and only 14% report joint decision-making. Pastoralist women who seem to continue to adhere to more traditional and conservative behaviours may get permission to act (e.g. to go to the market), but not full autonomy. New roles also come with increased workloads, particularly for women and youth.

Before, youth were just helpers. Now they run their own farms and provide for themselves.
(Male farmer, Adamawa)

These shifting roles are reshaping how households coordinate daily life. They are adopting more flexible arrangements, including sharing responsibilities on childcare and household care. Resilience becomes a joint effort, influenced by social norms and power dynamics.

At the community level, these changes are giving rise to early forms of collective resilience. See Figure 2. Households are pooling resources to invest in shared needs like borehole repairs. Local markets are more active; some households are investing in children's education; and informal safety nets are expanding. However, these shifts remain fragile as inclusion gaps persist, particularly for women with limited mobility and for remote pastoralist households.

FIGURE 2. THE LAYERED DYNAMICS OF ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE



Source: Authors' own.

Contributing factors: formal and informal networks

Behind the growing resilience of households in Yobe and Adamawa lies a layered network of formal and informal support systems that shape people's ability to adapt. While individuals rely heavily on their own efforts, these networks are vital in making adaptation viable and scalable.

Informal networks remain the most immediate, accessible, and trusted source of support, particularly for pastoralists and women. Households, neighbours, savings groups, and community associations (e.g. women's and youth groups) provide not only cash, but also information, labour, and emotional support. These networks help households launch or adjust livelihood activities, such as starting petty trade, learning new skills, or coping with failed harvests, by reducing risk and offering timely resources. Such relationships often provide a support structure faster than formal aid, especially in Yobe where NGO presence is thinner.

My cousin shared food with me when my crops failed. Later, I helped him fix his motorcycle to start work. We support each other. (Male farmer, Adamawa)

Formal support, primarily from NGOs, has also played a catalytic, but uneven, role. Respondents referenced at least 14 distinct programmes or organisations across both states, offering training, tools, startup capital, and technical assistance in areas like irrigation, animal health, and food processing. In Adamawa, such interventions helped households transition from subsistence to income-generating enterprises. However, coverage remains patchy, and follow-up is inconsistent – especially in remote pastoralist areas.

Here in Yobe, we didn't get any help. We rely on each other. (Male pastoralist, Yobe)

Importantly, the data shows strong linkages between informal and formal support systems. Many individuals began new livelihoods through peer learning or observation, then later received NGO support to scale up or improve those efforts, demonstrating sustained spillover effects. Conversely, some women and youth reported tailoring their livelihood aspirations to align with what formal programmes were offering.

Government actors, while less frequently mentioned, still play important roles where they are active: particularly in infrastructure, livestock services, and farmer–pastoralist conflict mediation. In both states, local officials supported borehole development, agricultural inputs, and grazing corridors.

Markets and peer learning were essential channels for skill acquisition and information flow. Whether in the realms of tailoring, petty trade, or irrigation, people reported learning by observing others and informally mentoring one another, including intergenerational transfer of skills and experience.

We learned by watching others in the market. Some taught us how to sell better, fix pumps, or dry leaves for soup. This is how we adapt.
(Female farmer, Yobe)

Critically, this blend of formal and informal support is not always additive; **the strength of spillover effects depends on enabling factors** like trust, strong local leadership, and security. Where these are absent, the reach and sustainability of external support may weaken. Still, in contexts like Adamawa, NGO partnerships have helped reinforce informal systems (e.g. through Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) or youth leadership training), rather than replace them.

Together, these findings suggest that resilience is not built by a single actor or intervention, but through the interaction of institutions, social ties, and embedded local knowledge. Other recent studies in northeast Nigeria confirm this pattern. For example, Awoniyi and Nhodo (2024) and Elsamahi et al. (2021) highlight how informal social networks, especially among women, are crucial in helping communities navigate climate shocks and support household adaptation.

Constraints to scale: structural barriers and unequal access

While livelihood diversification is now widespread across communities in Adamawa and Yobe, the ability to scale and sustain these efforts remains deeply uneven. It is shaped by gender roles, livelihood type, geography, and structural limitations.

Access to finance is a persistent constraint for all groups, but disproportionately affects women and youth. In both states, women typically fund their businesses through savings, family loans, or VSLA contributions. Few can access formal credit, often due to lack of collateral, restrictive application processes, or gender bias. Male farmers and pastoralists are more likely to sell livestock or harvests to raise capital, giving them a relative advantage in expanding new ventures.

We sell part of our grains after harvest to fund business. But women rely on group contributions or small loans from friends.
(Male farmer, Adamawa)

Access to land remains a critical barrier across groups. Women and youth often depend on informal rental or family plots, which are insecure and easily withdrawn. Youth farmers report competition with elders, while pastoralists face shrinking grazing areas and weak land governance, further limiting mobility and herd management. These challenges restrict both livelihood stability and the ability to scale.

Women face layered barriers – financial, social, and spatial. In Adamawa, men often retain control over household income, even when women are the primary earners. In Yobe, women report more joint or independent financial decision-making but still face limited mobility and market access. Single and widowed women are more economically autonomous, yet often more financially insecure. Cultural norms restrict many married women from pursuing work outside the home, leading them to focus on home-based activities, like tailoring and processing, or selling condiments indoors.

I make the soap, but my husband decides what we do with the money. (Female pastoralist, Adamawa)

Youth experience both opportunity and overload.

Young men, especially in Yobe, are active in trade, transport, farming, ICT, and repair services. But many also need to balance income generation with school, household duties, or supporting parents, which leads them to exhaustion and limits their ability to grow their enterprises. Young women, meanwhile, face stricter mobility norms and are often confined to home-based or informal activities.

I run my own transport business now, but I barely rest. I work to support my siblings too.
(Male youth, Yobe)

Pastoralists face distinct challenges tied to remoteness and mobility. Compared to farmers, pastoralist households (especially in Yobe) report lower access to NGO support and training. Men often migrate with herds, leaving women with less support and fewer livelihood options. In contrast, settled farming communities are more likely to benefit from irrigation projects, agricultural inputs, and regular NGO engagement.

We didn't get support, but the farmers nearby got seeds and training. Here, we rely on each other. (Male pastoralist, Yobe)

Geographic disparities also shape access to

support. Respondents in Adamawa generally report greater NGO presence and support services (e.g. Sahel, CRS, Red Cross), while those in Yobe cite fewer interventions and more reliance on informal networks. Access to training, boreholes, tools, and follow-up support remains uneven across Local Government Areas, and pastoralist settlements are often the most underserved.

Conclusion

In the face of repeated and compound shocks, pastoralist and farming communities in Northeast Nigeria are demonstrating resilience by weaving together traditional skills, improved practices, social networks, and occasional external support. Women and youth are central to this transformation, leading innovations in trade, agriculture, and informal services. Without addressing systemic barriers, including inequitable access to capital and land, restrictive norms, and patchy formal support, these efforts risk stalling progress toward better equity, or even amplifying inequalities.

Strengthening resilience will require investing in what already works – informal networks, peer-driven learning, and layered livelihood strategies – while expanding inclusive access to finance, land, and training. Multi-level, long-term approaches that engage households, communities, NGOs, and government are essential. Without them, there is a risk that the benefits of diversification will concentrate among those with the most connections and resources, rather than lifting entire communities.

Recommendations

Strengthen the social foundations of adaptation

Invest in informal systems that already drive resilience, such as savings groups, peer learning and observation-based learning. Use participatory mapping or social network analysis to identify trusted local actors and build around them. Furthermore, to prevent widening gaps between men, women, and youth, support must be inclusive and locally grounded. NGOs, for example, can strengthen informal networks by training local group facilitators, supporting savings

and mentorship schemes already in place, and linking these networks to complementary services such as extension agents, inputs, or mobile finance tools.

Who leads?

NGOs, local CBOs, women/youth groups, supported by local government

Expand inclusive livelihood options beyond agriculture

Support the growth of skill-based and service-orientated alternatives (such as tailoring, processing, local transport, and tech-enabled kiosks) that women and youth can combine productively with farming or other seasonal work. Programmes should recognise that people balance livelihoods not just for income, but also for status, and for reliability and frequency of returns. Helping women and youth pair fast-return, low-margin activities (e.g. petty trade) with higher-investment roles (e.g. irrigated farming, solar services) can stabilise income and open paths to upward mobility.

Who leads?

Private sector and NGOs, supported by skills training agencies and government. Public–private partnerships are critical for expanding access to capital, training, and markets while ensuring these roles remain viable year-round

Promote sustainable, youth-driven livelihoods

Design programmes that accommodate youth realities: flexible training, green and tech-based options, and pathways that recognise their economic roles within households. Prioritise early-stage incubation and peer-to-peer learning over formal classroom models.

Who leads?

NGOs, youth associations, private sector incubators, with support from local education and employment agencies

Tackle structural barriers to participation in these livelihoods' adaptations and innovations

Address constraints on mobility, decision-making and capital access, especially for women. Support norm-shifting strategies and unlock gender-sensitive financial tools like VSLA support, mobile credit, and flexible loan products.

Who leads?

Government (social protection, legal reform), supported by NGOs and inclusive finance providers (MFIs, digital finance platforms)

Throughout, prioritise co-designing with communities

Co-design should build on how people already adapt, using flexible, iterative approaches rather than fixed project plans. Successful models rely on trusted local groups (like women's associations and traditional

leaders), participatory tools (e.g. seasonal calendars, market mapping), and phased rollouts to manage cost and complexity. Programmes must also ensure marginalised voices – especially women and youth – are heard, to avoid reinforcing power imbalances.

Who leads?

NGOs and international programmes, in partnership with local government, civil society, and traditional institutions

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We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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