

What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks!

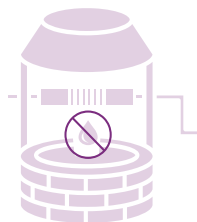
March 2026



Adapting to drought

Managing the unmanageable: household adaptation to drought, water shortages, and food gaps

“Dried vegetables and Qurut were very useful when fresh foods were not found ... Stockpiling rice and wheat have kept us from going hungry.”
Male, Nangarhar



Introduction

Afghanistan is facing intensifying climate shocks, with drought affecting 89% of communities nationally, and nearly all areas in Daykundi, Ghor, Badghis (99%) between mid-April and December 2025, ([IOM](#)). These hazards are directly undermining nutrition, livelihoods, and food security. Households are left increasingly vulnerable as crops fail,

livestock decline, and essential resources become scarce.

This research focuses on drought, nutrition and water scarcity to understand people's experiences and their coping mechanisms. These insights can offer valuable learnings for communities and practitioners working in the health and nutrition sectors.

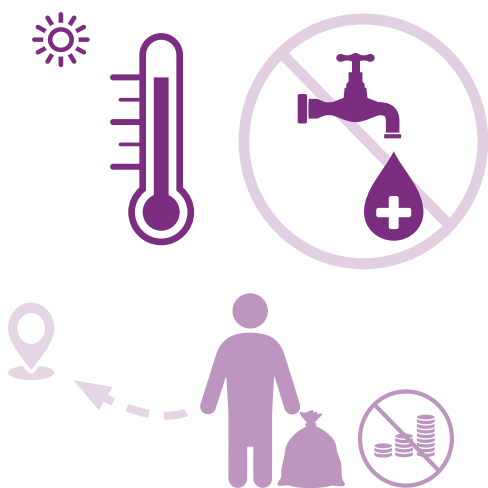
Research approach

The research used 14 focus groups and seven interviews with men and women, and seven key informant interviews with nutritional providers across seven provinces during February 2026.

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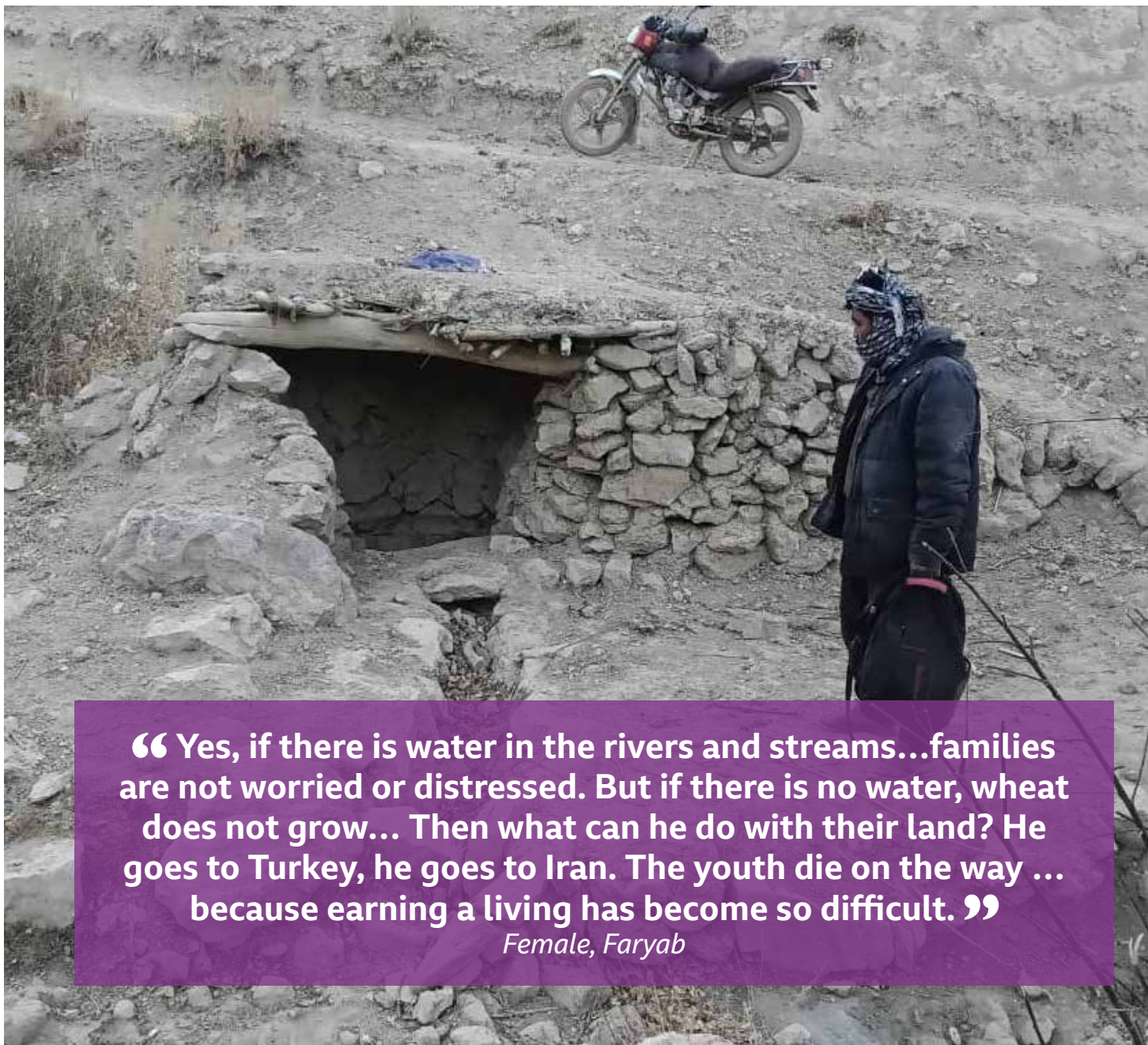
The impact of drought on nutrition

Participants mentioned that extreme weather events, particularly drought, have devastated farming and livestock, reduced access to safe water, and limited the availability of nutritious foods.



Livelihoods and displacement

These shocks have affected employment and overall livelihoods, leaving many families displaced and trapped in debt and facing economic uncertainty. In Faryab, a woman explained that her husband had to migrate to Iran for work while she took on tailoring and farming herself, showing how drought forces households into migration and informal labour just to survive.



“ Yes, if there is water in the rivers and streams...families are not worried or distressed. But if there is no water, wheat does not grow... Then what can he do with their land? He goes to Turkey, he goes to Iran. The youth die on the way ... because earning a living has become so difficult. ”


Female, Faryab

Drought's impact on farming and agriculture

Across all seven provinces, households consistently reported a significant decline in the consumption of key food groups. Participants attributed these reductions to a combination of drought-related crop failure, increased insects that destroyed crops, livestock losses, reduced pastureland for animals, and declining household purchasing power.

“ ...we used to keep livestock, but now, due to the drought, we are unable to maintain livestock. In the past, we had yogurt and milk at home, but now there is nothing. ... Our people are facing serious problems due to the drought. Our crops and livestock have been destroyed for the same reason. ”

Male, Nangarhar



In these provinces, the food consumption of households is limited to their livestock products and crops. Households report being compelled to consume mouldy wheat and potatoes, spoiled by unexpected rain, due to food scarcity, high prices, and crop failure.

Families face a decline in nutritious diets

Participants across provinces reported that foods that have decreased are meat (mutton, beef, chicken), dairy products (milk, yogurt, cheese), legumes (beans, chickpeas, mung beans), fruits and vegetables, cooking oil and rice.

“ Before there was no drought, everything was from our own crops... Now there are nights when we don't even have oil to cook our food. ”

Female, Badghis



“ Half of the food on our table has been lost due to the drought. ”

Male, Nangarhar



“ Fruits and vegetables have almost been eliminated from our diet. ”

Female, Badakhshan

Child and maternal malnutrition

Male and female participants reported that this decline in nutritious food has particularly affected children, pregnant and lactating women, as well as the elderly, and people with disabilities.



Participants reported that this lack of diverse foods has contributed to child weaknesses, iron deficiency and reduced breastfeeding among women. They described widespread malnutrition in both mothers and children, including lower weight and shorter height. Parents said that their children were born underweight and placed in incubators, while many others were born with developmental delays.

“ My kids are weak because we don’t have any nutritious food for them which makes them sick. ”

Female, Badghis

“ Our children are malnourished because we have not eaten meat and rice for months. If a breastfeeding woman does not eat nutritious food, the child will also become weak. ”

Female, Faryab



Coping strategies during the drought

There are several strategies that people have applied to help them cope.

Food preservation

Families across the provinces say they have learned from droughts to adopt a range of food preservation strategies to stretch limited supplies and prevent spoilage. With reduced harvests, unreliable electricity, and limited access to refrigeration, households say that they rely heavily on **traditional, low-cost preservation methods**.

These include drying vegetables and fruits, storing grains in sealed containers, and storing root vegetables, such as potatoes, carrots, and beetroots, by placing them in hessian sacks and burying them underground. Others produce sesame oil from their own crops to have cooking oil, and some mix wheat and corn flour to reduce costs.

Homemade Processing: Women said that they prepare tomato paste from surplus tomatoes, or yogurt and cheese from milk, when livestock are available. Also, they make Samanak (a traditional sweet dish made from germinated wheat) for pregnant and lactating women, or a kind of 'Halwa' by cooking rough rice with wheat flour

in ghee, halwa from rice flour, juice from grapes, mulberry, Qurot from yogurt, and prepare a mix of chopped apples, apricots, and cherries for breakfast.

“When there was a lot of rain, we had a lot of tomato crops. I made a lot of tomato paste and also gave them to the neighbours.”

Female, Herat



Drying strategy: Participants said that they slaughter their livestock, when possible, and cut the meat into strips, then dry it in the cold air. This preserved meat (یدنال) is a staple in provinces like Daikundi and Badghis, eaten throughout winter.

Women said that they slice and sun-dry vegetables such as eggplant, okra, tomatoes, spinach, clover, and onions. These are later rehydrated and cooked in stews or soups. Also, they dry fruits such as apples, apricots, beetroots, and grapes for consuming in other seasons and during scarcity.

“ I slaughter a sheep and dry its meat called Landi, and we use its meat in the winter. ”

Male, Daikundi

“ If we didn't dry the vegetables, we wouldn't have anything to eat now. The Qurut food helped us through the hard times, without which the children would have gone hungry. ”

Female, Badghis



“ Dried apples and apricots were very useful in times of famine. Qurut has always helped us, especially when fresh milk and yogurt are not available. ”

Female, Badakhshan

Smart cooking

Participants across provinces said that they use **simple, low-cost food mixing techniques** to improve nutrition when food is limited. By combining grains with legumes, adding small amounts of dairy, or mixing dried vegetables into staple dishes, households create meals that are more balanced and filling. These strategies help compensate for the lack of fresh foods and protect children and lactating mothers from severe nutritional decline during droughts. Many households mentioned that they lived only on bread or bread with milk tea for all three meals of the day.

“For children, we always cook lentils with rice to make their food more nutritious. For pregnant women, we add Qurut in the meat soup (shurwa) to make women stronger.”

Female, Badghis

Poultry and gardening: Participants said that they often raise a small number of chicks/hens at their homes so they can consume eggs and meat. Additionally, many participants mentioned having small gardens of vegetables to meet their food needs.



Identified gaps from nutrition experts' perspective

Nutrition experts mentioned **nutrition literacy** as the main gap in the community. They believe that there is a limited understanding of what a balanced diet looks like, particularly when it comes to using low-cost, locally available food.



“People think that if there is no meat and rice, the nutrition will not be good. They say we don't have meat, so how about good nutrition? They don't understand that eggs, beans, and chickpeas also have protein and can replace meat.”

Nutrition expert, Faryab

Additionally, experts said there is limited awareness of essential micronutrients such as iron, folic acid, and vitamins.

“ Mothers don’t understand what iron and folic acid are good for. When we tell them that these tablets are for anemia, they say we don’t know why we should take them. ”

Nutrition expert, Badghis

Experts further highlighted that there is limited understanding of food preservation and safe storage, even in communities where drying food is a common practice.

“ People dry vegetables, but they don’t know how to store them, so they don’t spoil. They say that when we dry it, it smells bad after a few months, and we don’t know where the problem comes from. ”

Nutrition expert, Ghor



This highlights an opportunity to improve community nutrition by communicating the importance of nutritional diets, especially for mothers and children, and reinforce good practices in food preservation.

Drought and its impact on water access and quality

Reduced safe water and hygiene practices

Water scarcity is also one of the most critical impacts of drought, forcing families to travel long distances or wait for hours, and rely on unsafe sources such as storing rainwater in open grounds for drinking and washing purposes.

“ Last year we had a severe shortage of drinking water. There is still no water in most areas. ”

Male, Nangarhar



Hygiene becomes a luxury

Water scarcity severely undermines household hygiene, forcing families to ration water for drinking and abandon essential cleaning practices. When wells dry and water becomes limited, families prioritise survival needs, leaving little or no water for bathing, washing hands, cleaning utensils, or maintaining household sanitation. This leads to a rapid decline in personal and environmental hygiene, especially in homes with young children.

“ Because of the lack of water, bathing has almost stopped. (Sometimes) clothes and dishes are washed late, and the children get sick all the time. ”

Female, Faryab

For lactating mothers, poor hygiene raises the risk of breast infections and contamination during infant feeding. For children, weakened immunity combined with unclean environments creates a dangerous cycle of illness and malnutrition.

“ Water is scarce, so cleaning the house and washing clothes have been reduced. Children get very sick because of the uncleanliness. ”

Female, Badakhshan



Water scarcity during a drought directly undermines the health of families. When wells dry up, and clean water becomes inaccessible, households are forced to rely on unsafe sources such as rivers, runoff, or unprotected wells. This also leads to waterborne diseases such as diarrhea (AWD) among people.

Coping mechanisms when water is limited

Families facing water scarcity adopt a range of practical strategies to stretch limited supplies and protect their health. They reduce water use for hygiene and cleaning, and reuse water for multiple purposes:

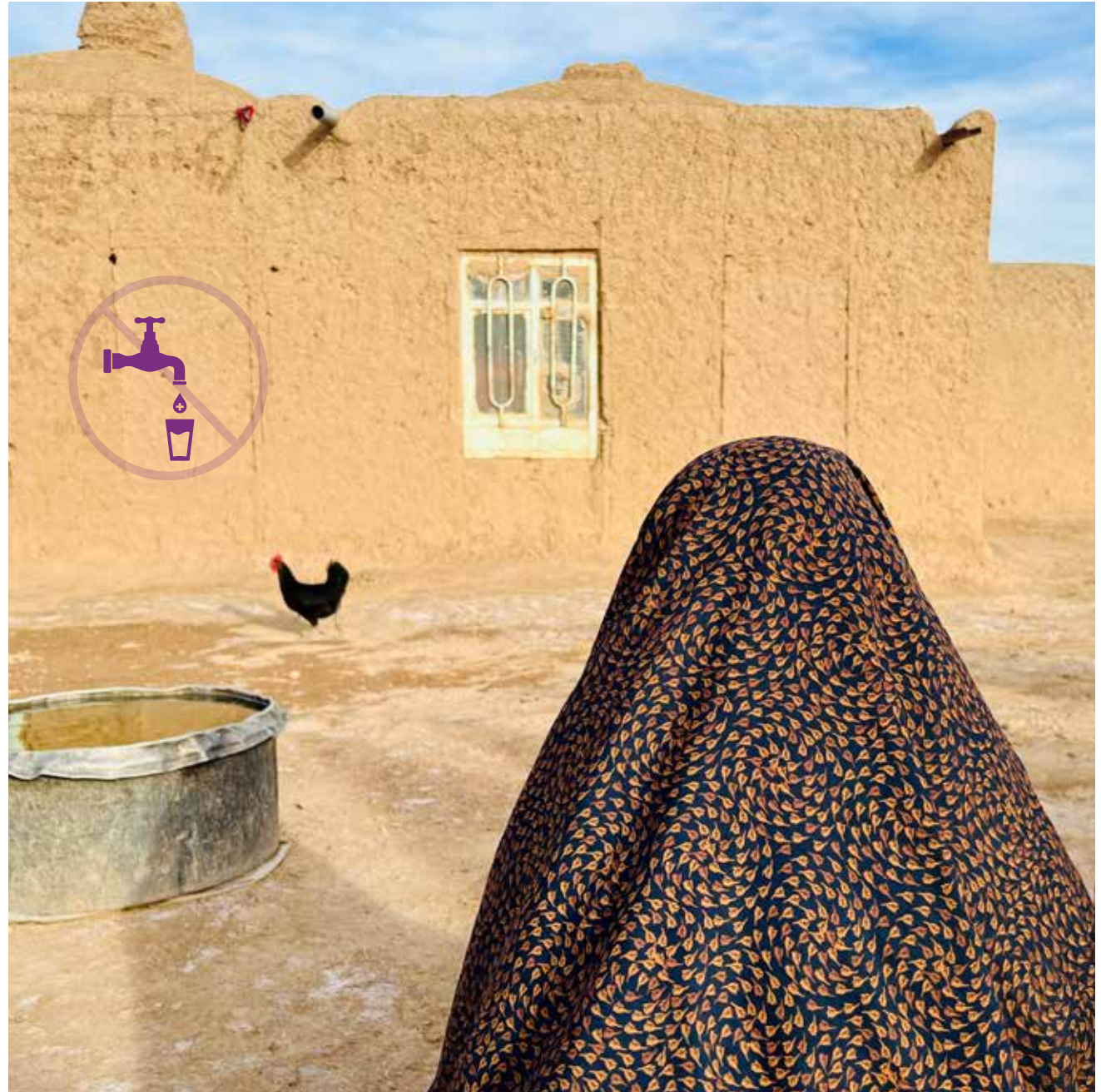
“ Water is very scarce, so we use it to clean the house after washing the vegetables so that it doesn't get wasted. ”

Female, Nangarhar

When clean sources dry up, households often rely on unsafe wells, canals, stored rainwater in open grounds, or purchased tanker water, sometimes on credit.

Many families walk long distances to fetch water, while prioritising the cleanest water for children and pregnant or lactating women.

While these coping strategies help families get by, they also show the urgent need for reliable access to safe water.





Recommendations

For sharing coping strategies around accessing safe drinking water and maintaining hygiene during a drought

- Communication could include advice on how to reuse water for multiple household purposes; the importance of prioritising clean water for children and pregnant or lactating women, and advice on avoiding unsafe sources.

For sharing coping strategies related to food and nutrition

- Introduce low-cost solar dryers: Provide training on food drying to reduce contamination and preserve nutrients.
- Promote safe storage solutions: Encourage the use of airtight containers, raised platforms, and grain banks, to prevent mould, pests, and food loss.
- Develop guidelines for “nutritious one pot meals through radio and TV programming: Standardise grain, legume, vegetable, and dairy meals to improve dietary quality using existing foods.
- Provide micronutrient supplements or fortified foods: Distribute vitamin A, iron, folic acid, MNPs, and fortified staples to fill nutrient gaps.
- Expand community-based nutrition education: Use demonstrations on drying, food mixing, and safe cooking to strengthen household nutrition practices.
- Increase awareness of the importance of consuming nutritious foods: Encourage families to utilise nutrient-rich foods distributed by humanitarian assistance organisations, rather than selling them in local markets. Promoting community awareness can help ensure that these foods contribute to improved household nutrition and health outcomes.
- Raise awareness of consuming wild herbs and the potential health risks for women and children.
- Promote awareness on the importance of sufficient nutrition for pregnant and lactating women: The strict control of food sources often by mothers-in-law limit women’s access to nutritious foods during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Encourage family members, particularly mothers-in-law, to support and facilitate pregnant and lactating women’s access to sufficient nutritious food to improve maternal and child health outcomes.



About What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks!

What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks! is a quarterly bulletin which informs the humanitarian community about how people are experiencing issues on the ground. It is part of the Driving Action for Well Being to Avert Mortality (DAWAM) project which aims to contribute to decreased morbidity and mortality in women and girls and high-risk groups including persons living with disability in Afghanistan. The project is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). It is implemented in seven provinces by a consortium consisting of World Vision-Afghanistan, Action Against Hunger (ACF), Action Aid (AA), BBC Media Action, Nai Qala, Afghan Women's Educational Centre (AWEC) and AADA. This bulletin is produced by BBC Media Action, Afghanistan. The content of What Matters? Afghanistan Speaks! is the responsibility of BBC Media Action. Any views expressed in this report should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself, nor any donors supporting What Matters? or the work of the charity. BBC Media Action welcomes collaboration with other organisations collecting feedback in areas where they work or who would like to contribute to the analysis and production of this bulletin.

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Methodology

This research utilised a qualitative approach to explore people's experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies related to nutrition under drought and water scarcity. Data was collected through 14 gender segregated focus groups discussions (FGDs) and 7 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with men and women across seven DAWAM provinces, capturing diverse perspectives on people's experiences and their coping mechanisms related to nutrition, particularly for women and children facing drought and water scarcity. Seven key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with nutritional services providers in health clinics across seven provinces to understand existing nutrition interventions and the accessibility of services and communication channels particularly for women and children. These insights offer valuable learnings for communities and practitioners working in the health and nutrition sectors.

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