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Status and Vulnerability of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Host Families in the Face of the Livelihood Crisis in Northern Benin

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ABSTRACT: *Since 2021, armed violence spreading south from the central Sahel has driven refugees from Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Togo into northern Benin and uprooted many Beninese households inside their own country. Almost all of them live outside camps, side by side with host families, while aid is still largely allocated by mobility status. Working from a population geography perspective, this paper asks whether that status really tells us who is most vulnerable. A stratified random sample of 250 households (98 host families, 64 internally displaced persons [IDPs] and returnees, 88 refugees and asylum seekers) was drawn from the 2026 multisectoral needs assessment of the Benin Red Cross in Alibori, Atacora and Borgou. Nineteen indicators were grouped into the five capitals of the sustainable livelihoods framework and combined into a livelihood vulnerability index (LVI); food security was measured with an adapted CARI console. The analysis uses χ^2 and Kruskal-Wallis tests, ordered logit models and ROC curves. The LVI rises from host families (0.443) to IDPs (0.488) and refugees (0.520; $p < 0.001$), mainly because of natural and financial capital: only 14% of refugees still own livestock, against 39% of hosts, and 56–57% of displaced households have lost their home or belongings. Crisis or emergency coping strategies are reported by 17% of hosts, 33% of IDPs and 39% of refugees. Food insecurity, on the other hand, reaches 73% of all households (CARI ≥ 3) whatever their status, and the status effect vanishes once the capitals are controlled for. Status predicts food insecurity no better than chance (AUC = 0.52), and host families account for 27% of the most vulnerable tercile. Status records a history of loss, but on its own it is a poor targeting rule. Area-based targeting built on household capitals, and open to host families, would serve people better.*

KEYWORDS: *Population geography, forced displacement, refugees, host families, livelihoods, vulnerability, humanitarian targeting, northern Benin.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Forced mobility has become one of the main forces shaping settlement in West Africa, and it is no longer confined to the central Sahel. Since 2021, attacks by non-state armed groups have reached the northern margins of the coastal states (ACLED, 2024). In Benin, the border communes of Alibori, Atacora and Borgou now receive refugees and asylum seekers from Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Togo, together with internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees (Croix-Rouge Béninoise [CRB], 2026a). Very few of these people live in camps. They move in with relatives, rent a room, or build on a plot lent by a local family. This dispersed pattern of reception changes the distribution of population in rural villages that were already coping with erratic rainfall, growing pressure on land and recurrent friction between farmers and herders.

Aid agencies, meanwhile, sort beneficiaries by status: refugee, IDP, returnee or member of the host community. The distinction rests on legal and operational grounds, yet its analytical worth has been debated for a long time. Zetter (1991, 2007) showed that bureaucratic labels govern access to resources more than they describe need. Bakewell (2008) warned researchers against taking policy categories as their starting point. Work in development economics adds that the arrival of displaced people produces both winners and losers in receiving areas (Alix-Garcia & Saah, 2010; Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014; Verme & Schuettler, 2021). Host families who share their rooms, grain stores and fields can therefore become vulnerable precisely because they host (Davies, 2012).

Population geography offers a useful way into the problem. It treats migration status as one component of population composition, on a par with age, sex and household structure, and it looks at how mobility moves people and resources between places and between groups. From this angle, a host village is not a passive setting

for displacement. It is a receiving population whose size, make-up and resource base shift with each new arrival. The sustainable livelihoods framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Scoones, 1998; DFID, 1999) describes those resources as five capitals, human, natural, physical, financial and social, and Hahn et al. (2009) turned it into a livelihood vulnerability index. For northern Benin, most of what is known about the crisis comes from operational reports. These describe needs category by category, but none of them checks whether the categories actually separate vulnerable households from the others.

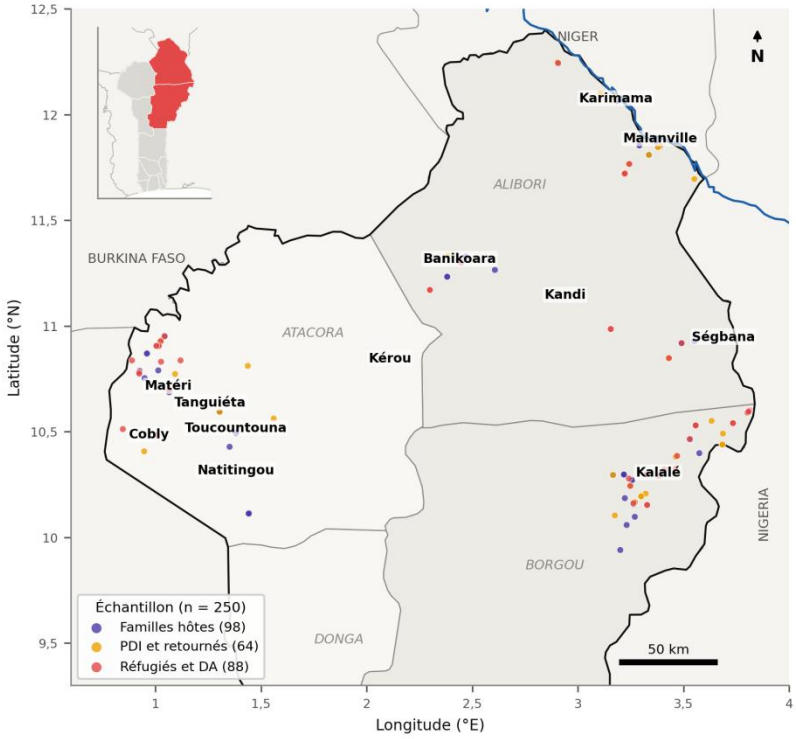
The paper addresses three questions. (i) Do host families, IDPs and refugees differ in their stock of capitals and in the losses they have suffered? (ii) Do these differences show up as gaps in food security and coping behaviour, and does the effect of status operate through the capitals? (iii) Can status be relied on to identify the most vulnerable households? Our working hypothesis is that status reflects a path of dispossession specific to displaced people, but that food insecurity is so widely shared, host families included, that status has limited value as a targeting criterion.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study area

Northern Benin comprises the departments of Alibori, Atacora and Borgou, between latitudes 9°30′ and 12°30′ N. The climate is Sudanian in the south and Sudano-Sahelian in the north, with a single rainy season from May to October and annual totals of 900 to 1,200 mm (Adam & Boko, 1993). Livelihoods depend on cotton, cereals and tubers, on transhumant livestock and, along the Niger valley, on rice and fishing. Close to 80% of the sampled households are rural. The population is mostly Bariba, Dendi, Fulani, Gourmantché and Berba, groups whose kin networks straddle the borders with Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. These cross-border ties explain why many refugees settle with relatives, and why the line between refugees, IDPs and returnees is much more fluid on the ground than in administrative records.

Figure 1 shows where the sampled households are located in the three departments.



169 ménages géoréférencés sur 250 (Kérou : coordonnées absentes). Sources : Highcharts Map Collection, Natural Earth, enquête CRB (2026).

Figure 1: Location of sampled households by status in northern Benin
Source: CRB field survey (2026); Highcharts Map Collection; Natural Earth

The surveyed households cluster in three reception areas. The first is Kalalé in Borgou, along the Nigerian border (89 households). The second lies in Atacora, around Matéri, Cobly, Tanguiéta, Toucountouna and Natitingou, close to the Burkinabè and Togolese borders (68 households), plus 10 households in Kérou. The third stretches along the Niger valley and into central Alibori, covering Malanville, Karimama, Banikoara,

Ségbana and Kandi (83 households). All three status groups are present in each area, and displaced households live in the very villages where host families reside. Because they share the same space, the groups can be compared within the same local settings.

2.2. Data and sampling

The data come from the household multisectoral needs assessment carried out by the CRB in August and September 2026 across the three departments (CRB, 2026a). The questionnaire, run on KoboToolbox, covers household composition, shocks, shelter, water, food security, livelihoods, protection and social cohesion. The database holds 2,451 households, 2,435 of them with complete composition data. In line with the study design, a sub-sample of 250 households was drawn by stratified random sampling with proportional allocation. Strata cross department with status (host families; IDPs and returnees; refugees and asylum seekers). Stratum sizes were computed with Equation 1 and rounded using the largest remainder method. Households were drawn without replacement, with a fixed random seed (2026) so that the draw can be reproduced.

$$n_h = n \cdot N_h / N \quad \text{and} \quad e = z_{\alpha/2} \cdot \sqrt{[\, p(1-p)/n \cdot (N-n)/(N-1) \,]} \tag{1}$$

Here n_h and N_h are the sizes of stratum h in the sample and in the database, n = 250 and N = 2,435. The margin of error e is computed for p = 0.5 at the 95% level (z = 1.96), with a finite population correction, and equals ± 5.9 percentage points for the whole sample. Table 1 gives the resulting distribution.

Table 1: Distribution of the sample by department and status

Department	Hosts	IDPs	Refugees	Total
Alibori	36	26	21	83
Atacora	30	16	32	78
Borgou	32	22	35	89
Total	**98**	**64**	**88**	**250**

Source: CRB database (2026); figures are numbers of households drawn (n = 250).

The sample keeps the structure of the database: 39% host families, 26% IDPs and returnees and 35% refugees and asylum seekers. Borgou (89 households) and Alibori (83) weigh slightly more than Atacora (78). In Atacora, refugees outnumber IDPs two to one (32 against 16), a reflection of the inflow from Burkina Faso. With 64 to 98 households per status group, the margin of error for a proportion estimated within a single group rises to ± 10 to 12 points. Only marked differences between groups can therefore be treated as significant.

2.3. Indicators and indices

Nineteen indicators were coded so that a value of 1 always stands for the favourable situation. They fall into five capitals:

- **Human capital:** share of children aged 5–17 in school; low dependency burden (1 minus the ratio of persons under 15 and over 64 to adults, divided by 4 and bounded to [0; 1]); no member with a disability; household head aged 25–59;
- **Natural capital:** access to land; livestock ownership; drinking water from an improved source;
- **Physical capital:** durable shelter; protective shelter (1 if fully, 0.5 if partly protective); ownership of essential household items; market within 30 minutes;
- **Financial capital:** food stock available; income-generating activity; at least two income sources; no debt;
- **Social capital:** membership of a group or association; assistance received; awareness of a complaints mechanism; family support.

Each capital K_c is the mean of its m_c indicators x_{ij}. The livelihood vulnerability index (LVI) is the complement of the mean of the five capitals (Equation 2), following the equal-weight aggregation by component proposed by Hahn et al. (2009).

$$K_{c,i} = (1/m_c) \sum_{j \in c} x_{ij} \qquad LVI_i = 1 - (1/5) \sum_{c=1\ldots5} K_{c,i} \tag{2}$$

Six loss indicators complete the picture: livestock stolen or lost, dispossession of property, destruction of the dwelling or belongings, lost or restricted access to land, and absence of any income-generating activity. Food security is measured with an adapted CARI console (WFP, 2021). The food consumption score (FCS) is converted into a rating of 4 if FCS ≤ 21, 3 if 21 < FCS ≤ 35 and 1 above that. Livelihood coping strategies (LCS) are rated from 1 to 4: 1 for none, 2 for stress strategies (using savings, borrowing, selling non-productive assets), 3 for crisis strategies (cutting health or education spending) and 4 for emergency strategies (selling the last productive assets, begging, distress migration). The console combines both ratings (Equation 3). Because the survey had no module on the food expenditure share, this simplified two-dimension version had to be used.

$$CARI_i = \lceil\, (FCS_{sc,i} + LCS_i) / 2 \,\rceil \in \{1; 2; 3; 4\} \tag{3}$$

2.4. Statistical analysis

Differences between status groups were tested with the χ^2 test of independence for binary indicators and the Kruskal-Wallis test for continuous indices. The role of the capitals was examined with two ordered logit models of the CARI console (Equation 4). Model 1 includes status, department, sex of the household head and household size (log); Model 2 adds the five standardised capitals.

$$\text{logit } P(CARI_i \leq k) = \tau_k - (\beta' \, Status_i + \gamma' \, K_i^* + \delta' \, Z_i + \mu_{dep}) \quad (4)$$

If the status coefficients shrink markedly from one model to the other, the effect of status runs through the capitals. The two models are compared with a likelihood ratio test and the Akaike information criterion. A binary logit of crisis or emergency coping (LCS $\geq$ 3) and a linear regression of the FCS, with HC1 robust standard errors, complete the analysis. Lastly, the ability of status and of the LVI to pick out food-insecure households (CARI $\geq$ 3) or households using crisis strategies was measured by the area under the ROC curve (AUC), which equals 0.5 for a random ranking and 1 for a perfect one:

$$AUC = P(\, s_i > s_j \mid y_i = 1, y_j = 0 \,) + \tfrac{1}{2} P(\, s_i = s_j \mid y_i = 1, y_j = 0 \,) \quad (5)$$

Computations were run in Python 3 (pandas, scipy, statsmodels, scikit-learn) and maps were produced with geopandas. The CRB collected the data with the informed consent of respondents. We worked on an anonymised file, and household locations are only shown at a small scale.

III. RESULTS

3.1. Demographic profile of households by status

Any population geography analysis starts with composition. Table 2 compares the households of the three groups.

Table 2: Demographic profile of households by status

Characteristic	Host families (n = 98)	IDPs and returnees (n = 64)	Refugees and AS (n = 88)	p
Mean household size (persons)	10.3	8.6	8.9	0.104
Households of 10 persons or more (%)	43.9	34.4	29.5	0.118
Female-headed households (%)	23.5	31.3	44.3	0.010
Head aged 25–59 (%)	84.7	95.3	84.1	0.079
Low dependency index (0–1)	0.482	0.422	0.508	0.164
No member with a disability (%)	84.7	90.6	87.5	0.540
Arrived or settled less than 6 months ago (%)	4.1	15.6	33.0	< 0.001
Household attacked (%)	12.2	32.8	45.5	< 0.001
Rural residence (%)	87.8	73.4	72.7	0.021

AS: asylum seekers; p-values from χ^2 or Kruskal-Wallis tests. Source: CRB field survey (2026), sample of 250 households.

The three groups do not share the same structure. Host households are the largest, with 10.3 persons on average, and 44% of them have ten members or more. They absorb incoming relatives, and most of them live in rural areas (88%). Refugee households are far more often headed by a woman (44% against 23% among hosts; p = 0.010). This points to a sex-selective migration in which couples are split, with men staying behind, still on the move or working elsewhere. One third of refugee households arrived less than six months ago, compared with 16% of IDPs, and 45% have been attacked. IDP heads are almost all of working age (95%). Displaced households are also more urban (about 27% against 12% of hosts), which suggests that small towns serve as reception nodes. Status, then, also captures differences in composition, length of stay and exposure to violence, and the rest of the analysis has to keep this in mind.

3.2. Erosion of capitals follows status

Figure 2 shows the five-capital pentagon and the distribution of the LVI by status.

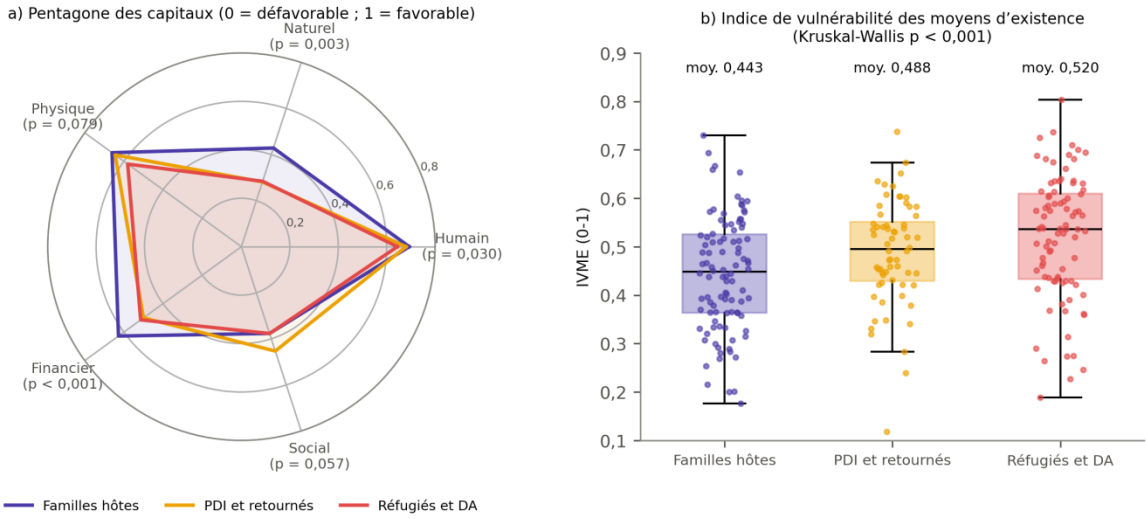


Figure 2: Capital pentagon and livelihood vulnerability index by status
Source: CRB field survey (2026)

The host-family pentagon almost entirely encloses that of refugees. The mean LVI goes from 0.443 among hosts to 0.488 among IDPs and 0.520 among refugees ($p < 0.001$). Most of the gap comes from natural capital (0.429 against 0.281 and 0.284; $p = 0.003$) and financial capital (0.628 against 0.500 and 0.514; $p < 0.001$). Human capital ($p = 0.030$) and physical capital ($p = 0.079$) differ less. Social capital behaves differently: it peaks among IDPs (0.453), who receive more aid and more help from relatives. The distributions nonetheless overlap a great deal, and some host households have an LVI above the refugee median.

Figure 3 breaks these capitals down into their nineteen indicators.

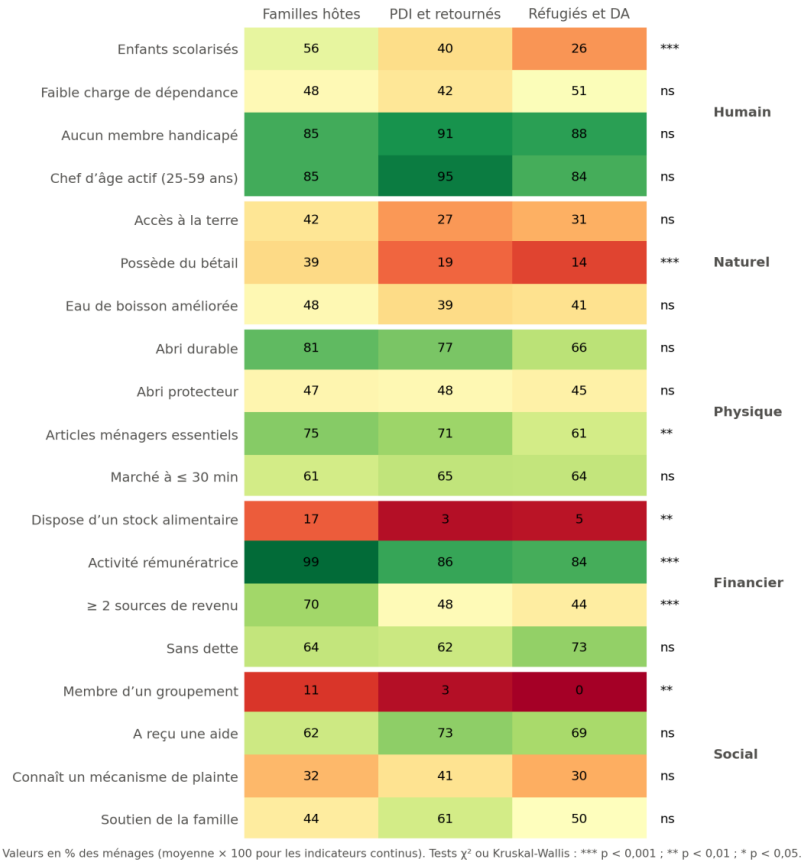


Figure 3: Capital indicators by household status
Source: CRB field survey (2026)

The indicators that set the groups furthest apart concern the assets lost in flight. Only 19% of IDPs and 14% of refugees still own livestock, compared with 39% of hosts. A mere 3 to 5% hold a food stock, against 17% of hosts. Fewer than half combine two income sources, against 70% of hosts. Not a single refugee belongs to a local group. School enrolment falls from 56% of children in host households to 26% in refugee households. Other indicators hardly vary with status: access to land is low for everyone (27 to 42%), as is improved drinking water (39 to 48%), and 27 to 38% of households are in debt depending on the group. Physical capital deteriorates mostly among refugees, only 66% of whom live in durable shelter and 61% of whom own the essential household items.

3.3. Livelihood losses linked to displacement

Figure 4 shows how often households of each status have suffered losses.

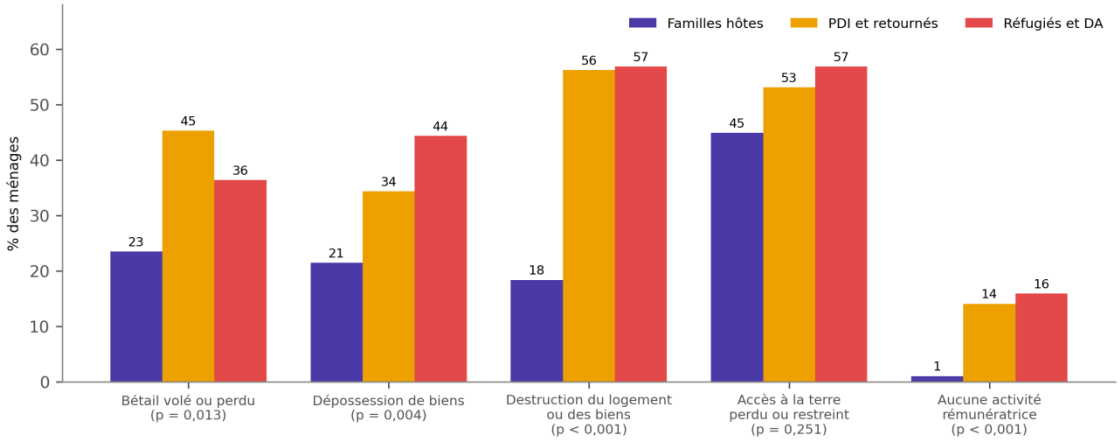


Figure 4: Livelihood losses by household status

Source: CRB field survey (2026)

Displacement first means destruction: 56% of IDPs and 57% of refugees have seen their home or belongings destroyed, against 18% of hosts ($p < 0.001$). Dispossession (34% and 44%) and livestock losses (45% and 36%) are also more frequent. These losses account for the collapse in natural capital noted above. Yet host families are not spared. Nearly a quarter of them have lost livestock and one in five has been dispossessed, a reminder that reception villages are themselves exposed to armed incursions. Access to land is restricted for 45 to 57% of households with no significant difference between groups ($p = 0.251$): land is a constraint for all. Finally, 14 to 16% of displaced households have no income-generating activity at all, compared with 1% of hosts.

3.4. Coping strategies and food security

Figure 5 compares the severity of coping strategies and the adapted CARI console across status groups.

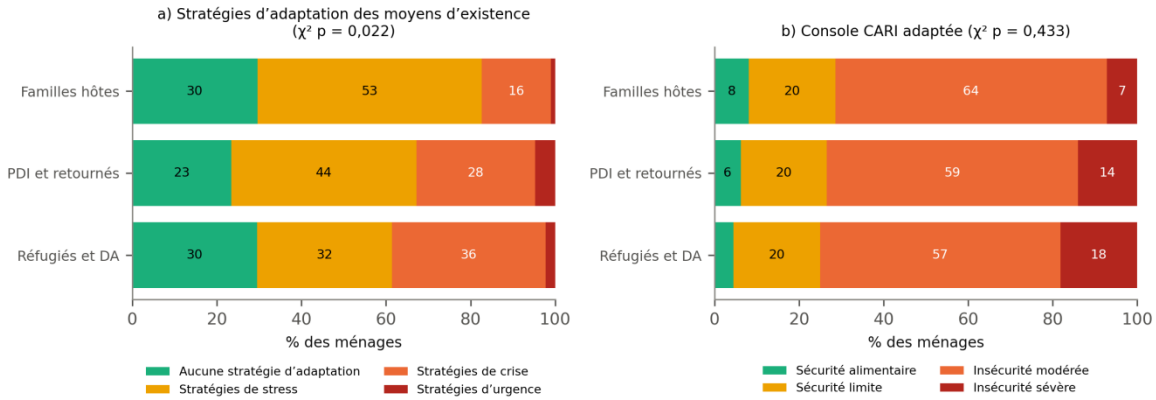


Figure 5: Livelihood coping strategies and adapted CARI console by status

Source: CRB field survey (2026)

The two measures tell different stories. Coping strategies differ clearly ($p = 0.022$): 17% of hosts resort to crisis or emergency strategies, against 33% of IDPs and 39% of refugees. Most host families stay at the stress stage (53%), drawing on savings or borrowing, whereas displaced households are already cutting back on health

care and schooling. Food security, by contrast, looks much the same in all three groups (p = 0.433). Some 71% of hosts, 73% of IDPs and 75% of refugees are moderately or severely food insecure, and the mean FCS does not differ (25.6, 21.6 and 25.1; p = 0.394). In each group, close to half of households have poor consumption. Food insecurity is the common condition of everyone living in these villages; what sets displaced households apart is the price they pay to hold it in check.

3.5. Does status operate through the capitals?

Table 3 reports the models linking the CARI console, crisis coping and the FCS to status and capitals.

Table 3: Models of food security and coping strategies (n = 250)

Variable	CARI, Model 1 (OR)	CARI, Model 2 (OR)	LCS ≥ 3, logit (OR)	FCS, OLS (coef.)
Status: IDPs (ref.: hosts)	1.38	0.98	1.96	−2.25
Status: refugees and AS	1.86 *	1.34	3.14 **	2.23
Human capital (1 SD)	–	0.96	1.07	0.55
Natural capital (1 SD)	–	0.73 *	0.84	2.62 **
Physical capital (1 SD)	–	0.75 *	1.20	4.20 ***
Financial capital (1 SD)	–	0.80	0.81	0.46
Social capital (1 SD)	–	1.11	1.37 *	−0.02
Female household head	0.62	0.55 *	0.65	2.47
Household size (log)	0.78	0.88	1.07	1.56
Atacora (ref.: Alibori)	1.03	1.05	1.79	−1.33
Borgou (ref.: Alibori)	0.50 *	0.51 *	0.91	3.67
Goodness of fit	AIC = 538.9	AIC = 531.4	Pseudo-R^2 = 0.078	R^2 = 0.160

OR: odds ratio; SD: standard deviation; ordered and binary logit models; OLS with HC1 robust standard errors; **** p < 0.001;*** *p < 0.01; * p < 0.05. Likelihood ratio test, Model 2 vs Model 1: p = 0.004. Source: CRB field survey (2026).*

In Model 1, refugees have higher odds of food insecurity than hosts (OR = 1.86; p = 0.039), while the gap is smaller and not significant for IDPs (OR = 1.38). Once the capitals enter (Model 2), these odds ratios fall to 1.34 and 0.98 and lose all significance, and the fit improves markedly (likelihood ratio test, p = 0.004). Natural capital (OR = 0.73 per standard deviation) and physical capital (0.75) protect against food insecurity. The effect of status on the CARI console therefore passes through the loss of land, livestock, shelter and equipment. Crisis coping follows another logic. Even with equal capitals, refugees are three times as likely as hosts to use crisis strategies (OR = 3.14; p = 0.002). Here status keeps an effect of its own, tied to the lack of reserves, legal uncertainty and the pressure of a recent and hurried settlement. The FCS depends mainly on physical capital (+ 4.2 points per standard deviation) and natural capital (+ 2.6 points). Female-headed households and those in Borgou show lower odds of food insecurity, perhaps because assistance tends to reach them first.

3.6. Status as a targeting criterion

Figure 6 plots the estimated effects of status and capitals on the CARI console in the two models.

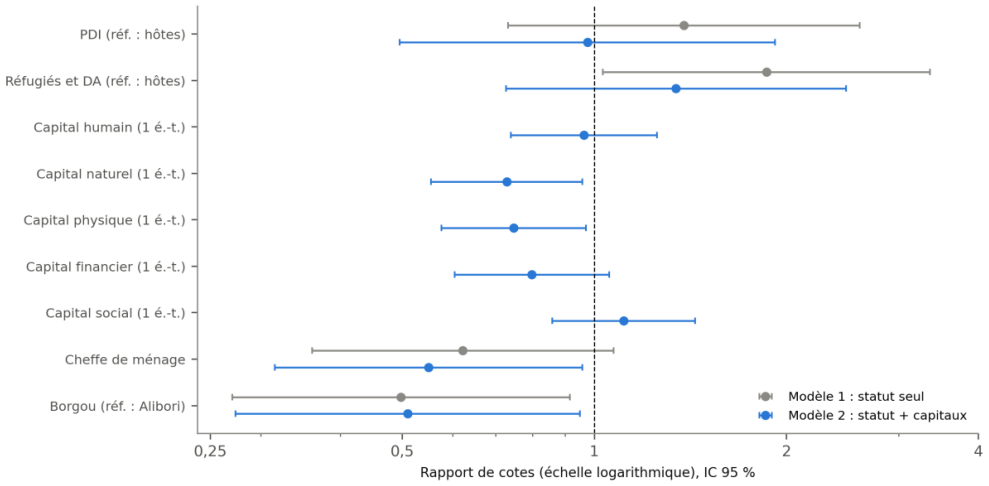


Figure 6: Odds ratios of status and capitals on the CARI console (ordered logit models)
Source: CRB field survey (2026)

Between the two models, the confidence intervals for status visibly slide back towards 1. Natural and physical capital are the only ones whose interval stays entirely below 1. Food vulnerability, in other words, depends less on the label a household carries than on what it still owns. This bears directly on targeting, examined in Figure 7.

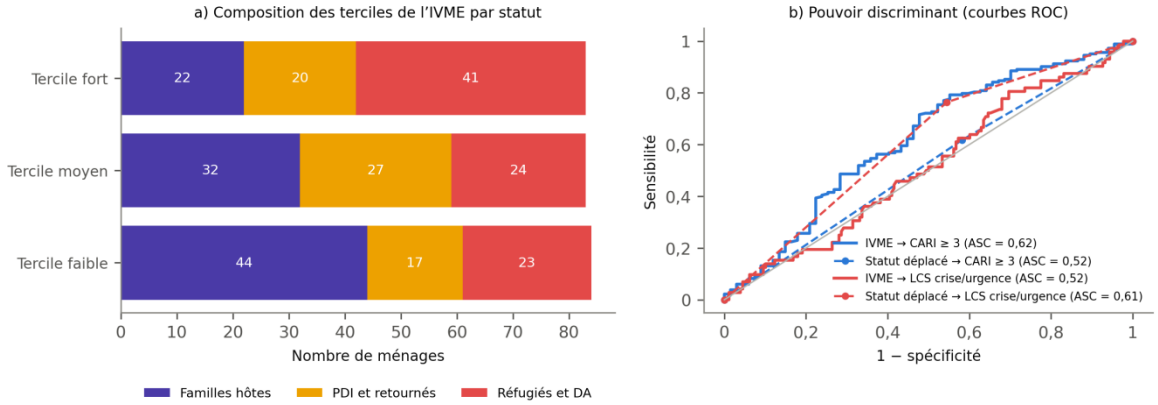


Figure 7: Composition of vulnerability terciles and discriminating power of status and LVI
Source: CRB field survey (2026)

The most vulnerable tercile contains 41 refugee households, 20 IDP households and 22 host households. More than a quarter of the poorest households are hosts, and 22% of all host households fall into this tercile. Conversely, 26% of refugees and 27% of IDPs sit in the least vulnerable tercile. Targeting by status alone would thus leave out part of the most vulnerable while including households that are relatively well endowed. The ROC curves bear this out. For food insecurity (CARI ≥ 3), status yields an AUC of 0.52, close to chance, compared with 0.62 for the LVI. For crisis coping the order is reversed: status (0.61) does better than the LVI (0.52). Each criterion captures a different dimension. The LVI detects a lack of resources; status detects the pressure that pushes households to sell their last assets.

Lastly, the LVI varies little between departments ($p = 0.415$). The host–IDP–refugee gradient appears everywhere, but it is steepest in Borgou (0.444 for hosts against 0.540 for the refugees of Kalalé) and flattest in Alibori, where IDPs and refugees stand at the same level (0.500 and 0.495). Status-related vulnerability therefore also has a territorial dimension, specific to each reception area.

IV. DISCUSSION

4.1. Status as a marker of a path of dispossession

The results first confirm that mobility status corresponds to a real path of loss. Displaced households have lost livestock, belongings and reserves, and many now depend on a single source of income. The host–IDP–refugee gradient matches what has been observed in other out-of-camp settings, where refugees arrive the most destitute because they have crossed a border and left their economic networks behind (Jacobsen, 2005; Betts et al., 2017). It also reflects the composition of refugee households, more often headed by women and more recently arrived. Status thus works as a demographic shorthand that compresses length of stay, household structure and exposure to violence into a single label. For population geography, this confirms that the legal category has a social and temporal content. It also shows that the category lumps together very different situations, as Brun (2003) found when examining the blurred line between long-term IDPs and local citizens in Sri Lanka.

4.2. Food insecurity shared by host families

The second finding strongly qualifies the first: host families are just as food insecure as displaced households. They host 11 people on average (median 8), and they share their stores, rooms and fields until their own reserves run out, as participants in the Kalalé focus groups explained (CRB, 2026b). In demographic terms, the host household acts as a buffer that absorbs the newcomers and carries the cost of their settlement. This is what Davies (2012) describes for family hosting arrangements, where the burden of reception shifts onto households that receive no compensation. It also fits studies showing that poor and landless host households lose out when displaced people arrive, even when others gain (Maystadt & Verwimp, 2014; Verme & Schuettler, 2021). The difference between groups lies less in the level of food insecurity than in how they deal with it: hosts draw on savings, displaced households cut their children's health care and schooling. Because the CARI console merges the two dimensions, it hides this difference, which is why coping strategies deserve to be reported separately.

4.3. Implications for targeting and the geography of aid

The third finding has practical consequences. Status is a weak predictor of food insecurity, and more than a quarter of the most vulnerable households are host families. Interviews conducted by the CRB show that excluding hosts from aid breeds jealousy and tension in several villages, and 23 key informants explicitly ask for hosts to be included (CRB, 2026c). A two-step approach seems preferable. The first step is geographical and selects reception villages without regard to status. The second relies on a simple capital score built around livestock, food stocks, shelter and income diversity. Status remains relevant for interventions meant to stop households from selling their last productive assets, such as emergency cash transfers to new arrivals. Such a scheme is close to what has been recommended for out-of-camp responses, which address the reception area rather than the category (Davies, 2012; Betts et al., 2017).

4.4. Limitations

Several limitations should be kept in mind. The 250-household sample, chosen by design, limits statistical power: gaps of 10 to 15 points between two groups may fail to reach significance, and analyses on the full database of 2,451 households would help confirm them. The CARI console is an adapted version without the food expenditure share. Giving equal weight to the five capitals in the LVI is a normative choice. The data are cross-sectional, so they neither measure losses against the pre-displacement situation nor support causal claims. The positive association between social capital and crisis coping most likely reflects reverse causality, since households in difficulty turn more to relatives and to aid. Finally, 81 households, including those in Kérou, have no geographic coordinates, which rules out a fine-grained spatial analysis.

V. CONCLUSION

In northern Benin, refugees, IDPs and host families live in the same villages but do not share the same history. Displaced households, refugees above all, have lost much of their livestock, belongings and reserves, which shows in a higher LVI and in more frequent recourse to crisis strategies. This dispossession does not, however, produce a gap in food insecurity, because host families, who bear a large part of the cost of reception, are equally affected. Once capitals are taken into account, status no longer explains food security, and it identifies food-insecure households no better than chance, whereas capitals do. For population geography, mobility status emerges as an indicator of trajectory rather than of need. For humanitarian action, the findings argue for targeting based on household resources and on reception areas, with host families included. Panel surveys following the same households over time would show whether their capitals are being rebuilt or keep eroding.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this manuscript.

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