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Indigenous Poultry Production and Marketing in Bombali District, Sierra Leone: Pathways to Rural Livelihoods and Food Security

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Abstract: Indigenous poultry production plays a vital role in food security and rural livelihoods across Africa, particularly in low-income countries such as Sierra Leone. Despite its potential contribution to household nutrition and income generation, indigenous poultry farming remains largely underdeveloped and constrained by low productivity, weak market linkages, and poor veterinary services. This study examines the socio-economic importance, production systems, and marketing of indigenous poultry in Bombali District, Sierra Leone. Results indicate that indigenous poultry production is dominated by women (74%) and middle-aged farmers (36–45 years, 40%). Most respondents (64%) had no formal education, while 88% were unemployed outside poultry production, demonstrating the sector's significance in sustaining livelihoods. Production was primarily semi-intensive (78%), with meat as the dominant output (98%). Family contributions (74%) were the main source of start-up capital, while only 2% of farmers had formally registered their enterprises. Despite constraints such as poor housing, limited access to veterinary services, theft, and high transportation costs, 90% of farmers reported profitability from indigenous poultry production. Marketing was largely informal, with 94% of farmers selling through retail channels in local markets, predominantly as live birds. The study concludes that indigenous poultry is a critical livelihood strategy for rural households in Bombali District but requires targeted interventions to address systemic challenges. Policy support in areas such as veterinary services, credit access, extension support, and market infrastructure would improve productivity and profitability. This study contributes empirical evidence to debates on sustainable rural livelihoods and agribusiness development in West Africa.

Keywords: *Indigenous Poultry, Production Systems, Marketing, Rural Livelihoods, Sierra Leone, Food Security.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Agriculture has long been recognized as the backbone of Sierra Leone's rural economy, providing livelihoods, food, and income for the majority of the population. Livestock, within this sector, plays a critical role in ensuring food security, supporting rural development, and alleviating poverty, with poultry, especially indigenous chickens, emerging as a key component due to its accessibility, adaptability, and socio-cultural relevance (Gueye, 1998; FAO, 2022). Unlike larger livestock, indigenous poultry requires relatively low capital investment, making it a practical enterprise for women, unemployed youth, and resource-poor households seeking both nutritional and economic benefits. Globally, the demand for poultry products has been rising steadily due to population growth, urbanization, and changes in dietary preferences, and Africa has not been exempt from this trend. In sub-Saharan Africa, indigenous poultry contributes over 70% of poultry products consumed and accounts for approximately 20% of total animal protein intake (Kitalyi, 1998; Njenga et al., 2021). In Sierra Leone, indigenous chickens are widely kept by rural households for domestic consumption and income generation; however, despite their importance, they remain marginalized in national agricultural policies and development programs (Sonaiya, 1990; FAO, 2023).

In Bombali District, the production of indigenous poultry is predominantly small-scale and family-operated, following traditional free-range systems where birds scavenge for food during the day and are housed at night in simple shelters. While this low-input system reduces production costs, it exposes birds to numerous challenges, including predation, theft, and disease outbreaks, compounded by limited access to veterinary services, poor-quality feed, and inadequate knowledge of biosecurity measures (Njenga et al., 2021; UNDP, 2024). These constraints not only affect productivity but also limit the

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potential of indigenous poultry to contribute fully to household food security and income. Marketing of indigenous poultry in Bombali remains largely informal, with farmers selling live birds directly to consumers or through local markets. Prices are influenced by negotiation, bird size, and seasonal demand, and indigenous poultry often commands a premium relative to exotic breeds due to perceptions of better taste, nutritional value, and cultural authenticity (Magothe et al., 2006; FAO, 2022). Nonetheless, poor infrastructure, lack of organized producer groups, limited access to market information, and high transportation costs continue to constrain market efficiency.

Given the socio-economic importance of indigenous poultry in rural livelihoods, the sector presents an opportunity for enhancing food security, women's empowerment, and poverty reduction. However, the challenges associated with production, health management, and market access highlight the need for targeted interventions to unlock this potential. Understanding the socio-economic characteristics of poultry farmers, their production practices, and marketing strategies is therefore essential for formulating policies and programs that can promote indigenous poultry as a sustainable agribusiness enterprise in Bombali District. This study seeks to investigate these aspects to provide insights into the constraints and opportunities within the sector, ultimately contributing to evidence-based policy recommendations and strategic interventions that can strengthen rural livelihoods and support national development objectives (FAO, 2023; Invest Salone, 2025).

➢ *Objectives of the Study*

This study aims to assess farmers' preferences of adopting improved rice varieties in Sierra Leone with special focus on the following districts (Kambia, Bonthe, & Pujehun districts).

- *This Study was Designed to:*

✓ Characterize the socio-economic status of indigenous poultry farmers in Bombali District.
✓ Assess the prevailing production systems and practices.
✓ Investigate the marketing channels and processes for indigenous poultry.
✓ Identify constraints and opportunities within the production and marketing systems.
✓ Recommend strategies for enhancing the role of poultry in rural livelihoods and agribusiness development.

II. STUDY METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*

The study employed a descriptive survey design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. A structured questionnaire was used to collect primary data from poultry farmers, supplemented by direct observation of production and marketing practices. The design allowed for characterization of socio-economic attributes, production systems, and market structures.

➢ *Study Location*

The research was conducted in Bombali District, located in Northern Sierra Leone, with Makeni as its administrative capital. Bombali is one of the largest districts in the country with an estimated population of 606,183 (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015). The area is ethnically diverse, with Temne, Limba and Loko being the predominant groups. Agriculture and petty trade are the main economic activities, and poultry is widely kept in both rural and peri-urban areas.

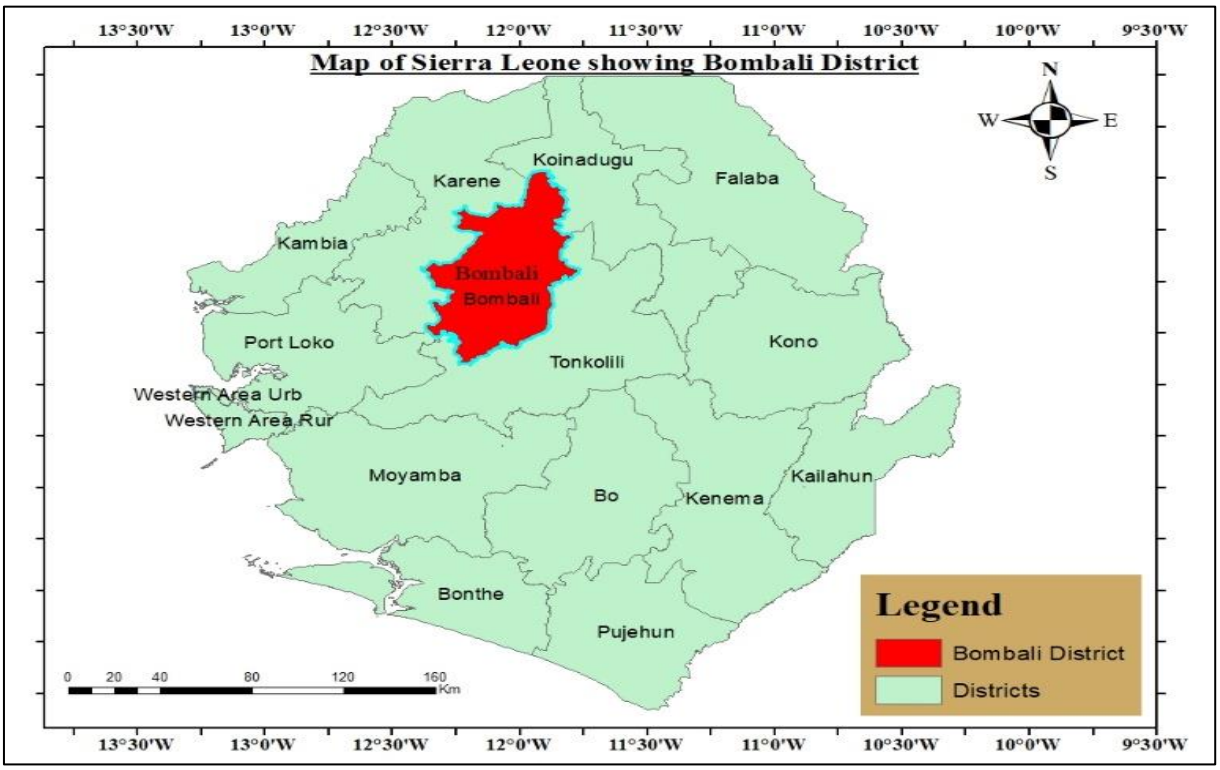


Fig 1 Sierra Leone Map Showing Bombali District.

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➢ *Study Population and Sample Size*

A total of 50 indigenous poultry farmers were randomly selected from different communities in Bombali District. The sample size, though modest, provides a reasonable representation of smallholder poultry keepers in the district. Farmers included both men and women, across different age groups, marital status categories, and educational backgrounds.

➢ *Sampling Techniques*

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select 50 poultry farmers in Bombali District. This method was appropriate because it targeted households directly involved in indigenous poultry farming, ensuring the relevance of data collected. Purposive sampling is widely applied in agricultural and rural livelihood studies where the population of interest is specialized and not evenly distributed (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

➢ *Data Analysis*

Quantitative data was entered into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS (Version 20). Descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, mean) were used to summarize findings. Results are presented in tables, charts, and narratives. Qualitative responses were thematically analyzed to complement the quantitative results.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents and interprets the findings on the production and marketing of indigenous poultry in Bombali District, highlighting key practices, challenges, and trends.

➢ *Socio-Economic Characteristics of Indigenous Poultry Farmers*

This table presents results and discussions based on the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents, including gender, age, educational status, marital status, and occupation.

Table 1 Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Farmers

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	13	26.0
	Female	37	74.0
Age	15-25Yrs	7	14.0
	26-35 Yrs	16	32.0
	36-45 Yrs	20	40.0
	Above 45 Yrs	7	14.0
Educational Status	Non formal Education	32	64.0
	High School	13	26.0
	Tech/Voc	3	6.0
	Tertiary	2	4.0
Marital status	Single	7	14.0
	Married	37	74.0
	Widow/Widower	6	12.0
Occupation level	Employed	13	8.7
	Unemployed	131	87.3

Field Survey 2025

The results (Table 1) show that indigenous poultry production in Bombali District is strongly gendered, with 74% of respondents being female compared to 26% male. This reflects the established trend across Africa where poultry is described as a "woman's enterprise" because it requires low capital, fits into household routines, and contributes directly to food security (Kitalyi, 1998). In Sierra Leone, this pattern is particularly relevant, as rural women often manage small livestock to provide quick cash for school fees, health care, and household consumption (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015).

Age distribution indicated that 40% of farmers were between 36–45 years and 32% between 26–35 years, showing that poultry keeping is concentrated among middle-aged, economically active adults. Only 14% were below 25 years, suggesting that youth involvement in poultry is still limited, despite its potential to create employment in a country with high youth unemployment rates (FAO, 2020).

Educational attainment was generally low, with 64% of respondents reporting no formal education and only 4% attaining tertiary education. This mirrors national statistics where literacy levels in rural Sierra Leone remain low, particularly among women (Statistics Sierra Leone, 2015). The low educational background constrains farmers' ability to adopt record-keeping and improved husbandry practices, similar to challenges reported in Malawi and Nigeria (Gondwe, 2004; Sonaiya & Swan, 2004).

Marital status data revealed that 74% of respondents were married, while 14% were single and 12% widowed. In Sierra Leone, where households often depend on joint family labor, poultry farming serves as a collective activity that supports family nutrition and generates supplementary income for married households.

Finally, occupation status further highlights the importance of poultry as a livelihood option. A striking 87.3% of respondents were unemployed outside poultry,

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relying primarily on poultry farming as a safety net in a fragile rural economy. This is consistent with broader employment challenges in Sierra Leone, where agriculture, including small livestock production, remains the largest source of livelihood for the rural poor (World Bank, 2019).

Overall, the socio-demographic profile of respondents underscores that indigenous poultry production is a critical livelihood strategy in Sierra Leone, particularly for women, less-educated farmers, and unemployed rural households.

➢ *Prevailing Production Systems and Practices*

This study set out to assess the prevailing production systems and management practices in poultry farming within the district. The results show that poultry production is largely semi-commercialized, with farmers adopting varied approaches in terms of experience, housing, feeding, capital access, and disease control.

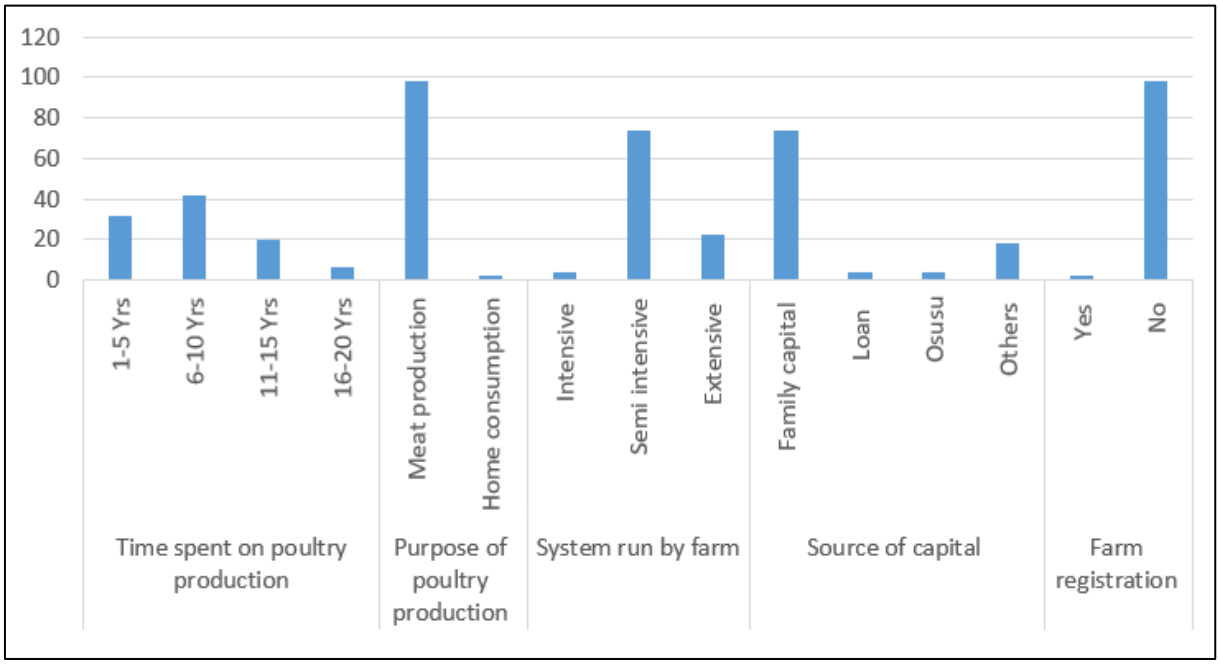


Fig 2 Prevailing Production Systems and Practices.
Field Survey Data 2025

The results reveal that poultry farming in the study area is dominated by farmers with moderate experience levels, as 42% of respondents had spent 6–10 years in production, followed by 32% with 1–5 years. This indicates that poultry keeping is not entirely new, but many farmers are still in the developing stage of management practices. Only a few (6%) had more than 15 years of engagement, suggesting that long-term sustainability in poultry farming is still limited.

In terms of production objectives, nearly all farmers (98%) kept poultry primarily for meat production, while home consumption accounted for just 2%. This finding highlights the market-oriented nature of indigenous poultry in the district, reflecting poultry as both a source of income and livelihood support rather than merely subsistence.

The production systems further support this orientation, as 74% of farmers operated semi-intensive systems, combining both free-ranging and some level of housing. This is consistent with the resource-constrained but adaptive strategies of rural farmers. Only 4% reported intensive systems, which reflects limited access to capital and modern infrastructure. Indeed, capital sourcing was largely informal, with 74% relying on family capital, while very few accessed loans (4%) or organized financial schemes such as *osusu* (4%). The low engagement with formal financing may hinder expansion and modernization of poultry enterprises.

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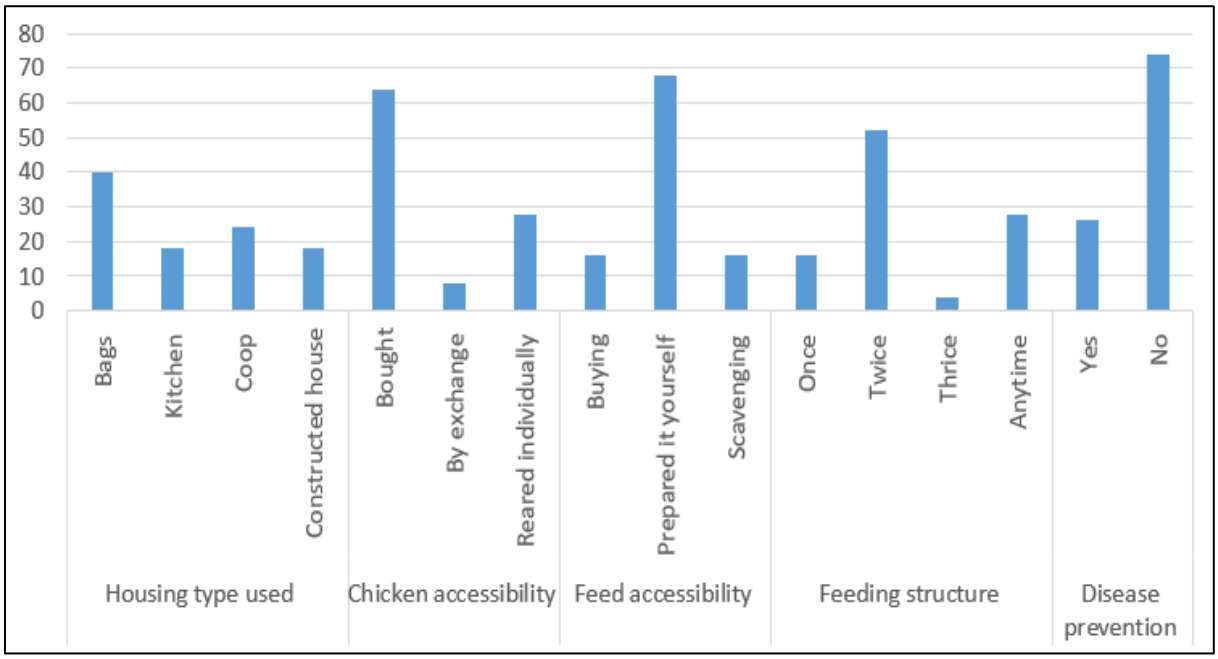


Fig 3 Prevailing Production Systems and Practices.
Field Survey Data 2025

Another striking result is that poultry farming remains largely informal, as 98% of farms were not registered. This points to structural challenges in formalizing smallholder poultry businesses, which has implications for policy support, access to credit, and integration into value chains. Housing types were generally improvised, with 40% using bags and 18% adapting kitchens, while only 24% used proper coops and 18% constructed dedicated poultry houses. This shows that housing remains a major limitation to improved productivity and disease control.

Access to poultry was mainly through purchases (64%), with fewer farmers rearing birds individually (28%) or obtaining them by exchange (8%). Feed was mostly prepared by farmers themselves (68%), indicating reliance on locally available feed resources, while 16% each depended on scavenging or commercial purchase. Feeding frequency showed that most farmers fed their birds twice daily (52%), although a significant proportion (28%) fed "anytime," reflecting less structured management.

Disease prevention emerged as a major concern, as 74% of farmers reported not practicing any formal disease control. This exposes flocks to mortality risks and undermines productivity. The lack of veterinary inputs, coupled with poor housing and limited capital, makes disease outbreaks a critical challenge.

Overall, these findings highlight that poultry farming in the area is semi-commercialized, resource-limited, and informally structured, with strong potential for growth if interventions in capital access, veterinary services, housing improvement, and formalization are provided. In the Sierra Leonean context, poultry represents not just a livelihood but also a pathway for addressing food security and rural poverty, though constraints in finance, infrastructure, and management practices must be addressed.

- *Marketing Channels and Processes for Indigenous Poultry*

This consist of the following; the form at which products are sold, determinant of product price, form at which meat produced is sold, preference of buyers, availability of extension services on market, marketing destination, preference of buyers regarding sex of fowls, transporting chickens to the markets, methods of sales, profitability of business and financial record keeping done by the respondent involved in the indigenous poultry production in their respective communities.

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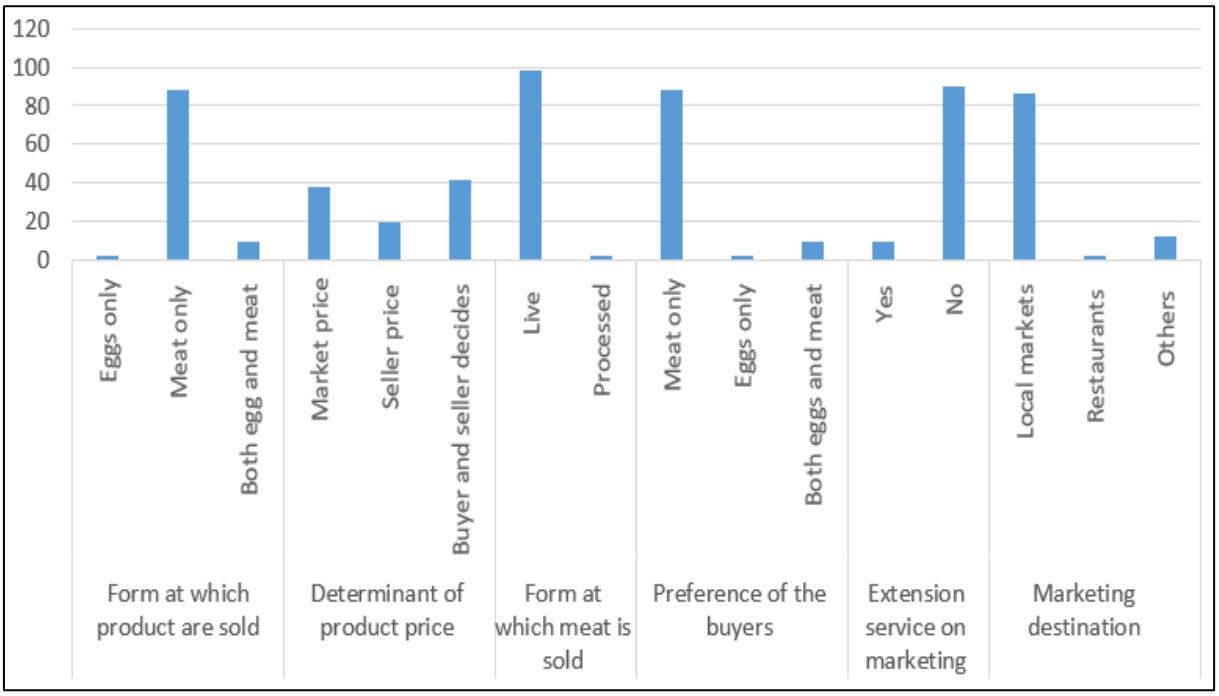


Fig 4 Marketing Channels and Processes for Indigenous Poultry
Field Survey Data 2025

The results on the marketing of poultry products provide a comprehensive picture of prevailing production and consumer trends within the study area. The analysis demonstrates that poultry marketing is overwhelmingly skewed towards meat production. A substantial 88% of producers reported selling their products in the form of meat only, compared to 10% who combined both eggs and meat, and just 2% who sold eggs exclusively. This distribution suggests that poultry enterprises are primarily meat-oriented, with egg production remaining a secondary or marginal activity. Similar findings have been reported in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa where consumer demand for poultry meat tends to surpass that for eggs, largely due to cultural preferences and perceptions of meat as a more prestigious or substantial food source.

Price determination was found to be shaped by a mix of market forces and interpersonal negotiations. While 38% of respondents relied on prevailing market prices, a slightly higher proportion (42%) indicated that prices were set through mutual agreement between buyer and seller. Only 20% of producers unilaterally determined their prices. This reflects the character of informal poultry markets, where bargaining power and buyer–seller relationships are central to shaping market outcomes. The finding highlights the fluidity of pricing systems in such environments, where standardized pricing mechanisms are largely absent, leaving room for negotiation and contextual influences such as seasonality, demand surges, or buyer loyalty.

A particularly striking observation is the overwhelming reliance on live bird sales, with 98% of respondents reporting this as their mode of sale compared to only 2% who sold processed meat. This points to very low levels of value addition in the poultry sector. The dominance of live bird sales reflects both structural and cultural factors: limited access to processing facilities, inadequate cold-chain infrastructure, and entrenched consumer preferences for purchasing live poultry to ensure freshness and quality. From a development perspective, this finding highlights a missed opportunity to diversify product forms, capture higher margins, and meet the demands of more formalized markets.

Consumer preferences closely mirrored the production and marketing trends. The majority of buyers (88%) preferred meat only, with 10% expressing preference for both eggs and meat, and just 2% favoring eggs alone. The close alignment between supply and demand reinforces the notion that producers respond directly to consumer priorities, particularly the strong preference for meat over eggs. This consistency between production orientation and consumer demand suggests a market equilibrium, albeit one that may limit the expansion of egg production and its nutritional benefits in household diets.

The findings also underscore a critical institutional gap: the lack of marketing extension services. A vast majority of respondents (90%) reported having no access to such support, while only 10% had received guidance. This absence of structured advisory services on marketing and value-chain development likely contributes to the reliance on live bird sales and localized market channels. Extension support has been shown in other contexts to improve farmers' knowledge of marketing strategies, strengthen market linkages, and encourage product diversification. Its absence therefore constrains the modernization and competitiveness of the poultry subsector in the study area.

Finally, the analysis of market destinations highlights the dominance of local markets, which accounted for 86% of

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sales. Other outlets represented 12%, while only 2% of products were sold directly to restaurants. This distribution emphasizes the largely informal and community-based character of poultry marketing, with very limited penetration into more structured commercial outlets. The absence of strong linkages to restaurants, supermarkets, and institutional buyers not only limits opportunities for scaling up production but also reflects barriers to meeting the quality, safety, and consistency requirements of formal markets.

Overall, the discussion reveals a poultry marketing system that is heavily localized, dominated by meat sales in live form, and largely disconnected from formalized value chains. The lack of extension support and low levels of processing constrain opportunities for value addition and broader market access. Addressing these challenges through targeted interventions—such as strengthening extension services, promoting value-addition technologies, and improving linkages to formal markets—could enhance both the profitability and sustainability of poultry enterprises while also meeting evolving consumer needs.

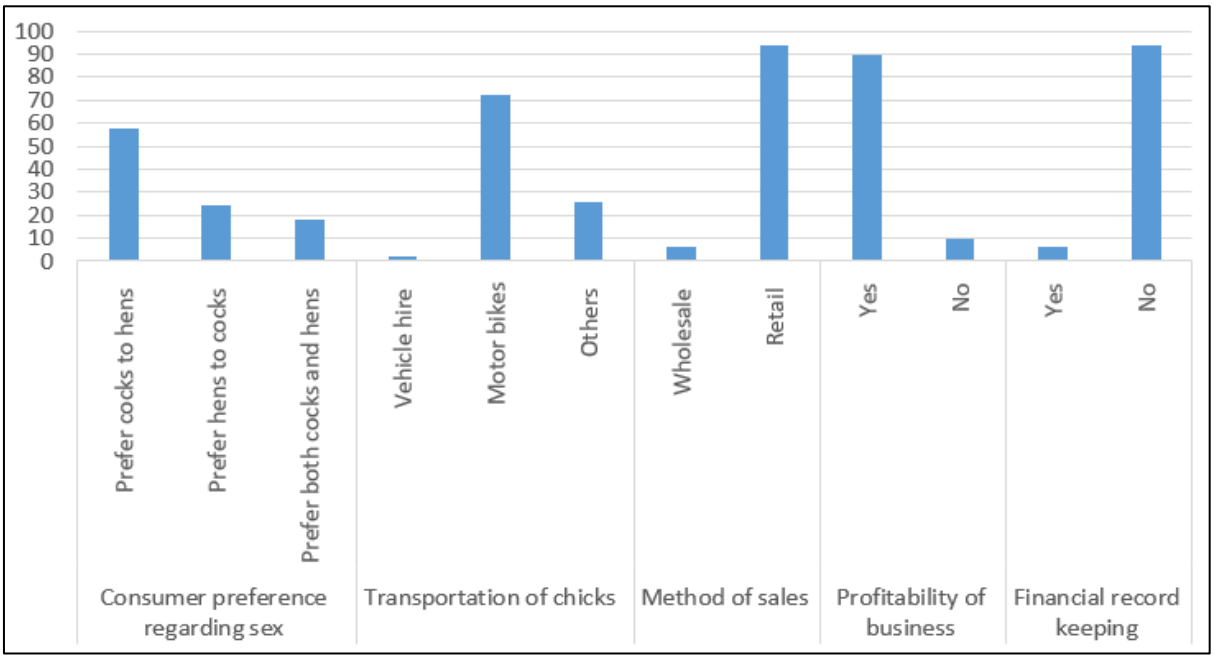


Fig 5 Marketing Channels and Processes for Indigenous Poultry
Field Survey Data 2025

The findings on consumer preferences and business practices in poultry production reveal important dynamics in the marketing and management of the enterprise. With regard to consumer preference for sex of birds, the results show that a majority (58%) of consumers preferred cocks to hens, while 24% favored hens, and 18% indicated no preference, opting for both sexes. The strong inclination toward cocks is likely driven by their relatively larger body size and perceived higher meat yield, which make them more attractive to buyers seeking value for money. Hens, though less preferred, may be valued by some consumers for their dual-purpose role in both meat and egg production. The presence of a group that accepts both sexes indicates a moderate level of flexibility among buyers, though the overall market signal is skewed toward male birds.

Transportation of chicks is another critical aspect shaping the poultry value chain. The results reveal that motorbikes are the predominant means of transport (72%), followed by other informal methods such as manual carriage or local arrangements (26%), with vehicle hire accounting for only 2%. This heavy reliance on motorbikes reflects both the infrastructural realities of rural areas—where road access may be limited—and the small-scale nature of most poultry operations, which makes motorcycles the most accessible and cost-effective option. However, motorbike transport raises concerns about the welfare of chicks, as exposure to long distances, heat, or rough handling may compromise their survival and productivity. The very limited use of vehicles highlights constraints in logistics and the absence of organized transport services for poultry producers.

In terms of marketing practices, the data show that poultry products are overwhelmingly sold through retail channels (94%), with only 6% of respondents engaged in wholesale sales. This demonstrates the highly fragmented and small-scale character of the poultry market, where producers cater primarily to individual consumers rather than supplying bulk quantities to larger buyers or institutions. The dominance of retail sales may provide higher profit margins per unit, but it also reflects the absence of structured aggregation systems that could link producers to broader markets.

Profitability perceptions among farmers were overwhelmingly positive, with 90% reporting that their businesses were profitable, compared to only 10% who indicated otherwise. This finding underscores the potential of poultry production as a viable livelihood activity, particularly in settings where demand for poultry meat is consistently

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high. However, it is important to interpret this profitability in light of the prevailing production systems that is dominated by small-scale, retail-based operations with limited value addition which may restrict the overall growth potential of the sector despite positive individual outcomes.

One of the most striking findings relates to financial record keeping. An overwhelming 94% of respondents reported not keeping financial records, with only 6% maintaining such practices. The absence of record-keeping reflects a significant gap in basic business management skills among poultry farmers. Without proper records, producers face challenges in tracking costs, monitoring profitability, and making informed decisions for business expansion. This finding highlights a critical area for intervention, as financial literacy and record-keeping are essential components of enterprise development. In similar contexts, training in financial management has been shown to improve profitability and sustainability, suggesting that this could be a key lever for strengthening the poultry subsector.

Overall, these results depict a poultry marketing system that is highly localized, consumer-driven, and retail-oriented, but constrained by weak logistics and poor business management practices. While poultry production is widely perceived as profitable, the absence of financial record keeping and reliance on basic transport and sales systems indicate that the sector remains underdeveloped. Strengthening transport infrastructure, promoting aggregation and wholesale opportunities, and building capacity in financial management could enhance both efficiency and profitability. Addressing these constraints would be essential for transitioning the poultry sector from its current small-scale orientation toward a more structured and competitive enterprise.

- *Constraints and Opportunities within the Production and Marketing Systems*

This consist of the following; the form at which purchasing and transportation constraints faced, sales and marketing constraints faced, business expansion, business seen as the same, and reasons of business declining done by the respondent involved in the indigenous poultry production in their respective communities.

Table 2 Constraints and Opportunities within the Production and Marketing Systems

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Purchasing and transportation constraints faced	High cost of transportation charges	37	74.0
	Bad roads make journey long and boring	6	12.0
	Frequent breakdown on the road	1	2.0
	Other	6	12.0
Sales and marketing constraints faced	Poor and improper storage space for marketing	5	10.0
	Thieving	23	46.0
	Difficult pricing due to unstable market price	20	40.0
	Others	2	4.0
Business expansion	Yes	30	60.0
	No	20	40.0
Business as the same	Yes	12	24.0
	No	38	76.0
Business declining	Yes	8	16.0
	No	42	84.0

Field Survey Data 2025

The findings on constraints and business prospects in poultry production highlight both structural challenges and entrepreneurial opportunities within the sector. Regarding purchasing and transportation constraints, the data show that the majority of respondents (74%) identified the high cost of transportation charges as their major challenge. This reflects the significant role transportation plays in determining overall production costs, particularly in areas where inputs such as chicks, feed, and veterinary supplies must be sourced from distant markets. In addition, 12% of respondents pointed to bad roads that prolong journeys, while another 12% identified other transport-related difficulties. Only 2% cited frequent vehicle breakdowns. These findings underscore the dual challenge of high transport costs and inadequate road infrastructure, both of which hinder the efficiency of poultry operations. The implications are particularly relevant in rural settings where poor infrastructure not only raises costs but also increases the risks of mortality, stress, and delays in the delivery of inputs and products.

Sales and marketing constraints further illustrate the vulnerability of poultry enterprises. Nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported thieving as their major marketing-related challenge, making it the single most frequently mentioned issue. This points to a lack of adequate security and monitoring systems in the marketing of poultry products. Additionally, 40% cited difficulties in pricing due to unstable market conditions, reflecting the volatility of informal poultry markets where prices are highly responsive to fluctuations in demand and supply. A smaller proportion (10%) mentioned poor or inadequate storage facilities, which is consistent with the earlier finding that live bird sales dominate the sector, leaving little room for storage-based strategies to manage supply. The remaining 4% pointed to other challenges. Collectively, these constraints reveal that

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poultry marketing is shaped not only by external economic forces but also by structural weaknesses such as insecurity, poor storage, and weak market regulation.

In spite of these challenges, many producers expressed optimism about the growth of their enterprises. The results show that 60% of respondents had expanded their businesses, compared to 40% who had not. This suggests that the sector holds potential for scaling, driven by strong consumer demand and the perceived profitability of poultry farming. However, business continuity varied. Only 24% reported keeping their business the same, while a larger proportion (76%) had either adjusted their operations, diversified, or shifted their strategies. This indicates a dynamic sector in which most entrepreneurs are making changes either in scale, management, or marketing practices—in response to opportunities or constraints.

When asked about business decline, the majority (84%) reported that their enterprises were not declining, while 16% admitted to experiencing decline. This positive balance suggests that while constraints exist, most poultry producers are resilient and able to sustain their activities. However, the presence of a minority facing decline highlights the uneven distribution of resilience, possibly reflecting differences in resource access, management skills, or exposure to risks such as theft, market instability, or transportation bottlenecks.

Taken together, these results portray a poultry sector that operates under significant logistical and marketing constraints but continues to demonstrate resilience and growth potential. High transportation costs and poor infrastructure remain critical barriers to efficiency, while thieving and price instability erode profitability. Nevertheless, the willingness of producers to expand and adapt their businesses illustrates the sector's underlying strength. Interventions aimed at improving rural road networks, enhancing market security, stabilizing prices, and providing affordable transport services would not only address the key constraints but also amplify the expansionary momentum already present among producers. By doing so, poultry farming could evolve into a more stable and commercially competitive enterprise, contributing to both livelihoods and food security.

IV. CONCLUSION

The study highlights that poultry farming in the study area is mainly a women-led, small-scale enterprise, focused on meat production and relying heavily on family resources. While the sector is profitable and growing, it faces significant challenges, including poor infrastructure, limited access to credit, weak disease prevention, low formalization, and reliance on live bird sales. Addressing these constraints through targeted support in training, finance, transport, market access, and value addition can strengthen poultry production, increase income, and enhance livelihoods, particularly for women and unemployed adults.

RECOMMENDATION

- Provide better training and veterinary support – Farmers should receive guidance on disease prevention, proper feeding, and poultry management to improve productivity and reduce losses.
- Improve access to finance – Affordable loans and training in record-keeping can help farmers manage costs, expand operations, and make informed decisions.
- Enhance infrastructure and transport – Better roads and cost-effective transport will reduce expenses and make it easier to move chicks, feed, and poultry products to markets.
- Encourage farm registration and cooperative marketing – Registered farms and farmer groups can access support programs, subsidies, and larger, more stable markets.
- Promote value addition and market expansion – Processing poultry products and linking farmers to restaurants and formal markets can increase income and reduce dependence on live sales.

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