

Responding to Loss & Damage in Drought-affected Pastoralist Communities in Kenya

Case study jointly submitted by the Secretariat of the Platform on Disaster Displacement and the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction



Context: climate impacts on pastoralist communities

Between 2020 and 2023, Kenya was affected by the most severe drought in 4 decades, with 5 consecutive failed rainy seasons and significant impacts across Arid and Semi-Arid Areas (ASAL) throughout the country. The impacts of disasters and related environmental degradation have disproportionately affected pastoralist communities. Transhumance – the seasonal move of people and herds from place to place in search of pasture and water – is a millenia-old component of the lifestyle of these communities in Kenya’s ASAL areas. Climate change, through more acute and longer-lasting droughts, has however undermined the environmental conditions in which these movements have traditionally taken place, affecting the pastoralists’ ability to sustain their herds (especially cattle) and modifying their mobility patterns. People are being forced to move to new destinations, farther away from their homes and in some instances across national borders, and for longer periods of time, often leaving on multi-year journeys.

Economic and non-economic losses experienced by pastoralist communities

The loss of cattle and the reduced viability of their traditional lifestyle have profound, intertwined economic and non-economic impacts on pastoralists. Cattle have significant economic value in normal times, and droughts affect their market value by both reducing the animals’ health and by broadly influencing the market (as many herders are forced to sell their livestock as a measure of last resort, at the same time and with little bargaining ability). Cattle, however, also has a very significant spiritual and social value: herders are tied to their animals by an important emotional and cultural bond and their very status in their communities is determined by their ownership of livestock heads. Losing livestock

to a drought, both due to death and to forced sale, is an experience that entails both short- and long-term impacts on the wealth, well-being and prospects of pastoralists.

Moreover, as herders lose their livestock, they are often forced to become sedentary, finding places to leave in and around cities. This forced immobility entails significant cultural losses, as a traditional lifestyle becomes unviable and herders' knowledge of local ecosystems and their management goes lost. The unplanned inflow of these populations into peri-urban areas brings challenges that extend to host communities, linked with competition for limited resources, pressure on local ecosystems and basic services, and can lead to intra-communal conflicts.

Gender and age-specific impacts

Specific economic and non-economic impacts are felt by women and young community members as climate change erodes the sustainability of the pastoralists' livelihood system. In many local communities, women used to accompany men and herds on their journeys. In recent years, however, many have opted to adopt a more sedentary lifestyle, staying behind with young children who are increasingly attending school. As droughts shift transhumance cycles, family and community ties and support systems are put under stress.

Cattle provide milk to drink and manure that can be sold as fertilizer for income, and both the loss of livestock and the longer periods of absence of men and herds directly threaten the food security, psychological well-being, and access to healthcare and education of family members staying behind. The personal security of women and children is also threatened as heads of households leave and they are made more vulnerable to violence and crime. Lastly, periods of economic distress are also associated to coping strategies, such as child marriage, that specifically affect the rights, physical and psychosocial health and well-being and long-term prospects of local girls.

Initiatives to avert, minimise and address Loss & Damage

In the face of these challenges, grassroot responses have focused on improving livelihood security and access to services for community members staying behind. A diversity of practices have been implemented to support water harvesting and storage, climate-smart agriculture, diversification of livelihoods and access to markets, often focusing on women as the main recipient of capacity building initiatives and investments, to also support empowerment and gender equity.

For instance, the Rural Women Network has supported women in agropastoral communities in arid rangelands in Kajiado County through hands-on trainings on innovative practices. Newly-introduced cultivation techniques, such as spiral gardens that require very little irrigation, to allow women to grow drought-resistant, indigenous African leafy vegetables around their homes. Women are also encouraged to take on rearing of goats and chickens, which are not traditional to herder communities but require very little resources to maintain and provide meat, eggs and milk while herds are away. The establishment of Livelihood Learning Centres allows for the dissemination of relevant awareness and techniques across vast areas through demonstrations and trainings-of-trainers. Lastly, improved access to market and information also allows these women to sell surplus produce from gardens and small animals, as well as traditional handicraft (e.g. beadwork), which reduces household's dependence on livestock.

Positive outcomes

The benefits of this kind of initiatives are numerous, allowing to address both economic and non-economic challenges induced by climate change and disasters. Water availability and nutrition improve for women and children as household-level solutions are implemented. Higher, more predictable incomes allow for better access to education and healthcare, and reduce the need to resort to negative coping strategies such as child labour and marriage, and household split (with related loss of education) as some

children are sent off to other less affected areas. In the absence of men, women are empowered to make decisions on the management of household resources and budgets, including slaughter of small animals and selling of meat and produce. Women's enhanced social status, and increased access to education for girls and other community members is also translating in women's increased representation and visibility in community and county-level decision-making, including through increased access to positions of power, the reduction of instances of Gender-Based Violence, as well as the reduced incidence of traditional practices such as Female Genital Mutilation.

The challenges posed by climate change to pastoralist communities in Kenya are diverse and significant, but holistic responses that address their economic and non-economic dimensions can help promote positive coping strategies and long-term adaptive capacities that avert and minimise Loss & Damage.

Links to additional resources

Case study: Supporting the Livelihoods of Women in Marginalized Pastoralist Communities https://pamad.disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/11/Case_Study_Rural_Women_Network_screen_compressed.pdf

Notes from a Consultation of Civil Society Organisations on Displacement and Loss & Damage held in Turkana (Kenya), November 2023: <https://pamad.disasterdisplacement.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/11/Northern-Kenya-Consultation-notes.pdf>

This case study is an outcome of the project to "Avert, Minimize and Address Displacement Related to the Effects of Climate Change" (PAMAD) to assist countries and communities facing the challenges of Loss and Damage and Displacement. Under PAMAD, and in partnership with the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations on Disaster Reduction (GNDR), the PDD promotes peer-to-peer learning on effective responses to displacement and climate change in Kenya. The project is supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). For more information, visit <https://pamad.disasterdisplacement.org>.