KENYA MEAT EXPO
A Sizzling Experience

4TH EDITION OF THE KENYA MEAT EXPO AND CONFERENCE

Theme: 'Driving Sustainable Growth Across the Meat Value Chain'

RECONCILE

Pastoral futures at stake: Why Kenya must protect rangelands, pastoralists' land tenure, mobility, and livelihoods



Pastrolism as a Livelihood System.

Background

What happens when the communal rangelands that feed 70 percent of Kenya's livestock herd are steadily fragmented and repurposed? For millions living in the country's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), where 80 percent of production relies on traditional free-range pastoralist systems built on communal grazing and herd mobility (Bett et al., 2020; Njanja et al., 2021), this is the reality they face.

Today, across Kenya, communal and pastoralist lands are being adjudicated, subdivided and repurposed for infrastructural development, land-based investments, and climate finance projects such as wind, solar and carbon schemes. As a result, rangelands are becoming degraded and fragmented, pastoralists are losing access to critical grazing areas, grazing routes are 'disappearing', and livestock-based livelihoods are being lost.

These threats are not abstract. They are already visible on the ground. Recent findings from a community lands update process spearheaded by the Resource Conflict Institute (RECONCILE) in five Kenyan counties – Samburu, Kajiado, Turkana, Baringo and Tana River – provide compelling evidence of reduction and fragmentation of communal lands. Further, it was observed that these shifts are most pronounced in areas affected by



Validation of Rangeland management plan.

municipal expansions, infrastructural corridors such as the Lamu Port-South Sudan-Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET), and new development zones that have encroached on formerly shared grazing lands.

The consequences of communal land loss are stark and deeply felt across Kenya's pastoral counties. In Turkana and Samburu, official livestock data (KNBS, 2024) shows declining small ruminant off-take, seasonal migration constraints, and deteriorating body condition scores during droughts. In Baringo, trading centres sprawl has disrupted livestock corridors, leading to rising cases of livestock theft and inter-community tension. Consequently, herders are being forced into sedentary systems that lower productivity and raise disease risks. The link is clear: when communal tenure collapses, rangelands degrade, and livestock productivity plummets.

How Large-Scale Land Acquisitions are reshaping rangeland economies

Large-Scale Land Acquisitions (LSLAs) are accelerating this challenge. Various localised studies in Kenya's ASAL counties provide direct evidence linking grazing land loss to LSLAs expansion. For instance, Wachira et al. (2024) found that between 2000 and 2019, NGO-driven conservancies in northern Kenya increased by approximately 4.7 million hectares. Additionally, they observed that these conservancies often impose "resource enclosures that aggravate conflicts over land rights and pastoralists' vulnerability to climate variability by constraining their mobility." Such spatial restrictions, reinforced by legal and institutional changes favouring conservation, have steadily weakened communal tenure systems. As a result, herders are being forced to reduce their herd numbers.

RECONCILE is working with the Land Matrix Initiative (LMI) to document large-scale land investment deals across Africa to showcase the impacts of such investments on communal land and resource tenure rights. LMI *(**https://landmatrix.org/**)* is an independent global land monitoring initiative that promotes transparency and accountability in evidence-based decisions over LSLAs in low and middle-income countries across the world.

In Kenya, for example, 33 documented projects are located in the ASALs and are often established in pastoral grazing lands. These cases include eight REDD+ and carbon offset projects covering more than 132,000 hectares. The other 25 projects, covering another 240,041 hectares, include wind farms, commercial ranches, and mining concession areas. The implications of these investments to sustainable pastoralism and rangelands are restricted mobility, land use change and rangeland degradation.

RECONCILE is therefore engaged in interventions that are covering restoration of rangelands, promotion of pro-pastoralist policy and legal frameworks, and advocacy around land and natural resource management.

A collaboration between RECONCILE and other actors, such as the Nation Media Group, is a strategic opportunity to present the value of pastoralism and dialogue with both national and regional governments to prioritise legal protection for the pastoralist land.

It is also a call for governments to ensure that such legal and policy protection aligns climate-smart investments with rangeland management strategies that are participatory, transparent, and rooted in pastoralist realities.

Policy recommendations

There are policy, legal and institutional recommendations that underpin sustainable pastoralism. This article has been developed within the context of the Kenya Meat Expo, which demonstrates the importance of the livestock production system. Whereas there are different ways which are largely intensive and extensive livestock production, RECONCILE leans towards the extensive and advocates for sustainable pastoralism, which has low investments yet has the largest market. In this connection, therefore, it is important to recognise and engage local, national and regional governments on how best to support pastoralism through promoting the following:

- **Rangeland protection and management:** It is only possible to promise pastoralists a brighter future if there are healthy rangelands to support healthy livestock. Degraded rangelands should be restored through holistic approaches that link grazing to stronger value chains. While working with communities, RECONCILE has protected and promoted restoration of 337,000ha of rangeland through participatory rangeland management. Further, we continue to work towards the establishment of grazing, water, and rangeland management structures to help mitigate against resource conflict in our project intervention areas.
- **Pastoral land tenure is weakening.** There's a need to strengthen pastoral land tenure to enhance the resilience of communities. This can be achieved through inclusive and flexible governance that protects communal lands from unchecked takeovers.
- **Pastoralism is about collective tenure that is flexible.** At the centre of the collectives is the mobility, which is the key ingredient of pastoralism. Mobility in pastoralism promotes rangelands' health and allows pastoralist to organise their grazing calendar and patterns as dictated by traditional wisdom, for sustainable herding. This can be safeguarded by recognising and protecting traditional grazing routes that are vital for survival during droughts.
- **Data-driven policies that value pastoralism.** This can be supported by initiatives like the Land Matrix, which shine a light on land use trends and empower communities with evidence to lobby for the protection of their lands.

Reference

Wachira, J., Atela, J., Stacey, P., and Outa, G. (2024). ***NGO-Led Community-Based Conservation: A New Frontier of Territorialisation with Implications for Pastoralists' Land Tenure and Climate Change Adaptation.*** Land, 13(6), 740. https://doi.org/10.3390/land13060740