RECONCILE | Resource Conflict Institute

POLICY BRIEF

Pastoral Mobility and Transhumance

Securing Mobility Corridors for Resilient Pastoral Economies



KEY MESSAGES

1. Kenya already possesses the core legal and policy foundation to protect pastoral mobility; the binding constraint is implementation, not the absence of law.
2. Mobility corridors, seasonal grazing areas and drought reserves function as a single interconnected system: protecting one element while neglecting another undermines the whole.
3. The Community Land Act, 2016 gives registered communities a statutory route to secure corridors and reserves through Section 19 land use plans; that route is used in only a small minority of cases.
4. Kenya's ratification of the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance remains before Parliament; completing it is a prerequisite for full participation in regional corridor mapping, disease surveillance and conflict-prevention mechanisms.
5. Spatial planning, service delivery and investment decisions in ASAL counties continue, in practice, to favour fixed settlement over mobility, even where policy formally recognises pastoralism.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands cover close to nine-tenths of the country's territory and sustain more than a third of its population, most of its livestock herd and a large share of its wildlife. Their productivity rests on one organising principle: mobility. Pastoral herds move across interconnected wet- and dry-season grazing areas, water points and drought reserves, tracking rainfall too variable, and too unevenly distributed, to be managed from a fixed location. Where movement is possible, rangelands recover, herds remain productive through drought, and competition over scarce resources is contained through negotiated access. Where it is blocked, degradation accelerates and conflict over the remaining resource base intensifies.

Kenya has built a strong legal and policy foundation for this system, from the 2010 Constitution's recognition of community land to the Community Land Act, 2016, the arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) policy framework and, regionally, the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance. What matters most now is not law but implementation: corridors remain unmapped and unprotected, community land registration proceeds slowly, sectoral planning still treats rangelands as available for other uses, and the Transhumance Protocol that Kenya signed and its Cabinet approved has yet to complete parliamentary ratification. Closing that gap, rather than drafting new instruments, is the central policy task ahead.

1. Pastoral Mobility as a Production and Adaptation System

Mobility matches pastoral production to an inherently variable resource base. Kenya's rangelands receive rainfall that is erratic in timing, location and volume, so forage and water availability shifts across the landscape from season to season. Herders respond by moving livestock between wet-season grazing areas, dry-season reserves, drought refuges and the corridors that connect them, timing movement to rainfall, forage recovery and disease risk. The strategy has a clear ecological logic: it spreads grazing pressure across space and time, allows vegetation to recover between grazing episodes, and converts dispersed, short-lived forage into livestock products, income and stored wealth that can be drawn on in bad years.

The system depends on its components functioning together. A wet-season grazing area is only useful if the corridor linking it to a dry-season reserve stays open; a water point is only accessible if the surrounding land has not been fenced or converted; a drought reserve retains its value only if it is not grazed pre-emptively in normal years. Disrupting any single element, by blocking a corridor, converting a reserve or restricting a water point, reduces the functionality of the whole system, not just the affected site. This is why interventions calibrated to fixed parcels of land routinely underperform when applied to rangelands.

2. The Growing Pressure on Mobility

Several converging pressures are narrowing the space in which this system can operate. Land once dismissed as marginal is attracting large-scale investment in energy, commercial agriculture and infrastructure, much of it sited without reference to the migration routes it intersects. Subdivision and individualisation of land, formal and de facto, is converting communally managed grazing areas into fragmented holdings that no longer support seasonal access. In some counties, accumulation of large landholdings by a few actors, including capture of community land processes, has removed substantial acreage from shared grazing. County and national planning frameworks, meanwhile, continue in practice to favour fixed settlement and sedentary production even where policy formally recognises pastoralism.

The cumulative effect is a rangeland estate that is smaller, more fragmented and less connected than the system requires. This is not primarily a livelihood problem confined to pastoral households; it is a land-use planning failure with consequences for rangeland condition, livestock productivity, food security, conflict management and long-term investment in ASAL counties.

3. Land Rights, Community Governance and Mobility Corridors

Kenya's land governance framework already provides substantial tools for protecting mobility. The 2010 Constitution recognises community land as a distinct category alongside public and private land, and the Community Land Act, 2016 sets out procedures for registration, community land management committees and, under Section 19, community-led land use plans submitted to county government for approval. These provisions give registered communities a formal route to protect seasonal grazing areas, water points and corridors, rather than leaving them to informal negotiation alone.

The limiting factor is implementation rather than legal design. Registration of community land has proceeded unevenly, and many communities dependent on shared grazing have yet to complete it. Where registration has occurred, land use planning under Section 19 remains the exception, leaving corridors and reserves without the statutory protection the Act makes possible. A 2025 High Court ruling revoking part of the title to a large wildlife conservancy on registered community land in Garissa illustrates both the risk and the remedy: the court found the conservancy had been established without the public participation and environmental approvals the Act requires, denying pastoralist communities grazing access, and used the Act itself to reverse the conversion.

Strengthening this system does not require new legislation. It requires sustained investment in community land registration, technical support for communities preparing Section 19 land use plans, and closer coordination between county spatial planning and the customary institutions, including Participatory Rangeland Management structures and grazing and peace committees, that already regulate seasonal access. Treating these institutions as partners in statutory planning, rather than as arrangements it supersedes, will determine whether registration and mapping translate into protected corridors.

4. Mobility and Climate Resilience

Pastoral mobility should be understood as an existing climate adaptation mechanism, not a vulnerability to be managed alongside climate impacts. Its core function, tracking forage and water across a variable landscape, is precisely the

capability that rising rainfall variability and more frequent drought make more valuable. Herders' decisions about when and where to move already constitute a form of anticipatory action, informed by indigenous forecasting knowledge, social networks and market signals, operating ahead of and alongside formal early warning systems.

The policy implication is to strengthen the conditions under which this mechanism functions rather than substitute for it: protecting the corridors and reserves mobility depends on, integrating mobility explicitly into county and national climate adaptation planning rather than treating drought response as a separate humanitarian track, and designing climate information services, including seasonal forecasts and forage advisories, to reach mobile populations and complement rather than override indigenous knowledge. Done well, mobility functions as standing adaptation infrastructure that reduces the frequency and cost of emergency response.

5. Development, Investment and Spatial Planning

Because mobility depends on connected corridors rather than isolated parcels, development planning in rangeland counties has consequences for pastoral production that are often underappreciated. Roads, transmission lines, irrigation schemes, conservancies and energy projects sited without reference to migration routes can sever corridors built through generations of negotiated access, with effects reaching well beyond the project footprint. Service delivery carries similar weight: health, education and market infrastructure designed only for fixed settlements tends, over time, to draw households toward permanent residence regardless of whether the resource base can support it, weakening the mobility rangeland condition depends on.

Reversing this requires spatial planning that treats mobility corridors, seasonal grazing areas and drought reserves as protected land-use categories in county spatial plans and national infrastructure planning, on the same statutory footing as other land uses. It also requires investors to assess corridor impacts before siting infrastructure, and to structure service delivery, including mobile health models and cross-border animal health coordination, to follow pastoral populations rather than fix them in place. Emerging opportunities in traceable, grass-fed livestock value chains offer a further avenue for aligning investment with mobility, provided returns are structured to benefit rangeland-based producers rather than being captured downstream.

6. Transboundary Mobility and the IGAD Framework

A significant share of pastoral movement in Kenya's northern counties crosses international borders, following resources rather than administrative lines. The IGAD Protocol on Transhumance, adopted by the IGAD Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in June 2021, gives this movement a predictable legal and operational basis: a framework for safe, orderly and documented cross-border movement of herders and livestock, coordinated animal disease surveillance and vaccination, and mechanisms for preventing and resolving resource-based conflict, implemented through a phased roadmap running to 2030 covering domestication, cross-border governance, corridor mapping and monitoring.

Kenya signed the Protocol in June 2024 and its Cabinet approved it in January 2025; as of early 2026 the instrument remained before Parliament, referred to the Departmental Committee on Agriculture and Livestock ahead of ratification. Completing this matters beyond symbolism. Ratification gives Kenya standing to participate fully in the Protocol's cross-border governance mechanisms, including joint corridor mapping and disease surveillance with Ethiopia, Uganda, South Sudan and other neighbours, and creates the domestic legal basis to align national livestock movement permits, county border administration and customary cross-border agreements with a common regional standard. Absent ratification, cross-border mobility continues to rely on informal and bilateral arrangements historically vulnerable to disruption, disease risk and conflict.

Translating ratification into practice will still require follow-through: aligning livestock movement and animal health regulations with Protocol standards, resourcing the joint mapping and gazettement of corridors the roadmap envisages, and equipping border counties, administratively and financially, to participate in its coordination structures.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

National Governments

- Kenya should complete ratification of the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance and set a domestication timeline aligning livestock movement, animal health and border regulations with its standards.
- The Ministry of Lands and National Land Commission should fast-track community land registration in ASAL counties, with dedicated budget lines and technical teams assigned to

communities managing active mobility corridors.

- The State Department for ASALs and National Land Commission should require a corridor-impact assessment before siting approval for national infrastructure and investment projects in ASAL counties.

County Governments

- Designate mapped mobility corridors, seasonal grazing areas and drought reserves as protected land-use categories within County Spatial Plans, gazetted with the same statutory weight as other planning categories.
- Support registered communities to prepare and submit Section 19 community land use plans under the Community Land Act, including technical assistance for participatory mapping and cross-county negotiation on shared corridors.
- Structure health, education and animal health outreach, including mobile clinic schedules and vaccination campaigns, around seasonal movement patterns rather than fixed settlement centres.

IGAD and Regional Institutions

- Support Kenya and remaining member states to complete ratification and domestication of the Transhumance Protocol, including technical assistance for aligning national legislation with its standards.
- Resource the joint mapping, marking and gazettement of priority cross-border corridors under the Protocol's roadmap, prioritising clusters with active movement and recurrent conflict.
- Strengthen cross-border animal disease surveillance and vaccination coordination, building on existing cluster mechanisms, and link these to harmonised transhumance documentation for herders and livestock.

Development and Investment Partners

- Shift financing from short-term drought response toward multi-year investment in corridor mapping, community land registration and Participatory Rangeland Management.
- Require corridor and mobility-impact assessments as a standard part of due diligence for infrastructure, energy and land-based investment in rangeland counties.
- Support ethical standards and traceability systems for rangeland livestock value chains that direct a larger share of value addition to producer communities rather than downstream actors.

CONCLUSION

Kenya does not lack a policy or legal basis for protecting pastoral mobility; it lacks consistent implementation of the instruments already in place. The Community Land Act provides a route to secure the corridors, water points and reserves mobility depends on; the ASAL policy framework recognises pastoralism as a productive system; the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance offers a regional architecture for safe cross-border movement, awaiting only ratification and domestication to take effect. Converting these commitments into mapped, gazetted and enforced protection for mobility corridors, backed by spatial planning, service delivery and investment decisions designed around movement rather than settlement, is the task that will determine whether Kenya's rangelands remain productive, resilient and capable of sustaining the pastoral economies that depend on them.

Selected references and data sources

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