The aspired trillion-shilling meat industry starts with the herder, not at the abattoir

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This week, the 5th Kenya Meat Expo has brought producers, processors, investors and policymakers to Nairobi to shape the future of Kenya's meat industry. Other than the exhibitions and demonstrations, the event has featured talks around technology, processing, exports and jobs, among others. But even as focus centres on the end of the value chain, there is a question worth asking about its beginning: Who produces the animal? For Kenya, the answer takes us to the rangelands.

Rangelands cover approximately 80 percent of Kenya's landmass. They are home to more than 8.8 million pastoralists, and support 70 to 90 percent of the national livestock herd, besides hosting roughly 90 percent of the country's wildlife.

Livestock contributes about 12 percent of the national GDP and 42 percent of agricultural GDP. This is one of the country's most important production systems, built on land many still think of as empty.

And yet there is a contradiction we must confront honestly. We want to build a trillion-shilling meat industry, yet the people who own most of the animals are still expected to survive on a livestock economy designed as if they are an afterthought.

Government has set an ambitious target of growing the sector from below Ksh200 billion towards a Ksh1 trillion economy. However, processing plants and export deals alone will not get us there. The transformation has to start with the producer and the land that producer depends on.

That land is under a growing strain. Kenya faces a livestock feed deficit that government and industry figures now put at 56 to 60 percent, while the 2020–2023 drought alone cost the country an estimated 2.6 million livestock, according to the National Drought Management Authority.

Degradation, fragmentation and shrinking grazing corridors pile on further pressure, and every one of those numbers shows up somewhere in the meat sector too: Fewer animals for the processor after drought, higher costs once corridors close, and producers selling early and cheaply when finance and markets fail them.

Pastoral mobility deserves a fairer hearing in this conversation. Pastoralists in Kenya's drylands move because pasture and water shift constantly across space and time, and communities have built institutions and knowledge around exactly that reality over generations. Mobility is the main foundation for pastoralism as a livelihood system in rangelands landscapes. Protecting corridors, securing community land rights and strengthening local institutions are investments in the country's production base, and ultimately in its meat industry.

To build the trillion-shilling industry requires people-centred interventions that recognise the dynamics and holistic pillars of pastoral systems, built around the concept of **people-resource-environment**.

Pastoralism and Livestock Adaptation to Climate Change in Eastern Africa (PLACE), a four-year EU-funded programme, presents an opportunity to reframe the rangelands, livestock and livelihoods intervention.

PLACE as designed, seeks to directly contribute to improving livelihoods of over 100,000 households across Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, in the Karamoja, Mandera and Mara–Serengeti border clusters.

PLACE mirrors RECONCILE's focus on building community systems to restore, protect and secure rangelands and pastoralism through sustainable rangelands governance and management through the Participatory Rangelands Management (PRM). The results so far speak for themselves. The figures on the table show that over 412,000 hectares have been restored or placed under improved management. More than 53,000 community members are benefiting, and household income from livestock sales have climbed from $650 to $1,097. Government ministers from all the seven IGAD member states have since agreed to take up PRM as a regional approach.

Pastoralists should never have to pick between conservation and production, because in practice, the two rise or fall together. A productive rangeland supports livestock. Productive livestock supports household incomes. Stronger incomes build the resilience that gets families through the next drought.

Technology, traceability and investment need to reach the rangelands themselves, not stop at the processing plant, so that the next generation sees livestock as a modern enterprise worth staying in rather than a livelihood to leave behind.



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The Kenya Meat Expo should go beyond asking how we sell more meat to the world, to also question whether the Kenyan who raises that animal can afford to remain in the business of producing it. Because if the producer leaves, there will eventually be nothing left for the processor, the exporter or the consumer.

Kenya's meat revolution will not be secured by processing capacity alone. It will be achieved when rangelands are productive, producers see profit, mobility is protected, and communities hold secure land tenures.

The meat industry does not begin at the abattoir, but with a pastoralist, a healthy animal, and a healthy rangeland. If Kenya is serious about a trillion-shilling livestock economy, that is where the revolution must start.

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