

Pastoralists in Kenya

CASE STUDY

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The pastoralist community of northern Kenya has been ravaged by both droughts and floods.

In the past 100 years, Kenya recorded 28 major droughts, four of which occurred in the last ten years. These droughts have had a devastating impact on people's lives and livelihoods. For the three million pastoralists of northern Kenya, climate change is today's reality.

The way of life that has supported them for thousands of years is falling prey to the impact of climate change. It is estimated that close to one million have already been forced to abandon pastoralism.

Along an 800-kilometre stretch of road to Mandera in northern Kenya, a number of new villages have sprung up. These villages are now hosting the very first 'environmental refugees' in northern Kenya whom, in our language, we call 'pastoralist dropouts'. In this region livelihoods today are almost entirely dependent on emergency food aid.

Pastoralists traditionally move from one area to another in search of pasture and in search of water for their livestock. They will move with their livestock in response to drought, so every time there is climatic stress – which manifests itself in failure of the rains – pastoralists will traditionally migrate, following the rains. With the increasing frequency and severity of the droughts, pastoralists' land can no longer sustain them and people have been forced to migrate.

Migration comes now in two forms. Firstly, some completely drop out of the pastoralist lifestyle and system, moving to urban centres to seek casual work or to depend on gifts from relatives – the first line of defence against climate stress. Secondly, many move near to urban centres to seek emergency food aid. These are people who would traditionally have migrated in search of better opportunities – water and pasture – to elsewhere in East

and Horn of Africa, particularly to neighbouring Somalia and Ethiopia. But these cross-border avenues are now closed because of the geopolitical situation. People can no longer move where they need to for better opportunities. Their only option is to live on the periphery of urban centres as internally displaced people. Waiting for emergency aid is now their main system of livelihood.

There are certainly many other factors that bring about poverty in the region, that make people vulnerable to these climatic conditions, but the one that is now tipping things over, that is bringing the people's livelihoods to their knees, is climate change.

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