
Climate-induced involuntary migration: nomadic-pastoralists' search for elusive pastures in Kenya

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As the impacts of climate change grow more severe, Turkana nomadic-pastoralists are increasingly being forced to move, rather than choosing to move. Their voices must be heard at the local and international level, and their knowledge and insights must inform policymaking.

I hail from Turkana, a nomadic-pastoralist community that numbers approximately one million and occupies the most arid parts of northwestern Kenya. Our region, Turkana County, stretches to the Ethiopian, South Sudanese and Ugandan borders. We keep cattle, donkeys, camels, goats and sheep, and engage in transhumance, moving livestock from place to place in search of water and greener pastures.

Turkana County is also known for its fragile state of security, with repeated internal and cross-border attacks and counter-attacks from other pastoralist communities in the region. While the world now considers climate change as a new driver of internal displacement, pastoralist communities have long had their own ways of tackling the impacts of climate

changes – by moving into neighbouring countries where they may either collaborate or clash with their new neighbours.

Largely due to a feeling of being neglected by government, there is a general reluctance by the Turkana and indeed all other pastoralists to follow immigration policies. On its side, the government evidently does not consider the challenges faced by the Turkana as a priority, yet the conditions of this region demand innovative approaches. Governments need to wake up to reality, and to be alert to weather patterns and the likelihood of pastoralists having to move with their livestock. The Turkana experience has highlighted how reactive the government is, rather than proactive, even when information about a planned 'distress migration' of the pastoralists is available beforehand.

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Learning from the Turkana way of life

It is a common misconception that the pastoralist communities of the world are constantly on the move. The Turkana debunk this narrative. While they do move from place to place, when Turkana pastoralists have access to water and green pasture they do not keep moving on. The decision to move is therefore not a voluntary one. Additionally, the decision is usually made on an individual basis, especially for movement within their own country. The decision to cross international borders, however, is often made as a group because, as they often move into volatile security situations, there is greater security in numbers when they move together. The community's council of elders plays a critical role in assessment and decision making. The elders may send out emissaries to neighbouring communities or countries to inspect the pastures and report back.

In the Turkana context, numerous factors influence the community's decision about whether to move or not. Before any decision is taken to move on, the depletion of local pastures is first countered by controlled

grazing, communal sharing and rotational grazing. These restrictions are established by consensus and the elders take the lead in implementing the rules. The Turkana attach a lot of importance to land and consider it a blessing from *Akuj* (God), with the current generation holding it in trust for future generations. Other pastoralist communities that permit an open policy where individuals permit their animals to graze as they wish are often adversely affected. As different animals have different grazing patterns, an uncontrolled system will create a tragedy of the commons that will have devastating effects for all. The Turkana people have learned such survival tactics – which are worth emulating.

Turkana is a region that is grappling with the harsh realities of climate change, and there is an urgent need to enable local pastoralist voices to be heard in climate discussions, something that has hitherto been lacking. Recognition of pastoralists' opinions on climate change and of their knowledge pertaining to climate adaptation has generally not been accorded international



attention, especially when such tribal minorities and indigenous communities as the Turkana are detached from the societal fabric of the rest of the country. Indeed, community strategies are not reflected in climate modelling – a significant failing in our approach to climate adaptation.

Bilateral negotiations by the countries involved to allow reciprocal grazing by pastoralists as well as concerted efforts to encourage joint grazing appear to be the best solution in order to call a halt to the incessant conflicts over pasture. In 2019, Uganda and Kenya signed an agreement to allow grazing rights for the Turkana pastoralists in Uganda and for the shared use of Kobebe dam (owned by Uganda). This has been effective, and such initiatives – if adopted by communities facing similar challenges elsewhere – may have the potential of allowing climate-hit communities to escape the climate wrath in their indigenous lands by seeking refuge in foreign lands, undisturbed.

Despite historically being purely nomadic, the Turkana have been forced by climate change to increasingly embrace agro-pastoralism. This is evident especially along the region's Turkwel and Kerio rivers which, due to aridity, now only flow during the rainy seasons. Here the government and NGOs have helped the Turkana to adopt agro-pastoralism. Additionally, a number of the Turkana community engage in fishing in Lake Turkana. Such grassroots adaptation efforts need to be adopted and supported as mitigation measures to enable pastoralist communities to diversify their livelihoods, recover and rebuild. However, this is only possible for those who live around the lakes and rivers and have access to land on the banks.

Culture and faith play a big role in the life of the Turkana. Making sacrifices to ancestors is a common practice, traditionally geared towards preventing and reducing the negative impacts of climate change. While science indicates that climate change is a result of disastrous human activities, the Turkana believe that the aridity that pushes them into moving is a result of the *Akuj* being unhappy. Two worlds apart! The climate debate needs

to take into consideration such beliefs, debunking them if need be in order for science and tradition to read from the same script.

The involuntary nature of migration

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees does not address the emerging issue of people displaced because of the impact of climate change. Some scholars argue that the correct terminology to be adopted ought to be 'climate migrants' – as the term 'climate refugee' has no legal standing – but this ignores the involuntariness which characterises most, if not all, climate-induced migration, especially in a pastoralism context. There is a need to place climate change at the heart of the refugee discourse by recognising it as a ground for flight. Additionally, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration should endeavour to monitor climatic conditions and weather patterns in pastoralist-occupied areas in order to be sufficiently prepared to assist pastoralists forced to move.

Meanwhile, there is a need to provide opportunities to people such as the Turkana to migrate with dignity, especially in cases of distress migration. For this community of people, who have increasingly embraced agriculture, there are a number of climate adaptation initiatives that may strengthen resilience, including training and assistance with growing more drought-resistant crops. It is imperative to increase pastoralists' access to alternative sources of livelihoods outside traditional nomadism. However, it should also be noted that the most appropriate interventions largely depend on the specific context of a local community. Governments and the international community must do more to support pastoralists' own adaptation efforts and to promote legal migration pathways. If the voices of the people at the grassroots are anything to go by, this is what those most affected most want.

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