



Supporting the Livelihoods of Women in Marginalized Pastoralist Communities

Rural Women Network (RWN)

is a not-for-profit grassroots women's network that has been operating in Kenya since 2003. It aims to empower rural women, especially in marginalized arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL), through civic education, poverty alleviation, organizational development, peaceful co-existence and dignified livelihoods.

AREA AND SCOPE

RWN works in Kajiado County, an ASAL area in Kenya's Rift Valley. Since 2020, the organization has engaged 561 women leaders in gender-just and climate smart activities, directly benefiting more than 2,800 people. The adoption and replication of these climate smart technologies, innovations and management practices have had further indirect benefits.

Since 2020

561

Women leaders engaged

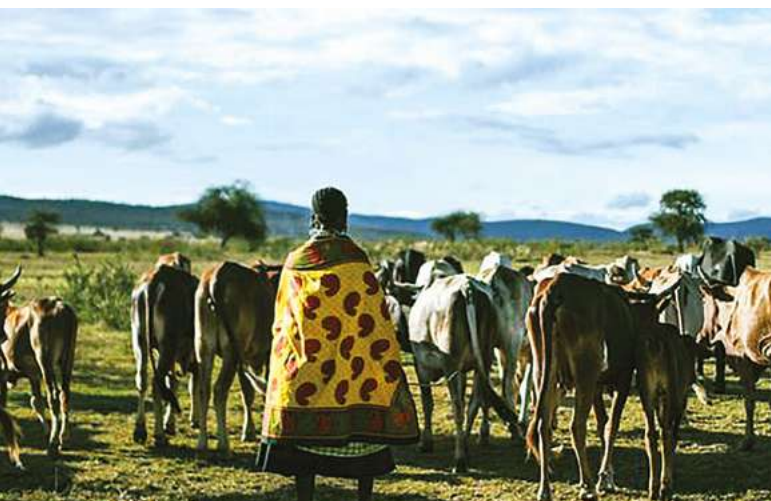
2.800+

People directly benefited



CONTEXT

The adverse impacts of climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately impact the Maasai pastoralist community in Kajiado County. While pastoralists have traditionally moved from place to place in search of grazing pastures, consecutive years of unprecedented drought patterns have forced them to move further away and for longer periods of time. Transhumance cycles that formerly lasted months now can last more than a year, with pastoralists roaming the Eastern, Southern, and Northern rangelands with their livestock - sometimes even crossing international borders.



While Maasai women traditionally accompanied men during these transhumance cycles, they have increasingly become sedentary, choosing to remain in place to care for young children that are attending school. The departure of men significantly impacts the health and well-being of family members that remain in place, including in terms of food security and access to nutrition. While cattle provide milk to drink and manure that can be sold as fertilizer for income, these options are not available during transhumance and few alternative livelihood opportunities exist in ASAL areas, which have historically been overlooked in development plans primarily targeted towards more productive rural areas where cash crops such as tea and coffee are grown. As a result, women struggle to provide for themselves and their children.

RESPONSES

RWN seeks to support and empower women in agro-pastoral communities in ASAL rangelands in Kajiado County. In doing so, it promotes locally-led climate adaptation initiatives, builds women's awareness and skills around innovative livelihood management practices, and enhances women's access to information to support informed decision making. By providing hands-on training and demonstrations, the work mobilizes some of the most marginalized and at-risk women in the area.

Spiral gardens and learning centers

The organization promotes the production of indigenous African Leafy Vegetables (ALVs) to enhance household-level food security and nutrition. ALVs are commonly used in traditional foods and have been found to be more drought resistant than other commercially available exotic vegetables. In promoting their production, RWN encourages the use of spiral gardens, which allow vegetables to grow on multiple levels and require little water for irrigation.



RWN has also established a 'Livelihood Learning Centre' with international funding from the Community Based Adaptation Programme of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCAD) and the Huairou Commission. The Learning Centre provides a hub where relevant technologies, innovations, and management practices are demonstrated. It provides training for women community leaders on the establishment of spiral gardens, including how to build the frame, plant seedlings, mix soil with manure and irrigate crops, as well as demonstrations on the planting and tending of fruit trees, which can be added to kitchen gardens to further diversify food intake, improve nutrition and provide microclimate regulation. The women are placed in charge of follow-up actions, including watering and weeding the gardens and harvesting the produce, and are trained as trainers so that they can share this knowledge with their communities.



Livestock Diversification

While not traditionally reared by the Maasai community, RWN encourages women to rear dairy goats and chickens to ensure that they have access to milk, eggs and meat when herders are away. Ownership over these animals also enables women to make decisions on all aspects of their management, including slaughter and sale, whereas they are normally excluded from livestock-related decision making.

Access to Markets

The organization further aims to empower Maasai women by promoting their market access; this enables them to sell their surplus produce as well as traditional beadwork handicrafts, both of which are in increasing demand. In doing so, the organization delivers trainings on product value chain development, including dehydrating vegetables and designing and improving beadwork, as well as financial literacy and numeracy, accounting and marketing. RWN also supports Maasai women in establishing cooperative societies to further facilitate their access to local and external markets.

CHALLENGES

A key challenge is the traditional and patriarchal nature of the rural communities where RWN seeks to work with women on climate-smart and innovative practices. In order to address it, RWN co-develops and promotes its actions together with community members, particularly targeting men holding positions of power, such as chiefs.

Moreover, the communities that RWN supports are scattered across a vast and difficult terrain, hindering the effective circulation and rapid adoption of practices. Connecting and engaging networks of women leaders and garnering the support of Agricultural Extension Officers from the county government have been essential to overcoming this challenge.

Finally, as kitchen gardens become more widespread, there are increasing instances of human-wildlife interactions and conflicts. This is because elephants are attracted by vegetable gardens and trees in the middle of vast ASAL areas. Addressing this issue will require RWN, communities and local government representatives to engage with the Kenya Wildlife Services in a coordinated manner.





RESULTS

The use of spiral gardens is increasing as a result of RWN's work and the training and demonstrations provided at the Livelihood Learning Centre. RWN also continues to receive several requests for support from community members where women have been trained on, or exposed to, climate-smart innovations.

Moreover, the fact that the Learning Centre is accessible to Agricultural Extension Officers from the county government ensures that these practices and technologies are able to reach communities not directly targeted by RWN. Connecting these Officers with local communities has also further increased their awareness around the financial and technical support available to rural households through government channels.

Finally, while women in these communities traditionally had limited public visibility, the organization's work on social mobilization, food production, capacity development and economic independence have helped shift traditional gender roles. Women are increasingly represented in decision-making positions, including in local water and education committees, and are empowered to proactively raise issues with government representatives.

Photos: © IFRC, RWN

The PDD implements the project to “Avert, Minimize and Address Displacement Related to the Effects of Climate Change” (PAMAD) to assist countries and communities facing the challenges of Loss and Damage and Displacement. Under PAMAD, and in partnership with the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations on Disaster Reduction (GNDR), the PDD promotes peer-to-peer learning on effective responses to displacement and climate change in Kenya. The project is supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad). For more information, visit <https://pamad.disasterdisplacement.org>



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