



Leveraging women's groups to lead conservation initiatives in arid and semi-arid lands: Indigenous movement for peace advancement and conflict transformation (IMPACT)

Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) comprise over 80 per cent of the Kenyan landmass and are characterised by high variability in climate systems and available resources. The impact of climate change on these already vulnerable ecosystems is an increase in the frequency and severity of droughts. The ASALs of Northern Kenya display many of the characteristics of remote rural areas caught in chronic poverty traps, facing multiple and interlocking forms of disadvantage. Isolation, insecurity, weak economic integration, limited political leverage, and the challenging nature of climate change combine to produce high levels of risk and vulnerability. In the last 100 years, Kenya has experienced over 28 significant droughts, four of them within the previous 10 years.

Pastoralism is the dominant economy in the targeted counties of Isiolo, Samburu, Marsabit, and Laikipia. Approximately 80 percent of about 2 million people in these counties derive livelihoods from livestock-related enterprises. The poverty index is 73.6 per cent in Northern Kenya, according to the 2013 Kenya Population Analysis Situation Report. Northern Kenya has faced marginalisation over the years through poor infrastructure, high illiteracy levels, and limited access to digital technology. This has contributed to the inability of young people to fully pursue or achieve their aspirations and fully exploit their talents.

This region has been characterised by frequent conflicts over natural resources, retrogressive cultures that undermine girls' and women's rights, and patriarchal societal norms. There is also a lack of implementation by government bodies of pastoralist-friendly policies that promote livelihoods and counter gender bias with



respect to women's empowerment and youth. Due to the arid and semi-arid features, communities are highly mobile, searching for pasture and water. Children often accompany the livestock, which denies them access to education.

Initiative overview

The organisation endeavours to realise its mission by promoting effective leadership, fostering environmentally sustainable practices through training and entrepreneurship, facilitating exchange visits for exposure, amplifying women's voices, dismantling patriarchal norms, and advancing gender equality. Lobbying and advocacy efforts are also employed to secure equitable resource sharing and enhance women's participation in leadership roles. Additionally, the organisation aims to diversify livelihood options to mitigate the impacts of climate change on household economies and alleviate poverty by promoting savings and alternative sources of income. It seeks to foster cohesion and support networks to empower individuals to cope with the challenging effects of climate change in the semi-arid regions of northern Kenya.

Recognising women as custodians of land who possess profound knowledge of environmental management, the organisation champions women-led conservation initiatives at the grassroots level in ASALs. Leveraging existing women's groups in northern Kenya, the initiative empowers women to combat the climate crisis through innovative rangeland restoration techniques, such as earth smiles or semi-circular bunds. This approach involves digging bunds and reseedling barren lands with perennial grass species, like *Cenchrus ciliaris* and *Eragrostis superba*. Women then harvest seeds stored in locally constructed seed banks and sell them to community members during dry seasons. Furthermore, women's groups engage in Indigenous tree planting to combat deforestation, recognising the cultural significance of trees like the olive tree in ceremonial practices. Encouraging household-level vegetable cultivation using locally available materials further promotes nutrition among households. Through these multifaceted efforts, the organisation empowers women to be key agents of environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods in northern Kenya.



Women's involvement

The essential role played by women in the initiative is re-greening the earth using semi-circular bunds. Semi-circular bunds rehabilitate degraded, denuded, and hardened land for crop growing, grazing, or forestry. The women are involved in this simple innovation to restore their ecosystem, enabling them to be part of transformative changes in the community, when their contributions to nature-based solutions and natural resource management may otherwise go overlooked.

As the first contact of children, women are agents of socialisation. They create songs and dances with conservation best practices in local languages to enlighten the pastoral communities on the benefits of holistic management of rangelands (e.g. education on how women preserve and maintain trees, such as Reteti and Olgaboli, and conveying their significance to children). These trees remain untouched, as they serve as locations for women's prayers during the dry season.

Women involved in these projects also interfaced with one another, as in the case of women's groups from Opiroi village and the Twala Tenebo cultural women's group. The groups shared their knowledge on grass seed harvesting and grass banks, forging bonds as they exchanged stories, techniques, and challenges. Armed with newfound knowledge and strengthened networks, the Opiroi women returned home as catalysts for sustainable practices, advocates for gender equality, and guardians of their rangelands.

The women will also serve as custodians of the land through the IMPACT land programme, which has been underway for several years, on community land ownership under the Community Land Act 2016, a Kenya law on land ownership at the community level. The women will be involved in dialogues over their inclusion in decision making processes on land use and the management of natural resources. By requiring women to be represented on the Community Land Management Committees (CLMCs), the Act enables women's needs, ideas, and thoughts to influence land management. The same has also informed the development of grazing/land use plans. They have become active participants in curbing activities that expose them to climate vulnerabilities caused by cutting trees for charcoal use and harvesting sand.

Women are contributing to rebuilding household economies in the face of drought and conflict through complementary livelihood options, like poultry farming. Poultry farming is an alternative source of livelihood amidst drought and conflict in Samburu County, which has faced six consecutive drought seasons. The effects manifest as displacement of families, scarcity of water resources, hunger, insecurity, and conflict. The traditional way of life, pastoralism, is under threat.



Despite these challenges, women have stepped up, embracing poultry farming for their livelihood. Amidst limitations, such as low production, disease control, and a lack of information on farm management, women have taken the initiative to adapt to the situation. The project will be crucial in enabling these women to provide extensive training through a collaborative effort between county livestock and veterinary extension agents, village-based consultants, and input corporations.

Women will also pursue beekeeping, be trained to brand their products and take advantage of technological advancements by creating marketing strategies through digital mediums to sell their honey products. They will be provided with mobile phones and tablets as tools to enhance marketing. The equipment will be eco-

friendly as it will utilise solar energy for charging. The proceeds from honey sales will be used to open a small emergency fund to purchase food items, pay school fees for their children, and purchase sanitary products. This is distinct from current practice that often leaves women dependent on donor aid during a crisis and will instead be readily available.

Women champions

Rosemary Nenini is a 40-year-old Maasai woman leader who manages the Twala Cultural and Manyatta women's group in Ilpolei. She and other like-minded women formed this group, the Twala Tenebo Women Cultural Center, located in Il Polei, Laikipia North, a sub-county. 'Twala' is a Maasai word meaning a bell. 'Tenebo' means coming together.

In 2007, the 'bell rang' as a symbol of calling the Maasai women to action for empowerment and capacity building. They joined hands and established a cultural centre together. The centre works to empower women to be self-reliant and create employment opportunities while still preserving the rich cultural and historical heritage of the local Maasai people. The women have overseen the management and local running of the centre who strive to preserve their cultural heritage while rejecting aspects that are less beneficial to all, such as female genital mutilation, denial of children's education, and early marriage. In addition, the centre provides eco-tourism facilities, Maasai cultural experiences, and accommodation in modern eco-manyattas made from bricks and cement. The Manyatta is also a resource centre where groups can come together to share ideas and information. Through their activities, the women make profits that go directly to the community and are utilised for poverty reduction and sustainable development, with 10 per cent supporting girls' education through the Maasai Girls' Empowerment Today programme (MEET).

Jane Sarioyo is the founder of the Naatum women's group, in the Mukogodo Division, Mukogodo westward, and continues to oversee it. Started in 2006, the group has a total of 35 members and is registered as a self-help group. As a women-led, community-based institution whose mission is to build resilient households that adapt to climate change for natural resource management and alternative livelihood options, the group was formed to inspire and help uplift and improve the lives of women, in part through savings, and to promote their children's education.

Elizabeth Nasipa is the chairwoman of the Namaiyana women's group. Her passion for impacting women's lives led her to establish the Ramayana women's group with other like-minded women in Arjiju Village, Laikipia North Sub-County. The Arjiju Namayiana Cultural Organization is a non-governmental, non-political, and non-partisan community-based organisation. Its primary goal is to empower women by fostering sustainable livelihoods to alleviate poverty. The group's objectives include: unite the Arjiju community to enrich cultural values; promote integrated natural resource-based enterprises; advance gender equity and self-reliance through information sharing for women and youth; establish a networking platform for individuals and organisations to share and complement resources; economically empower women through sustainable natural resource management; and participate in discussions for the overall development of the locality.

Challenges

Challenges in ASAL communities include unequal power distribution, limited representation in decision making, low self-esteem among women, and weak market linkages.

Patriarchal norms: Men typically hold power over resources and decision making due to patriarchal norms, leading to women facing domestic abuse and stigma when they engage in empowerment activities. Despite their presence on land management committees, women lack meaningful representation. Collaborating with women-led CSOs, the initiative aims to advocate for quality representation and appeal stakeholders to recognise and help respond to their needs.

Low self-esteem: Low self-esteem hinders women from expressing themselves and seizing opportunities. Continuous support and training through exchange programmes will bolster their confidence.

Weak market linkages: Weak market linkages hinder economic activities. Women face delays and difficulties accessing markets for products (e.g. honey, grass seeds). Strengthening market connections will alleviate this, ensuring women can sell their goods without hassle.

Addressing these challenges requires empowering women with skills, resources, and representation in decision making processes, ultimately fostering gender equality and sustainable development in ASAL communities.



United Nations
Convention to Combat
Desertification



**Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations**

Supported by



Deutsche Gesellschaft
für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

On behalf of



Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development



**For more information,
contact:**

Sajila Pamita
impactkenya2002@gmail.com
resilience.manager@impactkenya.org
<https://www.impactkenya.org/>