



Engaging pastoral women in landscape restoration enterprises to tackle drought resilience and land degradation: JUSTDIGGIT

In Kenya, ASALs cover a significant portion of the country, hosting 36 per cent of the population. Pastoralism and extensive grazing represent the predominant land use system in the ASALs, collectively accounting for 70 per cent of the national livestock herd. Livestock rearing is a fundamental source of income in these regions, constituting a significant portion of household livelihoods. However, recurring droughts severely threaten the livelihoods of pastoral communities, exacerbating poverty and food insecurity. It is estimated that the drought period of 2008–2011 resulted in a loss of USD 8 billion in the livestock sector. The escalating frequency and intensity of droughts in the region exacerbate the vulnerability of pastoralists, necessitating urgent and impactful interventions to address their needs, foster sustained development, and enhance drought resilience in ASALs. Additionally, given the heavy reliance of pastoralist livelihoods on livestock and related products, it is vital to address challenges related to pasture production and market access to reverse trends of increasing poverty, reduce food insecurity and malnutrition among women and children, and foster resilience within these communities.

Recognising these pressing challenges, Justdiggitt is committed to address the complex interplay of drought, livelihood sustainability, and ecosystem degradation in Kenya's ASALs. Through collaborative efforts with pastoral communities and local partners, Justdiggitt implements greening initiatives to restore degraded rangeland ecosystems. Leveraging nature-based solutions, Justdiggitt emphasises traditional, scalable, and easily applicable landscape restoration techniques. These initiatives contribute to improving soil, water, and food security and enhance biodiversity and overall quality of life by reintroducing vegetation on a significant scale.



Initiative overview

This initiative aims to tackle drought resilience and land degradation by involving pastoral women in landscape restoration enterprises. Grass seed bank enterprises form the core of the approach, utilising women's traditional knowledge in ASALs to restore degraded rangelands and enhance community resilience.

Justdiggitt starts by identifying and mobilising women's groups and, then, they provide women with the training and resources needed to establish and manage grass seed banks. These banks transform degraded communal land into productive green grasslands, exclusively owned and managed by pastoral women's groups. Indigenous grass species are planted to boost pasture resilience to climate variability and preserve native biodiversity. Pastoralists access diverse fodder options through grass seed banks, improving livestock nutrition, milk yields, and household incomes. Women's groups are further supported to package and market grass seeds, creating economic opportunities along the value chain and linking pastoralists to markets.

Beyond restoration, this initiative fosters social and environmental transformation by empowering women as environmental stewards and agents of change. It provides them with alternative income sources, amplifies their voices in decision making, and promotes gender equity and social inclusion. This collaborative approach helps address the multifaceted challenges of ASALs, aiming for a resilient and sustainable future for these communities and beyond.

Women's involvement

In Kenya's rangelands, particularly within pastoral communities, women play vital roles in SLM, shaping the resilience and sustainability of these ecosystems. As caretakers of natural resources, women are deeply involved in managing land, water, and vegetation. They oversee grazing patterns, water sources, and fodder availability, ensuring the sustainable use of resources even in the face of recurring droughts. Women's intimate knowledge of the land passed down through generations guides their decision making processes and enables them to adapt traditional practices to changing environmental conditions.

Pastoral women also play instrumental roles in landscape restoration efforts. Through initiatives, like establishing and managing grass seed banks and other restoration interventions, they contribute to reversing degraded rangelands and creating green corridors. Engaging in activities, such as grass seed collection, cultivation, and planting, they actively participate in re-greening communal lands. They are also keen on undertaking Pastoral Managed Natural Regeneration (PMNR) to increase the forest cover in these regions. By restoring vegetation cover and enhancing soil health, they mitigate erosion, promote groundwater recharge, and improve habitat quality for both wildlife and livestock.



Furthermore, women serve as guardians of biodiversity, preserving and promoting the diversity of plant and animal species within their ecosystems. They cultivate and conserve Indigenous seed varieties and protect endangered plant species, contributing to the resilience of local ecosystems. Women's knowledge of traditional ecological practices and entrepreneurial spirit drives innovation in SLM. In recent years, women-led enterprises have emerged, focusing on activities such as eco-tourism, value-added agro-processing, and grass seed and fodder production. These initiatives generate income and promote environmental conservation and economic diversification within pastoral communities.

Women champions



Jackie Kemboi, affectionately known as the 'Justdiggitt regreening queen' by local women, has emerged as a pivotal figure in the Justdiggitt project. With a deep-rooted understanding of the challenges faced by pastoral communities, Jackie has dedicated herself to training women in restoration initiatives, like grass seed banks. Her expertise in grass seed cultivation techniques and harvesting methods has significantly enhanced the productivity and sustainability of these grass seed banks. Growing up in a pastoral community, Jackie witnessed firsthand the devastating impacts of drought on her village, igniting a passion to pursue professional knowledge to reverse desertification. Jackie was also inspired by her mother, a Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR) champion, who mobilised her community to adapt SLM practices and, in so doing, inspired women to follow in her footsteps and engage in similar initiatives and leadership roles.

Lolingojin Dorcas, a Samburu woman working with the Northern Rangeland Trust, a local partner for Justdiggitt, is another champion within the Justdiggitt project. Witnessing the dire consequences of drought on women in her community, Dorcas was spurred to action. She observed livestock losses due to inadequate pasture and water, compelling women to embark on tiring journeys searching for pasture for their animals. In response, Dorcas has dedicated herself to sensitising and raising awareness among Samburu women about the importance of forming pasture groups. Through these groups, women cultivate grass seeds, secure pasture for their young, and milk livestock, mitigating drought impacts and fostering community resilience. Dorcas' advocacy and leadership exemplify the power of grassroots initiatives in addressing pressing environmental challenges and empowering women to enact positive change within their communities.

Mary Nkao, a Maasai woman residing in the Southern Rift Landscape, represents a beacon of resilience and leadership in this project. Despite numerous challenges, including recurrent droughts and land degradation, Nkao has steadfastly committed to SLM. Drawing upon her intimate knowledge of the local landscape and traditional practices, Nkao has played a vital role in actively mobilising women in her community to participate in restoration efforts. Nkao has mentored and advocated for sustainable grazing management and conservation practices as a seasoned agro-pastoralist and respected community elder. Her hands-on approach and unwavering dedication have inspired women of all ages to embrace environmentally sustainable livelihoods and actively contribute to regenerating degraded rangelands. Nkao's invaluable contributions exemplify the transformative impact that local women can have in fostering environmental stewardship and building resilient communities.



Challenges

Climate variability and extreme weather: Climate variability and extreme weather events pose significant challenges to pastoral communities and rangeland restoration efforts, affecting grass seed germination, pasture growth, and ecosystem stability. Adapting strategies to climate change impacts requires innovative solutions and adaptive management.

Gender norms and barriers: Traditional gender norms and socio-cultural barriers within pastoral communities hinder women's participation in SLM. Addressing gender disparities involves promoting women's empowerment, challenging gender roles, and fostering inclusive decision making.

Insufficient awareness: Insufficient awareness and dissemination of knowledge about SLM practices hinder community engagement. Investing in community education and knowledge-sharing platforms is vital to mobilise collective action.

Sustainable financing: Despite support from partners and donors, securing sustainable financing for projects remains a persistent challenge. Sustainable funding is essential to scale up activities, reach more communities, and ensure project success. Developing innovative financing mechanisms, forming strategic partnerships, and advocating for increased investment in SLM are crucial strategies to sustain efforts in the long term.



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