

# Research Update

## Innovation and Distress: Managing Multiple Uncertainties in Laikipia, Kenya

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FAC Pastoralist Theme, November 2010

### Summary

- FAC's Pastoralism researchers analyse coping innovations during the 2009 drought that pushed Maasai herders to Mount Kenya.
- Despite previous brittle social relations, agreements between ranchers and farmers permitted limited grazing of cattle and sheep inside commercial ranches on a controlled basis
- Herders also cooperated with small-holder farmers living adjacent to the Mt. Kenya forest, whereby Maasai kept the animals on farms during the night and grazed inside the forest at night.
- Research also noted preference for smaller and improved breeding stock and livelihood diversification.
- Social contracts and other drought coping strategies will be presented in detail in early 2011 as input into Kenya's Arid Lands Resource Management Project and its Natural Resource Management component.

### Background

In 2009, the worst drought in a generation gripped the drylands of northern Kenya. On the Laikipia Plateau stretching west of Mt. Kenya, Maa-speaking herders, were pushed to extraordinary lengths to support their livestock and sustain their livelihoods.

The sub-humid Laikipia Plateau is a fragmented landscape, with pastoralists restricted to the arid northern reaches of the district and patches of rangeland adjacent to large commercial ranches, individually-titled lands and other protected areas. In addition to physical barriers that exclude pastoralists from these lands and restrict mobility, the resilience of pastoralists in Laikipia has been hampered by brittle social relations resulting from a long history of tensions around land and access to grazing as well as distrust between different livelihood groups.

But the 2009 drought forced pastoralists in Laikipia respond with a mix of tested and tried coping techniques as well as innovations that helped them to secure access to critical grazing resources lying across social and ecological borders. Innovations in the relationships between pastoralists and commercial ranchers as well as Meru and Kikuyu small-holder farmers living adjacent to the Mt. Kenya forest were made possible through careful negotiation, trust and mutually-beneficial support. Important new social bonding came about through the devastating impacts of the 2009 drought.

FAC's Pastoralism Research Theme is examining the Maasai drought response, the dynamics of these social innovations as well as other notable ways that Maa-speaking herders in Laikipia sought in new and different ways to withstand and recover from the drought crisis. As well as considering the longitudinal continuities in how

these groups responded to the drought, the research examines the drivers of these innovations, who is involved, who is benefitting and who might lose out.

### Methodology

The UK-Maasai research team began its work in June 2010 following a season of unprecedented rains. The team travelled extensively throughout the Maasai-inhabited rangelands of Laikipia as well as neighbouring conservation areas and the narrow agrarian belt between the rangeland plateau and the Mt. Kenya forest.

This study is based on key informant interviews and focus group discussions with Maasai women and men in five locations in Laikipia, including young herders, elders and political representatives. The team also met with actors from pastoralist self-help groups, small-holder farmers, staff from government programmes and non-governmental groups and other knowledgeable observers of the region.<sup>1</sup>



Photograph: Jeremy Lind

Livestock Corridor, Laikipia

### Analysis

#### The early drought: December 2008 – February 2009

The drought came upon consecutive seasons of poor rainfall – rangelands that were accessible to Maasai herders were quickly exhausted after the short rains failed late in 2008.

Herders began applying customary coping practices to manage the deteriorating situation including:

- cessation of bleeding livestock
- pruning branches of trees near town and along rivers to feed weaker livestock at home and avoid moving them
- moving stronger cows and sheep more widely

- illegally grazing cows on neighbouring commercial ranches ('night grazing')
- dipping and inoculating livestock to maintain health of stronger animals
- intensification of non-livestock tasks, such as burning charcoal, buying chickens and selling eggs, tending bee hives, casual work on horticulture farms and large ranches, and selling goats

**Deteriorating conditions and herder-rancher agreements:  
March – May 2009**

By the beginning of 2009, limited night grazing was commonplace. But by February 2009, conditions had deteriorated to a point where pastoralists negotiated with ranch owners to open up controlled grazing on commercial ranches. Pastoralist elders from Maasai group ranches and settlements approached ranch owners and managers to negotiate terms to open grazing on the ranches.

Through careful negotiation, elders from group ranches and the managers of large ranches reached agreements permitting pastoralists to graze a limited number of cattle and sheep inside commercial ranches on a controlled basis.

**Intensifying drought and moving to Mt. Kenya: April/May – November 2009**

A complementary response by pastoralists was reciprocal agreements that individual herders negotiated with Kikuyu and Meru small-holders living adjacent to the Mt. Kenya forest. From April 2009 as drought conditions worsened, pastoralists began driving their herds to Mt. Kenya in search of fodder and forage but were prevented from residing inside the forest, a move intended to conserve the forest vegetation and prevent destructive grazing practices under the cover of darkness.

Pastoralists agreed to kraal their livestock on small-holder farms at night and drive their animals into the forest during the day. The benefits, to both sides included:

pastoralists	farmers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• having space to kraal livestock and thereby access critically important grazing reserves inside the Mt. Kenya forest</li> <li>• acquiring agro-ecological knowledge to begin cultivation</li> <li>• sharing milk with farmers in exchange for farm produce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• farmers earned fees from herders</li> <li>• opportunity to buy weak animals</li> <li>• urine and dung improved soil nutrients</li> </ul>

This reciprocity and mutual help had existed in previous crises but never before had agreements been reached so systematically.

**Looking ahead**

Although the crisis of 2009 gave rise to these important new social innovations, they did not prevent catastrophic livestock losses for Maa-speaking pastoralists, whose herds were weakened by drought and decimated by cold and disease encountered on Mt. Kenya.

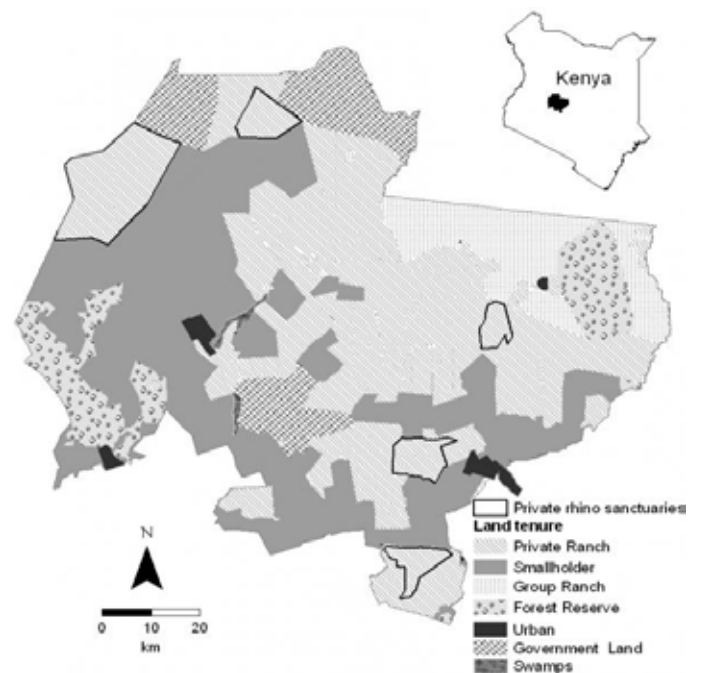
But this research also suggests how future shocks may be mitigated through social contracts and innovations and it identifies other interesting findings:

- Younger herders in particular now prefer improved breeds and smaller herds, particularly steers that can be marketed to Nairobi livestock traders and better-off elites.
- Younger herders are also committed to a productive form of diversification – maintaining links to the livestock sector but deepening their involvement in other areas of Laikipia’s dynamic and diverse economy.

The experience of Maasai herders responding to *Olamei Oodo* is a story of innovation in distress, and the very different options and opportunities available to different people within a highly stratified society.

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> The team visited Makurian, a group ranch near to Dol Dol and bordering the Mukogodo Forest; Chumvi, a settlement sitting next to the Oldaiga and Olenaisho ranches; Ethi, a settlement next to the Ngarendare Forest and near to the Kisima Borana Ranch; Ngarendare, a settlement with a mix of Maasai, Meru and Kikuyu that sits between the Kisima Borana Ranch, Lewa Conservancy and the Ngarendare Forest; and Jua Kali, an expanding small town situated 20KM west of Nanyuki on an expansive plain.



This **Research Update** was written by **Jeremy Lind** and **John Letei** of the **Future Agricultures Consortium**. The series editor is David Hughes. Further information about this series of Research Updates at: [www.future-agricultures.org](http://www.future-agricultures.org)

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