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Climate Change Pushes Pastoralists to the Brink in Northern Kenya

A special report by The Advocacy Project



Hilary Bukuno, founder of Children Peace Initiative Kenya, with women from the Samburu and Pokot tribes in northern Kenya

Climate change is devastating the culture and livelihood of pastoralists who offer the best chance of protecting the fragile environment in Northwest Kenya, according to Hilary Bukuno, a leading peace activist from the region.

Speaking with The Advocacy Project (AP) from Kenya after spending several weeks with Turkana and Samburu herders in the North, Mr Bukuno (photo above) warned that if nothing is done the long-term damage could be irreparable. “Pastoralists are under siege,” he said.

Mr Bukuno is founder and director of Children Peace Initiative Kenya (CPIK), a partner of AP since 2015. He is from the Gabra, one of the tribes in Kenya’s northern Rift Valley, and has spent his adult life trying to end conflict between pastoralists. AP plans to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

Mr Bukuno's warning comes as heads of state gather in Glasgow for the UN Summit on Climate Change. Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta **warned the conference on Monday** that "extreme weather" was costing Kenya between 3% and 5% of the country's GDP.

The goal in Glasgow is to curb carbon emissions, but Mr Bukuno said the global discussion must hear more from vulnerable communities that guard fragile ecosystems. He called for a comprehensive new strategy to protect the pastoralists that should also address their own herding practices, which can damage the environment.



Mr Bukuno met recently to discuss climate change with village elders in Nachola, a village in Baragoi sub-county that has been the scene of deadly cattle raids between Turkana and Samburu herders. He was accompanied by Monica Kinyua, a founding member of CPIK who is seen in the photo with Turkana children in Baragoi.

Pastoralists are used to the vagaries of nature but even they are bewildered and frightened by the irregular rainfall patterns triggered by climate change, said Mr Bukuno.

Mr Bukuno and Ms Kinyua found the elders in a state of desperation over their cattle, which are their main source of wealth and food. As water sources run dry and the grass loses nutrients, cows that once lived for 5 years are dying younger. "The herders and their cattle can no longer predict rainfall," said Bukuno. "They are no longer in a state of harmony with nature."

As the water table falls, more and more boreholes are being drilled, pushing the water table even lower. Cows need to drink every two days, but often have to go up to nine days without water. "This is torture for the cows," said Mr Bukuno.

Even in elevated areas where rainfall is more regular, water is being hoarded for so long that it becomes foul and unfit for consumption by humans or animals. Ms Kinyua added that kitchen gardens, which have always been part of the pastoralist "survival strategy," are also disappearing as families make hard choices about the use of water.

All of this makes the economics of pastoralism increasingly punitive. Mr Bukuno's brother owns cows and spends the equivalent of \$250 a week (the cost of a cow) to supply his herd of 50 animals with water.

As the cattle suffer, so does the food security of their owners. The traditional diet of milk, meat and blood – which defines pastoralist culture for much of the outside world – is increasingly rare because cows are too emaciated to be bled.

Mr Bukuno confessed that much of this has come as a shock. "A lot of this I did not know," he said. It is incredibly alarming."



Kenya's pastoralists have long struggled with drought, conflict, water and land, but climate change is accelerating the process and creating a lethal cocktail that is increasingly resistant to narrow solutions.

CPIK focuses on conflict, which is both a result and cause of the crisis. As their own pasture withers, herders are taking their cattle deeper into the territory

of other tribes in search of water, re-igniting old feuds. With guns readily available and police overstretched, this is a recipe for violence.

The region has long been known for cow wars and locals remember how forty-two Kenyan policemen were slaughtered near the village of Nachola in December 2012 by Turkana rustlers. But climate change has added a new urgency to the search for peace, say CPIK officials. "They used to raid for fun," said Ms Kinyua. "Now they raid for survival."

CPIK'S peace-building starts by bringing children from warring tribes together at peace camps. This builds trust between their parents, village elders and even warriors which eventually translates into cooperation and reduces the temptation to rustle and kill.

CPIK provides an added incentive by offering a cow to two families from opposing tribes if they agree to raise the cow jointly and share the income from milk and calves. (Top photo)

This strategy extends to sharing critical resources such as pasture land and water. While working with the Pokot and Samburu, CPIK realized that Samburu lands were at a higher elevation and benefited from more rainfall

than the Pokot. Pokot land was more arid, but Pokot cattle markets attracted more herders. CPIK identifies such complementary assets and encourages cooperation.



With peace have come entrepreneurs like Josephine Lengapiani (photo), an enterprising Samburu businesswoman who buys maize from Pokot farmers, grinds the maize and sells it to Samburu. She uses her mobile phone to send money through [Mpesa](#).

Working with local partners like Ms Lengapiani, CPIK has helped to put a complete stop to fighting between the Samburu and Pokot – a remarkable achievement.

Last year CPIK secured German funding to work in six new villages in Baragoi sub-county, home to Turkana and Samburu. The villages include Nachola, near the scene of the 2012 massacre of policemen.

The results are encouraging. Conflict deaths in Baragoi have fallen from almost 60 in 2019 to 17 so far this year, and stolen animals are being returned by former warriors. [Learn more about CPIK's model here.](#)



CPIK finds itself in a race against time with donors as well as the climate. Mr Bukuno wants to expand into other front-line villages in Baragoi, but first he needs to secure more funding.

As the drought becomes more aggressive CPIK will also need to draw on technical skills such as water management, animal husbandry and farming

practices that have been tried and proven elsewhere in arid lands. This calls for building alliances with other experts and disciplines.

Mr Bukuno also hopes that any action plan can reduce the size of herds and eliminate herding practices by the pastoralists that damage the environment. “We are not starry-eyed about pastoralism,” he said.

The larger question is how far the world will go to invest in vulnerable communities like the pastoralists and their range-land. Partly ethical and partly practical, the question also hangs over coral reefs, Pacific Islands, and rainforests.

Some feel the battle is already lost but Mr Bukuno hopes the issue will be fully aired at Glasgow. “Our argument is simple,” he said. “If we want to halt climate change, we must invest in those who have most at stake.”

The Advocacy Project is committed to CPIK’s mission and has sent four [Peace Fellows](#) to work at CPIK since 2015. In 2019, we commissioned tribal artwork from two Samburu and Pokot artists that was attached to the evocative [Kenyan Cow Quilt](#).

The quilt was used by Mr Bukuno at the UN Summit on Women and Girls in Nairobi in November 2019. CPIK and AP plan to use the quilt in supporting CPIK’s advocacy on climate change.

* Hilary Bukuno and Monica Kinyua will assess the Glasgow conference and review the impact of climate change on pastoralists on **Tuesday, November 16, 2021 at 7 pm Kenya time; 4 pm GMT; 11 am EST (US); and 8 am PST (US)**. [Click here to register](#). The discussion will be recorded and available to those who register.



All photos by Children Peace Initiative Kenya and The Advocacy Project