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Cushioning Pastoralists: Hay Cultivation Alleviates Pains of Climate Change in Isiolo

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Hussein Salesa, Communications Coordinator, County Government of Isiolo

USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) is funding a 5-year Development Food Security Activity (DFSA) project known as Nawiri, led by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and being implemented in the arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) counties of Isiolo and Marsabit in Kenya. The project's goal is to sustainably reduce levels of persistent acute malnutrition among vulnerable populations in Isiolo and Marsabit Counties.

In September 2021, Isiolo County government and Nawiri (CRS) undertook a joint documentation initiative in collaboration with other USAID PREG implementing partners, the National Drought Management Authority (NDMA), local media outlets and communities. The aim was to identify and showcase compelling stories of community resilience in the county, by capturing inspiring efforts underway to help prevent and withstand the impact of climate- and human-made shocks. The emergency response activities reported on below are supported by Isiolo County government, by USAID Nawiri and by CRS emergency funding.



Photo: CRS/Nawiri

Cushioning pastoralists: Hay distribution by the USAID funded CRS Nawiri program in Isiolo County to cushion herders against the ravaging drought. Image: Hussein Salesa (Isiolo County Communications Officer), during the USAID RLA/Nawiri Joint Documentation Initiative

Under the searing heat and stress caused by unforgiving climatic shock, Amina Boru, 56, cushions herself from the effects of ravaging droughts by collecting bird nests which can be turned into alternative animal feed for her emaciated livestock, animals facing potential decimation.

For Boru, it's a desperate time that calls for desperate measures. The punishing drought has cleared vegetation and pasture, dried the water holes, and negatively impacted social, economic, and livelihood

options for communities inhabiting the parched Isiolo County. In the past, Boru and fellow community members used indigenous knowledge to help mitigate droughts and save their livestock. However, the current drought (2021) has disrupted all available indigenous mechanisms that the community deployed in the past. Use of indigenous knowledge previously entailed community members, including Boru, maximizing available pasture while preserving their pasture fields for prolonged use.



Cushioning pastoralists: Hay distribution by the USAID funded CRS Nawiri program in Isiolo County to cushion herders against the ravaging drought. Image: Hussein Salesa (Isiolo County Communications Officer)

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The second strategy was to collect wild fruits from the acacia trees, locally known as urbu. The same is used to feed livestock while the community waits to improve and return to normalcy. The current climatic shock has affected the impact of indigenous knowledge strategies, as all acacia trees have dried up and so produced less natural wild fruits for livestock. Also worth noting is the speed at which water holes have dried up, further aggravating the dire situation and contributing to mass livelihood loss, displacement and strange diseases.

“I used to wake in the morning and move with my four goats for hours before returning home. During the drought period I collected wild fruits for my goats, and the fruits were enough to last my herd till the next rainy season. But things have changed now, and I am experiencing a different drought which finishes everything at once and brings scorching weather,” Boru observed.

This revelation by the Isiolo community indicates climatic vagaries are hitting harder and thus there’s a need to establish if the current situation is due to increased earth temperature.

“It’s important that climate scientists in Kenya observe current climatic trends in northern Kenya, which is facing a new type of drought. It has disrupted everything at once, unlike past droughts. Scientist should investigate and propose new adaptation strategies to cushion the communities and safeguard their livelihoods,” Bitacha Sora, an Isiolo program coordinator said.

Residents have voiced their concern, urging the state to draft a “Marshall Plan” to tackle recurrent droughts and not wait until the situation is out of hand to declare it a national disaster.

“Government needs to act with speed and mobilize resources to address droughts and other disasters at early stages. State interventions only come when the situation is out of hand. We need a reset on these interventions and for the government to come up with a plan like

distribution of hay which is currently being done by USAID-Nawiri," Abdi Roba, a resident of Garbatula sub-county, said.

Nawiri is also implementing a four-month cash transfer program targeting 700 beneficiaries across the county. Already, the third batch of beneficiaries received their allocation last week. Each beneficiary received at least Sh5,000 meant to cushion them against the ravaging drought.

"We identified the neediest cases among the communities, including those with children who are malnourished, lactating mothers, elderly and disabled people before disbursement of the funds," Nawiri field officer Munira Isack based in Garba Tulla said.

In September 2021, President Uhuru Kenyatta declared the drought a national disaster and called for urgent interventions to cushion hundreds of families affected by drought in the Northern parts of Kenya.

The presidential declaration proclaiming the current drought as a national disaster has seen concerted interventions by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Nawiri program, implemented by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Isiolo county government, complemented by CRS own emergency response funding which, for example, is providing hay for hundreds of livestock herders in Garba-Tulla and Boji, Isiolo sub-county.

The rapid response by CRS, USAID-Nawiri and Isiolo County government saw 400 herders from Garba-Tulla and Boji benefit from life-saving animal feeds which will protect their herds. The herders were at risk of losing their livestock herds to the disruptive drought.

The current drought is also fueling a social and economic crisis with

families thrown into food insecurity situations. This affects community health and puts the lives of children and pregnant mothers on the line as the region stares at the possibility of starvation.

"The drought is forcing us to skip meals or stay the whole day without it. I know of other families who have gone without food for several days. Food prices have exponentially gone up while purchasing power has dwindled due to livelihood loss," Roba intimated.

The social cost of the drought hitting Isiolo is well manifested in the education sector, where children are forced to drop out of school due to a lack of fees. School fees and other associated education costs are made from livestock sales; the current drought has affected the livestock industry and reduced herds to unworthy carcasses.

"I have two sons and a daughter studying in various secondary schools however I cannot sustain both, and one has to drop out of school to look after livestock. I sold four cows and 24 goats to keep them in school, but the situation is not bearable anymore," Roba said.

Local communities have hailed USAID-Nawiri's partnership with the Isiolo County government to provide hay for affected herders and provide cash transfer programs in various centers. Based on lessons learned from past drought cycles, a local women's group based in Kinna town, Isiolo, established a fodder growing and distribution business as part of community adaptive strategies.

Situated 80km from Isiolo town, the Malka women's group is waiting to cash in during drought and assist the communities in sourcing locally planted and packaged fodder for their livestock. The chairlady Makai Intalo says the group partnered with CRS Nawiri to supply 600 bales to herders affected by drought in the larger Garba-Tulla sub-county. She says hay farming has proved lucrative and the way to go with the changing climatic conditions.

"We began this activity five years ago after we received training organized by Isiolo County government through the Livestock Department. We were provided with seeds and farm tools through the Department of Agriculture and Livestock production," Intalo recalled.

She says the group plans to expand to supply across the county and tap into other North-Eastern counties.

"Fodder can be harvested thrice a year with an estimated 350 bales per acre. We sell each bale between Sh300-500 depending on demand, but most of our local clients get it at a subsidised cost of Sh200 per bale," Intalo said.

Most Kinna wetlands farmers opt for hay farming because of high demands, especially during dry spells.

"We resorted to hay farming because it has better returns than maize, onions and tomatoes put together. Herders are forced to purchase bales to sustain their livestock with good feeds that give them enough milk and keep them healthy," the chair said.

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Farmers who keep large herds of cattle are resorting to buying hay to supplement their animals' nutritional value and keep them healthy and strong. Isiolo County agriculture, livestock, and fisheries executive Lawrence Mwongera said hay farming has proved profitable as hundreds of local farmers have ventured into the new profitable business enterprise. He said the county government has so far distributed 3,500 kgs of grass seeds worth Sh3.5 million in the last two years across the county, namely Cenchrus Ciliaris and agrostis superb.

The World Food Program also bought 5,000 kgs that were distributed within the county.

Mwongera said the county dispatched livestock production officers in various areas to train farmers and organized groups on cultivating and managing the fodder grass till maturity and harvesting. He noted that the Department of Livestock used the same grass seeds to plant grass in county feedlot and pasture farms within the Livestock Marketing Division. The Isiolo county steering group, led by county commissioner Geoffrey Omondi and Governor Mohamed Kuti, authorized the purchase of hay and other interventions to support various livestock farmers as drought intensifies.

The group was acting on a report by the National Drought Management Authority following the recent drought assessment indicators that classify Isiolo among the areas hard hit by drought. Water availability was down due to low recharge levels and worsened by increased distance to forage.

Water boozers were deployed for livestock and human consumption in most areas, especially in areas affected including Modogashe, Chari, Yamicha and other strategic pasture grazing zones.

Isiolo Governor Mohamed Kuti said the county government would deploy more water boozers and supply relief food to all the areas to cushion the communities during this dry spell. He called on research institutions to partner with farmers to help them improve the quality and quantity of hay. He also advised farmers to use better research methodologies to improve food security in drought-prone regions, especially in organized groups. The governor said the lack of food in Kenya and more so in the northern region resulted from farmers failing to use proper research advice when dealing with food security. He said farmers had also failed to diversify their livelihood through venturing into drought-resistant crops as a coping mechanism for the drought in the region. The governor directed

the Agriculture, Livestock, special programs, and Water departments to develop plans to mitigate the effects of droughts in the area. He said the county would partner with the national government and various development partners to distribute food and non-food items to hundreds of families affected by drought. He advised the pastoral communities to reconsider their way of life by growing crops favoured by the environment and harvested in the shortest time possible.

He also noted that the region had continued to experience short rains which were not reliable for farming but urged them to grow drought-resistant crops along Ewaso Nyiro River, draining into the Lorian swamp.

"We are advising farmers to start planting drought-resistant crops like sorghum, green grams, cow piece, cassava and Katumani maize which can be harvested within the shortest time possible, during November and December rains," Kuti added.

He called on the communities to adhere to early warning systems issued by relevant organizations to diversify their economy by selling some of their livestock and putting up other businesses. The governor regretted that the communities have continued to lose hundreds of cattle to the drought due to ignorance. He urged them to seek advice from the relevant ministries to dispose of the animals during drought season and buy them during the rainy season.

Kuti said the county government was planning to develop measures to see the communities venture into large-scale farming in Kubi Qalo and Sericho in the Garba-Tulla sub-county.

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