

From millionaire to pauper: Plight of a Maasai herder

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William ole Lelei of Enobelbel, Kajiado District, was a millionaire in June last year.

He had more than 140 cows, each valued at an average Sh10,000.

Had he sold them then, he would have earned Sh1.2 million.

But by last month, Lelei was reduced to a beggar by biting drought and a disease that wiped out almost his entire herd.



A boy leads a herd of cattle from Kajiado District to Tanzania's Longisa Hills in search of pasture as drought persists. Photo: Maxwell Agwanda/Standard

He did not move his animals to greener pasture in far away areas outside Kajiado District, as is the trend.

By the time he started herding them out in late December, they were too weak to make the journey.

"They died on the way to Tanzania, where he wanted to take them for pasture. He had held on, hoping it would rain. When he decided to move, it was too late," said his brother, Peter Sunkuli, whose herd of 50 animals made it to Longisa water catchment area near Namanga, on the Tanzania side of the border.

Lelei's story is all too common in many parts of drought-prone Maasailand, where herdsman who won't sell their cows even when it is evident drought would wipe the herds out. Many are ruthlessly dispossessed by the vagaries of nature.

But those who would not stay put and take the risk like Lelei have taken to migrating with the animals at the onset of drought, to greener areas as far as Nairobi, Thika, Kiambu, Voi and Tanzania until drought passes.

Resistance

Some cattle owners, especially old men, resist the tell-tale signs urging them to start the trek and hope to sustain their herds by watering them in traditional watering pans. If the succulence of the ground dries up before the drought is over, as did for Lelei, the whole herd is in danger.

Joyce Saiko, a field co-ordinator with Neighbours Initiative Alliance (NIA) that works with communities in Kajiado on modern methods of water and livestock development, said it

was a widespread scenario to see livestock millionaires turn paupers overnight.

"Some have been reduced to nothing just a few months from owning a herd of even 500 cows," says Mrs Saiko.

"They fail to sell and keep the money to buy back (cattle) later. They do not imagine life without their livestock. Even when you tell them it is the sensible thing to do, they ignore you and just keep hoping for rain," adds Saiko.

She says some herdsmen in Kajiado District have resorted to begging after they lost everything they owned to drought.

"They cling on and watch the animals die one by one when the drought becomes severe," she says.

The tradition

"It is a Maasai man's tradition; you do not sell all your cows, no matter what. They are like our land. This is my bank account," says Sunkuli, Lelei's brother.

When the drought is over, he will give his dispossessed brother some heifers and bulls to help him restock.

Lower productivity

The Kajiado office of the Ministry for Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands said in its latest monthly report on Arid Lands Resource Management Project that livestock keeping as a sole means of livelihood in dry areas like Kajiado was threatened by persistent drought and resultant water shortage.

By December, all water pans and dams had dried up, leaving herders no option but to migrate or sell.

"The average distance to water sources is 15km in dry areas," said the report.

This had led to "increased incidences of livestock deaths associated with disease as most animals had moved to dry season areas, which have tick challenges," the report indicated.

Other challenges brought on by the dry season include risk of wildlife attacking animals during migration and in homesteads.

The report indicated: "Livestock performance in terms of productivity (milk) is low compared to previous months (rainy season). This is attributed to lack of forage, water, long trekking distances and livestock diseases."

The animals lose value so that even those willing to sell a few fetch miserable prices.

The report indicates that from November to January, the prices of a grown cow declined on average from Sh10,000 to below Sh8,000 and was getting worse.

A survey by The Standard late last month found that a full-grown goat at Kajiado's Bisil market sold at Sh1,000 down from about Sh4,000.