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Examination of Livelihoods Vulnerability among the Samburu Nomadic Pastoralist Community in Samburu County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the livelihood vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoral community in Samburu County, Kenya. Livelihood insecurity remains a pressing challenge in Africa, with over 85 per cent of people lacking stable means of sustenance. In Kenya, Samburu County stands out, with approximately 76 per cent of the population living below the poverty line, and widespread food insecurity and child malnutrition. The study sought to probe the indicators, categories, risk factors, manifestations, and causes of vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoralists. Using a qualitative research approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 30 elderly participants aged between 60 and 79 years, selected through purposive sampling due to their cultural knowledge and life experiences. Data were analysed thematically and presented through narrative summaries and direct quotations. The findings reveal several signs of vulnerability, including physical weakness, hunger, displacement, and identity crises. Vulnerable groups include orphaned children, expectant and nursing mothers, the elderly, persons with disabilities, widows, and individuals with no livestock or social support. Key risk factors identified include old age, childlessness, and social exclusion due to perceived illegitimacy or taboo actions. Vulnerability manifests through hunger, poor health, marginalisation, and economic oppression. Causes are multifaceted, encompassing man-made factors such as cattle rustling and irresponsible resource management; natural factors like droughts and floods; and economic challenges stemming from the shift towards a cash economy. The study recommends urgent government intervention to reduce livelihood vulnerability by promoting diversification of livelihood sources. Further research is suggested to explore sustainable, culturally appropriate livelihood options that blend traditional and modern practices for enhanced community livelihood resilience.

Key words: Nomadic pastoralists, livelihood vulnerability, signs of livelihood vulnerability.



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INTRODUCTION

Livelihood vulnerability has been a challenge that societies have sought ways to grapple with. Livelihood vulnerability refers to the degree to which individuals, households, or communities are exposed to, and unable to cope with, the adverse effects of shocks and stresses. Causes that impact livelihoods arise from natural disasters and climate change. They affect the ability and capacity of people to thrive. Nomadic pastoralists' susceptibility to disruptions in their livelihood systems due to recurrent droughts, resource-based conflicts, climate variability, restricted mobility, and marginalisation from formal economic systems has become worse (Dong, 2022).

The status of livelihood vulnerability globally is getting acute. The Global Food Security Report indicate that, in 2022, the population facing acute livelihood insecurity was greater than at any point in the six-year history. The people requiring urgent humanitarian assistance reached 205.1 million in 45 of the 53 countries surveyed (Food Security Information Network, 2022). The situation did not improve despite the population continuing to receive food assistance. The reasons posited were the worsening acute food insecurity situation and an expansion in the population. The United Nations explicates the entitlement of the people to food that is nutritious, especially to vulnerable groups like children. It obligates governments to help families and guardians who are not able to provide food to children (UN, 2021). About 255 million people in Africa go to bed without taking a meal, yet more than a hundred forty million of them are also confronted with intense food distress. Despite this unpleasant livelihood vulnerability scenario, only 17.4 per cent of all African populations receive some sort of government and development agencies' social protection benefit (UN, 2024).

Generally, eighty per cent of Kenya's population is regarded as insecure in their livelihoods, based on daily expenditure per person of less than Kenya shillings two hundred and eighty (Mercy Corps Nawiri Consortium, 2021). Despite specific social protection interventions by the Kenya government, inform of cash transfers for orphans and vulnerable

children, persons with severe disability, and older persons who are seventy years and above (Republic of Kenya, 2017), the poverty rate among children, older persons, and persons living with disability is still significantly high at 42 per cent, 39 per cent, and 42 per cent respectively. In Samburu County, the poverty rate is 76 per cent against the national rate of 36.1 per cent. Those experiencing chronic food poverty are 60.0 per cent, with 81 per cent experiencing dimensional poverty (Council of Governors, 2020). This is inadequate to meet nutrition, health, housing, and clean water needs, thus living in low-standard living conditions. The majority (93.3 per cent) of the county's inhabitants live in rural areas, and the arid and semi-arid geographic area is 75 per cent. This means that climate change has a lot of impact on the majority of the inhabitants. Specifically, 25 per cent of the children are persistently malnourished year after year, and 42 per cent are stunted.

Livelihood vulnerability has worsened due to frequent droughts and crumbling indigenous social protection mechanisms that helped traditional communities to mitigate, cope with, and recover from food vulnerability risks and shocks (Akall, 2021). Livelihood resources that help build their resilience and that were used in support of social protection arrangements have diminished. Traditional practices requisite for building livelihood resilience have also been affected. Livelihoods' sustaining resources like vegetation, water, wild fruits and herbs, and land have significantly diminished due to individualisation of land tenure systems, population growth, climate change, and lack of conservation. In Kenya, those living in arid and semi-arid lands account for forty-four per cent of the total poor population. The majority of the remaining fifty-six per cent live in slums and the streets (Republic of Kenya, (2017). Demand for cash for medical and education purposes has contributed to diminishing livestock numbers. More so, the crumbling of supportive indigenous systems due to westernisation has further made the people more vulnerable.

Livelihood vulnerability is a social problem. Social justice and access to food have been a

concern to social workers, as it is critical to human survival. In 1993, a rallying call was made to social workers in Canada to prioritise access to food within their practice as it was becoming obvious that food insecurity is a serious livelihood problem (Burton, 2022).

The general objective of the study was to examine livelihood vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoral people of northern Kenya. The specific objectives of the study were; to probe the signs of vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoral community in Samburu County, Kenya, to establish the category of vulnerable people among the Samburu nomadic pastoral community in Samburu County, Kenya, to assess the risk factors for livelihood vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoral community in Samburu County, Kenya, to investigate the aspects of vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoral community in Samburu County, Kenya, to examine the causes of livelihoods vulnerability among the Samburu nomadic pastoral community in Samburu County, Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vulnerability is the degree to which a person or family is likely to be negatively impacted by exposure to shocks, based on their capacity to cope, adapt, or recover. Livelihood vulnerability is sensitivity to exposure to risks and threats, and inadequate adaptive capacity. Vulnerability is often described as the susceptibility to harm resulting from the interaction of risk factors and the availability of supports and resources (Kieu & Senanayak, 2022). It refers to a situation where people experience a substantial decline in well-being or face threats that significantly impact their daily lives due to their inability to cope with risks (Qin, 2022).

There are several factors that come into play to influence people's vulnerability to situations. One is assets. When people have assets like livestock, for instance, such assets may be under threat from diseases, droughts, and raids. Habitation also can make people susceptible to risks of diseases, drought or raids. Populations such as nomadic pastoralists and hunters and gatherers are mostly

considered vulnerable based on their socio-economic characteristics, location, and reliance on natural resources. In the northern semi-arid areas of Tanzania, groups such as poor farmers who are reliant on rain-fed agriculture are identified as vulnerable to climate change (Leal et al., 2020). These aftereffects of droughts include failure of crops and vegetation, scarcity of water, and loss of livestock as a result (Mdemu, 2021).

WHO (2018) indicates that the poor, individuals living in rural areas, and those relying on natural resources are particularly vulnerable to climate change. These groups face challenges associated with limited access to resources, including food, water, education, and healthcare. WHO indicates that in 2023, an estimated population of 48.3 million are acutely food insecure in the Horn of Africa, with 13.5 million of them being internally displaced. Among them also are children under five years who are acutely malnourished, numbering 2.3 million in Somalia, 1.7 million in South Sudan, .1 million in Kenya, and 120,000 in Uganda (WHO, 2023). Climate change brought about shifts in temperature, variability in precipitation, and weather unpredictability, which can disrupt indigenous peoples' traditional sustenance activities, in particular rearing of livestock, crop farming, hunting, and fish breeding.

Vulnerability is further heightened for marginalised and discriminated populations, such as women, children, and people with disabilities, who face additional barriers to accessing resources and are more susceptible to the effects of climatic variables (Elsamahi et al., 2021). Due to historical marginalisation, indigenous peoples face unique challenges that make them vulnerable to shocks and stresses. According to the study conducted by Adams et al. (2020), they have limited access to resources and services compared to non-indigenous populations. This is because of the dispossession of ethnic territories and traditional localities through colonisation, together with development projects, causing disruption of indigenous communities' connections to their natural resources, leading to food insecurity and the ability to sustain their livelihoods.

Globally, about 820 million people are experiencing chronic hunger (Save the Children, 2022). In 2022, the drought situation in Kenya was so severe that it affected 91.3 per cent of ASAL Counties, that is, twenty-one out of twenty-three. Because of this, four and a half million people faced food insecurity in these Counties, with many children suffering from acute malnutrition. Many children left school because of a lack of food at home, so that they could help their parents look after siblings as parents fend for the families (UNICEF, 2022).

Despite the target of realising Zero Hunger status by 2030, the magnitude of people still suffering as a consequence of hunger continues to increase. In 2020, the numbers increased by 10.4 per cent. There was an upsurge of one hundred eighteen million additional people who suffered starvation in 2020, unlike in 2019. In Africa, about 21 per cent of the people faced hunger in 2020, which was double the proportion of any other region. Sub-Saharan part of Africa is the most food-insecure region globally (FAO, 2021).

Climate change has a lot of impact on nomadic pastoralists who rely on dryland's natural resources for livestock grazing. Of late, vegetation in drylands is diminishing. Grassland cover now is at 39 per cent while forested areas are decreasing at a rate of 5 per cent per year (UNICEF, 2023). Notwithstanding the erratic rainfall patterns, drylands are affected negatively by the cutting of trees for construction materials, fuel wood and charcoal, which directly reduces grazing and water resources as well as increases soil erosion, subsequently adversely affecting food production (FAO, 2021).

Dry areas account for an estimated forty-one per cent of the total earth surface worldwide. Arid regions experience frequent droughts due to erratic rainfall patterns affected by climate variability (Schilling et al., 2021). As a result, food production systems, especially relating to livestock, being the mainstay of nomadic pastoralists, crumble. Vegetation for livestock diminishes during dry seasons, causing livestock deaths,

consequently, livelihood vulnerability (Sujakhu et al., 2019).

Demographic stressors also impact food security. According to the United Nations, population growth, maximal hunger, and severe malnutrition are still the critical inhibitors to viable development. It creates an entanglement and quagmire that traps people in a way that blocks their escape from it. A condition and scenario of hunger that results in malnutrition, weakens the productive capacity of individuals. This is because they become more prone to illnesses that impair their ability to hustle in improving their livelihoods. It is estimated that one out of nine people worldwide is under-nourished, i.e. 815 million have access to less than 1,800 kilo-calories per adult per day (UN, 2021). A large part of the world's population continues to suffer from hunger. Many of these people live in rural areas and yet contribute to feeding the world as farmers, pastoralists and fishermen (Fan et al., 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Samburu County, Kenya, among the Samburu nomadic pastoralist community. The study adapted a qualitative research approach, where an interview schedule was used to solicit responses from 30 elderly informants who were selected using purposive sampling. The older participants were those whose ages ranged from 60 to 79 years. These were the categories that had rich knowledge of their cultures and traditions, and were able to provide the requisite information. The responses were analysed using a thematic approach and presented narratively and by use of verbatim quotes. Utmost ethical considerations were adhered to in the process of the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All 30 informants participated in the study. The percentage of women interviewed aged between 60 and 69 years was 20 per cent, while the percentage of men was also 20 per cent. Women aged between 70 and 74 years were 60 per cent, and men were 66.75 per cent.

Signs of Vulnerability

The respondents disclosed that there are several signs and indicators of livelihood vulnerability among the people. One is physical appearance, whereas averred by Respondent M04 '... look haggard and weak'. Secondly, there is a sign that a person has had no meals for some time because of dry mouth and frequent yawning. Physical injuries are also a pointer to vulnerability in vulnerable individuals. Respondent M13 said, '... people who lack food, do manual work that exposes them to injuries, like being hired to cut branches for livestock fodder by climbing very tall and dangerous trees during drought season ...'. Moreover, when the cattle shed is empty (*aisiu boo*), it means there is lack of food resource. When children loiter for food (*aarripisho*), it means the particular family have no food. Sixty-five per cent of the respondents pointed out that some men arranged marriages for their daughters in exchange for cows. Fourteen respondents noted that a lack of identity as a result of illegitimate births makes children unwanted, stigmatised, and lack a family surname, making them and their mothers predisposed to maltreatment, scorn, and denied any privileges, rights, and inheritance. Displacement as a result of cattle rustling activities deprives people of their livelihoods.

Category of Vulnerable People in the Samburu Community

The respondents pointed out several categories of people in the Samburu community who were heavily impacted by the livelihood vulnerabilities. Respondent F10 simulated that orphaned children are highly vulnerable due to a lack of parental care. According to Respondent F05, expectant mothers are also viewed as vulnerable, as droughts them to livelihood vulnerability because of livestock deaths and when the remaining livestock are moved far and wide in search of pasture and water. Breastfeeding mothers are another category, especially during the dry season when the cows have to be grazed far away from the *manyattas*. Respondent F12 intimated that '... they do not have enough milk for the children because they do not get enough milk to drink. They are sometimes weak and sickly because the child takes everything'. Elderly persons are similarly cited as a vulnerable

group, especially when there is inadequate food in their respective households, making them prone to malnutrition, diseases, and starvation. Lack of sufficient and nutritious food. Respondents stated that when elderly parents die of starvation, they are said to have died of *nkoroit ng'iro*, and it is feared because that attracts a curse. Other categories of people that the respondents mentioned as predisposed to livelihood vulnerability include childless men and women, children whose parents are chronic alcoholics, persons living with disability, widows, the poor, children lacking identity and excluded lot, exploited individuals, and unmarried adult males.

Risk Factors behind Livelihood Vulnerability

According to the respondents, there are many factors that bring about vulnerability, impairing the ability and capacity of individuals to mitigate and manage situations of stress, shocks, and threats. Twelve respondents stated that old age predisposes elderly people to vulnerability due to a lack of sufficient and nutritious food; elderly people suffer malnutrition and hunger, especially so when their progeny have not been able to generate sufficient wealth to take care of their needs, leading to starvation and untimely and degrading death. Similarly, the respondents advanced sickness as a major risk factor for vulnerability as stated by Respondent M07, '...the condition of sickness keeps the sick people from going to take care of the cows because they are weak. When someone is sick for a long time, he becomes poor if he does not have sons to care for his livestock ... sometimes the sons are too young or are not responsible.' Eighteen respondents also averred that expectant and nursing mothers become vulnerable, especially during drought seasons when nutritious food is scarce, coupled with their inability to move around looking for food. Additionally, as mentioned by Respondent F06, 'childlessness is a sorry state among the Samburu, because children provide labour of taking care of the family livestock and take care of parents when they age' Barrenness therefore puts the childless family in a risky present and future. Correspondingly, according to Respondent M08, 'People who lack identity as a result of illegitimate

births and abominable acts (like murder), face discrimination, rejection and become vulnerable"

Aspects of Vulnerability

All (100 per cent) of the respondents concurred on the various aspects of livelihood vulnerability. F09 mentioned that "vulnerability manifests through hunger, ill-health, exclusions, and oppression". Chronic hunger due to a lack of food results from prolonged droughts, which lead to a lack of pasture and water for the livestock and food materials such as wild fruits from the forests. Respondent M10 lamented: 'Drought has finished our livestock. We do not have milk, and our children are hungry and weak. We do not have any other source of livelihood. It will take a long time before we can again rebuild our herds... we will continue to be hungry.' The traditional sources of food have also been abandoned to some degree, especially the consumption of wild fruits and vegetables like *lardo*. The traditional ways of food preservation, like *sirikan* (billtong), *mbareta* (outer parts of cow hide), and *loik* (dried bones), are no longer maintained, as people view them as primitive. Disease and poor health conditions are another aspect of vulnerability. Respondent F09 noted, 'During times of sickness, many people get affected because some do not go to health facilities, while some are far from us.' The death of a loved one is another indicator of vulnerability on the side of affected spouses, children, parents, and families. Respondent M02 pointed out, 'Causes of death include killings by raiders, sickness, and famine.' The respondents further pointed out other dimensions of livelihood vulnerability, including exclusion status, exploitation, marginalisation, and impoverishment.

Causes of Livelihood Vulnerability

The respondents elucidated four categories of factors which lead to livelihood vulnerability in Samburu County. These were man-made causes, natural phenomena crises, economic causes and

exclusion. Man-made causes include cattle rustling practice, as mentioned by 100 per cent of the respondents. Secondly, irresponsible squandering of family livestock by the family head; third, failure by the family to take care of the livestock, like herding them into lush grazing areas, and treatment against diseases. Respondent F02 indicated, "being irresponsible in taking care of own livestock results in poverty". The respondent explained that '*Keyiolo suom ltung; ani osham*-livestock can sense a person who loves them and therefore, respond by their increase'. Fourth, the level of family economic burden and commitments, such as the need for dowry payment, may take a toll on family assets. The second category is natural phenomena. During droughts, according to Respondent F03, '...some families lose all their livestock due to lack of water and vegetation..., and when it rains they have to be helped to start again ...'. 85 per cent of the respondents reported incidences of how flash floods kill several livestock, leaving families destitute. Economic causes are the third category averred by the respondents. Modern economy demands cash money for access to food, healthcare, education and other requirements. These requirements take a toll on livestock numbers as they are sold to meet these demands.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Most of the vulnerabilities elucidated in this study relate to food insecurity due to a reduced number of livestock in the community as a result of droughts and cattle rustling.

Recommendations: There is an urgent need for the government to intervene decisively in tackling livelihood vulnerability through the diversification of livelihood sources among nomadic pastoralists. Further research can be done on how indigenous communities can diversify their livelihoods (e.g., combining farming, artisanal crafts, and trade) to reduce vulnerability.

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