

## ‘Wildlife for Livestock’: COVID-19, Tourism and Community Conservancies in Northern Kenya

### Abstract

The existence of pastoralism as it has been organised for hundreds of years is dependent on constant adaptation to ever-changing situations. Such adaptation includes crop agriculture, wage labour, and community conservancies. In northern Kenya, conservancies are epicentres of wildlife, nature tourism, and commercial ventures. This study incorporates methods and perspectives from history, anthropology, and development studies. The study shows that the shift to community conservancies has exposed pastoral communities to a fluctuating international economic system that has collapsed due to COVID-19 pandemic. The instability caused by the pandemic exposed the vulnerability of community conservancy as a livelihood system.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Tourism, Community Conservancy, Kenya, Pastoralism.

### Introduction

Pastoral communities in northern Kenya, as is the case with livestock keepers worldwide, are under threat from climate change, demographic pressure, urbanisation, unfavourable public policies, and global pandemics including COVID-19. The prevailing pressure has led to various adaptation strategies at the individual and community levels. In Kenya, some of the adaptations include improved livestock production methods, species diversification, crop agriculture, wage labour, and in recent times the establishment of community conservancies. A conservancy is a geographical space that is protected for the conservation of nature encompassing but not limited to wildlife, plant and cultural heritage. Conservancies depend on domestic and foreign tourists to partake in the wildlife, nature, and hospitality facilities. The outbreak of COVID-19 in late 2019 and the subsequent closure of borders in an effort to stem its spread led to a total collapse of leisure tourism. The study shows that the shift to community conservancies and the abandonment of the traditional pastoral production system has exposed the communities to the fluctuating international economic system, which has been totally incapacitated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Community Conservancies and Pastoralism

In the last twenty years or so, community conservancies in Kenya have seen exponential growth to offer alternative livelihoods to members as well as provide wildlife corridors and tourism opportunities. According to the Northern Rangeland Trust (NRT), a member organisation, there are 39 community conservancies that occupy around 42,000 square kilometers in northern and coastal Kenya.<sup>2</sup> The conservancies are established on communal spaces where livestock and wildlife roam freely side-by-side.<sup>3</sup> The logic behind community conservancies is that such commons can be used for wildlife and nature conservation, which in return can attract tourist dollars and other commercial ventures including luxury lodges and hotels. The proceeds of this enterprise benefit the community through provision of social services as well as direct employment for members. However, the socio-economic benefits of conservancies is dependent on individual management and objectives of the organisations. As a result therefore, some of the conservancies have in their period of existence undertaken various welfare improvement undertakings that have had positive outcomes for members.

As of October 2021, there were 25 registered community conservancies within the northern Kenya Counties of Isiolo, Laikipia and Samburu. The conservancies depend on domestic and foreign tourists to maintain wildlife, nature and hospitality facilities. Apart from the conservation tourism, conservancies with the tutorage of NRT have also taken over security, livestock marketing and conflict resolution.<sup>4</sup> The NRT with financial and material support from multilateral and bilateral donors and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), undertake the non-conservation activities to member conservancies in the effort of ‘stabilising’ security in an otherwise marginalised zone.<sup>5</sup> The invasive role of the NRT, individuals and organisations in the conservation business has in-effect relegated the actual owners of the resources, in this case pastoralists, to the periphery. The centrality and power that the conservation fraternity has on resource allocation

2 The Northern Rangeland Trust, *Bi-Annual Report 2021*, January to June 2021, Isiolo, Kenya: NRT, 2021.

3 Laurence G. Frank, Rosie Woodroffe and Mordecai O. Ogada, ‘People and Predators in Laikipia District, Kenya,’ in *People and Wildlife, Conflict or Co-existence?*, Rosie Woodroffe, Simon Thirgood and Alan Rabinowitz (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 286–304.

4 Gitau Mbaria, ‘The Laikipia Crisis and the Disenfranchisement of Kenyans in the North,’ *The Elephant – Speaking Truth to Power*, <https://www.theelephant.info/features/2017/05/18/the-laikipia-crisis-and-the-disenfranchisement-of-kenyans-in-the-north/> (accessed 5 October 2021).

5 USAID, *Financial Audit of USAID Resources Managed by Northern Rangelands Trust in Kenya under Multiple Awards*, January 1 to December 31, 2020, Report No. 4-615-21-095-R, 2021.

and accessibility has resulted in loss of sovereignty on the resources. In the long-run the model leads to impractical conservation reproduction and has the possibility of collapse, as has been experienced with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The establishment of the community conservancies model is meant to supplement or in some cases replace traditional pastoralism. The thinking is around diversification of the economic system from predominant livestock production to mixed livelihoods. In many of the conservancies, livestock are kept within the communal spaces but with regulations as far as access to pasture is concerned. To begin with, some form of ecological controls are instituted with managed exploitation being enforced within the commons. In other words, a control mechanism is instituted whereby some areas are set aside for wildlife consumption, while access for livestock is regulated. This consequently has resulted into situations whereby some members within the conservancies are forced to move their livestock into communal spaces belonging to other groups, or as has been observed in the recent past, move their livestock into spaces such as Laikipia and Isiolo, thus increasing conflict.<sup>6</sup>

It is valid to argue that community conservancies have influenced traditional pastoralism in many ways: both positive and negative. The positive benefits, including creation of jobs, provision of social services such as health and wildlife conservation, are offset by the threat the model poses to traditional pastoralism. The controlled access to pasture as employed particularly during periods of stress such as droughts, in effect forces herders to venture beyond conservancy boundaries. This is a threat to pastoralism as it affects the balance in range management between livestock and wildlife which has historically evolved into a sustainable equilibrium. The overemphasis on wildlife and tourism products although halted by COVID-19 disruptions had the possibility of leading to a loss of the livestock production knowledge that has been practiced for generations.

## **Methodology**

In view of the interest in questions around the COVID-19 pandemic and the viability of the tourism-based conservancy model, a qualitative methodology was developed based on economic publications, government reports, and field observation and interviews in Archers Post and Leratain Samburu County. Reports by the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics, the National Treasury were heavily relied on. Ten oral interviews were undertaken in December, and March 2021 at Archers Post and Lerata, with individuals affected by the collapse of travel tourism within the Kalama Conservancy, two tour operators,

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6 Kennedy Gitu Wagura, *Samburu Demographic Dynamics 1984–2018*, PhD Thesis, Université de Pau et des Pays de l'Adour, 2019.

and a hotel manager provided insights on the devastating effect that the complete lock-down of Nairobi and Mombasa at the onset of the pandemic had on their businesses. Several telephone conversations were held in 2020 and 2021 by the author with people at the Archers Post and Lerata mainly on the general situation on the ground, the restriction on movement and the effect on the economy within the region. The field data collection was undertaken by the author.

A review of government documents, media reports, and other secondary data relevant to this study was analysed through content and discourse analyses. This approach sought to critically understand how COVID-19 and the conservancy model of conservation were impacted by the pandemic. The approach was undertaken with the understanding that most conservancies are dependent on travel tourism, which was impossible post-March 2020 when the pandemic was declared a national concern, resulting in lockdowns in Nairobi and Mombasa at the start and then closure of international borders and the subsequent national lockdown as the disease increased its grip on the country, region and the world.

### **COVID-19 and Tourism Kenya**

The global outbreak of COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on the Kenyan tourism industry. Kenya's economic growth pre-COVID was at 6.3% in 2018 and 5.4% in 2019. It was projected to grow by about 6.2% in 2020/2021 in the absence of COVID-19.<sup>7</sup> The first confirmed case of the pandemic in the country was on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2020. After about two weeks from the first confirmed case, there were over 100,000 cases in the country.<sup>8</sup> The outbreak was followed by strict containment measures meant to curb the spread of the virus. The measures taken included movement restrictions into and out of the country, restrictions on inter-county movement, imposition of curfew hours, suspension of in-person learning in all learning institutions, and work-from-home directives.

The initial measures were followed by further directives on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020 which introduced cessation of movement by road, rail, and air within the Nairobi Metropolitan area and the worst-hit counties of Mombasa, Kilifi, and Kwale.<sup>9</sup> As a result of the measures, all sectors of the economy including

7 Eldah Onsomu, Boaz Munga and Violet Nyabaro, 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Industries without Smokestacks in Kenya: the Case of Horticulture, ICT, and Tourism Sector,' *African Growth Initiative at Brookings and KIPPRA*, Working Paper No. 35, 2021.

8 Joshua Laichena, Evelyn Kihui, Daniel Omany, Rogers Musamali, Benson Kiriga, Victor Nechifor and Emanuele Ferrari, *Short-term Effects of COVID-19 and Containment Measures on Kenya's Economy*, KIPPRA Policy Brief No. 1, 2021.

9 Government of Kenya, *The National Treasury and Planning, Budget Policy Statement*, Nairobi: National Treasury and Planning, 2021.

the supply chains, hospitality, transport, and educational sectors were severely affected. The dire economic situation is evident in economy growth of – 0.1% in 2020 relative to a growth of 5.4% in 2019.<sup>10</sup> The effects of COVID-19 on tourism and by extension the Kenyan economy cannot be over-emphasised: the sector contributes on average 10% of the country's GDP.<sup>11</sup> The travel restrictions imposed within Kenya and other countries all over the world have had devastating effects on the sector, and other related tourism value chains such as transport. The tourism products that conservancies offer target both local and foreign travellers. The closure of international travel denied the sector its major source market. The containment measures instituted against Nairobi and Mombasa which are the main economic centres in the country also meant that domestic tourists were also affected.

Kenya's tourism industry is dependent on international and domestic travellers. The numbers of international visitors had prior to COVID-19 been on an upward growth path after the aftershocks of the 2008 post-election violence and terrorist attacks associated with the *al Shabab* attacks.<sup>12</sup> It is evident from international tourist arrivals that the industry was on an upward trajectory right before the pandemic struck: with more than 2 million international tourist arrivals to Kenya.<sup>13</sup> These figures dropped significantly by more than 70% during the period between January and December 2020, due to grounded flights and travel aversion witnessed all over the world.<sup>14</sup> From these grim figures, it is valid to argue that the hospitality industry all over the country was devastated. The crash in the tourism-based economy affected conservancies and other hospitality industries leading to massive job losses, loss of incomes, and other associated losses.

Conservancies have many income generation activities which sustain the concept, make money for members and sustain running expenses. The most popular of the undertakings is the running of lodges. The lodges, many of which are high-end, depend mostly on foreign travellers. The lodges, whose prices vary depending on the establishment, are out of reach for many budget travellers, read Kenyans. To illustrate their exclusive nature, the Ol Lentille lodge in Ol Lentille Conservancy in Isiolo County charges between USD 680

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10 International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: Managing Divergent Recoveries*, Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, 2021.

11 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, *Leading Economic Indicators, February*, Nairobi: Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2021.

12 David Anderson, 'Kenya's War in Somalia,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Kenyan Politics*, Nic Cheeseman, Karuti Kanyinga and Gabrielle Lynch (eds), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 576–89.

13 Government of Kenya, *The National Treasury...*

14 Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, *Leading Economic...*

and USD 1,250 per night depending on the season.<sup>15</sup> At the other end, Saruni Samburu lodge in Kalama Conservancy charges between USD 500, USD 700, and USD 860 per person per night during the low, middle, and high seasons respectively.<sup>16</sup>

The strict measures put in place to control the spread of COVID-19 also had direct effects on livestock trade and marketing. As measures were instituted, all public events including livestock markets were affected. This had a direct effect on the economic wellbeing of pastoralists as herders could not convert their livestock into cash in order to sustain other social-economic activities including the provision of food, health, and other primary necessities. The closure of the markets particularly hit the community hard as other job opportunities in tourism and logistics collapsed. The controls placed on markets and its associated lack of income in effect made an already vulnerable population more desperate and economically ruined.

### **Conservancies and COVID-19: the Implications**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had serious implications for the concept of conservancies and the business model that supports them. The pandemic has transformed and changed globalisation and any business that depends on international movement. The collapse of tourism in 2020 and into 2021 has resulted in the need to rethink the idea of conservancies, particularly the over-reliance on travel tourism. Tourism contributes 80–90% of conservancy management costs particularly staff salaries and community programmes.<sup>17</sup> As a result of the drastic changes, programmes dependent on income generated from tourism and hospitality projects have led to the collapse of dependent activities and other undertakings.

Conservancy tourism has been on an upward trajectory in the last few years. During 2017/2018, tourism growth and associated incomes in conservancies grew by 18% and the momentum was expected to continue into 2020 by more than 20%.<sup>18</sup> The growth trajectory would not only have translated into jobs directly and indirectly to thousands of pastoralists in the north, but also increased support for social programmes such as health providers to members. This momentum of growth can be attributed to a rise in marketing campaigns by conservancies and also by the conservation industry under the tutorage

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15 Ol Lentille, *2021 Rates*, 2021, <https://www.ol-lentille.com/rates/> (accessed 5 October 2021).

16 Saruni Samburu 2021 Brochure indicative of rates for 2021 in lodges located within conservancies in Samburu and Maasai Mara (Narok County).

17 Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association, 'Amidst COVID-19 Situation, Community Conservation Must Continue,' 6 April 2020, <https://kwcakenya.com/amidst-covid-19-situation-community-conservation-must-continue>, (accessed 5 October 2021).

18 Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association, 'Amidst COVID-19...'

of the NRT and other nature and conservation organisations. It is also valid to argue that conservancies have invested in products offered, including lodges and hotels, and also activities undertaken within the conservancies, as evidenced by the Reteti Elephant Sanctuary.<sup>19</sup>

Individually, conservancies that have initiated income generation projects that are dependent on tourism have been affected adversely. The collapse of the industry has in essence left conservation projects, conservancies and associated dependents including tour guides, game scouts, and drivers among others jobless. The beneficiaries of direct jobs, some of whom left other economic activities, are particularly more destabilised. The dire economic situation is exacerbated by the fact that the northern tourism circuit is not popular with low budget local travellers who prefer and have been sustaining Mombasa and other beach destinations on the coast due to their relatively cheap prices.<sup>20</sup> The COVID-19 disruptions have stripped funding for resources necessary for land management, for compensating private and community landowners who have forfeited use of their land to coexist with wildlife.

The provision of health services to communities within the conservancy is one of the direct social services that benefit from tourism. The collapse of tourism has affected the provision of the same in the conservancies. Health provision in the north by County Governments and historically by the national government is inadequate. The failure by the two levels of government has in effect led to non-governmental organisations and conservancies to fill the role of provision of services. In the case of conservancies, some have taken up the provision of health as a benefit from the income accrued from tourism activities.<sup>21</sup> The provision of health services although important has, like other services dependent on tourism income, been affected by lack of income attributable to the COVID -19 pandemic.

### **Conservancies and Pastoralism: the Implications**

Community conservancies in northern Kenya have resulted in a “mixed-bag” of results. The effect that they have had on pastoralism is particularly of paramount concern. To begin with, pastoralism has for millennia been the main economic activity for communities in the northern region, with cultural and

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19 Reteti Wildlife Sanctuary within Namunyak Community Conservancy in Samburu County is an elephant rescue and release center for orphaned elephants while creating benefits for local people. It has the potential of attracting visitors with an interest of elephant conservation among other nature related products: <https://www.retetielephants.org/who-we-are/> (accessed 5 October 2021).

20 Government of Kenya, *Domestic Tourism Recovery Strategies for Kenya*, Nairobi: Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife, 2021.

21 The Northern Rangeland Trust, *Bi-Annual Report...*

social activities built around livestock activities and production. Community conservancies whose origin can be traced to the conservation model that sought to make a profit out of wildlife that is outside protected areas started-off with private ranchers converting their properties into conservation areas. Thus, a model that advocated a mixed livestock and wildlife coexistence was born, but seem to favour private ranchers as compared to pastoralists whose land access and ownership are communal.

The practicality of the community conservancy's model as compared to private conservancies is complicated as there are issues that make its applicability difficult. To begin with, in a community conservancy, for members who may still keep livestock it becomes impossible to control the number of livestock that a household can keep. This is unlike in private conservancies where the owner/s can regulate both the number of livestock and wildlife in their properties. For the community commons, regulation of a number of livestock may lead to conflict with community members, as has been historically witnessed.<sup>22</sup> The model which actively advocates for setting aside some of the areas in the landscape for wildlife has in-effect reduced grazing grounds for livestock. This has led to two scenarios: the first one is that members of the conservancy are forced to move their herds outside the conservancy boundaries into either neighbouring group ranches or other commons within the community's boundaries, increasing conflict. The second scenario is where they move their herds into contested regions either occupied by other communities or into zones that are contested.<sup>23</sup> The second scenario has been played out by Samburu herders, who move their livestock into Laikipia and Isiolo Counties, and in the process increase conflict within the two counties.<sup>24</sup>

Pastoralism is built around mobility: that ecological variations are mitigated through movement through the landscape particularly from locations of scarcity to areas of abundance in pasture, water, minerals and away from diseases. Thus, with pastoralism as has been practiced in northern Kenya, access to pasture and other livestock resources is paramount. The community conservancy model is however destabilising this traditional balance by controlling access. It is observed that non-members of a conservancy are denied access to conservancies particularly during periods of stress. The control of access is meant to reduce competition for resources between livestock and wildlife, through the use of community wildlife scouts/rangers who are employed by conservancies. This in itself is a serious threat to pastoralism because it curtails access, which in the long-run can lead to collapse of pastoralism as has been practiced for millennia.

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22 Wagura, *Samburu Demographic...*, p. 136.

23 Wagura, *Samburu Demographic...*, p. 323.

24 John Maina and Mordecai Ogada, *The Big Conservation Lie*, Seattle, WA: Lens & Pens Publishing, 2016.

The control of access to pasture by conservancies to its members as opposed to free access by the entire community has the potential of silently killing pastoralism. As has been mentioned, the Samburu, Maasai, and Borana who are the main communities in the area of study have built adaptations that ensured pastoralism is the most viable economic activity. The most prominent of the adaptations is mobility and access to pastures, among other important resources. The conservancy model that emphasises the coexistence of wildlife and livestock, has, on the other hand, emphasised membership into the community conservancies, which in essence locks out non-members to spaces that were otherwise open commons to all members of the community. It is important to note that the argument here is not that access was 'free for all, no, rather that every Samburu, Maasai or Boran could utilise resources within their 'homeland.' The only requirement was negotiated user access with the family or clan. This important paradigm is what has sustained pastoral production particularly during periods of scarcity.

Controlled access advocated by conservancies can and will only be accepted if the accrue or the perceived benefits exceed grazing their pasture. The moment the benefits from conservancies are lower than livestock or unfettered communal access, then the model will be a source of conflict between members. With the failure by conservancies to satisfy promises or expectations, then it is likely that some members will weigh the cost-benefit analysis and the idea of conservancies may be under serious threat. The point at which members may start questioning the viability of the concept may be due to unavoidable circumstances such the COVID- 19 pandemic, which has drastically reduced incomes to the conservancies. The second scenario would be through failure by management committees to effectively run the conservancies. Conflicts over revenue sharing, project identification and decision-making have the potential for conflict. The possibility of disagreements in the running of the conservancies has been evidenced in the running of group ranches particularly in Kajiado and Narok where conflicts have been witnessed in some cases leading to the total dissolution of the organisations.<sup>25</sup>

Community conservancies have introduced 'new' diversifications away from the traditional pastoral production, which has been proven by the COVID-19 pandemic, may not be sustainable long-term. Community conservancies and the hospitality business has proven to be dependent on international travel, which is dependent on many factors including open borders. This diversification for pastoralists offered benefits but they have been

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25 Ben R. Koissaba, *A Critical Analysis of Factors that Contribute to Maasai Land Appropriation: The Case of Maasai Land Appropriation in Kajiado and Narok Counties in Kenya*, unpublished PhD Thesis, Clemson University, 2016, pp. 105, 157.

disrupted in a major way due to the pandemic. Apart from the pandemic, the tourism and travel business is also usually prone to insecurity and conflicts. Kenya was just recovering from the effects of insecurity brought about by *al Shabab* terrorist attacks on hospitality and education institutions. The attacks meant travel advisories almost completely shut down the tourism sector in the country. Thus the pandemic and previous travel advisories are evidence of the fragility of this form of pastoral diversification.

The instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to tourism and related livelihoods may in the long-term lead to social and political instability in northern Kenya. The lost job opportunities, most of which are performed by youth, could lead to insecurity through organised crime such as banditry, poaching, and cattle raiding which can lead to instability within the region. Previous experiences have shown that idle youth and unemployment have led to a rise in particular in cattle raiding, which in the region ignites cycles of violence between the various ethnicities in the region. The proximity of the region to the South Central Somalia region makes the youth susceptible to being recruited to the *al Shabab* militia, which preys on young unemployed people. Although this is speculative, this possibility is plausible considering that youth in the region have limited job opportunities. Thus, when the available limited opportunities collapse, then the right environment for recruitment is created with the accompanying instabilities.

## Conclusions

Pastoralism is dynamic: its survival this far is due to changes and adaptations that have been undertaken over time. The community conservancy model is one of the many adaptations that are currently being promoted, to mitigate challenges. This approach, as proven by COVID-19, has its shortcomings, challenging reliability and sustainability. The dependence of the model on the travel industry and open borders makes it unpredictable and unsustainable over the long term. The lockdowns instituted as containment measures all over the world reduced spending on cross-country and border spending for leisure. As a consequence, industries dependent on leisure travel experienced a major slump. The model used in resource management has the potential of being the source of resource conflict within pastoralist communities. The controlled access to pasture leaves some zones inaccessible to livestock during times of stress, which can lead to socio-political instability. The model, although providing an alternative livelihood, may over time lead to change or even death of pastoralism as we know it today through the gradual loss of the cultural know-how on livestock production practices.