



## USAID Nawiri Learning Brief: Livelihoods Systems in Isiolo and Marsabit

### Background

This brief outlines key findings of the Nawiri desk study on the livelihood systems of populations in Marsabit and Isiolo Counties. The desk study documents, examines and investigates the ways in which these systems operate as part of the basic causes of malnutrition, as illustrated in the new conceptual framework on acute malnutrition in Africa's drylands (Young, 2020). The objective of the desk study was to review existing knowledge on the role livelihood systems play in the underlying causes of malnutrition in the region and to highlight evidence gaps that could benefit from primary data collection.

### Summary Findings and Lessons Learned

- **Dryland ecosystems are characterized by dynamic and non-equilibrium conditions** due to unpredictable rainfall and spatial and temporal variations in natural resource distribution. While scholars once blamed pastoral production systems for perceived environmental destruction and loss of life in these areas, over the past three decades it has come to be understood that pastoral livelihood systems have evolved as a direct, appropriate, and largely benign response to these dynamic and non-equilibrium conditions (Ellis and Swift 1988; Scoones 1995).
- **Pastoralist livelihood systems include the flexibility to manage the unpredictable rainfall and harsh environment of the drylands when policies and institutions allow these systems to function properly.** Pastoralists employ short-term coping systems on a seasonal basis and in response to single-year droughts, as well as longer term adaptations to manage systemic change. Risk-spreading strategies have allowed human populations to "demonstrate long-term persistence in a difficult environment" (Ellis and Swift 1988, 457).

The primary means of managing risks entails splitting human and livestock populations into increasingly smaller and more mobile components which are better able to take advantage of the spatial and temporal distribution of water and pasture. These effective and appropriate coping systems are only possible when mobility is allowed, conflict is managed, and services and inputs (like veterinary support) are available and accessible.

■ **Some coping strategies and adaptations may be unsustainable and/or coercive.**

Individuals, household and communities are most likely to turn to these maladaptive options when they have few or no other alternatives (Young 2009). Examples include the heavy exploitation of natural resources like firewood harvesting and charcoal production, cattle raiding, or joining an armed group. Inter-household examples include early marriage of girls to reduce economic pressure upon a family, to increase social capital, or in an attempt to procure protection for the individual.

■ **While resources are important, it is the broad range of policies and institutions that have the greatest impact on livelihood systems and their success.**

These may function at local, regional or national levels (or at multiple or overlapping levels) and include both formal systems and informal norms. Examples include herd management practices, natural resource governance mechanisms, social safety nets, market systems and processes (including trade networks, commercialization, and commoditization), dynamics of wealth and inequality, gender and generational norms, conflict dynamics and conflict resolution mechanisms, political devolution to the counties, and modalities and assumptions driving external assistance and development policies. The dynamic and varied nature of these policies, institutions and systems means that different sub-groups experience shocks very differently and have different recovery trajectories (Mcpeak and Little 2017). For example, households with greater herd mobility were found to experience less animal mortality during droughts than those who did not (Little et al. 2008). The heterogeneity of experiences and efficacy of local institutions, combined with extreme spatial variations in rainfall, mean that the targeting of interventions in response to shocks must also be specific and carefully tailored.

■ **Impacts of multi-year droughts have increased due to greater drought severity and inadequate preparedness, mitigation and response mechanisms.** Existing evidence points to increased rainfall, temperature and seasonal variability in the Kenyan ASALs due to climate change, with associated livelihood impacts (Fratkin, Roth, and Nathan 2004; J. O. Ouma et al. 2018; Opiyo et al. 2015a; Boru and Koske 2014). Pastoral livelihood systems are well-suited to cope with high rainfall variability between seasons and years, including single-year droughts. Multi-year droughts, however, place much greater strain on these systems and are more likely to lead to substantial livestock loss, increased human mortality and acute malnutrition (Ellis and Swift 1988). Impacts of these climate shocks vary depending on several systemic and local factors including county-level disaster planning, wealth differentials, local support mechanisms, and community and household herd composition and resource access (Mcpeak and Little 2017).

■ **Longer term adaptations take place in response to both systemic shocks and emerging opportunities.** Such adaptations include diversifications in herd composition (often from large to small ruminants and between cattle and camels) (Roth 1996; Opiyo et al. 2015b), and income activities (such as increased market engagement) (Fratkin and Smith 1995; Adongo, Shell-Duncan, and Tuitoek 2013; Smith 1997; Watete et al. 2016), intensification of some strategies (e.g., the sale of natural resources or milk), migration of select individuals or entire households (often to urban areas) (Fratkin, Roth, and Nathan 2004; R. Ouma, Mude, and Steeg 2011; Stites 2020), and greater reliance on non-animal food sources (including purchased cereals, wild foods and relief food).

## Applying the Findings and Lessons Learned

The purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate what is already known and what requires additional primary investigation in order to design effective programs and policies. This review highlighted the following key questions as gaps in the evidence and knowledge base.

- As pastoralists adapt livelihoods in response to systemic shocks and long-term changes, what are the changes within **intra-household livelihoods**, including gendered and generational divisions of labor, control over resources (such as milk), and income? What are the implications of these shifts for acute malnutrition?
- As a growing number of **pastoralists settle** in and around towns, either out of desperation or opportunity, what are the nutritional impacts of these livelihood shifts? How does nutritional status change based on duration of life in town? Are there differences in livelihood and nutritional outcomes between those who settle in established towns and those who settle in newly emerging settlements in pastoral rangelands?
- How does **pastoral mobility** intersect with nutritional outcomes and how has this changed over time? How has the relation of different groups—men, women, boys and girls—to pastoral mobility changed and what are the potential implications of this for nutritional outcomes by wealth and status?
- As livelihood systems in the Kenyan ASALs have adapted over time, what has been the impact on **informal social safety net systems** that households typically rely on for risk mitigation and recovery? What, for instance, have the impacts of loss of pastoral livelihoods for some households, or greater market integration for others, been on women's networks of exchange and reciprocity that are often activated following idiosyncratic shocks? How have these shifts affected horizontal systems of exchange among male age-mates in coping with major life events? What are the potential implications of changing social networks for management of acute malnutrition?

The lessons learned included below stem from the findings and from the evidence and knowledge gaps listed above.

Key Lessons Learned	Adaptation or implication	Link to the DIP or TOC
1. Pastoral production systems have evolved as appropriate and largely benign responses to the dynamic and non-equilibrium conditions of the ASALs.	1. Ensure all stakeholders and actors at multiple levels have a firm understanding of pastoral production systems, the ways in which they work, and their appropriateness for the non-equilibrium conditions of the drylands.	P3 & P4
2. Pastoral livelihood systems can adapt to both harsh conditions and emerging opportunities when policies and institutions are in place to allow these adaptations to occur.	2. Prioritize systems that promote pastoral mobility, encourage local conflict resolution strategies, and provide through sustainable means the necessary services and inputs such as veterinary support.	P4 and SP 3.1

<p>3. While exceptionally well adapted to climate and rainfall variability, pastoral production systems cope less well with multi-year droughts and rising temperatures.</p>	<p>3. Support county-level disaster planning and adaptive management, including mobility and herd splitting, to enable pastoral groups to cope.</p>	<p>SP 3.1</p>
<p>4. Evidence and knowledge gaps exist in key areas regarding the link between livelihoods and acute malnutrition in Isiolo and Marsabit Counties.</p>	<p>4. Prioritize primary data collection to fill these evidence and knowledge gaps and ensure that the answers to these questions effectively and appropriately influence programming.</p>	<p>Evidence Gap</p>



[See the full CRS Nawiri Livelihoods Desk Study Report for all sources cited.](#)

This summary is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of Catholic Relief Services, recipient of cooperative agreement no. [72DFFPI9CA00002] and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States

