

Greening Up Against Drought in Turkana

By UNCCD

Turkana in northern Kenya is one of the driest regions of the East African nation. This 77,000 square kilometre county receives an average of just 200mm of rain annually, compared to a national average of 680mm. And with three consecutive rain seasons failing since 2020, many residents are now faced with food scarcity, one of the painful effects of an ongoing drought.

According to Peter Eripete, Turkana County's Head of Public Service, the effects of drought are hardest felt by the residents who are mainly pastoralists. Their reliance on livestock means that when their livestock die, their income levels fall drastically, affecting entire families' food security.

In Kangirenga Village in Katilu, an administrative Ward in southern Turkana, we found Lokutan Amaler preparing her only meal for the day - boiled maize. Food has been hard to come by for Lokutan and her family. "I had nothing to eat. All my food storage containers are empty. If I had not received this maize from a well wisher, I would not have had anything to eat today" Lokutan explained as she stirred the boiling maize in a cooking pot over a three-stone fire.

Traditionally, the Turkana people have always been dependent on their livestock for sustenance. Whenever they need to buy foodstuffs or household supplies, they sell a goat or cow at the market and with the money received, make the necessary purchases. But with the shortage of rains leading to a lack of pasture, many cows, goats and even camels have died, leading to a loss of income for many across this vast county. To get out of the recurring cycle of lack of food whenever drought visits, a few people have now diversified their sources of sustenance.

Lokutan has planted green grams a short walk from her home. Her garden is part of a 10-acre agriculture project initiated by Panafricaire. Eunice Eseason, who coordinates the farming project for Panafricaire says "Convincing the residents to take up farming was an uphill task. Though a few saw the sense it made, it took us very long to convince many that farming was something they could do profitably because it went against their culture".

But with time, those who enrolled in the project including Lokutan have seen the benefits after finding an alternative source of food at every harvest, and income when the excess is sold in the local market.

While the work done by organisations like PanAfricaire to mitigate the effects of drought are commendable, food security still remains a concern in Turkana. Greater investments are needed to have more land under cultivation with improved farming practices that will increase productivity from the land. This will allow greater year-round harvests for Lokutan and other farmers, ensuring that they are always cushioned from the harmful effects of the drought.