



# Voices of The Turkana People



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*The booklet is a collection of local narratives, presenting voices of Turkana pastoralists living in the south, in Kangakipur, Loperot and Napusumoru. The views expressed are those conveyed by local people and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the research team, their employers, institutions or sponsors.*



## Chapter 1: Turkana Pastoralists

*“The people of Turkana speak the *ɲaTurkana* language”*

Turkana pastoralists are Nilotic people located in northwest Kenya, bordering Uganda, South Sudan and Ethiopia. They live in a semi-arid region where their neighbouring pastoralist communities are the Pokot, Samburu and Rendille. Turkana pastoralists have simple dome-shaped houses with wooden walls and grass thatches. They build animal sheds for livestock to keep them safe and secure.

Traditionally, Turkana men and women wear wraps made of rectangular woven materials and animal skin. Men wear wraps, with one end connected to the other end over the right shoulder. They like to carry wrist knives made of steel and goat hide and *ekicholong*, a simple stool used for sitting. Turkana men also like walking with long sticks for balance when carrying things and for prodding livestock when herding.

Turkana women tend to wear two pieces of cloth: one wrapped around their waist and other covering the top. They love to wear thick necklaces made from colourful beads. They have a unique hairstyle: the whole head is shaved leaving only a small patch of loose hair in the middle to which beads are attached.

Livestock keeping remains a common livelihood activity amongst the Turkanas, although crop cultivation is done along major rivers (e.g. Turkwell and Kerio). They keep goats, sheep, camels, cattle and donkeys and rely on these animals for food (meat, milk and blood) and for payment of

bride price (dowry) during marriages. Traditionally, milk, meat and blood form a big part of their diet; they enjoy meat roasted on open fire and goat is the most commonly eaten meat. Vegetables, wild fruit, cereals and legumes are also a part of their diet.

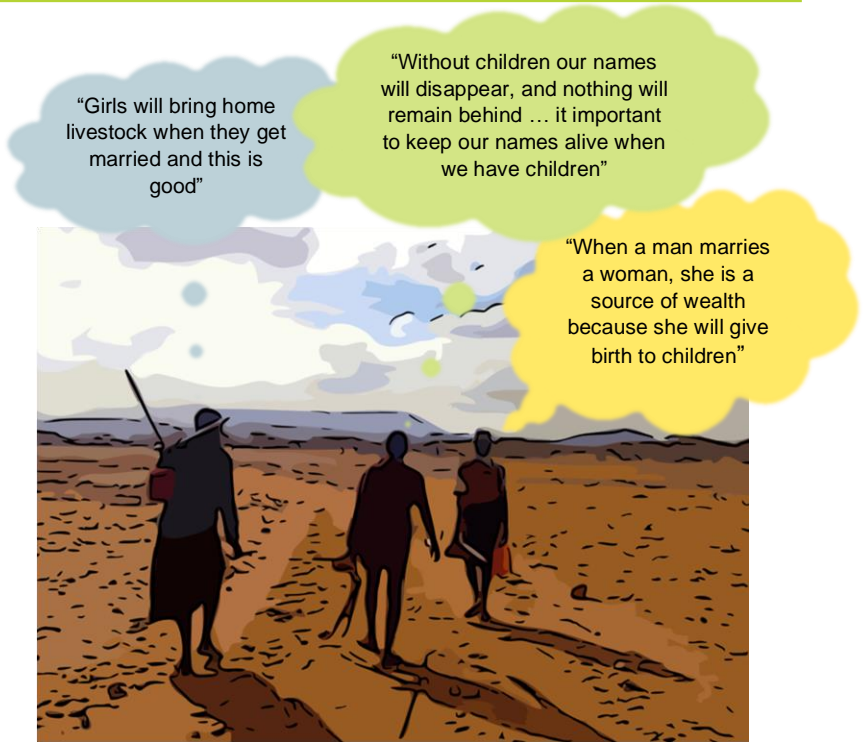


## Chapter 2: The value of marriage

*“Marriage is a celebration! We get married to have a partner, a friend, a companion”, “We get married to have children”*

Turkana pastoralists consider marriage as culturally important and prestigious. A married person can establish a family and a home, set up a bloodline/clan, have children and enjoy respect and recognition from society. Some Turkanas believe that getting married is God’s plan and that it can change one’s personality. Others believe that marriage gives a woman a sense of belonging to her husband’s clan, and wearing a ring after marriage is prestigious.

Turkanas say that it is their desire to have many children. It is good to get married officially to have children. This is because if a man is not married to a woman officially and he still fathers children, the children belong to the woman’s family and not to his. In this situation, when the daughters come of age and get married, the man is not recognised as the father and cannot have a claim over his daughter’s dowry; all the animals are given to mother’s family.



***What are the benefits of marriage, and how are these different for men and women?***

Many Turkana pastoralists practise polygamous marriages because it has benefits for them. They say it helps them to extend their families, which is a huge part of their culture as their forefathers had many wives. In polygamy, multiple wives can give birth to more children who will help in many ways: some children will look after livestock while others will attend to other household chores. Typically, the daughters help with the household chores, while the sons help with caring for livestock.



Having multiple wives also means that the wives can share duties and responsibilities: some will look after the children while others will look after livestock and still others burn charcoal. These collective efforts are important for family welfare. The women also keep each other company when their husband is away.

“Many wives in the home can help each other; if one lacks school fees for her child, she can be helped to by sale of livestock from the other wives ...”

“When one woman is ill or has gone on a journey, others can take care of all the children and livestock and other things”

“With many wives, there will be more celebrations in the home during ceremonies such as marriage and births ...”



***Do you think it is better to be part of a polygamous or monogamous family? Why?***

Wedding ceremonies are an opportunity for celebration and for extended families to unite. Everyone is involved in the preparations: some women cook while others take care of the visitors and other things. Women are happy when their daughters get married, and they also receive livestock as a

gift. Even when the daughters of their co-wives get married, they receive a share of the livestock as a gift.

However, polygamous marriages are costly for Turkana men because marrying many wives means paying dowry for each bride, which requires having more livestock. Therefore, this way of living is becoming difficult due to declining livestock numbers in Turkana.

"In the old days, our parents and grandparents paid hundreds of goats and sheep all at once. Nowadays, many men cannot pay dowry in one instalment; it can take several years ..."

"...You are required to pay goats, sheep, cattle and camels for each wife, and it can be difficult if you do not have enough livestock"



***What difficulties do Turkana men face when they are hoping to get married, and what can be done to solve these issues?***

The elders say that in the old days, food was plentiful and feeding many wives and their children was not a problem, but nowadays it is difficult for some men to cater for all the needs of wives and children including food, clothing, medicine and education.

Another challenge is that polygamy can bring conflicts, especially if the husband favours a specific wife and does not pay as much attention to others.

Despite its difficulties, polygamy continues. According to Turkana culture, having more wives is a sign of wealth and prestige for a man. Some polygamous men have a lot of livestock; they are rich and wealthy, and women are attracted to them because they know that their husbands can take care of them and their children and, in general, provide security. Younger wives are usually preferred as second or third wives because they are more active, can care for older husbands and co-wives as well as help with the caring for livestock. If a polygamous Turkana man is a good head of household, and there is a spirit of cooperation among co-wives, the family can prosper.

### **Key points for reflection / discussion**

- 1. Why is marriage so important for the Turkana community? What are the key benefits of marriage?*
- 2. What important roles do women serve in the family and community?*
- 3. What are the major differences between monogamous and polygamous marriages?*
- 4. Is marriage the only source of respect and prestige? Are polygamous families more prestigious than monogamous families? Why?*
- 5. What are the benefits and challenges in polygamous marriages? What can be done to minimise the challenges?*



## Chapter 3: Children

*“The beauty of a home is defined by people. Even if you don’t have something to give, it is good to have children”*

Turkana people value children: they view them as blessings from God. Boys and girls are both valued among Turkana communities because they are a source of wealth and respect. Everyone in the community is expected to care for children, even those who are not their own. Children are the future because they carry forward family names and Turkana culture.

“Our children are like our cover and protection ... they care for us during old age”

“When children are educated, they will get jobs and support family members and relatives”



***What does it mean to say that children are the future of the Turkana people?***

Children provide companionship. For example, when a husband has taken the animals away to look for water and pasture (*Kraals*), he may stay away for several months before coming back home and the children will keep their mother company. Her children give her a sense of kinship, belonging and pride.

"I love my children because they fill the home with warmth, and they make the home a lively and busy place ... homes with no children are ever silent and dull"

'... you can send children here and there to help with various activities: building, cleaning, fetching firewood, water, herding animals and so on ...'



***In your household, what chores/tasks do children help with?***

Turkana people value girls because they are a source of wealth and prestige: when they get married their parents receive goats, sheep, cattle, camels and donkey for dowry.

Their brothers can use these livestock to pay the dowry when they get married themselves.

Boys are valued because they are the heirs, provide support, security, protect the livestock and help with herding. When boys marry, they extend their families, and their wives can care for elderly parents.



“Once a girl is married, she belongs to the family of her husband ... a boy is closer to the family in case of any emergency ...”

***Are girls and boys different within your household and if yes, how?***

Raising many children is costly because of the increased needs of raising a child (school fees, medical fees, etc.), but the benefits outweigh the costs. Turkanas believe that a poor person with children is often happier than a rich person with no children.





***How do Turkana children support their family, both when they are young and when they grow up?***

Children are a source of support. The government, civil service organisations and private companies give support to Turkana communities through schools. They build schools, provide school fees, food, and sanitary and hygiene facilities for children. Children learn new things in school and share knowledge with their parents and the community, for example, on whether there is going to be prolonged drought or disease outbreak.

***What else do children learn at school that is useful for the community?***



## Key points for reflection / discussion

1. *In Turkana culture, what do you think are the main reasons for having children?*
2. *Do boys and girls contribute differently to the community? How?*
3. *Do boys and girls have different options as they grow up? Why?*



## Chapter 4: Our Livestock

*“We Turkana people value our livestock because animals are our source of food, wealth, livelihood, prestige and pride”*

Turkana people say that livestock is their main source of sustenance and an important part of their culture, heritage and identity. They acquire livestock through payment of dowry, as well as through purchase and gifts from family, relatives or friends. Turkanas eat meat, drink milk and blood and use animal skin for a range of things.

“Our livestock brings us together during celebrations ... we slaughter animals during marriage, and it is customary to give sheep to the mother of the bride...”

“... but livestock can separate us too ... during prolonged drought, men migrate long distances to look for pasture and water leaving their families behind, sometimes for many months ...”



***Do you think the importance of livestock is changing or will change in the future?***

Families with many girls are likely to receive a variety of animals for dowry, but anybody can buy more livestock if they can afford it. Turkana people value livestock as their main source of sustenance, and because they can help them raise their children. For example, it is customary to slaughter a sheep or goat for a mother who has given birth to ensure that she and her baby stay healthy.

“During the rainy season, there is plenty of milk to drink and everyone is healthier”

“To get a good woman, a man should pay a good price ... if the girl's parents ask for a camel, you will give them a camel”



***What the main occasions when livestock are slaughtered?***

Goats and sheep are easily acquired, can reproduce quickly, mature faster and can be sold easily when one is in urgent need. Bigger animals, like camels and cattle, have higher value and are usually sold to cater for big expenses,

such as raising school fees. Donkeys are useful for transportation because they can carry luggage, water and other things over long distances. During marriage ceremonies, bulls are slaughtered for visitors, camels are given to fathers-in-law, sheep to mothers-in-law and so on.

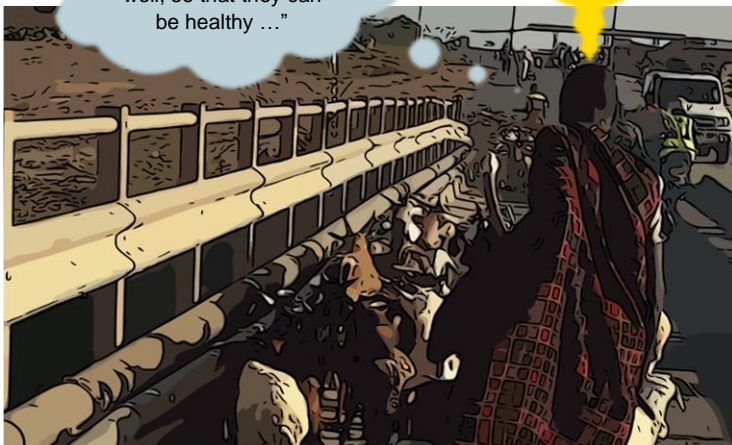


***Are there other reasons that camels are so valuable?***

It is useful to have a variety of animals: goats and sheep can help pay for small and immediate needs, while camels and cattle can help with bigger things like education. For Turkanas, keeping different types of livestock is protection: if a disease or drought strikes and one type of animal dies, another may survive. Keeping one animal type can be risky. In the event of a raid, some types of animal may not be taken.

"We love our animals and try to ensure that they eat and drink well, so that they can be healthy ..."

"... livestock can fight your problems ... if you have many types of animals, you will not ever suffer from thirst and hunger"



***Can you think ways of protecting your livestock?***

### **Key points for reflection / discussion**

1. *Would you prefer your livestock to consist of only one type of animal or many types? Why?*
2. *Why do you think that giving animals is a good way to pay dowry?*
3. *Are you involved in keeping animals and if yes, how?*



## Chapter 5: Drought, Diseases and Raids

*“Drought, diseases and raids are our greatest enemies”*

Turkana pastoralists think that the climate in Turkana is changing, with droughts becoming more frequent and persistent. The worst drought in recent years was in 2009, when almost all the livestock died. The years 2017 and 2019 were also bad and households lost many goats, sheep and camels.

When drought strikes, animals die in large numbers, mainly due to lack of water and grass. Many households starve, and people become weak due to lack of food. People walk long distances in search of food and water, which is stressful. Some people walk as far as Lochedome and “Loruth kaliban” to look for pasture, wild fruits and water, spending the night away from home, and sometimes leaving young children behind. Droughts also lead to stress and unhappiness.

Drought brings health problems. For example, pregnant women who are severely malnourished can miscarry. It is a common practice to slaughter a sheep to support the nutrition of a mother who has given birth, but during a drought, breastfeeding mothers and babies lack food and are weak. Even if both survive, malnourishment at a young age can constrain the mental and physical development of babies and children.

“During drought there is no food, no fire in the kitchen ... children cry so much that some mothers boil stones to pretend that there is food ...”

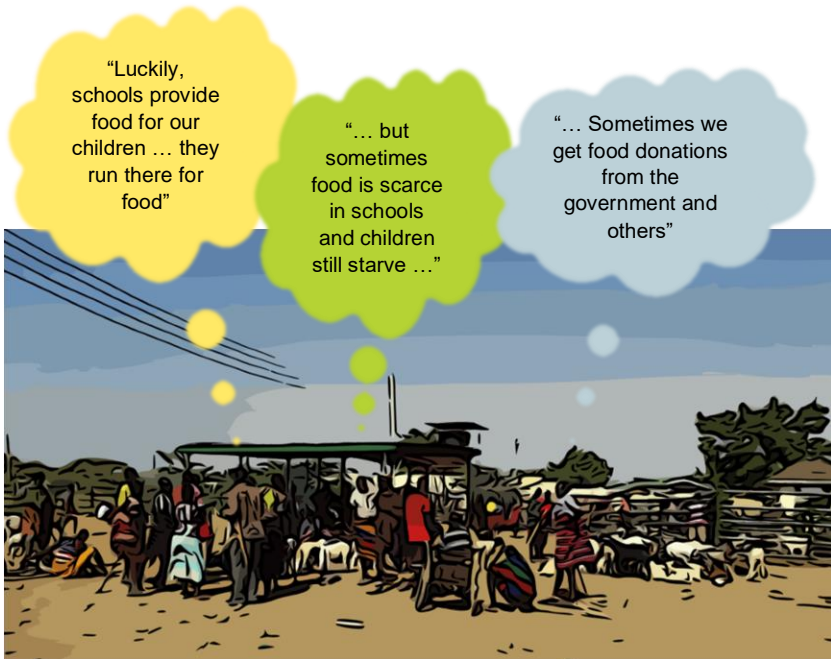
“Our livestock are malnourished too, and we feed our livestock on wild fruits and food waste”

“... men and women become aggressive - they have no time for each other, and they have no strength to have a baby ...”



### ***What was your experience from the last drought?***

Drought divides families and communities because people begin to migrate in different directions in search for a living. Men migrate to unsafe boundaries of Pokot and Samburu and sometimes the animals are raided. Some leave their wives and young children behind without care and support.



A drought can affect education as well because there is no livestock to sell to cover school fees and educational resources. During drought, school absenteeism is common because some children are too weak to attend school, while others have to migrate long distances with animals in search of pasture and water.

Drought is like a curse for Turkana pastoralists. Swarms of worms and grasshoppers appear and eat everything, leaving nothing for livestock to feed on. With no grass and leaves left on the trees, the animals tend to feed on worms which makes them ill with diarrhoea. They become so weak that they are unable to walk long distances and many



eventually die. In addition to drought, there are also diseases that affect animals.

"The diseases Etone and Lotome are common and tend to kill animals in large numbers"

"luckily we sometimes get help to cure our animals during disease outbreaks"

"we have traditional men to cure diseases but you have to pay them with livestock"



***If there is no drought but you still see your animals dying in large numbers, what would you do, and why?***

Drought has made Turkana pastoralists diversify their livelihoods: now they start businesses, are employed working for others, rear chickens, sell charcoal or alcohol, make beads, weave mats, and so on. Livestock keeping is no longer an activity to fully rely on because there is a danger of losing large numbers of animals due to drought

and recurring diseases. But that does not stop Turkana pastoralists from keeping livestock as this is an important cultural and survival practice.

### **Key points for reflection / discussion**

- 1. How have your parents dealt with drought? Would you do the same?*
- 2. Can you think of any ways to improve livestock keeping practices?*
- 3. Why is it important to be able to move freely with your livestock?*
- 4. How can you minimise the risk of losing all your livestock during drought?*
- 5. How has climate change affected the welfare of Turkana communities?*

## Chapter 6: Education

*“Education is the only way to a good life, the roots and fruits to education are very sweet, they are not bitter ... they are sweeter than even honey ...”*

Turkana pastoralists explained that they are struggling to sustain their livelihoods due to various risks to their livestock, which are central to their existence. Education is appreciated by Turkana pastoralists as a means to help them attain better livelihoods and nowadays many families are keen to take their children to school.

Educated children are more likely to have a means of income that does not depend on livestock. This means their families can benefit during drought because their children can support them by buying food and paying for their basic needs.

However, a big challenge of education for Turkana people is its cost. Many families struggle to raise school fees and buy school materials. They rely on selling livestock to educate their children but during drought, livestock prices are lower because animals are thin and malnourished.

Education in Kenya is compulsory and there are no school fees required at primary school but parents are still required to buy uniforms, books, pens, etc. They are often also expected to contribute money to school development. Some parents explained that if they do not do these things, their children are dismissed from school until they can afford them. Raising fees for secondary school or boarding school is hard, although some students receive scholarships.

“When my children are educated, God blesses them, they can build me a permanent house and furnish it with good sofa seats and beds, television, radio ... they can buy me livestock ...”

“Education brings light into the kitchen because one can find something to cook and eat ... those with educated children have something to eat ... they have light in the kitchen”



***What do you think are the key benefits of education?***

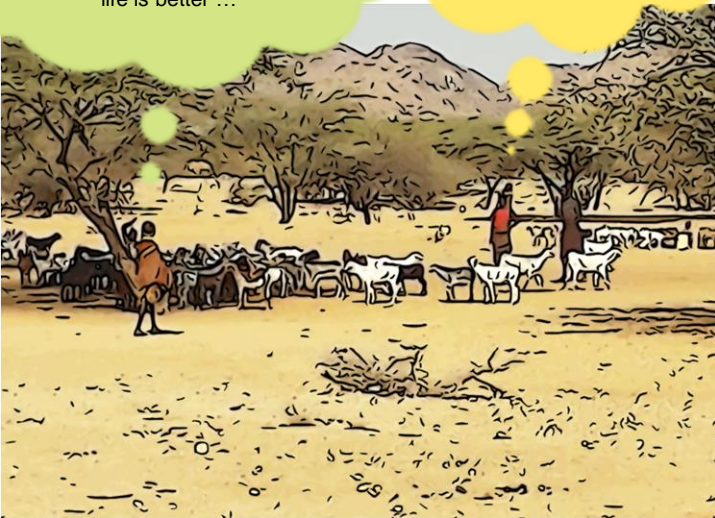
There are very few schools in the areas where most Turkana pastoralists live, and some children must walk long distances to attend classes. Resources in local schools are very poor: classrooms, desks, books, toilets, security and others. In some schools, children share water with the livestock, which is dangerous.

Another challenge is that some people still prefer that some of their children remain at home to herd instead of going to school, because of the importance that livestock have for them. Others keep their girls at home because they fear

them getting pregnant and fetching a lower bride price. Sometimes boys, too, drop out of school when they have been away herding for months and cannot catch up with learning.

“All my children are in school ... I employ herdsmen but they do not care for my livestock properly ... some steal my goats or sheep ... they think that my life is better ...”

“During prolonged drought, older boys migrate with the animals in search of pasture and water... when they return after months, they are unable to catch up at school”



***Do you know anyone who has faced problems like those described above?***

Despite these challenges, many Turkana pastoralists see education as leading to greater freedom because it can set them free from problems. For example, they explained that an educated person can learn quickly how to use a phone

and not rely on others to make phone calls and read messages for them. They can easily chat with their children and relatives on the phone and check when their children send money.

“When you are illiterate you will not know when your children send you mobile phone credit or Mpesa ... you will have to ask someone to help you ...”

“And they may steal from you ... I do not want others to take advantage of me when someone sends me money or phone credit, I want to do it myself ...”



“I don't mind selling my livestock to educate my children because I know that they will support me ... one day they will buy me more livestock ...”

“Yes ... we have seen parents whose children work at Tullow Oil company and in towns have bought them goats, and sheep and camels and donkeys.”



“I want to educate my daughters because I do not want them to be lagging without a vision ... I want to be proud of my daughters”

“... but an educated girl will not fetch as much dowry because the suitor might say ‘oh the girl is educated ... she will buy livestock for her parents ... why should I pay dowry?’”

“but I no longer have the traditional belief that it is useless to educate girls ...”



***Do you think that an educated daughter would fetch a higher or a lower dowry?***

Although not all Turkana people agree with this, some households explained that educating a girl can bring double benefits because when she gets married, she brings dowry, and when she gets employment, she can buy more livestock to support her family. When boys are educated, they are more likely to find jobs and accumulate their own livestock and pay dowry.

Through education, people can also learn other languages such as Kiswahili and English so that they can communicate with non-Turkanas. In addition, educated children who manage to find a job can help their family restock their livestock to replace the ones sold to pay school fees. One vet pointed out that it is easier to communicate about effective livestock treatments with educated individuals.

Many Turkana pastoralists have witnessed the fruits of education. Some educated Turkanas have high positions in the government: they are governors, members of the county assembly (MCAs), women representatives and they make big decisions for development. They travel outside Turkana, outside Kenya, to America, China, Europe and so on. The educated Turkana men and women are role models who inspire boys and girls. Turkana people want to be educated so that they are not left behind anymore.



## **Key points for reflection / discussion**

- 1. Why is education so important for Turkana society today? What are the key benefits of education? What are the disadvantages of not being educated?*
- 2. Are views about educating boys and girls the same now as when our grandparents were growing up? How? If you think views have changed, why is this?*
- 3. How do conditions in Turkana, and the Turkana way of life make schooling difficult?*
- 4. What can Turkana people do to minimise the challenges of education? What can parents do? What can children do?*

## Chapter 7: Support and Insurance

*'We Turkana like to support each other. We have always had strong kinship ties, helping each other during bad and good times'*

Turkana people love to celebrate together at different ceremonies and events. Although their kinship ties are not as strong as in the old days, Turkana pastoralists still carry the spirit of community and solidarity from their ancestors.

"Nowadays, our kinship ties are weak ... people move to towns looking for a better living ..."

"... but when disasters strike, everyone feels the pain ... everyone loses livestock ... everyone is badly off ..."

"... those who remain in the villages try to help each other ..."



***Has your family ever helped a friend or a relative?***




In the old days, when people had more livestock, it was easier to give some animals to a struggling family member, relative, or neighbour. Livestock was also used as a guarantee when borrowing from relatives or friends. However, in times of drought and diseases, livestock die in large numbers and there is no guarantee that friends and relatives will have livestock to help out those who are struggling. Some families can only hope for getting remittances from relatives and friends outside the community who are not immediately affected by the drought or a disease.

Turkana people appreciate help during drought from various supporters, such as the church, local and national government, civil society organisations and some private businesses. Some of these support the Turkana communities with livestock, cash, cereal, oil, sugar, soap and water, while others support the children in school,

mainly with food or scholarships, sanitary materials, or they support Turkana people to diversify their livelihoods by setting up businesses. All of this helps them cope with life's challenges.

Lack of proper roads and other services limit Turkana pastoralists from travelling. The main means of transport is motorbike (*boda boda*) which is costly, and many remain in the villages unless it is essential to travel. Due to poor infrastructure, local investors prefer to invest only in Turkana (sub)urban areas or elsewhere (Lokichar, Lodwar, Kakuma and Lokichokio.).



"The last drought was so severe that people almost died ... our supporters distributed food and animal feed to our people."

"... but sadly, not everyone gets such support ... sometimes more deserving people are left out."

***Should Turkana people rely on others (e.g. NGOs and government) for support?***

***What can communities do themselves?***

Turkana pastoralists are often encouraged to form community groups, save money through table banking to support each other, and start small businesses. When the government and civil society organisations talk about benefits of community groups, people become interested and some form groups, but they tend to fail due to lack of resources.

“The challenge is lack of commitment ... many people are yet to see the fruits and benefits of joining such groups”

“We lack good plans ... we don't have skills and knowledge to make the groups succeed”

“Maybe we shouldn't form groups just because we have been told to do so ... we should firstly have good plans”



***Why do you think that community groups have not worked very well, and what can be done to make such groups effective?***

## **Key points for reflection / discussion**

- 1. What are the main things that Turkana do to help protect themselves against future risks?*
- 2. Is insurance against risks likely to become more important in the future and if yes, why?*
- 3. How can Turkana people use the support provided by NGOs and government to increase resilience and avoid depending on external support in the long term?*





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