

From Pasture to Peace

Why Northern Kenya Needs a Herders' Approach to Conflict Resolution.

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Let the Herders Lead: Why North Rift's Peace Must Be Built from Within

For years, the story of Kerio Valley in Kenya's North Rift Region has been told through the language of crisis banditry, cattle rustling, displacement, and military operations. From the counties of Baringo, to Elgeyo Marakwet and West Pokot, communities have endured cycles of revenge driven by competition over water, pasture, and livestock. Successive governments have responded with crackdowns and security deployments. Yet despite these efforts, insecurity still persists.

What if the problem was never simply the absence of force, but the absence of ownership?

That is the bold proposition behind the Herders Approach Model pioneered by MIDRIFT HURINET under its Resilience, Peace and Stability (RPS) Programme. Instead of viewing morans (pastoral youth) solely as perpetrators of violence, the model recognizes them as the primary managers of grazing systems and therefore as indispensable architects of peace. This shift from a "hard" to a "soft" approach is not theoretical, for it is already reshaping realities on the ground. In Kerio Valley, intercommunal peace forums facilitated among Pokot and Marakwet herders led to the formation of a 30- member inter-community peace committee. These herders did what years of hostility had prevented: they agreed to reopen transport corridors and revive cross-border trade.

The once- deserted Chesegon Market is operational again. Movement of people and goods across borders that were defined by fear has resumed. Joint irrigation farming initiatives are now underway, with communities clearing acreage together, turning former battle lines into shared fields of opportunity. In Baringo's Tiaty East and Baringo South sub-counties, herders who once engaged in livestock raids are now forming Community-Based Organizations (CBOs). They now embrace Financial literacy and diversifying alternative livelihoods, including beekeeping, crop farming, and livestock trade. Five groups have reseeded grasslands with Boma Rhodes on at least two acres each to cushion against climate shocks.



The logic is simple but powerful: climate change and population growth mean that pasture will only become more scarce. Without cooperation and diversification, conflict will intensify. With adaptation and shared planning, inter-community co-existence and resource sharing becomes a lived reality.

Rethinking Peace-building among pastoral communities

The results speak for themselves. Reports indicate calmness in previously volatile areas. Communities have agreed to ensure the full recovery of stolen livestock. Voluntary information sharing with security agencies has improved. Markets have reopened. Dialogue has replaced retaliation. Crucially, this approach does not sideline government. Instead, it strengthens it. Governors from Baringo, Elgeyo Marakwet, and West Pokot have endorsed the soft approach, agreeing to collaborate on violence prevention and early warning systems. By aligning community-led initiatives with county and national structures, the model bridges the gap between grassroots legitimacy and institutional authority. Another often-overlooked dimension is culture. In Tiaty, elders proposed to review and restructure Lapai cultural practices traditionally linked to cycles of revenge and compensation to place them under clearer community oversight.

Reform from within culture, rather than condemnation from outside it, is far more sustainable. And then there is the question of youth and women. Monitoring data reveals that groups, including women, are more progressive and sustainable. The model increasingly recognizes that women, often the greatest victims of conflict, must be central to decision-making. Likewise, engaging 'morans' in dialogue about climate change, education, and alternative livelihoods is producing measurable mindset shifts. When young herders see a future beyond the rifle, peace ceases to be imposed; it becomes chosen.

Key Learnings

The lesson from North Rift is clear: peace-building in pastoral regions cannot rely solely on security operations. It must address socioeconomic vulnerability, climate stress, governance gaps, and cultural dynamics simultaneously. It must empower those who are most affected by conflict to take the lead in coming up with sustainable solutions.

The future of Kerio Valley will not be secured by the use of forceful measures alone. It will be secured by shared grazing agreements, functioning markets, diversified livelihoods, empowered women, and youth who see more value in education rather than in cattle raids. Peace in the North Rift is no longer just a policy aspiration, but a reality in many parts of the valley, for it is becoming a lived experience that the herders themselves are taking a lead on.

