

Opinion: Why Kenya must embrace the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists

by Basele Stephen Galgesa

The United Nations (UN) has designated 2026 the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). This declaration by the UN is a major boost for pastoralism and pastoralists globally, recognising their roles in sustainable development. Sadly, the Kenyan Government and wider society in Kenya seem unaware of this, or maybe this reflects the continued marginalisation that indigenous people face globally.

Rangelands aren't "*terra nullius*" or just empty lands. They're complex ecosystems supporting millions of Kenyans and diverse wildlife. Pastoralists have honed sustainable management practices over centuries, protecting these lands and their biodiversity and are great stewards – their connection to nature is spiritual, and they do not conserve for economic benefits. Their indigenous knowledge offers invaluable tools for combatting climate change and desertification.

Many people still believe the outdated myth that pastoralism is a backward and unsustainable means of livelihood. In school, we were taught that nomadic pastoralism is just aimless wandering in search of water and pasture. Yet, in a paper published in 2005, A. Koocheki and S. Gliessmann described pastoralism as a complex set of practices and knowledge that has permitted the long-term maintenance of a sophisticated "triangle of sustainability" that includes plants, animals and people. But still, the Kenyan Government and other investors covet rangelands for projects that undermine the very nature of pastoralism. Large-scale conservation efforts, carbon offsets and wind farms threaten to displace pastoralists from their lands. This attitude by the Government, even by recent revelations by Cyrus Jirongo on nuclear waste dumping that took place in the late 80's in Northern Kenya, shows how we ignore the immense value these rangelands hold.

The Community Land Act (2016) and the Constitution of Kenya 2010 recognise the importance of community land ownership, a powerful tool to secure communal land rights and to help reduce the massive subdivisions of land we see in other parts of the country that have rendered them unproductive! Sadly, there has been little progress in registering these lands to protect ancestral rangelands.

The IYRP should be a wake-up call for Kenya. It's time to:

- As a matter of urgency, prioritise the registration of traditional pastoralists' rangelands under the Community Land Act (2016). This process must be open and transparent and must ensure genuine community involvement and ownership as enshrined in our Constitution, preventing future exploitation and subdivisions. Backdoor dealings and illegal transfers of these lands must cease immediately.
- Involve pastoralists in all land-use and conservation decisions that impact on their rangelands. Their deep understanding of these ecosystems is critical for sustainable planning and management.
- Support pastoralist communities through programmes that promote sustainable livestock production, improve access to fair markets (both local and international) and provide tailored services, such as veterinary advice and care, mobile education, etc., that meet the specific needs of the pastoralists. Forced and/or induced sedentarisation of

pastoralists must cease. Their rights to mobility are enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

- Collaborate with pastoralists to document their indigenous knowledge and combine their age-old rangeland knowledge with modern science and technology. This is in a bid to create innovative, climate-smart solutions for rangeland health and resilience.
- Provide subsidy programmes targeted for pastoralists, just as the Government supports other agricultural producers, e.g. support to coffee and tea farmers with fertiliser and input subsidies. This can be done through subsidising livestock feeds, ensuring access to water resources and advisory and veterinary services, and investing in breed improvement research programmes.

County governments in pastoralist regions must also step up. They should lead in implementing policies, projects and campaigns that align with the IYRP's goals. They must act and prioritise registration of these community lands. It's an opportunity to build sustainable, thriving pastoralist communities while contributing to our nation's progress.

Kenya can become a leader in sustainable rangeland management and pastoralist development. But we must act now. The IYRP 2026 isn't a distant event – it's a chance to secure a fairer and more resilient future, starting in our own rangelands. Let's not miss it!



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