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Mapping Kenya's livestock routes: The 'arteries' of dryland pastoral economies

SPARC has partnered with the Kenyan government and IGAD to map - for the first time - the country's major livestock routes.

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Kenya has taken a significant step towards regional integration and strengthening the future of its livestock sector, after participating in a national livestock route mapping forum. SPARC, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Centre for Pastoral Areas and Livestock Development (ICPALD), convened a national livestock route mapping forum with Kenya's [State Department for Livestock Development](#) in Nairobi, in May. This is the first time the country is mapping its major livestock routes.

The event was led by SPARC member organisation the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) as a contribution to the implementation of the regional [IGAD Protocol](#) on Transhumance. Experts from all Kenya's 47 counties, government officials, private sector actors, and regional bodies gathered to systematically chart the vital migratory corridors, water points, grazing areas, and market infrastructure that underpin the country's livestock mobility.



Livestock, Kenya - Photo by [Ahmed Galal](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Why mapping matters for pastoralism and food security

Livestock mobility is the cornerstone of Kenya's pastoral livelihoods, supporting not only food security but also regional economies and trade within the IGAD region. The pastoral sector in Kenya alone is worth over [US\\$1.1 billion](#). Yet, these critical migratory routes are increasingly under threat from land subdivision, climate change, invasive species, infrastructure development, and weak [policy frameworks](#). Blocked or fragmented routes not only undermine pastoralists' access to pasture and water but also [heighten conflicts](#) and accelerate [land degradation](#).

The mapping activity aims to transform community knowledge and undocumented livestock pathways into authoritative digital maps that can inform future planning, policies, and investments, laying the groundwork for safeguarding pastoral mobility across county and national borders. Policy and decision makers will be able to use the maps to inform future investments in water infrastructure, veterinary services, pasture development, and market access—all critical elements for supporting Kenya's livestock economy. The mapping exercise also sets a model for neighbouring countries. SPARC led a similar [mapping forum in Ethiopia](#) earlier this year - also the first time the country mapped its major livestock routes.

Speaking at the opening of the Kenya workshop, Blaise Okinyi Akite, Assistant Director of Livestock Production at Kenya's State Department for Livestock Development, emphasised the urgency of the exercise. He said: "Without mobility, pastoralism cannot survive. This mapping exercise comes at a critical time when land use changes across many counties are threatening the very foundation of our livestock systems."



A map of major livestock routes in Tanzania produced previously – Source: ILRI / 2015

IGAD region: Africa's livestock powerhouse

Spanning Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda, the

IGAD region stands as one of Africa's most significant livestock regions. It supports 43% of the continent's cattle population (160 million), 34% of its sheep and goats (308 million), and almost half of the world's camels (19 million) - a total of [488 million](#) animals.

These livestock assets are managed predominantly by pastoralist communities in arid and semi-arid areas and are a cornerstone of food security and national economies, contributing up to 70% of agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in some member states. Livestock exports, largely destined for [Middle Eastern markets](#), remain a critical source [of foreign exchange](#). Despite the impacts of climate change, livestock continues to play a central role in sustaining livelihoods and ensuring nutrition across the region.

Collaborative process anchored in local expertise

During Kenya's livestock route mapping forum, 55 experts - including county livestock officers, veterinary specialists, range management experts, and private sector actors, brought rich, localised knowledge to the process, ensuring that the final digital maps will reflect both traditional practices and modern realities.

Participants used detailed topographic maps to identify livestock routes, markets, water points, and infrastructure. These were verified through peer review and consultations, culminating in the development of comprehensive digital maps to be integrated into Kenya's National Livestock Market Information Service ([NLMIS](#)) - an online resource that provides producers and traders with accurate, timely livestock market information.

Mohammed Yahya Said, ILRI researcher who led the technical mapping sessions, highlighted the transformative potential of this work. He said: "What we are producing is more than maps, it is a foundation for smarter planning, better investments, and more resilient pastoral systems. These routes are the arteries of our livestock economy and understanding them is critical for the future of both people and animals."



Experts gather to map Kenya's major livestock routes - Image by Polycarp Onyango / ILRI

Aligning with regional priorities: The IGAD Protocol on Transhumance

Beyond Kenya's borders, this mapping initiative aligns with wider regional efforts under [the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance](#), which aims to legalise and facilitate the safe, free, and orderly cross-border movement of livestock and pastoralist communities. During the workshop, Japheth Kasimbu, Project Coordinator for Transhumance at IGAD ICPALD, underscored the protocol's potential to transform livelihoods through formalised corridors, certification systems, and cross-border cooperation. "The protocol is not merely a legal document - it is a strategic framework to restore dignity, security, and opportunity to pastoralists across the region," Mr Kasimbu said. By providing precise data on livestock routes and infrastructure, Kenya's mapping initiative directly supports the operationalisation of the protocol and brings the region a step closer to the development of coordinated, harmonised policies.

Towards action, not just documentation

The maps are expected to shape future policies, budget allocations, and County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs). Plans are underway for broader regional consultations and public engagement in Kenya to validate and promote the maps at community and county levels. The process will culminate in the State Department for Livestock Development endorsing the maps.

Fabian Kausche, ILRI Deputy Director General for Research and Innovation, closed the

workshop by affirming ILRI's ongoing commitment. He said: "Mapping livestock is a strategic tool for resilience, food security, and smarter investment. The participatory spirit and collaboration we've seen here will drive meaningful, lasting change."

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