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Dynamic Drylands: 'What place do pastoralists have in a fast-changing Africa?'

This episode of Dynamic Drylands podcast interviews two experts about how pastoralists are adapting and innovating in response to changes in the drylands.

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Below is an edited transcript of "What place do pastoralists have in a fast-changing Africa?", the latest episode of Dynamic Drylands podcast. We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so on Acast, Spotify and Amazon Music.

Bola Mosuro: Drylands across Africa and the Middle East are often portrayed only through crisis headlines: hunger, conflict, poverty, and extremism. Yet these regions are also home to extraordinary resilience, innovation, and potential.

Too often, investments and policies have overlooked local realities or failed to match the scale of the challenges; yet governments and donors expect transformational' change.

What if people living in the drylands actually have most of what they need to foster peaceful, prosperous, and resilient lives?

What if the stories of doom are blinding other people working in the drylands–governments, funds and NGOs—to these opportunities?

This is Dynamic Drylands, and I'm Bola Mosuro. I'm a journalist, broadcaster, documentary maker with over 30 years' experience. My work has covered a host of issues spanning the African continent and beyond: from globalisation to political transitions, conflicts to the demands of environmental shocks. I'm passionate about culture, history and the dynamics of social change.

In the face of these challenges, one thing has always made a significant impression – how resilient people can be.

If you've listened to series 1 of this podcast, you will have heard from some of the people driving positive change in the drylands: from the pastoralists pioneering 'digital herding' tech, to a campaigner at the frontline of resolving farmer-herder conflict.

In this series, we're focusing on what donor and government support looks like in the drylands: what is, and isn't, working to build the resilience of people living in some of the

most remote and marginalised places.

We'll hear from experts about how people in the drylands are getting by in some of the most challenging environments—and they've given us their frank assessments on how outside support can make a difference and how sometimes so-called 'well-intentioned assistance' can make a situation worse.

If you work in development, you're going to want to listen.

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There's one group of people who are central to understanding the drylands: pastoralists. These nomadic herders have roamed Africa's drylands for thousands of years—but their seemingly low-tech way of life is still an essential part of Africa's food network: pastoralists supply 50% of the continent's meat and 75% of its milk.

Yet pastoralists are increasingly seen as a problem in the drylands: perceived as old-fashioned, unproductive and incompatible with expanding cities, farms, conservation areas and other new developments. It's an intensely political issue in many African countries I've reported in.

So, where does pastoralism fit in modern-day Africa?

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In the fast-changing drylands, pastoralists sometimes travel hundreds of kilometres, and cross modern-day national borders, to access water and grazing areas. And they've developed informal ways of sharing these resources with others. Ken Otieno is the executive director of the Resource Conflict Institute, a Kenyan-based policy and research organisation commonly known as RECONCILE:

Ken Otieno: Pastoralists use land in a collective manner. It's not supposed to be a private individualised tenure. And this is what makes pastoralists and pastoralism a completely distinct people and livelihood system, oftentimes governed under traditional governance structures which are historical in nature but which are also understood. And sometimes, or most of the times again, these are not even written in any particular form.

Bola: But this 'collective understanding' is increasingly clashing with what governments and developers do in the drylands: like farms with fencing which blocks movement, new mining developments, tourism, conservation areas and more.

Ken: Sometimes when a government wants to undertake a development investment, then it does not recognise the traditional stock routes, for example. It might as well not recognise that this is a grazing area. Because, for example, if we look at the case of Kenya, the constitution provides for land that is not necessarily public land, which happens to be hosting or holding natural resources that are of national nature of interest, that is supposed to belong, to be used for everybody's benefit—then the government has the right to take the land. And when that happens, communities, if that was their traditional grazing area, then it becomes a source of conflict.

We are having these communities who have been operating, managing their resources, including land, for many years without registration. But then now we are bringing in a system which we are trying to convince them that if you do this, then this is going to be

secure.

But the flip side of it is that the moment it is registered and therefore it can be used as part of collateral, then it also disintegrates that cohesiveness of these communities. And therefore, there are these things that we need to understand and we need to try as much as possible to decipher them in a manner that they do appreciate, but they also respect the traditional mechanism that communities have lived over a period of time.

Bola: But Ken says there are solid cases where governments and pastoralists can get along—and they need to be shared more.

Ken: I give the example of an agreement between Kenya and Uganda, which is stemming from a traditional agreement between pastoralists within the Karamoja cluster which straddles Kenya, South Sudan, Uganda.

This community had fought for very many years, when they decided to come up with an agreement which was not externally facilitated, but which was locally and traditionally facilitated and has become a pillar of peace, [where] communities agreed to bury the hatchets and live on as one: communities who believe and practice pastoralism across the three countries.

And as a result of that, it is also the only example where member states between Kenya and Uganda went ahead and signed a peace agreement which now facilitates the mobility between pastoralists in Kenya and pastoralists in Uganda. And they've made it a practice that every year they commemorate this kind of peace agreement. So those are for me very concrete and practical examples which do exist, and they can present even greater opportunities in terms of how member states or governments are supposed to work.

Bola: Now there’s a persistent myth that pastoralists’ ways of life remain out of step with modern-day Africa. This idea couldn’t be less true. Pastoralists are some of the most adaptable and innovative people—as their rapid uptake of smartphones and social media shows.

Let’s hear now from an expert who knows all about that: Mark Kaigwa is founder and CEO at Nendo. It’s a research and creative agency based in Nairobi, a city dubbed ‘Silicon Savannah’ because it’s a hub for technological developments and innovation.

Mark Kaigwa: When we think of pastoralists, we can think of them really in a couple of different camps depending on where they are across Africa. So for countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, where mobile money has reached north of 80% of the adult population, then they will have a phone and that phone will have access to mobile money. But even when you go to West Africa or Southern Africa, or other African countries that are not as mobile money-led, you find the smartphone being the common denominator amongst them all. But it's not your everyday iPhone 16 Pro. We're talking about entry-level and mid-range smartphones all aimed at the African continent. And they tend to have some very particular features that suit pastoralists quite well.

For example, some may have a 10,000-milliamp hour battery. What that means is that can actually charge two or three iPhones all the way through and that's a phone that is going to have some very basic features but it's going to be built to last essentially two weeks to a month depending on how you use it. That's a key point of commerce, conversation, community all built on top of mobile payments which are built into the SIM card, so they're

not tied to a bank account or to a formal financial ecosystem, making them increasingly accessible even for nomadic lifestyles.

So Facebook has been around for 21 years, but TikTok has really surprised us at Nendo because they are on track to become bigger than Facebook in Kenya. We found some pastoralist content creators talking about their lifestyle, business, enterprise, entertainment, politics, sports, news, you name it, commerce… And so for seven cents, you have people being able to get one gigabyte of TikTok-only data wherever you are in the country. And so what that's done is completely open people's minds up to content create, to live stream, potentially those centres of commerce, which of course have a more cosmopolitan mix, but all of them they're able to exchange information and interact online.

I have long felt that particular information regarding practices to do with everything from keeping up with a WhatsApp group with fellow pastoralists who are giving updates on whether it's weather or water sources or certain aspects of need-to-know information, from consulting others… And so even everything from agronomists to livestock specialists to county staff are, in some cases, finding ways to join such WhatsApp groups as a one to many means of not having to hold what we call *barazas*, or at least in Kenya, these are small meetings that local county government officials are expected to have with everyday citizens so they can do some of those virtually.

Innovation doesn't start by delivering an app. In Nendo's experience, if you're building an app, especially for pastoralists, you have to follow our three rules of savings that you want to pass on to your audience. So firstly, you have to save their mobile data. Secondly, you want to save them battery life. And then the last one, and most notably—you want to deliver what we call a 'light app'. A light app just means it's less than say 30 MGs. If you could go less than 10, that'd be great. That's how you get the biggest space.

Bola: Pastoralists are constantly adapting and innovating in response to new conditions. And pastoralism can work alongside other developments in the drylands. I can't help but think that if more of these stories were told, pastoralists would be treated less as a problem to be 'solved'. Rather than being marginalised and even stigmatised, they would garner the respect they are due and their livelihood would be seen to be worthy of support and investment.

In the next episode, we're exploring why so often, development projects don't leave a lasting impact. What happens when NGOs leave?

Nancy Balfour: Every time there's a drought, somebody comes along and says, oh, you need more water, so we'll drill you another borehole. So there are actually eight boreholes in this one village, and only one of them actually delivers clean water and works. So what it actually shows is a pattern of not learning from experience. They come along and think, well, you know, we haven't got time to do a proper study to find out about the groundwater or to look at what somebody did five years ago. We're just going to put in a new water supply, because these people need it, because it's a drought, and they'll be very grateful if we do it.

Bola: I'm Bola Mosuro. Thanks for listening and thanks to Ken Otieno and Mark Kaigwa for taking part in this episode.

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