



NRGF Policy Paper

Mainstreaming Gender into Drought Management Policy in Africa: Recommendations for Decision-Makers

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About the author:

Elizabeth W. Mwangi is an environmental social scientist whose work spans Eastern and Southern Africa. Her experience includes strengthening networks of women climate leaders at The Rallying Cry, supporting community-led solutions to human-wildlife coexistence with WildAid Africa, and advocating for good governance in natural resources management with the IUCN CEESP NRGF. She also worked as a conservation education consultant and as a participant at the Eastern Africa regional climate adaptation forum hosted by the UNFCCC; presently, she is a member of the Conservation Social Science Partnership. Her research interests emphasizes participatory, community-centered approaches to ecosystem management and well-being. She was recently a 2023 Mandela Rhodes Scholar at the University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

Executive Summary

Drought is one of the most destructive climate-related disasters in Kenya's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs). In September 2021, the President of Kenya declared the ongoing 2020-2023 prolonged drought a national disaster following three consecutive below-average rainy seasons in the country (ACAPS.org, 2022). While the biophysical impacts of drought are well-studied, the gender and social dimensions of these disasters remain underexplored (Huho and Asokan, 2024). Consequently, the effects of drought continue to worsen gender inequalities, making women and young girls particularly vulnerable. The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Gender Caucus, which aims to address gender issues related to land, land degradation, and desertification, met during COP16 (2024) to highlight women's unique and valuable contributions to drought relief, land restoration, and sustainable land and food systems management. With the increasing frequency of drought worldwide, the Gender Caucus continued to stress the importance of ensuring that drought preparedness, responsiveness, and policies are gender-responsive (see Box 1 and 2 below) (UNCCD, 2022, p. 20).

As such, this policy paper addresses the gaps within Kenya's National Drought Management Authority (NDMA) and suggests improvements for gender mainstreaming in drought management. It is based on research carried out in 2023 and 2024 with fieldwork in Ngari Village, Samburu West Sub-County, during January and February 2024. It is informed by the IUCN CEESP¹ Natural Resource Governance Framework (the NRGF), a rights-based values framework to guide decision-making and actions for good governance of natural resources (Nuesiri, 2024a). The NRGF proposes ten principles for improved governance of natural resources derived from a rights-based approach, and associated criteria to guide natural resource governance actions. Based on results from the Ngari study, this policy paper recommends the adoption of four of the NRGF principles by the Kenya NDMA to improve gender mainstreaming in drought management in Kenya. They are:

1. **Inclusive Decision-Making:** Promote women's and men's decision-making capacity and establish a gender working group at the national level to review the current framework and identify any gaps and needs.
2. **Recognition and Respect for Diverse Cultures, Knowledge, and Institutions:** Integrate traditional drought mitigation practices into national drought resilience programs and respect cultural norms whilst ensuring that they do not perpetuate inequalities.
3. **Devolution:** Strengthen county-level governance within drought management to ensure women's rights are upheld and also implement gender-responsive drought budgets.
4. **Coordination and Coherence:** Improve collaboration and coordination between national and county-level drought management bodies to streamline gender-responsive solutions and responses.

Context: What's at Stake?

Presently, increasing drought frequencies in Northern Kenya continue to have dire impacts on agropastoral communities living in the ASAL regions.² Women, and young girls in particular, are more vulnerable to the impacts of drought due to underlying gender inequalities. In times of drought, women are faced with increased workloads and restricted access to critical resources and are more often excluded from key decision-making surrounding the use of natural resources. Despite the NDMA's efforts towards gender responsiveness,³ implementation remains weak, with little progress realised since its establishment. Rising cases of increased gender-based violence⁴, early childhood marriage⁵, and teenage pregnancies⁶ are just some of the gender impacts that have been observed to increase during drought periods. As such, mainstreaming gender within drought management is especially crucial.

The UNCCD (2021) defines gender mainstreaming within drought management as “an integrated approach that facilitates equal participation of both women and men in designing a national drought plan to ensure that their varying needs and priorities are addressed fairly.” Their recommendation states that the most important step is to ensure that men and women, boys and girls, are actively engaged and that their needs and priorities are well identified in the drought planning stage (see Box 1 below).

Box 1

UNCCD Gender Caucus COP 16, 2024: A Call for Gender-Responsive Drought Management

At COP16, the UNCCD Gender Caucus (2024) reinforced the urgent need for gender-responsive drought management, recognizing that women in agro-pastoral communities disproportionately bear the burden of climate-change-induced disasters. The Gender Caucus emphasized:

- **Strengthening Women's Land Rights:** Securing access to land for women and “rebalancing land ownership” as a way of enhancing women's potential to invest in sustainable practices in times of drought.
- **Enhancing Women's Decision-Making Roles:** Promoting inclusive governance in natural resource management by ensuring that women participate in both community-led and policy-level drought responses. This includes engaging international bodies, parliamentarians, and their subsequent networks in drought planning.
- **Investing in Women's Resilience and Livelihoods:** Encouraging the adoption of indigenous knowledge as well as women's knowledge passed down through generations and also diversifying women's income sources through climate adaptation programs.
- **Enhancing Gender-Disaggregated Data:** Ensuring that sex-disaggregated data is collected to inform drought strategies for policymakers and practitioners.
- **Reducing the Gendered Burden of Drought:** Recognizing the increased workload women face in securing water, food, and livestock care, and pushing for interventions such as community water infrastructures and climate-smart agricultural training.

Research Findings: Gender and Drought in Samburu County

Ethnographic research conducted in Ngari Village (January – February 2024) pointed to how drought exacerbates gender disparities in resource access, household responsibilities, and economic opportunities. To guide the study, the key research methods employed included participant observation, ten semi-interviews (five male and five female) at different *bomas* randomly selected, and visits to government and non-governmental offices such as NDMA and the National Environment Management Authority. Other research methods included archival research hosted digitally and reading through governmental and non-governmental reports, sessional papers, and publications on drought, with a focus on Samburu County and the ASAL region. The data was then analysed qualitatively to reveal key themes and insights. As related to gender relations and identified vulnerabilities, these included:

1. Women's Limited Access to Water and Pasture Resources during Droughts

- **Water Scarcity:** Women walk longer distances, sometimes more than 10 km, to fetch water from available sources. Queues at boreholes increase waiting times, further limiting their ability to engage in other activities.
- **Pasture Access:** During droughts, men migrate with livestock to distant grazing lands, leaving women with fewer animals (household livestock) and often times less access to milk, a critical nutritional source for children.
- **Land and Resource Rights:** Customary norms restrict women's land ownership, limiting their ability to influence grazing strategies. On top of this, women, for example, who are responsible for managing household livestock and resources, have adapted by engaging in income-generating activities outside the home, such as selling milk and livestock products. However, their contributions within the household and beyond remain overlooked in national policies, which tend to focus on large-scale agro-pastoral solutions that center male-dominated industries.

2. Increased Household Burdens During Drought

- **Household Livestock Management:** In men's absence, women take care of other livestock left behind, such as goats and calves. This increases their workload without additional support as they seek to feed and ensure the health of such livestock. As women take charge of small livestock business opportunities, they are often vulnerable to exploitation by buyers when negotiating prices. On top of this, since property and ownership rights primarily belong to men culturally, they have limited access to credit, which restricts their ability to expand such businesses.⁷
- **Economic Barriers:** Limited mobility and lack of financial resources or necessary support prevent women from engaging in alternative livelihoods, in turn making them heavily dependent on relief aid.

3. Women's Exclusion from Decision-Making on Drought Management

- **Community Engagement:** Women's perspectives on drought management, water access, and livestock survival strategies are often overlooked, despite their direct experience in managing household drought impacts.
- **Male-Dominated Institutions:** Traditional governance structures have also largely excluded women from resource allocation discussions, leading to gender-blind solutions that further exacerbate inequalities.
- **Government and NGO Projects:** Though some developmental initiatives aim to include women, the technical support offered (like cash disbursement initiatives that target women) fail to take into account historical complexities that equally shape men's lived realities.⁸ Programs operating under the banner of "resilience" or "empowerment" can unintentionally reinforce gender-based inequalities.

Box 2

Linking UNCCD's Gender Caucus Global Commitments to Local Realities in Samburu

Findings from Samburu County closely align with the Gender Caucus's global priorities.

1. Exclusion from decision-making remains a critical challenge
2. Rising economic challenges exacerbate gender disparities in drought resilience.
3. Women in Samburu experience limited access to water and pasture.
4. The increased household burden during droughts, particularly in securing water and food, highlights the need for infrastructure investment, a key Caucus recommendation.

Policy Gaps and Challenges

Discussions from the UNCCD Gender Caucus (Dec 2024), as well as findings from the research, highlight the need for gender-responsive drought management. In Kenya's NDMA, critical gender gaps exist that hinder progress in gender-responsive drought management.

Gaps in Gender-Inclusive Drought Management

Lack of Gender-Disaggregated Data in Drought Response

- The NDMA's Early Warning Systems in Kenya do not capture gender-specific vulnerabilities, which can limit evidence-based policy responses. Without gender-disaggregated indicators, funding and interventions remain gender-blind, further reinforcing existing inequalities.⁹
- At the continental level, although the AU's Framework on Climate Change and Resilient Development¹⁰ acknowledges gender disparities, it lacks enforcement mechanisms at the national level for countries, which slows down the process of implementing gender-responsive approaches.

Inadequate Consideration of Women's Resource Rights

- In Samburu County, traditional norms prioritize male heads of households when it comes to land rights policies, excluding women from decision-making on grazing areas and water access points.
- Furthermore, Kenya's land tenure system (despite the 2010 Constitution affirming women's land rights) still limits women's access to rangeland and pastures, further restricting their ability to contribute to drought management strategies.

Limited Representation of Women in Drought Governance

- Policy frameworks continue to prioritize scientific and technological approaches at the expense of community-led adaptation strategies that women use. These have been observed to offer solutions that fail to adequately capture the experiential realities of communities, which can reveal the deeper socioeconomic challenges faced by a community and why certain vulnerabilities persist.¹¹
- Despite being primary managers of water and household livestock during droughts, women are underrepresented in the decision-making processes at all levels.

Unpaid Care Work and Economic Marginalization

- Women's increased workload during droughts, such as care for malnourished livestock, collecting water, securing food, is not recognized as an economic activity, yet women spend at least 3 hours a day on unpaid care work (SDGAA, 2023).
- Financial aid programs and climate resilience funds may overlook women's contributions in informal economies. For example, women's roles in household livestock care. Conversely, those that do target women only (such as cash disbursements¹²) can overlook the lived realities of men which also influence ongoing gender relations and dynamics.

Coordination and Governance Challenges in Gender Mainstreaming

In Kenya, the NDMA Drought Risk Management and Ending Drought Emergencies (EDE) Strategy does not fully integrate gender-sensitive programming. Despite Kenya's strong commitments to earmark new policies for gender mainstreaming in policies on inclusion and climate action response¹³, implementation at local levels remains weak.

Weak Institutional Linkages and Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

- Even with NDMA's mandate to oversee drought-related matters, there is poor coordination between government and NGOs (Duguma et al., 2017, p. 76). This has led to the duplication of efforts, resulting in fragmented approaches and inefficient use of resources, which further complicates drought interventions (GoK 2013, p. 8; GoK 2017, p. 26). In the process, gender mainstreaming become sidelined. This lack of streamlined management has contributed greatly to undermining the potential for a unified, national, gender-responsive approach to drought management.

- At the County level, NDMA offices must coordinate with local county gender offices to implement gender-responsive approaches. However, efforts required to coordinate with different bodies and entities have led to inconsistent and non-standardized approaches to gender mainstreaming, with some counties treating gender as an afterthought rather than an essential part of drought management.¹⁴ This lack of standardization not only weakens the overall effectiveness of gender-responsive interventions but also contributes to uneven progress across the nation.
- With gender issues often siloed within the State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action, it becomes difficult to mainstream gender issues across drought management policies, water, agriculture, land, and other climate-related issues. This need for the SDGAA to coordinate with the different government bodies limits and coordinated responses for better drought management.

Funding Gaps for Gender-Responsive Drought Adaptation

- Despite calls for increased financing for gender and climate adaptation, dedicated funding for women-led resilience initiatives is scarce. In 2024, for example, the Kenyan government reduced financial allocation for NDMA from Ksh2B to Ksh 20M¹⁵. With such cuts and limited budgets, managing authorities are faced with the decision of prioritizing other areas of interventions that overlook gender issues.

Misuse of funds allocated for drought responses

- Each drought cycle brings renewed international appeals for aid, yet the NDMA's contingency fund remains only 25% funded (Loewenberg, 2024). With drought having been observed by some as “big money for the corrupt elites,”¹⁶ the lack of accountability and transparency in drought-allocated funds has hindered efforts at addressing drought challenges, and in particular gender-related drought impacts.

Policy Recommendations

The IUCN CEESP Natural Resource Governance Framework (the NRGF) outlines ten key principles for inclusive, equitable, and effective natural resource governance (see figure 1 below). The NRGF subscribes to the values-principles-action framing, which holds that human action, including environmental behaviour, is influenced by our values orientation (see Schwartz, 1992; Ihemezie et al., 2021); in this respect, the NRGF explicitly advocates for a participatory rights-based values approach as the most assured pathway to good natural resource governance (Springer et al. 2021; Nuesiri, 2024a).

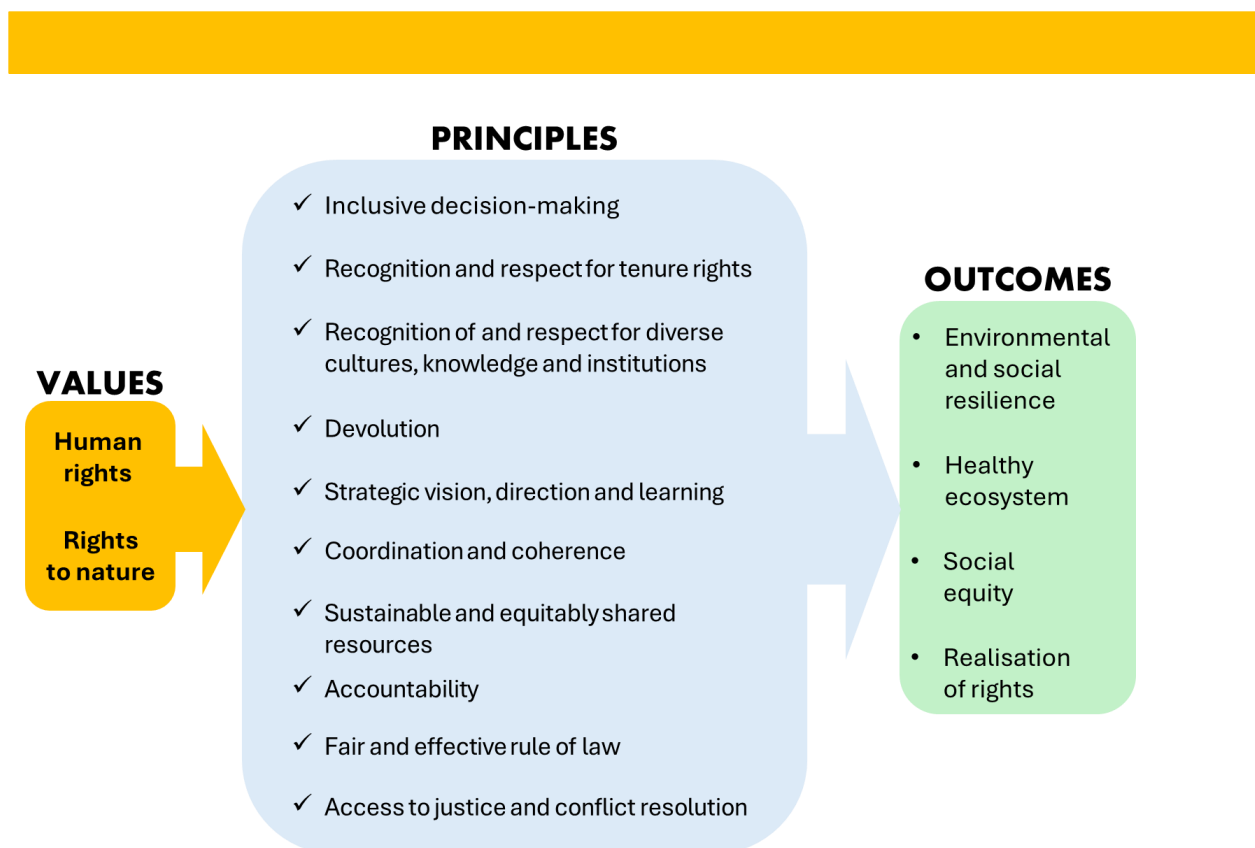


Figure 1: The IUCN CEESP rights-based natural resource governance framework

Source: Nuesiri 2024b

Thus, the policy recommendations provided below have been informed by a subset of the IUCN CEESP rights-based natural resource governance framework principles identified as the most critical and relevant for effective gender mainstreaming in Kenya's NDMA.

Principle 1. Inclusive Decision-Making: Ensuring Women's Participation in Drought Governance

Decision-making regarding natural resource policies and practices is based on the full and effective participation of all relevant actors, with particular attention to the voice and inclusion of rights-holders and groups at risk of marginalisation.

Recommendations

Promote Women's and Men's Participation in Decision-Making

- Encourage both women's and men's involvement in local and national discussions on drought management, natural resource management, and resource allocation. Frameworks such as the IUCN's CEESP Natural Resource Governance Framework further provide a set of guiding principles and tools that enable equitable decision-making processes, including, but not limited to gender-responsiveness.¹⁷

Establish a dedicated gender working group.

- Perhaps most crucial, a gender working group should be established to review existing drought management frameworks to identify gender gaps and needs. Working at all levels, this working group could either be hosted within the State Department for Gender and Affirmative Action or the NDMA, with a mandate to ensure that gender mainstreaming policies are implemented within drought management and decision-making are gender-inclusive at all levels.

Improve Gender-Disaggregated Data Collection

- Revise NDMA's Early Warning System to include gendered indicators (e.g., impact of drought on women's workloads and income).
- Implement county-level gender impact assessments for all drought response programs.
- Allocate a dedicated percentage of NDMA and county climate funds for women-led resilience projects.

Principle 3. Recognition of and respect for diverse cultures, knowledge and institutions

Natural resource governance is grounded in sound and diverse forms of knowledge and respect for diverse cultures, values, and practices.

Recommendations

Integrate Indigenous Knowledge into Drought Response Strategies

- Document and incorporate men and women's traditional knowledge and drought-resistant livestock practices into county-level disaster preparedness frameworks.

Respect Cultural Norms While Addressing Gender Inequalities

- Facilitate community dialogue forums that engage both men and women in discussing shifts in gender roles due to climate change, emphasizing shared responsibilities in drought resilience.¹⁸

Principle 4: Devolution

Decisions are taken at the lowest possible level appropriate to the social and ecological systems being governed, with particular attention to empowering the roles and authority of Indigenous peoples and local communities in natural resource governance.

Recommendations

Empower Local Women's Groups to Manage Climate Adaptation Funds

- Establish community-managed resilience funds, prioritizing women-led initiatives in drought mitigation (e.g., climate-smart agriculture¹⁹, *chamas*, and water storage). One revenue stream for this could be the annual County Climate Change Funds.
- Ensure that women have equitable access to county-managed climate adaptation funds, with simplified application processes. Provide and expand financial and technical support to community-based women's groups (e.g., *chamas*) and women-run agro-related and livestock management systems/markets, which serve as vital social and economic safety nets during droughts.

Principle 6: Coordination and Coherence

This principle addresses the need for actors involved in natural resource governance to come together around a coherent set of strategies and management practices.

Recommendations

Establish a coordination unit to streamline coordination and processes

- Sitting within the NDMA, this unit will track stakeholder activities, and provide accountability checks between the different agencies involved in drought management. The unit will enhance coordination and coherence, ensure strong accountability, while preventing the duplication of efforts.
- Likewise, the Gender Working Group could also serve as an entity to ensure that gender-responsive decisions are emphasised and well-coordinated as the various bodies collaborate with each other.
- Establish and require proper accountability and transparency of budget reporting for resources allocated during times of drought.

Conclusion

The UNCCD Gender Caucus (Dec 2024) emphasizes the urgent need for gender-sensitive drought governance. However, gender mainstreaming in drought management remains weak due to governance gaps, poor coordination between drought authorities, and the failure to integrate women's knowledge and economic contributions. Drought management authorities must adopt gender-responsive policy reforms, strengthen cross-sectoral coordination, and ensure women's leadership in drought management. By closing these policy and governance gaps, Kenya (and other African nations) can move toward gender-responsive drought management, ensuring men and women are equally capable of adapting to the challenges brought by drought periods.

Endnotes

¹ IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy (CEESP).

² [More than 80% of Kenya's land is categorised as arid and semi-arid land.](#)

³ <https://wrd.unwomen.org/index.php/node/131>

⁴ <https://kenya.unfpa.org/en/news/rapid-gender-analysis-reveals-gbv-silent-disaster-amidst-kenyas-drought-emergency>

⁵ <https://www.unicef.org/kenya/stories/drought-and-soaring-food-prices-force-more-girls-early-marriage>

⁶ <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/gender/half-of-samburu-county-children-are-born-to-teenage-mothers-4679688>

⁷ Also confirmed by Care International (2014).

⁸ A statement echoed by several male research participants was “women get more support.”

⁹ [During the Africa Climate Summit in September 2023, Honorable Harriette Chiggai \(Office of the President of Kenya, Women's Rights Advisor\) called for gender-disaggregated data, emphasising that “gender data is the bedrock of climate action,” yet it remains very scarce.](#)

¹⁰ [AU Framework on Climate Change and Resilient Development Strategy and Action Plan](#)

¹¹ <https://www.mdpi.com/2073-445X/13/6/740>

¹² In Ngari Village, cash disbursements were given to women as they are believed to handle cash better than their male counterparts. This was shared by an NDMA County official.

¹³ <https://gender.go.ke/resources/news/state-earmarks-new-policies-strengthen-gender-mainstreaming-across-sectors>

¹⁴ At the time of fieldwork, the NDMA did not have an existing standardized gender integration framework. An NDMA official revealed that they must coordinate with the respective gender offices to address challenges.

¹⁵ <https://nation.africa/kenya/blogs-opinion/editorials/drought-budget-cut-shocking-4764686>

¹⁶ [Breaking the Cycle: Drought and Hunger in Kenya.](#)

¹⁷ [Gender and Natural Resource Governance.](#) (The Natural Resource Governance Framework, p. 7)

¹⁸ CIFOR-ICRAF piloted a successful project [on community dialogues on gender and land restoration in Turkana County](#); drought practitioners can learn from such ongoing activities and adapt accordingly.

¹⁹ The Ngari Tree Nursery founded by the women is an example; a member mentioned that it was no longer operating effectively due to the drought. There were other more urgent priorities that members faced (such as acquiring food and income), and the nursery offered meager returns and gains. Despite community efforts to buffer the impacts of drought, Coppock and Desta (2013) highlight that there is minimal support from the government for community-run initiatives and the provision of safety nets for rural Kenyans.

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