POLICY BRIEF

Unlocking Livelihood Opportunities for Pastoralist Youth and Women in Kenya's Frontier Counties

A Policy Framework for Inclusive Economic Transformation, Climate Resilience and Employment Creation

Based on: *A Study on Pastoralist Youth and Women Livelihood Opportunities in Frontier Counties* (December 2025).

Executive Summary

Pastoralist youth and women constitute the largest untapped human capital in Kenya's Frontier Counties. Together, they represent the majority of the region's productive population and possess enormous potential to drive economic growth, entrepreneurship, innovation and climate resilience. However, despite their demographic significance, they remain among the most economically marginalized groups due to structural barriers that limit their access to education, finance, productive assets, markets, technology and decision-making opportunities. The study commissioned by the Frontier Counties Development Council (FCDC) demonstrates that addressing these barriers is not only a social justice imperative but also an economic necessity for accelerating regional development and achieving inclusive growth.

The study reveals that the Frontier Counties possess a rapidly expanding youth population, growing urban markets, significant livestock resources, emerging opportunities in digital technologies, renewable energy, climate-smart enterprises and value addition, all of which provide a strong foundation for transforming pastoral economies. Nevertheless, these opportunities remain largely inaccessible to youth and women because of weak policy implementation, restrictive social norms, limited business development support, inadequate financing and fragmented employment programmes. The study therefore calls for a comprehensive policy shift that places pastoralist youth and women at the centre of economic planning, investment and governance across the Frontier Counties.

Background

The Frontier Counties Development Council brings together ten counties that occupy approximately sixty-five percent of Kenya's land area and are predominantly located within the arid and semi-arid lands. These counties possess more than three-quarters of Kenya's livestock resources and support millions of pastoralists whose livelihoods depend largely on livestock production, natural resource management and cross-border trade. Despite their enormous contribution to the national economy, the region continues to experience high levels of poverty, unemployment, climate vulnerability and historical marginalization. Young people and women bear the greatest burden of these challenges as they face limited opportunities to participate meaningfully in productive economic activities.

Rapid population growth, increasing climate variability, prolonged droughts and changing pastoral production systems are transforming the economic landscape of northern Kenya. While traditional pastoralism remains the backbone of the regional economy, emerging opportunities are increasingly being created through livestock value chains, irrigated agriculture, renewable energy, digital technologies, tourism, blue economy enterprises, natural resource management and climate-smart businesses. Harnessing these opportunities requires deliberate investments that equip pastoralist youth and women with the knowledge, skills, resources and institutional support necessary to participate effectively in the evolving economy.

The Development Challenge

The study establishes that pastoralist youth and women continue to experience multiple and interconnected barriers that prevent them from accessing sustainable livelihood opportunities. Across the ten Frontier Counties, youth constitute more than thirty percent of the population while women of reproductive age account for more than one-quarter of the total population. At the same time, the region has a dependency ratio exceeding sixty-five percent, placing enormous pressure on the economically active population. This demographic structure presents a significant opportunity for economic transformation if adequate investments are made in education, employment and entrepreneurship. However, without deliberate interventions, the growing youth population risks becoming a source of increased unemployment, social exclusion and instability.

The study identifies entrenched patriarchal social structures as one of the principal constraints limiting women's economic participation. Women have limited ownership and control over productive assets, restricted access to land and livestock, limited participation in household and community decision-making, and reduced access to financial services. Young people similarly face barriers arising from inadequate technical and entrepreneurial skills, weak labour market linkages, insufficient access to finance and limited opportunities for enterprise development. These structural inequalities significantly reduce their ability to establish viable businesses and participate competitively in emerging economic sectors.

Policy and regulatory systems further constrain entrepreneurship by imposing complex business registration procedures, restrictive licensing requirements and limited incentives specifically designed for marginalized entrepreneurs. Existing employment programmes are frequently fragmented, underfunded and poorly coordinated, while business incubation services, mentorship programmes, market information systems and investment support remain inaccessible to many youth and women living in pastoral areas. The study concludes that these institutional weaknesses continue to suppress entrepreneurship, innovation and private sector growth across the Frontier Counties.

Emerging Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the study identifies significant opportunities capable of transforming livelihoods across the Frontier Counties. Rapid urbanization is creating growing demand for livestock products, stimulating investments in livestock markets, meat processing, dairy production, hides and skins, fodder production and other livestock value chains. The integration of digital technologies into livestock production, marketing and financial services is improving efficiency, traceability and market access, thereby creating new business opportunities for technologically skilled youth. Climate-smart livestock production systems, renewable energy enterprises, irrigation agriculture, blue economy initiatives and green enterprises are also emerging as promising sectors capable of generating employment while strengthening resilience to climate change.

The study also highlights the expanding role of women and youth in small and medium enterprises, retail trade, value addition, financial services, environmental conservation, beekeeping, renewable energy, tourism and climate adaptation initiatives. Successful examples documented across counties demonstrate that when supported through training, access to finance and market linkages, pastoralist youth and women are capable of establishing sustainable enterprises that improve household incomes while contributing to broader economic development. These experiences provide practical models that can be scaled up across the region through coordinated policy support and investment.

Strategic Policy Response

The study proposes a comprehensive policy framework that addresses both the structural barriers and emerging opportunities facing pastoralist youth and women. It emphasizes that economic empowerment should extend beyond income generation to include strengthening human capital, improving access to productive resources, promoting entrepreneurship, enhancing participation in governance and creating an enabling business environment. Governments, development partners and the private sector are encouraged to adopt integrated interventions that combine skills development, financial inclusion, enterprise support, mentorship, technology adoption and policy reform.

Investment in education and market-relevant skills is identified as a critical priority for building a competitive workforce. Technical and vocational education should be aligned with labour market needs, while entrepreneurship training should equip young people and women with practical business management, financial literacy and digital skills. Stronger partnerships between training institutions, financial institutions and private sector employers would improve transitions from education to employment and strengthen enterprise development across the region.

The study further recommends strengthening livestock production and sustainable natural resource management as the foundation of pastoral economies. Increased investment in livestock production systems, animal health, climate resilience, livestock mobility, rangeland management and disaster risk management will not only improve productivity but also create numerous employment opportunities throughout livestock value chains. Diversifying pastoral livelihoods through green enterprises, blue economy initiatives, renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture and digital innovation will further enhance resilience while reducing dependence on traditional livelihood systems.

Transforming harmful social norms is equally important. The study calls for deliberate efforts to challenge gender stereotypes that restrict women's participation in economic activities and decision-making. Engaging men, community leaders and traditional institutions in promoting gender equality will enhance recognition of women's economic contributions while creating more inclusive opportunities for entrepreneurship, leadership and employment. Such social transformation is essential for unlocking the full productive potential of pastoral communities.

Policy Recommendations

1. County governments should mainstream pastoralist youth and women's economic empowerment within County Integrated Development Plans, Annual Development Plans and county budgets by establishing dedicated programmes that support entrepreneurship, skills development and employment creation. Greater public investment should be directed towards business incubation centres, innovation hubs, vocational training institutions, digital skills development and financial inclusion initiatives that respond to the unique realities of pastoral economies.
2. Governments and development partners should establish inclusive financing mechanisms that improve access to affordable credit, grants, guarantee schemes and investment capital for youth- and women-led enterprises. Financial products should be adapted to pastoral production systems and accompanied by business advisory services, mentorship and market linkage programmes that enhance enterprise growth and sustainability.
3. County governments should prioritise investment in livestock value chains, climate-smart agriculture, renewable energy, digital enterprises, blue economy initiatives and green jobs as strategic sectors for employment creation. These investments should be supported through enabling policies, infrastructure development, market access programmes and stronger partnerships with the private sector to stimulate innovation and attract investment into the Frontier Counties.
4. Finally, governments, civil society organisations, development partners and community institutions should work collaboratively to address discriminatory social norms, strengthen women's leadership, promote youth participation in decision-making and ensure that all development programmes deliberately target the inclusion of marginalized groups. Continuous monitoring, policy research and evidence-based planning should guide future investments to ensure that livelihood interventions produce sustainable and measurable improvements in the lives of pastoralist youth and women.