

CASE STUDY

**Children's care in the context of climate  
Change in Kajiado County Kenya**



**Introduction**

With rising temperatures, unpredictable rainfall, increasing biodiversity loss, and prolonged droughts, climate change is already affecting ecosystems in the Eastern and Southern Africa region and the communities that depend on them.<sup>1</sup> For example, recent droughts in the Horn of Africa are widely attributed to climate change, with such extreme weather events likely to become more common as global temperatures rise.<sup>2</sup> Many areas of Kenya have experienced unprecedented drought, with five consecutive below-average rains.<sup>3</sup>

In Kajiado County, Kenya, Maasai communities have seen cattle herds decimated, resulting in increased levels of poverty and hunger. There is some evidence indicating that drought has adversely affected various aspects of children's well-being, including their education, nutrition, and protection.<sup>4</sup> However, the impacts of such climate change-related events on children's care remain understudied.<sup>5</sup>

In this case study we explore this issue further, drawing on evidence from nine interviews with children, caregivers, residential care home staff and government

officials in Kajiado County. Whilst this sample is too small to draw firm conclusions, it nevertheless illustrates the importance of understanding how climate change is impacting on children's care and raises valuable questions for further research.

“The drought hit our community very hard. It devastated the Maasai people, who rely heavily on their livestock. We depended on these animals for our livelihood, but they all perished due to hunger and thirst. Personally, I lost everything I had.”

Mother

“Usually, during a drought, people can move their animals to better places where there's still some grass and water, but this time, all areas in Maasai land were the same- there was nowhere to go.”

Mother

“ I saw my father and mother crying. Maasai men never cry, and when I saw that, it broke my heart; I really felt bad. I saw other small children in my family who suffered from hunger. My parents' animals died, and they had nothing else they could do ... I wanted to be a doctor and a doctor that treats children because I have seen children suffering in my community. ... But now all that is gone. I will never be a doctor. ) )

14-year-old girl, domestic worker

## Drought is affecting many of the drivers of children's separation from families

The interviews reveal four main ways in which the drought is impacting children's care; these factors have previously been identified as drivers of family separation in the region.<sup>6</sup>

- **Poverty and hunger.** All participants spoke of rising levels of poverty and hunger. Some said that this was especially acute in the early days of the drought as families struggled to adjust to the loss of centuries-old livelihood strategies based on cattle rearing. Others argued that this problem is worse now than it has ever been, even though some rains have fallen, as families have lost so many assets.

“ Many cows died, parents were not getting food to give us. Most of the time, we stayed hungry during the day, and we also went to bed without food... We only got lunch from school. ) )

14-year-old girl, domestic worker

- **Stress and violence.** All participants reported a steep decline in emotional well-being and a rise in stress because of the drought. Parents felt deeply upset about not being able to provide food for their children. Cattle rearing is embedded in Maasai culture, and the death of entire herds has left a deep sense of loss. As men ceased to be able to provide for their families, many experienced a crisis in their identities. Women took on paid work alongside their household responsibilities and struggled to juggle these competing demands on their time.

Men's frustration at no longer being able to provide for their families was sometimes blamed for violence against women and children. Coping strategies, including drug and alcohol abuse, work outside of the home and transactional sex also exposed family members to violence. The interviews indicate that transactional sex was often carried out by girls for sanitary pads or food.

“ My husband was always busy, working at night as a watchman and during the day herding cows. He hardly had any time to rest, which led to extreme stress. I even heard him talking to himself once, saying things like, 'I would rather die' or 'Should I end it all? This life is too tough for me.' I was terrified, thinking he might take drastic measures. Thankfully, he didn't... Things haven't improved, and he still carries a lot of stress. I haven't seen him smile or laugh in a long time. ) )

Mother

“ We've seen cases of domestic violence where family members, particularly men, resort to physical abuse when they're unable to cope with the pressures of providing for their wives and children, and they constantly feel that they are losing status and losing control and authority in the family. ) )

NGO Worker

“ During the drought, so many parents were frustrated, they were stressed to the extent that most of them used to vent on their children. Any small mistake would result in a thorough beating. ) )

Residential care home manager

- **Lack of access to education.** Across Kenya, 1.5 million children are estimated to need education assistance because of the drought.<sup>7</sup> In Kajiado, large numbers of children are reported to have dropped out of school as parents can no longer afford the costs of education.<sup>8</sup>

“We had around 50 cows, but we lost them all. Now, we don't even have one. So, my two children have been unable to go to school.”

Mother

“I cried a lot, and I still do sometimes. Seeing my girls not going to school makes me cry. It's a heartbreaking situation.”

Mother

• **Family and community support networks.** The length of the drought has gradually chipped away at the resources of families across Kajiado County. Whilst in the past friends and neighbours were able to support those in need, this is increasingly no longer the case. Participants said that extended family support has remained in place to some degree, but even this is starting to diminish.

“No one offered help to each other during the drought. Everyone wanted help, and there was no one with money or animals to provide help; almost everyone lost the cattle, almost everyone lacked food and water, and everyone needed help.”

14-year-old girl, domestic worker

“If you went to a neighbour to borrow some unga (flour), you'd meet them or someone else on their way to your house seeking the same help.”

Mother

## Drought is affecting rates of children separated from families through some forms of marriage and work

All participants spoke of the drought leading to higher rates of some forms of child marriage and child work, including work that involves children living apart from their families. Marriage and work were cited as the most common reasons behind family separation during the drought.

Participants told us that work affects both boys and girls and often follows school drop-out. Boys were described as leaving home to herd cattle for richer families, beg on the streets, and work as night watchmen or in mines. Girls tended to go to towns and cities to become domestic workers. According to one participant, this work can start at 10 or 11 years old.

“I felt so bad that I was going to work while my classmates were joining secondary school. I felt heartbroken... I miss my parents and my other family members so much, I miss them so much, I miss them a lot. I miss my grandmother who is always at home with us.”

14-year-old girl, domestic worker

Participants told us that children sometimes either chose to work with their parents' approval or ran away from home to earn a living and escape home environments that were either stressful or could not meet their needs due to high levels of poverty. Participants, including the two children we spoke to, described children feeling a sense of responsibility towards their family and a desire to contribute at this time of crisis. How much agency children can exert at times when choices are limited is often hard to determine and requires further investigation.

“My son saw the difficult situation at home after completing primary school and decided to seek work to help support the family. He found an opportunity to take care of someone's goats through a friend's connection.”

Mother

“When parents are constantly fighting each other, are angry all the time because they are stressed, that environment is not good for anyone, including children. So that is why you find that some children run away from home because home is not bearable. They come to towns to look for work and they really struggle because some of them have no place to stay.”

NGO worker



Child marriage was described as primarily affecting girls and often followed school drop-out and pregnancy. Ongoing UNICEF research on the impacts of climate change on marriage that covers Kajiado County suggests that the relationship between marriage and drought is complex.<sup>9</sup>

This study indicates that traditional arranged marriages may be falling owing to an inability to pay bride price usually includes cattle, many of whom have perished in the drought. However, informal unions instigated by children themselves are increasing. These marriages are usually due to pregnancy or an attempt to escape increasingly poor and sometimes violent homes.

Participants spoke of multiple reasons why the drought increases the risk of pregnancy amongst adolescent girls, including limited sexual and reproductive health services, girls being unoccupied as they are not at school and a lack of parental supervision leading to girls engaging in unprotected sex with their peers. As noted above, a rise in transactional sex was also described by some participants.

“Some girls could not even have access to essential commodities like pads and some men took advantage. They give them as low as 50 shillings to sleep with them so that they get money to buy the essentials. This has led to an increase in the cases of teenage pregnancy.”

NGO worker

“Many girls dropped out of school during that time. They stayed at home for so long and ended up getting pregnant... Some girls were married off by their parents when they got pregnant.”

14-year-old girl, domestic worker

“Very young girls are getting married these days. Even a girl in Class Six, around 11 years old, can get pregnant and enter into marriage. They often marry boys of a similar age. There are families with very young parents in our villages now.”

Mother

## There is mixed evidence on the impacts of drought on rates of kinship care

There are long traditions of extended family members or friends of the family caring for children in Kajiado County. This is especially common in cases where children live far away from schools. Some participants spoke of this practice reducing because of the droughts, as families are too poor to care for extra children. Others said that family members continue to support one another where they can, including caring for children. The ability of family members to care for other children was seen to vary by levels of wealth and profession, and between rural and urban areas. We spoke with one kinship carer who said that she was able to support her niece as her job in town was unaffected by climate change.

“Very few children went to live with the relatives, only those who had relatives in town I think went to live with the relatives. Every person out there was sorting their own problems.”

Government official

“Some parents were sending their children to live with the relatives who are better off.”

Residential care home manager

One NGO worker reported that during the drought children were sent to relatives alone and with no warning as it is harder to refuse to care for the child in these circumstances. One parent had removed their son from boarding school as they could no longer afford the fees, and had instead sent the child to live with another Maasai family close to the child's school. They reported that this form of kinship care is a commonly used arrangement.

## There is increased demand for residential care as a result of the drought

Participants, including the three residential care home managers we spoke to, reported that demand for residential care has increased due to the drought. Many desperate parents tried to place children into residential care to give them access to food and schooling.

“Most of the parents came here begging for their children to be taken in. When it started, people thought that it would just take a short period of time, but as it continued, it got to a point where men were running away from home because they lost everything and they felt that they were worthless. Women were left alone with the children and most of them could not take care of the children. So what happened is that some of them started looking for places to take their children for survival.”

Residential care home manager

“Children's homes never came to our village seeking children. We would have welcomed such assistance, but it never reached our family.”

Mother

“We even had situations where the children we have here wanted to invite their relatives here to also come and live here because of the situation at home.”

Residential care home manager

Kenya has been undergoing extensive care reform efforts in recent years, including attempts to reduce the number of children in residential care. For registered children's homes, decisions about entry into care are regulated by the government, and poverty or inadequate schooling alone are not seen as a valid reason for placement. As a result, care home staff confirmed that requests for entry into residential care due to poverty and lack of access to education do not always lead to placement into care. However, one of the care home managers and one of the parents we spoke to reported staff from some care homes going into communities to actively recruit vulnerable children. This suggests that not every facility is following government regulations and processes regarding entry into residential care.

Care home staff also told us that more children are now being placed into residential care than before the drought due to abandonment by parents, violence, abuse and exploitation. This includes children left behind by parents

migrating for work, children neglected or abused by their families, girls escaping Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and girls and boys removed from child marriage or the streets. In some facilities, this seems to be leading to an overall increase in the number of children in residential care.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a government directive designed to stem the spread of the disease led to the rapid reintegration of children from residential care back to their families. One care home manager described how falls in the number of children in their facility because of COVID-19 have been reversed due to climate change.

“But here in the children's home, I would say that during the drought, our number almost doubled. ... For example, a woman left her children in town. She used to be a casual labourer on the farms but due to the drought there's no work at the farm and there's some violence at home. She left her children there and went. We rescued the children and brought them here. And there were so many of such cases.”

Residential care home manager

More research is needed to explore 'rescue' from child marriage and consequent placement into residential care in the context of a decline in traditional arranged marriages and a rise in informal unions instigated by children themselves. It would be useful to examine what precisely children are being 'rescued' from and the necessity or otherwise of these placements into residential care.

## The reintegration of children from residential care back to families is becoming more challenging because of the drought

Following government-led care reform processes, the residential care homes we spoke to were trying to reintegrate children back into their families. However, the drought slowed down or stopped this reintegration process. In some cases, parents are no longer at home to care for the child as they have migrated for work. In other instances, staff felt that families were unable to care for children well, and that returning them to their homes at this time placed them at risk of hunger, pregnancy, marriage and work.

“They [the parents] would tell you that if you are bringing [the children] back, then bring them back with food because we don't have food here. If you don't bring them back with food, at least bring them back with coffins because they are going to die of hunger. And if you visit those families, you just find yourself shedding tears because they are so thin, children are crying, they have not eaten for so many days, and life is very difficult for them ... So drought has really affected our reintegration process ... I would say that were it not for the drought we would have reintegrated so many children back into their families, but now we are stuck because some of the parents have migrated, and some are leaving their homes for towns like Kitengela to look for employment, so even if you wanted to reintegrate the child where do you take her to?”

Residential care home manager

“You will release a girl and the next minute she comes back pregnant, and the mother is calling you asking for support. Like this one who has given birth and she is here. She had to come. The mother is asking ‘Who is going to feed the baby?’ and saying ‘Send me money for the milk.’”

Residential care home manager

“We have so far reintegrated about 40–50 children. I feel it's a good thing and we have tried to do as much as we can.... There has been no reintegration since the drought. We had an instance where we were taking the child home, by the time we got there, the father had left them and gone herding. The mum told us ‘There's no food so you bring her here to eat what?’ ... It was a situation like leaving a child in the lion's den and expecting her to remain alive and thrive. The lions will kill her.”

Residential care home manager

The government official we spoke to said that care home staff are often reluctant to reintegrate children as they become attached to them and are not fully committed to the value of family-based care. It was claimed that some care homes use the drought as an excuse to avoid reintegration.

“They are quick to admit children, but very slow to reintegrate children.”

Department for Children's Services

## Children can experience multiple forms of separation as a result of drought

Many of the participants described children experiencing multiple forms of separation from families due to the drought. Examples include the following.

- Inadequate care in kinship care placements leading to work, pregnancy and child marriage.

“Her mother sent her to live with her aunt and find a housemaid job. In the process, the girl got pregnant and entered into marriage.”

Mother

- Children leaving domestic work to marry as they hope marriage will provide them with a better life.

“I can't work as a house help forever. I would rather go and start my own family. In fact, if I found a husband today, I would just go and get married.”

14-year-old girl, domestic worker

- Children being removed from the streets or marriage to enter residential care.
- A lack of proper support for reintegration from residential care places girls at risk of pregnancy and subsequent marriage.

## Drought is affecting the quality of children's care

As well as the rising levels of violence in the home described above, the drought was also said to have reduced the capacity of families to supervise and engage with children. This was due to women having to work away from home, children not being in school, and caregivers being too distracted and stressed to care for children well.

“Life became very hard and some women had to leave their children at home and to look for casual jobs. This affected children because some cases of defilement were reported in these situations. The older children at home started looking after other children.”

NGO worker

“Parent-child relationships suffered due to parents' preoccupation with finding food for the family.”

Kinship carer

Communities are also less likely to supervise children as a result of the drought.

“With the drought, the community just turns a blind eye to the other kid: you cannot sympathise with the one whose mother is not there because you only have what is for you and your kids. And that is why you find that the young circumcised<sup>10</sup> girls can go and meet the boys who are selling sand, or the boys in town.”

Residential care home manager

As well as these negative reports around the quality of children's care, several of the participants were keen to point out how hard families continue to try to look after children in the face of enormous adversity.

“I think it is important that we understand some of the things that parents were doing were because they lacked any alternative and had no support. It could seem like child abuse, but for me, I see it as a parent who is trying so hard to support the children but not succeeding however much he or she tries.”

Residential care home manager

Residential care home staff said that drought-related shortages had led to struggles to provide adequate food and water for children in their care. One care home manager said that the donations from the community they used to rely on had also fallen. All of the residential care facilities said that they were managing to care for children despite these challenges. Further research is needed to understand the quality of care within residential care facilities in the context of climate change.

## Conclusion and implications for policy and practice

These findings raise multiple issues in relation to care reform in Kenya and the wider Eastern and Southern Africa region. They suggest that climate change is having an impact on patterns of family separation, entry into alternative care, reintegration back into families, and the capacity of caregivers to care for children. Relationships between drought and care are often complex, involving contradictory trends, and further research is clearly needed. However, our findings suggest that recognising and responding to climate change must now be a major feature of all care reform processes.

“You know, when we started, we never thought that drought would be something to consider when thinking of children in need of care and protection, but with the long droughts, we have learned that drought is a major issue that should not be ignored.”

Residential care home manager

In Kajiado County, where in the past children were primarily entering residential care because of poverty and lack of access to services, pregnancy, marriage and work seem to increasingly be contributing to the use of residential care. There are also connections between kinship care and pregnancy, marriage and work, and girls reintegrated from residential care may be more vulnerable to pregnancy and marriage.

More needs to be done to understand the connections between these child protection issues and ensure appropriate responses. This case study suggests that it is important to have a nuanced response that recognises the complexities in these linkages. For example, the care needs of a girl who has instigated an informal marriage with a boy are likely to be very different from the needs of a girl who has had an arranged marriage with an older man. Growing rates of pregnancy suggest the need for increased access to sexual and reproductive health services, and that forms of care need to be in place to support both young mothers and their babies.

The loss of cattle amongst the Maasai has led to cultural dislocation and a consequent enormous toll on mental health. Drought has dramatically increased poverty and hunger, reducing the resilience of families and communities to cope with shocks. This indicates that care reform processes must include stronger mental health and social protection components. This also provides greater impetus for reallocating resources devoted to residential care to supporting families to care for children.

The evidence suggests that climate change has had an impact on existing care reform processes. For example, slowing down reintegration and reversing gains in the reduction of the use of residential care. Care reform must be flexible and responsive to the dramatic changes happening in many communities across Eastern and Southern Africa as a result of climate change.

## Endnotes

- 1 IPCC (2022) *Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability – Chapter 9: Africa*. Geneva: IPCC.
- 2 Kimutai, J. et al (2023) *Human-induced climate change increased drought severity in Horn of Africa*. UK: Imperial College.
- 3 World Food Programme (2023) *WFP Regional Drought Response Plan for the Horn of Africa (January – December 2023)*. Switzerland: World Food Programme.
- 4 ACAPS (2023) *Horn of Africa – impacts of drought on children*. Switzerland: ACAPS.
- 5 UNICEF and Changing the Way We Care (2023) *Building climate change into care reform in Eastern and Southern Africa*. Nairobi: UNICEF.
- 6 Delap, E. and Long, S. (2023) *How to prevent family separation. Lessons learnt from Eastern and Southern Africa*. Nairobi: UNICEF.
- 7 ACAPS 2023.
- 8 Although primary education is free of charge in Kenya, parents are often expected to contribute to some of the costs of schooling, such as examination fees.
- 9 See webinar recording on this research here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48tKUW0ay-jo>
- 10 The interviews and wider research carried out by Child Frontiers indicate that in Kajiado County, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) represents a social sanction to engage in sexual relations. Although pregnancy outside of marriage is not considered taboo, pregnancy before FGM is.

## Acknowledgements

This document has been produced as part of the regional learning platform on care in Eastern and Southern Africa. The platform and its corresponding documentation were planned and conceptualised by UNICEF Eastern and Southern African Regional Office (ESARO) and Changing the Way We Care<sup>SM</sup> (CTWWC). CTWWC is funded by USAID, the GHR Foundation and MacArthur Foundation. The platform provides an opportunity for government, UNICEF and others involved in care reform in the region to share learning on care reform.

This case study was written by Emily Delap of Child Frontiers with the support of Ken Ondoro and Bertha Lutome. Changing the Way We Care played a key role in supporting the development of the case study. This was made possible with funding from USAID's Displaced Children and Orphans Funds.

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