Farmers working together to restore their degraded land and diversify production

Beverly Mugure Gichiri

Cattle benefitting from improved water sources. Photo: Beverly Mugure

As a farmer in northern Kenya, I came to understand the importance of dryland restoration. After moving to Kaijaido country in the south, I started an initiative to restore the land, increase food security and reduce poverty, supported by a grant from the East African Community with various activities supported by FAO and Yale University.

The local Maasai people are pastoral. They depend on pasture and browse trees for their livestock, but most land is now so degraded that this has led to hunger and hopelessness. I began by mobilizing the community and training them in the importance of land restoration. The aim was to foster relationships, learn by doing, and share and co-create knowledge on how to effectively and sustainably restore degraded land, in order to increase profitability and landscape and livelihood resilience.

The community's commitment was clear. They never missed a training session, which sometimes were held every day for a month, and this was key to the project's success. Training was done in different areas, with women's associations, schools and religious organizations in marketplaces and town centres, with local government, and private agricultural organizations. Kenya Red Cross supported costs for facilitation, volunteers, transport and learning materials. There were many challenges,

Beverly Mugure Gichiri, farmer, Kajiado County, Kenya

though, including language barriers (many Maasai women don't understand English and only some speak Kiswahili), poor roads, lack of water, and scarce finance. But the involvement of local government, an educational institution and a women's group was a great help. Many youth and women felt empowered and became interested in starting small agricultural projects themselves, to boost the local economy and tackle environmental challenges. This included vegetable growing, beekeeping, poultry production, tree planting, waste management, water conservation, fish farming in the newly constructed ponds, and even insect farming — raising crickets and termites for livestock feed.

Land restoration has had a great impact, with farmers taking active leadership roles. As a result, there is increased food production and reduced hunger, and the community members have mastered ways to conserve water by building small dams, which also increases production and biodiversity. I have seen a change of mindset among youth, and community resilience in their newfound ability to organize themselves and tackle climate change. At the international level, people can surely boost land restoration in Africa by focused incentives, introducing carbon prices, leveraging climate finance to mitigate risks, and educating communities to build self-sustaining agricultural projects.

A young farmer sowing vegetables after learning horticulture from other farmers. Photo: Beverly Mugure

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