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Youth as game-changers?

Young people's voices on social equity and climate adaptation in Kenya

NAI Working Papers 2

Olivia Ebenstål Almeida, Winnie Jeruto Chelagat, Reuben Kiptoo Cherutich, Eleanor Fisher, Jon Hellin, Tilde Lindbäck, Daisy Jepchirchir Kimaru, Wilson Kimaru, Benson Kimosop Ngetich, Patti Petesch, Caroline Jemase Yator

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Researchers and participants in a focus group discussion, Kenya, 2023. Photo: IRRI.

“Youth members in the village are supposed to be the game changers who should encourage more fairness in the village. This is because the youth in the village are the majority...”

25-year-old, young men’s focus group discussion, Cheso village.

Abstract

This working paper explores the perspectives of young men and women in rural Kenya on social equity and climate adaptation[1]. It draws on research conducted in three Endorois indigenous communities in Baringo County. Focus group discussions addressed young people's understandings and experiences of social equity and fairness, empowerment, collective action, local governance, natural resource management, and climate adaptation. By applying a social equity lens to young people's understandings and interpretations of the risks and opportunities they face, this research aims to identify entry points that empower them to advance their own lives and communities in ways they value. The findings suggest that young men and women perceive their communities as largely equitable — despite facing compounding disadvantages that include climate change and loss of livestock, the mainstay of their livelihoods. They value social equity and fairness, advocating for a balanced approach that prioritizes the most vulnerable, treats people equally, and ensures inclusive decision-making guided by competent leaders. Based on these understandings, they emphasize the strength of their village institutions and of their generation's agency and capabilities. Nevertheless, the testimonies also reveal significant barriers to achieving equitable climate adaptation, related to the need for greater access to resources and opportunities. Young women, especially, report a deep sense of marginalization and experience significant gender inequalities, noting their limited participation in the institutions and networks governing decision-making and resource distribution within their households and communities. Despite these challenges, both young women and men in the study had attained education at high school or college level, and felt empowered by their academic achievements. Their aspirations for improving their lives and strengthen their villages' resilience to climate change offer a basis for optimism. The study proposes investing in stakeholder capacity, fostering youth leadership and intergenerational exchanges, and developing strategies and partnerships responsive to the needs of rural youth, with particular concern for young women's inclusion. It underscores the importance of locally-led governance, inclusive decision-making, and collective action as key to achieving equitable climate adaptation and social transformation.

Key words: methodology, social equity, participation, gender, climate, transformative adaptation, Kenya.

1 This output accompanies the policy brief: Petesch, P., Fisher, E., Hellin, J., Ebenstål Almeida, O., Bullock, R. 2024. Building locally-led adaptation: Rural Kenyan youth perspectives on equity and resilience. CGIAR Research Initiative on Climate Resilience / CGIAR Research Initiative on Climate and Livestock. https://hdl.handle.net/10568/149343

Youth as game-changers?

Young people's voices on social equity and climate adaptation in Kenya

1. Introduction

Social equity is a crucial component of effective climate adaptation, as vulnerable populations — particularly rural youth— are disproportionally affected by climate change (Hellin et al., 2022). Natural resource sectors such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry are the backbone of rural economies but are highly sensitive to climate variability, making young people in East Africa especially vulnerable to climate impacts, with young women and children among the highest risks groups (World Bank, 2021). Importantly, many Kenyan youth, particularly those living in rural areas, depend heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods. They are part of a generation that will bear the long-term consequences of climate change and must be key agents in shaping sustainable and equitable responses to this global challenge. Their active participation in climate adaptation efforts is crucial for ensuring both economic resilience and environmental sustainability that are responsive towards young people's needs. Recognising the importance of socially equitable climate adaptation, this research focuses on Endorois pastoral communities in Kenya to ask how young people themselves understand social equity? And, what can decision-makers learn from their perspectives for building resilience to climate risks?

The African Union's Agenda 2063, titled *The Africa We Want*, envisions a continent centered on people-driven development, with a strong emphasis on harnessing the potential of its youth (African Union, 2015). Likewise, the Kenya's National Youth Development Policy seeks to ensure a socioeconomic transformation that benefits young people, fostering an equitable society through inclusive and participatory economic and social processes (MoIIYA, 2019). As this generation becomes increasingly well-educated and engaged in the civic and economic life of their communities, their voices in the climate conversation are vital for driving innovative, long-term solutions that are socially equitable.

According to the National Youth Development Policy (2019) nearly 75% of the Kenyan population are under the age of 35, with youth representing 55% of the country's labor force. However, there are significant challenges to realizing their full potential (NCPD, 2017). For example, in Baringo county only 45.3 percent of teenagers in Baringo County attend secondary school, and even those who complete their education face limited employment prospects and a need for greater training and skills development opportunities (NCPD, 2017).

Livestock keeping is a dominant form of livelihood in pastoral communities. Bullock et al. (2023)'s exploration of young people's climate adaptation strategies in

Kenya's livestock sector finds that traditional roles constrain young women's participation in potentially lucrative livestock opportunities despite some progress in resource access. With a focus on social norms and youth participation in livestock production and marketing in Baringo, Mutua et al. (2017) argue that social norms create disparities in claims and privileges based on gender and age; and these norms particularly constrain young women's ability to engage gainfully with livestock. They call for tailored measures to address gender and other inequities in youth access to employment in the livestock sector.

Gender roles, deeply embedded within social norms, influence access to resources, mobility, and opportunities for innovation in agricultural communities (e.g., Badstue et al., 2020). Bergman Lodin et al. (2019) reveal that gendered mobility impacts men's and women's capacities for agricultural innovation in Kenya, with women's freedom of movement often restricted by social norms. This limitation reduces their access to agricultural services and farmer groups, which in turn hinders their ability to innovate. Quandt (2019) further emphasizes the need for an intersectional approach to resilience, showing that perceptions of resilience in Kenya vary by gender and ethnicity. Women perceive their resilience as lower, highlighting broader inequalities in physical mobility, resource access and decision-making.

To understand the varied perceptions and disparities among youth, it is essential to move beyond treating them as a homogenous group. As Ng'ang'a and Crane (2020) highlight, climate change adaptation pathways are deeply influenced by the complexity of intersections between wealth, age, and gender, underscoring the importance of recognizing the diversity of social differences within communities. These distinctions directly impact individuals' access to adaptation resources and opportunities, resulting in unequal outcomes.

Incorporating a gendered and intersectional approach that provides insight into how social group differences shape people's experiences, we turn next to an introduction of the study's methodology; then outline challenges confronting pastoral youth in Baringo county, highlighting their perspectives on social equity, natural resource management and climate adaptation; finally, we end with a discussion of the conclusions and policy implications of the research. In presenting our findings, we prioritize the participants' voices, using direct quotes to convey the immediacy and richness of their perspectives. The quotes capture both the optimism of the young people and their recommendations for enhancing their lives and their communities' capacity to adapt to climate change.

The findings outlined in this paper are drawn from a larger participatory qualitative and comparative methodological study on socially equitable adaptation to climate change, within the CGIAR's Research Initiative on Climate Resilience (ClimBeR).[2] The research aims to better assess effective adaptation responses by exploring the underlying drivers of vulnerability to climate change, with attention to social differentiation, agency, and power relations. The methodology has been tested in six communities of Kenya and the Philippines.

2 For field methods, see Petesch et al., 2024a; for discussion and illustrative applications of the study's theory and methods, see Petesch et al., 2024c.

2. Methodology

The study employed qualitative social research methods. Data was collected through semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs) in three agropastoral communities in Baringo County, Kenya, in September 2023 (to maintain confidentiality referred to here by the pseudonyms Korok, Cheso, and Sipkawat). A total of 54 young people aged 18 to 25 participated, with focus groups held separately with young women and men. Research was conducted in the local Tugen language and later translated into English. The narrative data was analysed through coding and systematic content analysis, identifying key themes and patterns related to the study's objectives. For insights across the FGDs and study communities, such as from the narrative and numerical data generated by the "Ladder of Power and Freedom" activity described later in the text, comparative analysis was undertaken using a social science software (NVivo 14) and Excel.

Recognizing the inherent limitations of research methods such as FGDs, this study acknowledges potential biases. Participants might have had expectations of material benefits or felt pressured to present their community positively, possibly downplaying sensitive issues due to peer influence or to conform to community norms (see White, 2019). We address these concerns with methods that include: triangulating findings across the full dataset and with secondary literatures, transparently presenting both widely shared as well as less common findings and concerns, and by engaging reflexive pr actices that consider how our status as researchers can bias our learning.

3. Endorois Pastoral Livelihoods in Baringo County

Baringo County is located in central western Kenya. It is home to Endorois pastoralists who are a Tugen sub-group of the Kalenjin people. Endorois communities are concentrated in a part of Baringo County adjacent and near to Lake Bogoria. Both historically and in contemporary times, Endorois pastoralists have had to be flexible and innovative to cope with insecure land rights, climate variability and other rural uncertainties. Investment in social relations and the collective management of resources, while profoundly gendered, have long been central to how Endorois communities sustain themselves through periods of hardship and adversity, and through better times (Sergon, Akoth, & Dzinekou, 2022).

In the communities studied, most people are pastoralists, raising cattle, goats, sheep, and donkeys, with wealthier families owning larger herds and poorer households relying more on goats. Beekeeping is also a key livelihood activity, primarily carried out by men. Alongside managing all domestic labour in their households, women play a vital role in livestock keeping and chicken rearing. Income is primarily generated through the sale of animals, honey, charcoal, home-brewed beer, and through daily wage labour. Despite being illegal, charcoal production is widespread, driven by the need to cope with the changing climate and necessity of having ready cash. For local wage labour, men typically find work tending livestock or on farms, while women engage in domestic or farm labour. With limited formal employment opportunities, mostly restricted to a limited number of teaching, healthcare, or government positions, many young men migrate temporarily to seek work in sectors such as construction, hospitality, and transportation.

Intensified climate risks present new and significant challenges to Endorois communities. Although crop farming was a common practice in the past, recurring droughts and water scarcity have caused its decline, impacting not only agriculture but also household consumption and livestock care. An increase in extreme weather events is predicted, including heat stress and unpredictable rainfall, which exacerbate vulnerabilities to floods, droughts, and high temperatures (MoALF, 2017). A status report on participatory rangeland management initiatives by several Baringo communities, stresses major threats such as the rapid loss of natural vegetation, soil erosion, rangeland degradation, and low crop yields (Reconcile, 2022). These climate risks are compounded by high poverty rates—affecting 58.5 percent of the county's population—and limited infrastructure (MoALF, 2017, pp. 4-5).

Testimonies from young FGD participants confirm the profound impact of climate change on daily life, and illustrate how climate change and the pressures on natural resources are deeply intertwined with the community's social relationships and livelihoods:

> "Climate change has affected the operation of many [community] groups such that when there is no rainfall, we don't have pastures and our animals become emaciated to the point that they lose value. Our people are now divided because climate change has affected many activities. Even attendance at meetings is not regular anymore. Ploughing up land, planting and the whole crop wilts—this discourages even very strong members." (24-year-old, young men's FGD, Cheso village)

> "The river dried in 2022, hence leaving the spring as the only source of water. All the members of the village were depending on the spring for water. The pasture lands and the swamp also dried up leaving behind bare land. This brought a lot of stress on the livestock since there was no pasture for them. Hence farmers had to climb trees to cut branches for them to eat. It was during this season that most of the animals died due to hunger." (24-year-old, young women's FGD, Korok village)

Despite adversity, Endorois communities actively seek ways to overcome environmental stresses and build resilience. Several communities have adopted conservancy models, with over 15 established wildlife conservancies across Baringo County (BCCA, 2020).[3] Local conservancy organizations, managed by community representatives, play an active role in promoting and governing sustainable land management for agro-pastoral livelihoods as well as wildlife protection. Support from government, donors, NGOs, and private partners provides services like irrigation, seeds, early warning sys-

3 Conservancies are land designated by government through the Wildlife Act (2013) for wildlife, people and cattle to co-exist. For further information see: https://kwcakenya.com/conservancies/ accessed 2024.09.30.

tems, and credit, though these efforts are often hindered by resource constraints and limited farmer involvement (MoALF, 2017). Such financial and technical barriers can limit the communities' ability to employ and benefit from new technology and innovative practices advanced by the conservancies.

4. Youth Perspectives on Social Equity and Climate Adaptation

4.1 Understandings of Fairness and Social Equity

When discussing ideas of fairness and social equity in the FGDs, young women and men described a strong sense of community rooted in equitable treatment and long-standing traditions of consultation and sharing. Despite hardships and rapid change in the environment, they consult one another and share resources, such as food aid and school bursaries. Participants referenced circumstances when social equity calls for upholding the principal of equality, and associate fairness and social equity with inclusive decision-making and good leadership, which in turn fuels trust and harmony, alongside social and economic community development. The youth, especially young men, also felt empowered by their education. However, significant gender inequities emerged in how their knowledge and understanding can be applied within their communities. Young men generally reported capacity to shape important decisions in their lives and participate meaningfully in their villages' economic, civic, and political activities. In contrast, young women indicated they had limited freedom, influence, or means to access opportunities like community groups.

Prioritizing the Vulnerable. FDG participants agreed that vulnerable community members should be "considered first" when aid or resources become available. According to a 21-year-old woman from Korok Village, her community prioritizes households most in need, including *"families with large numbers of children and no source of income, or a family who is taking care of an elderly or sick member, or people with disabilities."* *"Nobody complains,"* related another 21-year-old while reflecting on the local custom, *"since it is very clear why that is being done."* Others agreed, adding that *"the worst off … are always considered first,"* which helps people to *"feel welcomed and appreciated in society."* Likewise, a 24-year-old man from Cheso village explained that vulnerable households receive larger portions of aid or resources: *"We look at a household which is very 'whusus' (with very scarce resources). This is because we cannot stay selfish in the village. In this village, everyone is not for themself. We want to see everyone in the village prosper."* In the same sentiment, a 23-year-old male business owner from Sipkawat cited a Tugen proverb, *'Moomei rorion koi,'* which translates literally as *"a stone cannot laugh,"* meaning that those facing problems should not be laughed at. Instead, he emphasized that the community should support and comfort those who are struggling to overcome difficult situations.

Equality. Study participants' reflections on equity also detail circumstances which call for equality in how people are recognized and treated, and how resources and opportunities are allocated. *"If you have a public office you need to serve all people equally,"* stated a 27-year-old man in Cheso. Other examples of equity include common grazing lands, boreholes, and rivers that all villagers can access equally. In Sipkawat, young

women stressed concerns for gender equality in their reflections on equity. A 23-year-old community warden and farmer in this group considered equity to require all people to be *"treated the same way … especially men and women, without favoring any of them, especially when sharing household chores, resources, or education opportunities."*

Equity and community harmony. On dimensions including prioritizing vulnerable people and equality, young people generally assessed their communities as being very equitable. For example, young men from Sipkawat emphasised their village is equitable *"because we share the available resources well."* Similarly, a 24-year-old woman from Korok perceived her village very equitable *"because natural resources like the rivers, the grazing fields... and even institutions like schools and the dispensary are used fairly among all villagers, and no one is excluded from using any of these resources in the village."* Participants in Cheso's young men's group emphasized that education is playing a crucial role in promoting equity in their community by *"bringing light."* Young people *"are now taking the lead in so many decisions in the village. They attend public meetings and have been included in the local government."* A 22-year-old man from the same community elaborated on how their village practices mutual support: *"We help each other during difficult times through fundraising and community work."*

FDG participants widely agreed that fairness and social equity are fundamental to nurture trust, harmony, and mutual support among villagers. A 24-year-old woman from Korok highlighted how fairness encourages positive social interactions: *"[Fairness] helps people to interact freely with one another in society since no one holds a grudge against the other person. When someone is in need or has a function and needs the rest of the people to help, people will help freely since there is no favouritism among them."* A 23-year-old man from Sipkawat shared a similar perspective, observing that *"If everyone is treated equitably, then there is harmony… and happiness in the family and village… This will increase the economy of the village because there will be more cooperation…"*

Inclusive decision-making and effective leadership. Young people consider fairness and social equity to be underpinned by participatory local governance and effective leaders, which in turn fuel greater trust, harmony and support among community members. All groups referenced their public community meetings ('barazas') when discussing equity: *"The chief calls meetings and villagers freely attend and are able to discuss issues in the village, and come up with solutions and this satisfies everyone"*, remarked a 24-year-old woman from Cheso. Another 24-year-old woman in this group drew attention to the importance of effective and responsive leaders:

> "The chief knows the population of every household. So, the chief prioritises the most vulnerable and the worst off in the village. In the case of [a household with many children], the chief and his committee decide to give them a little more."

However, study participants also described practices that are less equitable and even unfair. Several referred to instances of political favouritism by local leaders who, for instance, channel resources and opportunities to family and clan members or certain groups. They also lamented assistance programmes that provide insufficient aid and can exclude vulnerable community members, thereby fuelling tensions in their village. Moreover, heated debates arose in conversations surrounding gender inequities.

4.2 Persistent gender inequities - compounded by a young age

All three FGDs with young women referred to laws or expectations that provide for equal treatment of women and men, voicing frustration with customs that curtail their freedom to be mobile and manage their own livelihoods. They acknowledged education to be equally accessible to girls and boys and helpful in the "fight for their equity", but testified to gender norms that constrain women's freedoms whether or not they are well educated.

In the young women's FGD of Korok, the women especially stood out for their numerous testimonies about the persistence of restrictive norms that limit their influence, physical mobility, resource control and civic engagement. According to a 24-year-old mother of two with a college degree: *"Men in this village believe that women are people who should stay at home and take care of the house. Women are not allowed to move around anyhow and must ask permission first before going anywhere."* [There was a lot of agreement with this response.]

Other women of Korok testified that they generally have little control over the money they earn. In one case because *"the whole family is depending on her for food"*. Other testimonies included: *"some men even forcefully take money from their wives"*; and the husband *"ends up owning"* the livestock that women care for or even purchase themselves. Nor do women have much room for political engagement: *"Most women cannot get the time to go to those meetings due to the work they have at home. Hence, they lack the space to air out issues that affect them. Most public participation are attended by men; very few women go"* (24-year-old woman).

The two other women's groups addressed gender inequities less frequently in their discourse, though they often emphasized their limited participation in community meetings due to being *"busy at home doing chores."* While women appear to engage in political participation, they testified to significant barriers in Cheso that limit their influence:

> "Women are also heard but their decisions are not important compared to the men. Especially in the case of single mothers when their farms are invaded by other people's livestock, then they are not heard that much." (24-year-old)

> "Women do not have a voice because they do not take action when you report an incident where a goat has eaten your crops. When your husband has travelled, you will have to send a close male relative to the village elders so that your case can be heard." (24-year-old)

> "In this village, most of the leadership roles are given to men. Women are not given these opportunities to air their opinions. When given the opportunity then they are always put last. This opinion will not even be listened to." (23-year-old)

The young men's testimonies, meanwhile, mostly displayed little tolerance for gender equality. According to a 23-year-old man in Korok village: *"Men are the majority*

in the village; they are the ones making the decisions. And it's supposed to be like that because men are more than women. If a woman makes a proposal, and it is decided that way, then most men will not accept it." In Cheso and Sipkawat, some men challenged the fairness of aid, including from government agencies, which targets women while leaving men behind.

In discussions about their sense of agency and capacity to shape their lives, young men across the three focus groups generally conveyed this to be high, while women observed more modest levels of agency (see page 17). Many young people's testimonies about their 'power and freedom' expressed the strongly differentiated roles and conduct expected of young men and women in their villages.

4.3 Uneven capacities for collective action

The FGDs reflected on the young people's experiences with effective local networks as well as with initiatives in their villages to manage natural resources and address climate change. Again, clear gender differences emerged, with young men displaying stronger engagement in civic life, which also affords them more opportunities to adapt to climate change.

Young men's peer networks. Young men spoke highly of their local youth groups in Korok and Cheso. Korok's FGD contained members of a decade-old youth group that provides savings and loan opportunities and helps members with their businesses. *"When a member wants to do a project,"* explained a 24-year-old farmer and casual worker, *"we first look at the project or business plan they have, discuss this as a group, and then decide whether the member can be awarded the loan or not."* The group recently received training and seeds from the European Union to support grass regeneration, and the members are awaiting rains to proceed with testing the seeds. In Cheso, young men spoke of two groups that provide many benefits to their members and enjoy support from (unspecified) external partners. One group – a youth group – is open for all young men to join and supports members *"to stay on course"* with plans for their lives.

Young men also expressed strong appreciation for their community's environmental group, which protects wildlife and promotes the well-being of young people. In Sipkawat, young men associate their sense of power and freedom (represented by ladder step 4) to the rites of passage ceremony for boys of the same age set. This ceremony involves activities such as seclusion, circumcision, the construction of their own housing, and guidance from elders.

Young women's low levels of collective action. Unlike the young men, the young women who joined the study did not report being members of any groups. But they did testify to the presence of group-based savings, livestock rearing, vegetable farming and capacity-building initiatives for local women, some of which benefit from external support. However, some groups have dissolved due to hard times, lack of resources and members losing savings when others defaulted on loans. In Cheso, a 24-year-old woman engaged in farming, livestock keeping and charcoal burning stated, *"there are no groups that have brought a lot of benefits to the village. We have local groups that are not that helpful."* Study participants reported that some women's groups emerged following an awareness-raising initiative on the *"benefits of groups"* but they quickly disbanded due to lack of any meaningful support beyond the initial awareness campaign.

Value of conservancies. Two conservancy organisations (unnamed here for reasons of anonymity) were frequently mentioned during the youth FGDs. These conservancies are managed by community representatives, with one-third being women.

GENDERED LADDERS OF POWER AND FREEDOM

In this participatory activity, members of a focus group rate "most local young women's" (or men's if it is a young men's focus group) capacity to make consequential decisions. These decisions might include where to work for money or whether to start or end a relationship. On the ladder, step 5 indicates very strong power and freedom to shape their lives and step 1 indicates very little.

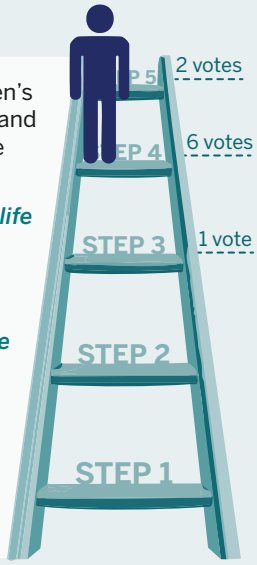
MOST LOCAL YOUNG MEN, KOROK VILLAGE

Participants of the three young men's groups on average rated most young men's power and freedom in their village to be at **step 4**, or quite strong. Leadership and marriage were considered empowering pathways for young men, as well as the consultative traditions of their villages and families.

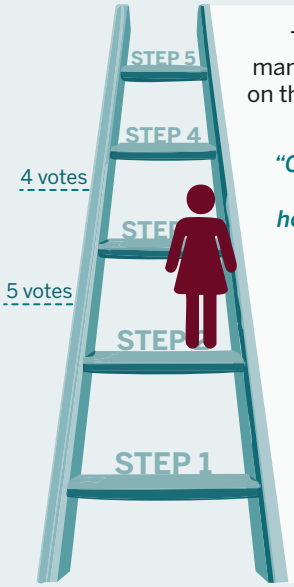
"Most of the youth in Korok make major life decisions...They are at a point in life of making choices about careers, a marriage partner, what to do to get daily bread and also what to do in the face of changing climate."
(25-year-old man)

"As youth we make decisions but not most decisions...Many of our youth have gone through school so they make informed decisions. "
(23-year-old man)

"There are those who have power because they are members of the Nyumba Kumi (a national community policing program) and may influence the outcome of some decisions they make."
(19-year-old man)



MOST LOCAL YOUNG WOMEN, KOROK VILLAGE



The young women's ratings averaged **step 2** across the three villages, with many young women testifying to the culture of their village as a key constraint on their capacity to make decisions and to access resources and opportunities in both the private and public spheres of their lives.

"Culture does not allow women to have a voice in a family or in the society. There is a level that women cannot go beyond when making decision at a household level. For example, they cannot decide if to sell livestock or land but have to wait for their husband."
(24-year-old woman)

"Women are in step 2 because they don't own any property...They just take care of their husband's property, and then the husband sells it and decides whether to give her some money, despite the fact that she has been the one taking care of this property."
(21-year-old woman)

"...even when you wish to go back to school to further studies, the husband will refuse...You end up staying to take care of livestock, which you don't decide anything about."
(24-year-old woman)

Both the young men's and women's testimonies about power and freedom reveal young people to be deeply embedded within their families, but in ways that differ markedly by gender. While young men often referred to parents and their own roles in sustaining the family as sources of strength, young women expressed frustration with parents who keep them from leaving the village to search for job opportunities.

This data collection tool builds on Petesch and Bullock (2018) "Ladder of Power and Freedom".

Both the young men and women testified to their conservancy being one of the most effective networks in their village, and how their interventions improve management of local land and water resources and have a positive impact on environmental protection, community development, and children's education.

Kipkawat's young women noted that the conservancies help protect swamps, catchment areas, rivers, trees, and wild animals. Young men in Kipkawat spoke about the conservancies' sensitization programs conducted through seminars and community meetings. They also highlighted efforts to curb charcoal burning, maintain *"good vegetation cover,"* and build drainage systems. Additionally, young women described the conservancies' contributions to the school, including the construction of classrooms, desks, gutters, and a water tank, as well as investments in fencing and planting trees to protect a nearby spring.

Equitable water management. The youth focus groups also reflected on the local institutions and natural resources they consider to be the most equitably managed. Four of the six focus groups selected boreholes. In each case, all community members access these water points for household and livestock needs throughout the year. However, village boundaries and the distribution of settlements cover extensive territory, meaning that access to water is very difficult for many villagers and also for livestock because of the distance they need to travel, and especially in long dry seasons that have become increasingly common. Observations suggest that wealthier households reside closer to borehole locations. In Korok, where the construction of a borehole is still underway, villagers depend on a local spring and river for their water supply. This source is located at a considerable distance from many households, creating a significant burden for women and children in particular, who are often responsible for collecting water.

All three villages have implemented rules to protect their water sources. In Korok, both youth groups reported established rules to safeguard their river and spring, including a ban on tree cutting in the area and washing clothes *"away from the river"* to prevent pollution. Similarly, Sipkawat benefits from river guards and rules *"made during public participation,"* which ensure fair access and maintain the river's health. Cheso is the only community with a reliable borehole that opened in 2022. *"We are taking care of it,"* says a 25-year-old man in the young men's group. One of the borehole's two water points is located near the Early Childhood Education Centre to facilitate access for children. Before the borehole, prolonged droughts caused severe hardship, as nearby springs and rivers dried up, forcing villagers to purchase or collect water from overused and polluted pan dams. Many villagers were dependent on a river nine kilometres away, and numerous livestock died during the droughts of 2018 and 2019.

Enduring seasons of scarcity. All the young people reported the climate was unpredictable and referred to the first five-to-seven months of the year as a period of limited rain, if it rained at all. The young people gave examples of diverse strategies they used to tide their families and animals over until the rains begin. Some village men migrate with livestock in search of pasture and water; others migrate temporarily for casual jobs, often in construction or retail. According to the young women's FGD in Korok, during rainy seasons young men typically sell livestock and honey, saving the proceeds to manage the lean periods when animals' prices fall and bees abscond from their hives. In Kipkawat, when nearby water sources are depleted, village men work together to secure water from boreholes for livestock and protect crops from wild animals. In semi-arid regions, crop farming is now only feasible in irrigated fields near persistent rivers, leading fewer households to store maize grain for lean times, a com-

mon coping practice now disrupted by recent droughts.

Other important coping measures pose health risks, strain natural resources or are illicit. Charcoal burning, an arduous and unlawful activity, is identified as a crucial way of securing cash to put food on the table. In Cheso, young women reported that during the season of scarcity, charcoal burning is *"mostly our main source of income."* Depending on the village, both men and women were reported to prepare and sell alcohol; this is carried out privately as it is also unlawful.

Men's migration – especially young men's – and the stress of protracted drought likely contribute to women's greater freedom as well as the need for women to take up livelihoods traditionally associated with men in their villages (also see Rao et al., 2019, referenced below). Some local women reported moving into beekeeping and honey sales, a domain traditionally associated with men. As discussed above, nevertheless, the young women who joined the study rarely consider their diverse contributions to sustaining their households to be empowering. Rather, they consistently express little control over their own livelihood activities, finance, and livestock.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The preceding discussion has explored the perspectives on social equity and climate adaptation of young men and women from the Endorois communities in Baringo County, Kenya. By centring their voices, the paper underscores the critical need for climate adaptation strategies that reflect the specific realities of rural youth, ensuring their active role in shaping sustainable and inclusive futures for their communities. Growing educational attainment and good awareness of social and environmental issues position them as crucial advocates for sustainable and equitable adaptation pathways.

Baringo's villages, many of which lack resilient institutions and infrastructure and sustainable livelihood opportunities, face significant challenges in adapting to climate change and addressing other pressures on their well-being. Nonetheless, the youth in these communities take action when they can and express a deep sense of pride in their villages, identifying strong community bonds as a key source of resilience.

The study participants place a high value on social equity and fairness, and evaluate their communities to be on an equitable trajectory despite facing multiple challenges. They express strong support for local customs that prioritize and share resources with the most vulnerable members of their communities. They also regard equity as the foundation for equal treatment among villagers and generally perceive their local government as practicing inclusive decision-making, supported by competent leadership.

The participants' narratives reveal deep integration within their families and communities, yet pronounced gender inequities persist within these social fabrics. Young men often describe a sense of power and freedom in their household roles and livelihood initiatives, while young women report constraints on their physical mobility, access to resources and livelihood opportunities, ability to engage in collective action, and have a voice within both their homes and in local governance structures.

The transition from dependency on parents to independence brings new responsibilities and expectations, which can be particularly stressful for both young men and women. Young women who challenge village norms, such as by pursuing a business enterprise, often face social backlash. Nonetheless, these young women are educated,

eager to enhance their autonomy, and seek support in their income-generating initiatives—especially during seasons of scarcity when the men in their households migrate for work or in search of pasture for livestock.

To effectively expand opportunities for both young women and men, collaborative reflection and negotiation is required. The Kenya Youth Development Policy's emphasis on "transformative leadership" recognizes the need for dialogue between youth and elders to exchange ideas on cultural values and mentorship (MollYA, 2019). This study supports this "whole-of-community" approach, emphasizing the knowledge and gatekeeper role of influential community leaders and the importance of engaging them in strategies that nurture equitable norms and institutions.

Insights from Baringo County reveal a need to build capacity among key stakeholders—such as elected officials, NGO representatives, and donors—to implement climate adaptation strategies with a focus on social equity. Participatory action learning programs that include marginalized voices can help address deep-rooted social norms and advance gender equity. Engaging local leaders and community institutions in these efforts can promote inclusive governance and fair resource distribution. For instance, multi-stakeholder planning platforms can ensure diverse community representation and support locally-led adaptation strategies. Addressing issues like water infrastructure through community-driven assessments and sharing successful adaptation practices can strengthen resilience. Additionally, fostering inter-generational mentoring networks and developing learning partnerships in remote areas can enhance indigenous knowledge and community resilience.

In conclusion, as testimonies from young men and women have demonstrated, achieving equitable climate adaptation and social transformation in Baringo and similar contexts depends on strengthening local leadership, improving community institutions, and promoting gender-inclusive policies that reflect the realities of young people's lives. Despite significant challenges, strategic, community-centred approaches offer substantial potential for transformative change.

Ethical and research clearance

Research was governed by the following ethical and research approvals: ILRI-IREC2023-39 and NACOSTI P/23/31996/402479 (Kenya).

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How do youth from a pastoral area in Kenya understand and experience social equity in their communities? How do they perceive their capacity to adapt to climate change? This paper draws on participatory qualitative research conducted in three Endorois indigenous communities in Baringo county. Applying a social equity lens to young people's understandings of the risks and opportunities they face, the study aims to identify entry points that empower them to advance their lives in ways that they value. The findings suggest that young men and women perceive their communities as largely equitable – despite facing compounding disadvantages. They emphasize the strength of their institutions and of their generation's agency and capabilities. Nevertheless, the testimonies also reveal significant barriers to change related to the need for greater access to resources and opportunities. Young women, especially, report a deep sense of marginalization and experience significant gender inequalities. The study underscores the importance of locally-led governance, inclusive decision-making, and collective action as key to achieving equitable climate adaptation.

This working paper is based on SDG-relevant research, concerning goals 5, 10, 13 and 15.

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THE RESEARCH PRESENTED here is drawn from a research project at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in partnership with CGIAR, a research alliance funded by among others the United Nations and the World Bank. The CGIAR Initiative on Climate Resilience aims to transform the climate adaptation capacity of food and agricultural systems in low- and middle-income countries. Its goal is to tackle vulnerability to climate change at its roots and support countries as they adapt and build equitable and sustainable futures.

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