

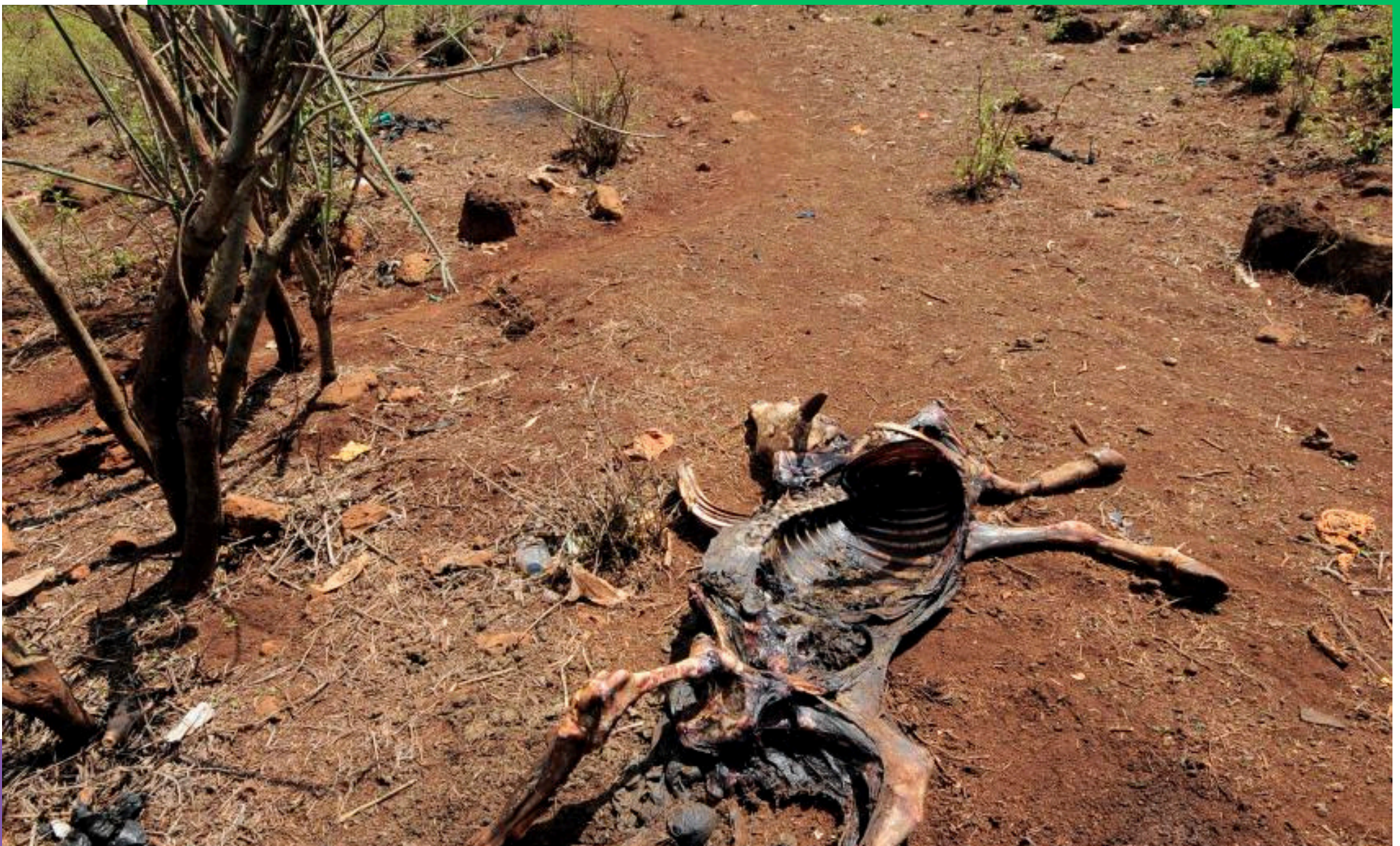
SHIFTING FROM REACTION TO RESILIENCE



**AS DROUGHT TIGHTENS ITS GRIP IN THE NORTH,
KENYA MUST SHIFT FROM REACTION TO RESILIENCE**

BY LABAN KEINO

Drought in northern Kenya has become an intensifying and recurring climate shock, and its footprint is expanding. Recent figures paint a harsh reality. Towards the end of 2025, the critical October-December short rains fell between 30 % - 60 % of the normal, marking one of the driest seasons since 1980s. This failure follows back-to-back poor rainy seasons, leaving the region without the basic moisture needed to sustain water sources, crops, or pasture. As a result, the World Health Organization warns that more than 2.1 million Kenyans are now at heightened risk of hunger, malnutrition, and disease, with pregnant women and children under five among the most vulnerable. This is far from a momentary hardship. It is a prolonged climate catastrophe that strips communities of dignity, undermines health services, and destroys food systems. Pastoralist communities are watching herds weaken or die, forcing families to make impossible choices. Relief food arrives, yes, but as one elder from Isiolo's remote drylands put it: "relief does not return our lost assets."





What Kenya is experiencing in the north is climate change in motion. In practical terms, it means three consecutive failed rainy seasons causing shifts in ecological dynamics. Pastures cannot regenerate, and livestock graze on ghostly landscapes or die. Social consequences are fast emerging. Extreme scarcity has led to increase in child marriage and exploitation, as desperate families trade daughters for livestock or immediate relief. Church leaders and community voices from the region plead for urgent help, describing the situation as dire and compounding hardships for those already marginalized. This is not just a pastoral crisis but cuts across social stability, gender equity, education, and nutrition.

In January 2026, the Kenyan government stepped in to mobilize over 6 billion ksh for food and drought response, along with efforts to protect livestock and provide fodder and water. Ministries continue food and non-food distribution to exposed communities, and efforts to protect livestock are still underway. These actions are necessary and timely. However, focusing only on relief is an incomplete response. It treats the symptoms but not the disease. As legislators and local leaders have urged, there is growing pressure to declare the drought a national disaster and to adopt strategic, long-term adaptations, and not just short-term fixes. Emergency food aid should continue. But relief without resilience means vulnerable populations will be one dry season away from catastrophe.

Kenya has an extensive policy and legal framework to address drought and climate shocks. The Climate Change Act mandates integration of climate risk into national and county planning, while the National Drought Management Authority, established under the National Drought Management Authority Act, was created to coordinate drought risk reduction and end emergency-driven responses. The National Climate Change Action Plan outlines adaptation priorities such as water harvesting, climate-smart agriculture, and early warning systems. Complementary frameworks like the National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands and the Ending Drought Emergencies Framework recognize pastoralism as a viable livelihood system and commit to long-term resilience building in ASAL regions..



However, implementation gaps continue to weaken impact. Adaptation financing remains inconsistent and donor-dependent, coordination between national and county governments is fragmented, and early warning systems are not always matched with timely action funding. Infrastructure such as boreholes often suffers from poor maintenance, while land fragmentation, conflict, and limited cross-border grazing agreements restrict pastoral mobility in practice. As a result, Kenya's strong policy architecture has not fully translated into resilience on the ground, turning recurrent droughts into recurring humanitarian crises and exposing deeper governance fragilities.

If we accept that this drought is shaped by global climate change, then our response must also be systemic and anticipatory. Here's what transformational action could look like:

Embed Water Security as Climate Security:

Drilling and rehabilitating strategic boreholes, expanding large-scale water capture and storage systems, and investing in watershed management must be non-negotiable priorities. Without reliable water, pastoral systems collapse, and families face impossible choices. The proposed Daa River Basin initiative could be game-changers for over 3 million people across Kenya, Ethiopia & Somalia.

Reimagining Livelihoods:

Pastoral mobility should be recognized and enabled through policy, infrastructure, and conflict management as a climate-adaptation strategy

Strengthening Early-Warning & Preparedness:

Predictive climate data and alerts that can be accessed by the community could transform drought response from scrambling to strategic. Investments in satellite monitoring and indigenous forecasting partnerships can save lives before conditions deteriorate.

Diversified Local Economies:

Livelihood diversification through non-farm employment, value addition, and drought-resilient agribusiness helps households absorb shocks without falling through the cracks. Social protection, nutrition programs, and cash transfers should not be intermittent stopgaps but permanent features. Drought-prone regions cannot wait until the next emergency to access support.

Some may argue that Kenya's economy cannot sustain these investments, or that climate adaptation is primarily a global responsibility. However, the cost of inaction is far greater than the cost of resilience investments. Climate adaptation is both a national and global imperative. While international support should supplement Kenya's efforts, local policies and systems should lead in the response.

At BRICS Insights we believe that Kenya should ring-fence predictable domestic financing for adaptation, legally link early warning alerts to automatic early action funding triggers, and strengthen national-county coordination through clear accountability frameworks and performance benchmarks. Without institutional accountability and guaranteed financing, even the best policies will remain aspirations rather than protection for vulnerable communities



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