How Indigenous People in Africa are impacted by climate change

The Indigenous Peoples in Africa are victims of climatic changes generated as result of polluting industry in other parts of the world. At the same time, they are displaced from their lands due to agricultural expansion and top-down conservation policies, the latter often to promote profitable tourism. While suffering from drought and famine, Indigenous pastoralists engage in livestock keeping that protects biodiversity, and they possess vital knowledge for the protection of nature.

By Gideon Sanago - October 1st 2022

As the continent gears up for tough negotiations in Egypt at the COP 27 climate talks, facts are glare that the Indigenous Peoples in Africa are victims of human-triggered climatic disasters that have added gloom to their poverty.

At Marsabit County in northern Kenya near the Ethiopian border, Abdullahi Aden tenders his only remaining cow after losing 40 animals to drought. He is one of the hundreds of Indigenous livestock keepers in drought prone northern Kenya which has not received rain for the past three years. Like elsewhere in the vast Horn of Africa, the crisis has been exacerbated by conflict and insecurity largely triggered by battle for the scarce resources.

The Maasai of northern Tanzania

In Ngorongoro, northern Tanzania, the iconic highlands that are famous world over have turned into a theatre of hopelessness. Poverty has descended on the once proud Maasai pastoralists such that some of them have been reduced to paupers begging for food. Indeed an estimated 50 percent of about 100,000 Maasai in the area are now categorized as poor. About 70 percent of them suffer from acute hunger, in essence under siege from starvation and hence aggravating their poverty status.

The Maasai constitute the majority of the Indigenous pastoralists of the Ngorongoro area in Tanzania's Arusha region. For more than 50 years they have been denied their rightful share
of the national cake when the authorities banned farming. The Ngorongoro Conservation Area is a multiple land use model which does allow both wildlife, tourism and human (the Maasai). Initially human activities was allowed such as small scale farming for subsistence, livestock grazing in critical areas such as the craters and any other social and economic activities. All these were restricted.

The Indigenous Peoples in the area have been living with and protecting the natural resources including the wildlife found in the conservation area for decades, but they have not received benefits for this. Rather they became victims of intimidation and harassment. The government insists that Ngorongoro be preserved to benefit the multi million dollar tourism industry and nature conservation. Incidentally, the Ngorongoro Conservation Area was, among others, established "to safeguard and promote the interests and the rights of Maasai Indigenous Peoples living in the area" (Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism).

In recent years, the Maasai and Barbaig (also known as Datooga) cattle keepers have been forced to migrate to other areas. With a ban on farming that would have catered to the food needs of their growing families, they have been forced out of their ancestral land to areas where cultivation is allowed.

Although the area has suffered cycles of droughts for decades, human rights activists have blamed unfriendly policies on the Maasai woes. One of them, PINGOS Forum based in Arusha, wants lifting of the ban on farming in the 25 villages in Ngorongoro and easing the mobility of their livestock.

This is the best way to address hunger and starvation of the Maasai living in Ngorongoro which was transformed into a conservation site in 1959. Mitigation measures against the climate change impacts have to include conservation systems by the Indigenous communities. Indigenous communities' practices of conservation and management of natural resources must be recognized and protected. Respect and protection of the pastoralists' livelihood is intertwined with conservation.

**Nomadic pastoralism defended**

Three other Indigenous Peoples in Tanzania -the Barbaigs, Hadzabe and Akiyie, who are also
found in the northern regions-, have suffered the same predicament. For the cattle-keeping Barbaig, the Nilo Hamitic group whose origin is the Manyara region, a land conflict has forced them out of their grazing land. They were forced out of their ancestral land over the Hanang plateau in the 1970s to pave the way for a grand wheat farming project by then supported by the Government of Canada. The new settlements were equally unfriendly; they found themselves in serious land conflicts with other land users over the grazing land. The Hadzabe and Akiyie, the hunter-gatherer communities found in the Lake Eyasi basin and in Kiteto and Simanjiro Districts, have their ancestral hunting land invaded by other land users.

PINGO’s Forum and other advocacy groups have persistently defended nomadic pastoralism practices by Indigenous communities especially given that livestock-keeping is more resilient to climate extremities than other livelihoods. Some have suggested that traditional herders should discard their nomadic way of life with the argument that methane emissions from livestock contributes to climate change. In reality, the nomadic Indigenous Peoples in Africa are the victims, not the cause, of the climate extremities and calamities brought about as result of centuries of polluting industrialization elsewhere in the world. Indeed the mode of life of the Maasai and Barbaig cattle herders should not be blamed for global climate hazards.

If the Maasai abandon cattle-herding this will be the end of their livelihood. But the fact is that the pastoral economy contributed little to greenhouse gas emissions in comparison with other sectors. Traditional cattle herders in Tanzania have been victims of climate-related hazards ravaging the world even with limited emissions from their countries. According to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Africa emitted only 3.8-4.0 percent of the greenhouse gases (GHGs) globally.

Indeed, the Indigenous Peoples contribute to protection of their lands and nature. In African countries climate change impacts are manifested as severe droughts which continue to decimate large herds of livestock and severe hunger to people. But besides land erosion in some spots due to large herds of animals, many areas inhabited by the Indigenous
communities have been safe from large scale loss of natural resources.

Who are the Indigenous People in Africa?

Although the vast majority of African peoples claims that they’re Indigenous in the sense that they originate from the continent, in practice, identity and self-determination as an Indigenous People per definition is more restrictive. Groups and communities who do claim this recognition are those who of various reasons, have been placed outside of the dominant state systems. Their culture and ways of life differ considerably from the dominant society and their cultures are under threat, in some cases to the extent of extinction. The survival of their particular way of life depends on access and rights to their traditional land and the natural resources thereon.

Another important aspect is that Indigenous Peoples from this continent suffer from discrimination being regarded as less developed and less advanced than the other more dominant sectors of society and they often live in inaccessible regions, geographically isolated and suffer from various forms of marginalization, both socially and politically. Indigenous Peoples in Africa tend to be subject to domination and exploitation within national political and economic structures that are commonly designed to reflect interests and activities of the national majority.

Their traditional practices and land claims often come into conflict with the objectives and policies implemented by governments, companies and surrounding dominant societies. Cattle herders in the Horn of Africa, notably Ethiopia, are among them and have also lately been reported to be confronting the worst consequences of extreme weather. Ethiopia, which is leading in Africa in livestock population - followed by Tanzania - has 15 percent of its people involved in pastoralism compared to 10 percent for Tanzania.

The PINGOs Forum official's view that pastoralism was more responsive to environmental and climate variability is supported by other activists in Africa who argue that instead of harming the environment, traditional livestock keeping has sustained biodiversity. "We don't accept the notion that nomadic pastoralists are contributing to climate change", said an activist from the Nairobi-based Pan African Climate Justice Alliance (PACJA).
Climate change linkage with conflicts and urgent call to take action

The Indigenous Peoples have an important role to play on a larger scale in taming climate change. Indigenous Peoples are the solution through the application of their knowledge as key adaptation and mitigation measures to climate change impacts. The United Nations recognizes the Indigenous Peoples as holders of invaluable knowledge on sustainable management of natural resources. They have a special attachment and relation to, and use of, their traditional land for their cultural, physical and economic survival.

As COP27 draws near, activists warn of how climate change triggers conflicts over the scarce resources and vice versa. Although climate change may not be directly linked to armed conflicts, communities that have conflict are not likely to cope with climate change challenges. It may indirectly increase the risk of conflict by exacerbating existing social, economic and environmental factors. This is more pronounced when livestock herders and farmers are pushed to share diminishing resources due to changing climate. The scenario, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), can stir tension in places that lack good governance.

But the cornerstone is for the world to seek ways and come up with solutions to contain the escalating heatwaves, floods, wildfires and severe droughts brought about by climate change. These will need first and foremost doing away with fossil fuels which is the primary source of rising carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Gideon Sanago is a Maasai leader born and raised in the big Maasai family in Simanjiro, Tanzania. He is currently working at PINGO’s Forum as Climate Coordinator. He also a National Coordinator for Tanzania Indigenous Peoples Network on Climate Change hosted by PINGO’s Forum.