

Stories from the field: Food and nutrition challenges in north-western Kenya

Based on interviews with two PFS members of the Pokot and Turkana tribe

Securing food supplies is a struggle some pastoral communities in the Horn of Africa face every day. In the semi-arid north-western region of Kenya, members of the Pokot and Turkana tribes live on two meals per day. FAO REOA and its partners have rolled out the Pastoralist Field Schools (PFS) programme to help improve the food and nutrition security situation, but the local communities are still vulnerable. Cheppurai Lolli and Elizabeth Imuran, both PFS members, share their experiences.



Cheppurai survives on two meals per day

Rain is pouring down in Pokot. The rainy season has started on time but for Cheppurai Lolli it doesn't bring much relief this year. Cheppurai lives with her husband and her youngest daughter of 13, who still goes to school, in a small, well-kept round hut. This morning, they had a little breakfast. For the next meal they will have to wait until the evening. Cheppurai is a member of the Nauyapong PFS group, but the last few months she had to cope with some setbacks she was not prepared for.

The family was badly hit by East Coast Fever, wiping out all their cattle. As dairy products are important traditional food sources for the Pokot ethnical group, the impact of the loss was significant. Cheppurai still has four goats, but they do not produce enough milk to feed her family.

"The milk produced by our goats is drunk by the herder before he takes them to the fields to graze. The milk from three goats does not even fill one cup so it is just enough to feed one person. I need a herder for security reasons as thieves might steal my few remaining goats."

The family relies on the community to help them through these difficult times. Their eldest daughter, who is married,

brings milk on a daily basis, while neighbors borrow some food if they have any to spare. The family's chicken can add some variety to their diet, Cheppurai explains while she shows a container with six eggs, but their number has decreased.

"Our chickens got infected by coccidiosis. Luckily some survived although it is a struggle to find their eggs as they wonder off in search of ants, worms and fresh grass."

Cheppurai has a small farm and some seeds to plant, but the yields would not be enough to feed them. She has addressed this issue at the PFS meetings. "We have requested for quality seeds but in the meantime we are sharing the little traditional seeds we have amongst ourselves. I normally preserve my share using smoke and ashes."

Access to water is less of an issue as two dams were built near the village, although the water is still dirty. She occasionally tries to boil it but she admits she is often too tired.

Building a food reserve

Food security is not so much an issue for Elizabeth Imuran at the moment. Elizabeth is a member of the Kogito PFS group. Through a loan via the Village Community Banking (VICOBA), set up by her PFS group, she has been able to start her own small business. Previously, Elizabeth could only sell a few sacks of maize, barely making enough to feed herself and her family. With the loan she can now make regular visits to Chepreria market in West Pokot where she buys maize stocks.

'I wait until sorghum is scarce and prices shoot up, then I go to the market and sell.'
Elizabeth Imuran

"When we started VICOBA I was able to take a loan of KS 4 000. After two months I made a profit of KS 15 600

through sales of the maize at a local market in Turkana. I returned KS 4 800 to VICOBA as we pay an interest of KS 100 for each KS1 000 borrowed per month. I was left with KS 10 000, which I invested further in my business. These days I am able to buy meat, sugar, vegetables or milk to feed my family and meet other basic needs in my house.”

Elizabeth has been living in Turkana since 1976. She takes care of her daughter’s children who live in the hut next to hers. The daily diet of the family mostly consists of a dish of maize flour called ‘ugali’ and milk. Vegetables, beans and fruits are only sometimes available. Elizabeth explains that there used to be a market close to her village, but traders would only offer fruits in November - just one month per year. Few families in her community grow vegetables and fruits, as the veggie patches and orchards need to be fenced and guarded against animals and thieves. The little fruits and vegetables Elizabeth buys, rot easily as she doesn’t know how she can preserve them.

This year Elizabeth planted sorghum, a cereal crop grown for food and animal feed. Currently the rains are sufficient and she can foresee a good harvest. Now is the time for Elizabeth to prepare and build a food reserve because she is aware that the elements of nature are very unpredictable in these regions.

“When I harvest, I first keep it all in the granary, but I divide it into two portions. One is for us to eat at home, and the other portion is for sale. We do not sell immediately, since the price will be very low. I wait until sorghum is scarce and prices shoot up, then I go to the market and sell. At that time, I am able to maximize profits.”

For Cheppurai and Elizabeth food and nutrition security is not a guarantee. FAO’s Pastoral Field Schools contribute to reduce their vulnerability by providing platforms for discussions and assisting members in identifying local solutions. VICOBA has played a great role in improving the livelihoods of communities and building resilience. But with the number of hazards increasing, the needs remain high.

April 2013

For more information contact:

Angela Kimani
Nutrition Officer
FAO REOA
Angela.Kimani@fao.org
+254-(0)20-7625970



Subregional Emergency Office
for Eastern and Central Africa