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Positioning Frontier County Governments for Future Pandemics, Natural Disasters, and Human-made Crises

Insights from the National Drought Management Authority, Chief Executive Officer - James Oduor

Introduction

One year since the first case of the COVID-19 pandemic was discovered in Kenya, the national and county governments are still reeling from its effect. Both National and County governments have been disrupted in terms of objectives, operations, and development progress. The situation is even worse for frontier counties, which are consistently faced by other shocks, including floods, locusts, drought, and food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic has stirred the need for both levels of government to reflect on preparedness for disaster management. Therefore, it is time for both levels of government to consider sustainable approaches in building resilience of both county governments and communities, in preparation for possible pandemics, natural disasters, and human-made crises that may occur in the future.

The National Drought Management Authority (NDMA), under the Ministry of Devolution and ASALs and is the national Authority responsible for drought risk management. NDMA disseminates information from the national drought early warning system to a wide range of stakeholders. It also issues periodical reports on the country's drought position through regular Early Warning Bulletins (EWB) to inform the decision-making process by the national and county governments, UN agencies, NGOs, and local communities.

In an interview with the Resilience Learning Activity, NDMA CEO James Oduor shares insights on disaster-resilient frontier counties' catastrophe management.



James Oduor

National Drought Management Authority, Chief Executive Officer

1. As the national agency responsible for drought management, NDMA has long-time experience in providing drought early warning and contingency planning support to county governments. How does NDMA provide early warning support to county governments?

- We manage a community-based early warning system that operates in each county and is coordinated at that level. Monthly, sometimes bi-monthly, field monitors collect data from a sample of households. This is combined with information from other stakeholders and institutions in the county and remote sensing to produce a county early warning bulletin.
- The county bulletin is reviewed and discussed by the County Steering Group (CSG) monthly. The CSG is chaired by the Governor or the County Commissioner and attended by all the relevant sectors. The CSG approves the bulletin, and the NDMA then combines it with the reports from all the other ASAL counties to produce a national bulletin.
- The data generated by the early warning system tells us what is happening and what is likely to happen and indicates the kind of actions likely to reduce the impact of an evolving drought. We believe it is a good decision-making tool that can help us prepare and take early action.
- However, we are always trying to improve the tools we use. We are currently reviewing the drought early warning system, including how it relates to other drought and climate information systems and will be discussing the findings with the county governments in due course.

2. Engaging communities in disaster contingency planning is essential to ensure that people on the ground are prepared for potential disasters. How does NDMA support community-based contingency planning about drought response and preparedness?

- We facilitate a process of ward-based Participatory Disaster Risk Assessment (PDRA) in collaboration with local leaders, technical officers from the county administration, and civil society.
- PDRA participants work through a series of steps, which include: (i) identifying and ranking the hazards they face in the ward, (ii) deciding which groups or individuals are particularly vulnerable to these hazards and why, and (iii) agreeing on the capacities they must deal with them. The hazards may include drought, floods, conflict, and disease: at the ward level, it makes sense to analyze all disaster risks, not just drought.
- The PDRA process uses several participatory tools, such as resource mapping, timelines, seasonal calendars, and gender daily calendars, to ensure that the analysis draws directly from participants' experience and knowledge. It concludes by developing a community action plan based on the analysis.

3. How does the early warning and contingency planning supported by NDMA guide the national and county governments' investment decisions on drought response and resilience building?

- In terms of drought response, the NDMA supports each county to develop a County Drought Contingency Plan. These are informed by the ward-level plans and describe, sector by sector, what should be done during each phase of drought.
- Five drought phases are identified each month by the early warning system, including: 'normal,' 'alert,' 'alarm,' 'emergency,' and 'recovery.' They indicate how far the situation is from what would be considered normal the time of year. Unlike other disasters, droughts evolve gradually over time. The drought phases help us identify the best course of action for the stage a particular drought has reached.
- The County Drought Contingency Plan is approved by both the County Steering Group and the NDMA in advance. An approved plan is a condition for accessing drought contingency funds held at the national level. Once a county, or part of a county, reaches the alert or alarm phase, the contingency plan is quickly reviewed. A more focused response plan is developed which addresses the features of that drought. For example, it may affect a particular area or a particular sector of the economy.

- These response plans are financed from multiple sources, including the county government and its partners at that level, such as NGOs active in the county. Counties can also apply to the NDMA for assistance since we can access some modest resources for preparedness and early response.
- In terms of resilience, these interventions are closer to sustainable development, such as strengthening basic infrastructure and services. So, we would expect to see them evolve out of the normal process of county development planning. However, the PDRA plans are one source that the county sectors can draw on as they prepare their annual plans and budgets.

4. Following devolution, disaster preparedness and response are shared responsibilities of the national and county governments. How does NDMA work with the county governments and the various sectors at the local level to coordinate drought response and resilience-building interventions?

- The County Steering Group is the principal mechanism for coordinating both response and longer-term action. The county leadership chairs the CSG, and the NDMA provides the secretariat. As well as technical officers from the sectors, representatives of civil society organizations, and other partners may also attend.
- When a drought arises, the county constitutes technical teams to carry out rapid assessments, prepare response plans, and monitor both the development of the drought and the effectiveness of the response. The relevant county sectors lead these teams. The NDMA is usually part of these teams and provides technical and financial support to them where it can.
- Twice a year, after the long and short rains, a multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder team of experts from both the national and county governments, UN agencies, and NGOs assess the impact of the season in each county using a standard methodology. The NDMA and the World Food Programme jointly lead this process, ensuring a more coordinated and efficient assessment approach. The final reports – one for each county and a national report – provide a single consolidated source of information about the current food security situation, which then informs response plans.
- Investments in resilience are coordinated under the Ending Drought Emergencies framework, Kenya's long-term strategy for reducing vulnerability to drought. These coordination arrangements are currently under review, and we hope they will be strengthened in the future.

5. Looking ahead, what do you see as the main challenges and opportunities for strengthening disaster management in the frontier counties?

- The biggest challenge is predictable financing. Without funds set aside and immediately available when the counties need them, the response will always be slow.
- Kenya is making progress: for example, we now have a National Drought Emergency Fund to which both the government and donors can contribute. Its regulations have been gazetted, and the fund should soon be operational. Once it is up and running, it will help us respond faster as soon as the early warning system alerts us to a problem. Some counties are also setting aside a part of their budgets in disaster or climate funds.
- However, one financing instrument is not sufficient: we need a range of complementary mechanisms. Two other examples are: (i) insurance, such as the livestock insurance scheme in ASAL counties, and (ii) donor contingency finance, such as the Catastrophe Deferred Drawdown Option (Cat DDO) negotiated with the World Bank. The National Treasury has integrated these various financing mechanisms in its National Disaster Risk Financing Strategy, the first to be implemented in Africa.
- In terms of opportunities, I am heartened by the commitment to improve disaster management that I see among so many different actors – the county governments, our donors, and civil society partners. Above all, the communities are directly affected. It is essential that these efforts are appropriately coordinated and aligned, which we are trying to achieve through the Ending Drought Emergencies framework. I hope that the current EDE review recommendations will give us all a solid basis to take our drought and disaster risk management efforts to the next level.