

Field Observations and Interviews: Lake Naivasha Catchment Area (Anonymised)

3 June 2022: Lake Naivasha

Lake visit

We had a day-long fieldwork at Lake Naivasha. We have visited three different sites around the lake. Our team has recorded our conversations with participants by obtaining a verbal consent, meaning that I limited my notes to my observations rather than paying attention to the direct quotes I could derive from the conversations. We visited three Water Resource Users Associations (WRUA) at the Lake and two tributaries (one midstream, one upstream). These conversations were follow-up of the interviews conducted by the Kenyan team.

The first visit was to the lake itself. We were guided by one WRUA representative. He summarised the membership to their branch and their activities during droughts. During our visit, we had a chance to observe the changes in Lake's water levels. For example, in our first stop, it was very clear that the Lake has shrunk, but the lake vegetation was still there. At the time of our visit, pastoralist communities were passing by with their livestock and cattle and goats were looking for food there, while zebras were also grazing in the same area. Nearby, there was a group of people who was cultivating the land on the lake (land which was part of the Lake before droughts) within a fenced area. Representative highlighted that such activities are examples of illegal farming, which increased in the region due to droughts, which led commercial farmers to fire workers, or smallholder and subsistence farmers to lose their livelihoods. (It is illegal, because people cannot own a "lake" area) These activities are not sustainable for sure, because we were told that changes in water levels of the Lake is very variable in the recent history, which we witnessed its shrinkage as well as its expansion to its pre-drought levels within short periods of time. Apparently, the Lake is in the shrinkage process again, following a short period of abundance last year. With that said, if the Lake reclaim its pre-drought area, these illegal zones will surely be inundated. And it is a very likely probability, as the lake vegetation is still alive.

When we navigated around the same area, we drove around fifteen minutes to see the lake closely. On our way, we see damaged fences of lands surrounding the lake. Representative informed us that this has become very common in the region during/after droughts. He told us that those fenced lands are private properties and/or farms or state-owned lands not available to the public use, but people damaged fences to access to land and water during the drought and practised illegal farming on those lands. He also added that some of fences were damaged by animals and pastoralist communities to access to water during drought.

When we arrived at the shore, we passed by a very poor settlement. Representative indicated that this settlement is an informal (and illegal) one, which emerged in the region during the drought, very recently. The houses were concrete, not like shelters, and the Kenyan state has provided electricity to the settlement, as evident in the transmission towers in the district. It seems that this informal settlement has gradually becoming a formal one. When I asked him about who these settlers are, he responded that they were farmers who lost their jobs and livelihoods during the drought. As seen in the district, people are mostly engaged with small businesses (shops, bazaars, trade of used goods etc).

In addition, representative mentioned about a conflict at the upstream. During drought, a private landowner at the upstream fenced their land (including parts of the river) and limited access of local Kenyans to access to parts of the river. This has led to conflicts between the landowner and local communities (partly violent one, but he didn't disclose details) and, at some point, there was a serious risk of this conflict to transform into a massive turmoil.

Apparently, the landowner did not provide access, even during the conflict, but locals trespass at some point. The conflict ended, but tensions remain there, as far as he reported.

Some of specific details from this trip can be found in partial transcriptions.

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Following this trip at the downstream, we climbed up to one of the tributaries of the lake. It was almost two-hour drive. We visited an old farmer, who hosted us in his house. Membership of this WRUA is mostly smallholder farmers and it was made very clear that farmers were heavily affected by drought in this region.

Both interviewees indicated that due to the water abstractions in the upstream (during droughts) and the river diversion, they literally have no access to water, and they cannot practise agriculture at all. He told us that most of farmers had to look for other options for livelihoods (small businesses) or wait for the rain to collect water. Obviously, they follow traditional farming methods, and they are too poor to implement efficient technologies, or they are not aware of the drought resistant crops etc.

There were some interesting observations to add:

- Although this area is heavily affected by drought, the government has not declared the area as a disaster zone. It means that people did not have access to food aid and other sort of assistance supervised by the government or NGOs. It is particularly problematic because some of the neighbouring villages/areas were administratively classified as disaster area and their inhabitants were offered some sort of drought relief aid. It is important to note that disasters are declared based on the districts, not villages. And this village is in between a disaster zone and non-disaster zone, leaving them out of this scheme.
- River has been recently diverted by the government and it has also created a serious problem for this village. The village is located next to the military barrack and military's water use was prioritised by the diversion. However, the WRUA president is very angry about this diversion, as water is mostly used to fill (and refill) the swimming pool of the barrack, while farmers are suffering due to lack of water. Apparently, this diversion has happened during/after drought.
- In the past, one eminent NGO has implemented some projects with this WRUA (at the end of 2000s), fliers of which could be seen in the meeting room. These projects were about equitable distribution of water in the region, and it seems like the project created a chart to help people to decide about how much water they should use depending on water availability. We were not allowed to take the photos within the room. Both old and new presidents are not happy with NGO projects, as they think that nothing changes because of the NGO involvement.
- The president said that illegal boreholes and digging for wells are very common in the region. He also indicated that he is in contact with upstream users and commercial farmers for them to release, but it seems he was not so successful in his attempts.
- When the Kenyan team described some possibilities and state subsidies around smart agriculture, which is being mainstreamed in Kenya as a drought response at national level, both interviewees seemed surprised as they have not heard about it. In addition, it seems that this WRUA has remained very limited to their locality. In other words, both interviewees were disheartened by the lack of support, but they do not have any knowledge of official processes or government programmes. They try to do everything by themselves, and it is not enough.

- The president come up with a water portioning plan for water users (members of the WRUA). Accordingly, he allocated certain windows for each user to take water from the river. He closely monitors this system. If a user misses their slot, then they miss the chance.

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After another two-hour drive up to the mountain, we observe a gradual change in vegetation, with landscape has turned to green. It was an indication that upstream regions have received more rainfall and farmers were able to irrigate (or practise rain-fed agriculture). Due to the remoteness of the village and timing (weather was getting dark), we kept this visit very brief (around 15 minutes), and the conversation was conducted in Swahili, with Kenyan colleagues translated into English. Our interviewee was a smallholder farmer who was associated with the WRUA.

Key insights from this conversation were:

- This area was not heavily affected by drought due to their geographical advantage. Although farmer noted that water availability decreased during drought, they were able to access to water and use storage by abstracting water from river.
- The area has a mixture of smallholder and commercial farmers, and main livelihood is about dairy products.
- It was also reported that farmers constructed some sort of infrastructure to abstract water and dig boreholes illegally during drought.
- In the partly transcribed interview (conducted by the Kenyan team before our visit), this region was calling drought as “blessing” and they claimed that they earned more money during/after drought. It is mainly because their production (dairy) decreased due to drought, but the demand was high, and they were able to sell their products more expansively. And they maintain these activities (less production, more money)
- When I asked about downstream users and water conflicts (indicated by interviewees as far as the team summarised me), farmer said that they know most of downstream users and downstream WRUAs and farmers contacted them about the issue. He claimed that they all initiated a forum to discuss about these matters and provided water flow upon the request. He also claimed that this forum has turned into a permanent platform where upstream and downstream users discuss about water portioning regardless of drought.