

Cattle rustling stimulates profitable dairy farming

West Pokot County, in north-west Kenya, was notorious as an unruly region. It is dry and hot and the tough land is plagued by cattle rustling between the Pokot people and their neighbours. However, life, especially in South Pokot, has now moved on. Charles Onyango-Obbo reports how, in a small corner of this land, in a place called Lelan, there are hopeful lessons for Kenya and East Africa.

As soon as you branch off from Kapenguria, the “capital” of the Pokot region, and hit the murram road to Lelan 70 kilometres away, you begin to sense that you will be in for a surprise. This is not an arid land. It is endless rows upon row of green rolling hills. In nearly every valley you look, there is a stream with clear water. As you climb to the higher hills, you drive by towns with tongue-twister names like Kaibichibichi.

Nearly every home has a neat wooden fence with Friesian cattle boxed in, and gardens arranged with great deliberation. As you approach Lelan, along the road you pass many women and young men leading donkeys weighed down with milk.

Crown jewel

The crown jewel of Lelan area is the Lelan Highland Dairy Company’s milk cooling plant. The economic “miracle” that the Lelan Highland Dairy Company has unleashed in this corner of Kenya has been told, though perhaps not often enough.

The story of the rise of Lelan Dairy Company, and the milk plant are as winding as the road between Kapenguria and Lelan. The Pokot and their Marakwet neighbours have feuded and fought over cattle for generations, but in the 1980s and 1990s things calmed down a little.

Then in 1998, hell visited the region. There was a memorably bloody clash between the Pokot and Marakwet that wiped all the progress that had been made over the years, and left many dead and impoverished.

It was the wake-up call the Pokot and Marakwet needed, and religious leaders worked overtime to mend relations.

On the sidelines, a boisterous and energetic Pokot farmer called Kenneth Lomaipong looked on, and thought that if cattle was what was bringing war



An elder in the Lelan area, Lorito Lomaru, was the first person to buy shares in the Lelan Highland Dairy Company.

Credit Stephen Mudiari

between the Pokot and Marakwet, then cattle could also unite them.

The Zebu cattle that the Pokot and Marakwet had kept for generations were resilient, but they had a problem that the uninitiated might not easily realise. First, they were hardy, so it was actually easy to rustle them and drive them long distances away.

Secondly, they needed open grazing pastures, thus increasing conflict over grass in dry seasons. Thirdly, and most importantly, Zebus were inefficient. They produced between six to 10 litres of milk a day. It was difficult to build a milk business around that. In addition, the large herds needed dramatically increased the chances of conflict over pasture and served as a magnet to rustlers.

Friesian cows, on the other hand, could produce 20 to 30 litres of milk a day in Pokot’s conditions. They could be fed in paddocks, and were not all-toughed-up lean muscle like Zebus. It was useless for cattle rustlers to target them. They wouldn’t get far with them.

Ahead of time

Men like Lomaipong saw Friesian cows as the ultimate economic fix, but they were a little ahead of their time. Their ideas were laughed off, but they persisted. Eventually in October 2008 they decided to form a cooperative, the Lelan Dairy Company.

An elder in the Lelan area, Lorito Lomaru, thought Lomaipong & Co were on to a smart idea. Lomaru became the first person to buy shares in the company. He paid Sh20 (\$0.23). Yes, Sh20.

The cooperative’s founders started travelling to cattle and agricultural shows, looking for ideas and help on how to shift to Friesian animals, and make money from milk. At one such event in Rift Valley, they were told to go and look for the people of East Africa Dairy Development (EADD).

EADD, which works in Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, was inspired and funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. EADD is not your regular NGO that dishes money. Its regional offices off Denis Pritt Road in Nairobi are decidedly unassuming. It is a