Field Trip Report: Loita Hills, Narok

Dates: 30th October – 1st November 2024

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A reconnaissance visit was made to the Loita Hills, Narok County to explore opportunities for developing both short-term and potential long-term activities aimed at addressing the ongoing land-use transition while promoting sustainable land management. The Loita Hills are experiencing a major transformation from communal to individual land ownership, creating both opportunities and challenges for local livelihoods, sustainable development, and forest conservation.

The visit involved field observations and community discussions to gain a better understanding of land tenure and land use dynamics, local livelihoods, and potential intervention activities in collaboration with local stakeholders. Areas visited included the plains, the forested areas, and the community-managed Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest. Discussions with community members and stakeholders provided insights into the challenges, priorities, and potential pathways for a sustainable transition.

Objectives of the visit

- Assess the impact of the recent transition in land tenure and use.
- Gather perspectives from community members and stakeholders on challenges, priorities, and aspirations for the future of Loita Hills.
- Identify potential activities aligned with community needs, including sustainable agriculture, fodder production, agroforestry, agrosilvopastoralism, rangeland management, and livestock production.

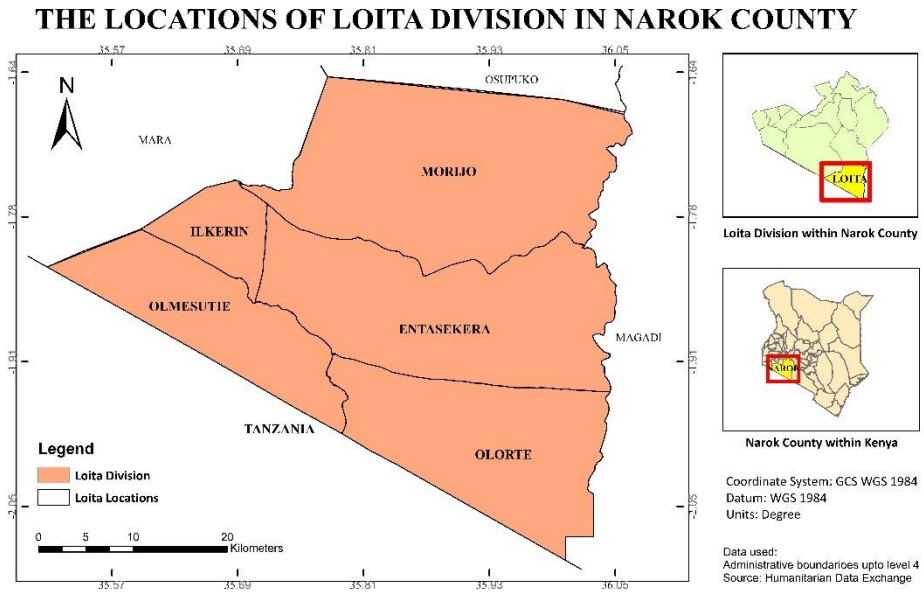
Location

Loita Division is located in Narok South Subcounty, Narok County, covering approximately 1730 km^2 at an elevation of 2,000-2600 metres. It lies between the Nguruman-Magadi Escarpment and Maasai Mara National Reserve (MMNR). The area is semi-arid with annual rainfall ranging from 600–1200 mm and average temperatures of 17–22°C, depending on elevation (Mbuvi and Kungu 2021; Otieno et al 2023*).* Its vegetation includes upland forests, bushland, thickets, and wooded grasslands. Wildlife move between the forest and the plains areas, and there are migratory movements of elephant and other wildlife between the MMNR and Magadi.

The region is home to the Loita Maasai, who are predominantly pastoralists, keeping cattle, sheep and goats, but also practice crop-based agriculture, growing beans and maize. The Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest, also known as the “Forest of the Lost Child” is central to their cultural identify spirituality, and livelihoods.

Loita Division comprises five locations: Entasekera, Morijo, Ilkerin, Olorte, Olmesuti (Figure 1). Loita Maasailand extends across the Kenya-Tanzania border, with the Tanzanian section being larger in size.

Figure 1. Map of Loita Division





Photos showing the typical landscape of Loita, consisting of rolling hills, forest patches, grasslands and cultivated plots

Land tenure transition

The Loita Hills, traditionally managed as communal rangelands by the Maasai community, are undergoing significant changes due to government policies promoting land subdivision and privatisation. Loita is among the last areas in Narok County to experience this transition, with neighbouring areas having undergone subdivision over the past two decades. In Loita, the process has occurred in phases, with locations like Ilkerin being subdivided two years ago, while areas closer to the forest have only recently been subdivided. Many community members are awaiting the issuance of title deeds to their land.

Land allocations range from 8 to 15 acres per registered community member, with larger parcels typically allocated in the plains and smaller ones in the forested areas. Notably, women in Loita received equal allocations as their husbands, an uncommon practice in previous land subdivision processes in Maasailand. However, unmarried women were not included in the allocations, and while sons received land shares, daughters did not. There were reports of irregularities in the

allocation process, including claims that land committee members involved in the allocation process grabbed larger parcels, some even reserving land for unborn children.

The shift to private ownership has already led to noticeable changes in land use. Many parcels, or portions of them, have been fenced off as owners demarcate boundaries and stake claim to their land. Although communal resources such as wetlands and water sources remain designated as public land, access to these resources has become more complicated due to fencing and the need to cross private land. While the communal forest - Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest - remains under community ownership, the forest fringe has been privatised and allocated as individual parcels (see ahead).

Community members expressed concerns over land sales as some individual sell land to neighbours with worries this would soon extend to outsiders. There were reports of individuals from outside communities covertly acquiring land through local Maasai intermediaries, creating apprehension about the potential implications of outside sales on the area's cultural and demographic identify.

One community member described the transition from communal to private ownership as a shift to 'living in boxes', reflecting the new landscape of demarcated, box-shaped plots. Everything now belongs to someone - even the trees – a stark contrast to the long-standing traditional communal use of the land.



Cattle grazing on a communal wetland area



Fences surrounding now private grazing land

Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest - 'Forest of the Lost Child'

The Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest, covering approximately 300 km^2, is one of Kenya's largest and best-conserved community-managed forests. The forest is a dense, indigenous forest that serves as an important water catchment for the region, critical wildlife habitat, and dry-season grazing area. The forest hosts high flora and fauna biodiversity, and is home to at least 277 documented plant species (Mbuvi et al 2019).

The forest is one of Kenya's few non-gazetted indigenous forests, managed under a traditional community-based forest management system (Mbuvi and Kungu 2021). Narok County Government holds the forest in trust on behalf of the Loita community and there is limited involvement from the Kenya Forest Service. External efforts to gazette the forest, including proposals by the former Narok Council and by IUCN to establish it as reserve (Karanja et al 2002; Otieno et al 2023), have been rejected by the community who have retained control over its management

The forest is integral to the local culture and spirituality. The community use an indigenous system allowing resource access within the forest, managed by the Oloibon traditional institution under the leadership of the Chief Laibon (Mbuvi and Kungu 2021). The forest contains sacred sites and serves as a cultural and spiritual home for the community, deeply intertwined with their traditions. The forest provides benefits, including dry season grazing for livestock, the sustainable use of forest resources such as medicines, dead firewood, and ceremonial sites.

Some CBOs and NGOs contribute to the conservation and protection of the forest. The Ilkimpa Community Conservation Association (ICCA), a local CBO, works to protect the forest and wildlife, and recruits local youth as scouts. NGOs such as SORALO and the Mara Elephant Project also support conservation efforts by employing community rangers to protect the forest and monitor elephant movements along the corridor between the Mara and Loita.

Recent land privatization, along with growing external pressures on the forest, may undermine the traditional management system. There are also concerns about a proposed tarmac road linking Shompole to Loita, which could disrupt the forest's integrity and wildlife corridors. These pressures may require new governance models that include a broader range of stakeholders, including county and national government, civil society, and NGOs, through pluralistic governance, with the community however maintaining control and authority (Mbuvi and Kungu 2021).

Before land adjudication, the boundaries of Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest were not clearly defined. During the land adjudication process, the Ministry of Lands worked with the community to establish boundaries and demarcate outside sections for individual private parcels (TMG 2024).



Photos showing Loita Naimina Enkiyo Forest in the background, behind the settlements and buildings

Adjacent (subdivided) forest areas

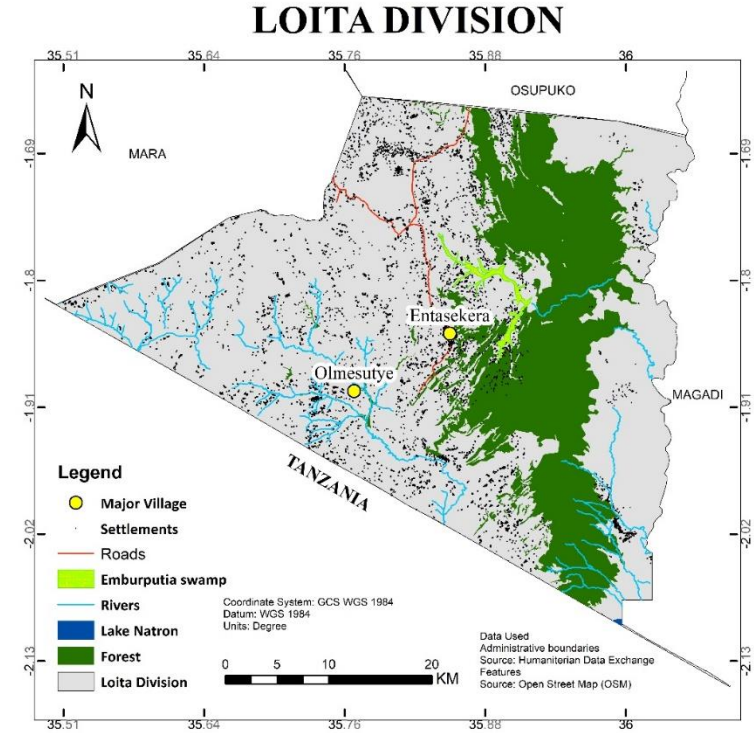
Adjacent to the Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest, there are forested areas with dense tree cover that the community does not consider part of the community forest (see full extent of forest areas in Fig 2). During land adjudication, community members were allocated 8-ha plots in these areas, extending up to the boundary of the Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest. Many of these parcels contain mature, dense trees, and some have already been cleared for cultivation or for timber used in fencing. These areas are considered to have higher potential for cultivation compared to the plains areas.

Community members have mixed feelings about the subdivision of these forest-adjacent areas. Some appreciate the access to fertile land for farming, while others are concerned about the environmental impact of clearing the land, especially given the presence of large, mature trees. Although these areas are the most recently subdivided, clearing has already begun, and further land

clearing is expected. Some elders are advising members to preserve the trees and refrain from selling their land.

One community member who was allocated land near the Loita forest was not particularly concerned about subdivision. Her plot, located near a swamp and directly adjacent to the Loita forest, offers fertile land with good grass for livestock grazing, access to water, and rich soil for farming. She valued the forest for the benefits it provided, such as shade, cattle grazing, and good soil for crops. She suggested that if grazing land becomes scarce due to land privatisation, people could rent out pasture to others in need. She had already planted a few trees on her land, preferring fruit trees for household consumption.

Figure 2. Map showing the forested areas (both the Loita Naimina Enkiyio Forest and adjacent forest lands), major centres, roads, rivers and settlements





Forest fringe with typical patchwork of grass and forest



Forest plot cleared for cultivation use



Mature trees in forest fringe



'Natural' fence erected to demarcate forest plot

Livelihood activities and challenges

Livestock:

- The plains area is well-suited to extensive livestock grazing but subdivision has led to smaller parcels of land. Community members thought that shared grazing was now difficult, particularly between areas with different vegetation types, such as the wooded and plains regions. However shared grazing was still possible on the plains.
- In response to subdivision, some families are organising their own grazing arrangements, especially when plots are adjacent to one another. Some families were sharing up to 10 parcels, using them for both grazing and cultivation.
- The Sahiwal cattle breed was introduced to Maasailand some years ago to improve productivity compared to the local Zebu. However, Sahiwals are less hardy, require more grass and water, and are more susceptible to diseases. They are used for crossbreeding with Zebu to improve productivity.
- Every four years or so, cattle are decimated by drought, making the storage of hay for livestock and grain for food critical during these lean times. Community members mentioned that while some buy and store hay, they rarely produce it themselves.
- Community members recognised that growing grass could increase the land's carrying capacity and resilience to drought. However, forage cultivation is a new concept that the community is not familiar with. There are some indigenous trees that are used for livestock grazing during dry periods.
- The idea of learning from pilot projects by innovative farmers was welcomed, but it was emphasised that such projects should be carefully introduced due to cultural sensitivities. For example, when camels were introduced, people did not like their appearance or the taste of their meat and milk.
- Extension officers were reported to rarely visit the area, leading to a lack of awareness about different practices and innovations.



Cattle grazing near to their enclosure/ boma



calves grazing

Crops:

- The community commonly grows maize and beans, with some have been farming for over 20 years. Maize is primarily grown for subsistence, while beans are grown for both subsistence and sales. Traders come from Nairobi buy surplus beans and maize.
- The forest areas have good potential for cultivation, with good soils and higher rainfall.
- Near Entasekera centre, some wetlands are used for growing vegetables like sukuma and cabbages.
- During the visit, no one was preparing their farms, as land preparation mostly take place in February in anticipation of the March/April rains. Most fields still had stubble left from the maize harvest, which typically occurs around August or September.
- There is desire to grow maize to store for the dry season, ensuring a supply of food for household consumption.



Areas cultivated for the last 20 years or so



Cattle grazing on maize stubble




Maize stubble on fields from the last harvest

Emerging conservation initiatives

- The Maasai community has a long history of coexisting with wildlife. However, increasing land subdivision and fences are restricting wildlife movements, leading to conflicts as people and wildlife are confined to smaller areas. Wildlife corridors, free of fencing, are proposed as a solution to allow the movement of wildlife.
- Different organisations have recently visited Loita to discuss the establishment of conservancies. Conservation groups, including the Maasai Mara Wildlife Conservancies Association (MMWCA) and Kenya Wildlife Conservancies Association (KWCA), have held meetings with the community to explore this idea. Nearby examples from the Mara, where landowners have formed conservancies, are viewed favourably by some and provide potential models for Loita.
- A conservancy in Loita would aim to connect a corridor from Shompole to the Mara. A conservancy would likely involve no fencing or cultivation within a designated area. The conservancy could maintain livestock grazing through paddocking. Additionally, it could allow landowners to access loans using their title deeds.
- For the conservancy idea to take root and be accepted, there needs to be extensive discussions with the community and careful mobilisation. By learning from nearby areas with established conservancies, it is clear that gaining a full understanding of the process takes time. Ensuring local support and understanding throughout the process was considered a priority.
- There are also discussions around the potential for carbon credit projects, focusing on both grassland and forest carbon. Organizations such as WWF, IFAW, ICCA, (the local CBO funded by IFAW), are exploring initiatives to preserve trees and keep the land intact while generating income through carbon credits.

Acknowledgement

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