

## Promoting ASAL Counties as Prime Destinations for Tourists in Kenya

By Faith Kimaiyo and Winfred Gatwiri

### Key Highlights

Promoting tourism in Arid and semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) is important for revenue generation and job creation. This policy brief discusses the tourism opportunities that exist in ASALs of Kenya, the challenges faced and provides recommendations to address the challenges and promote ASALs as attractive tourist destinations. The key highlights include:

- i) Tourism contributes 10.4 per cent of output to gross domestic product (GDP) in Kenya. ASALs are home to 90 per cent of the wildlife in game reserves and national parks. However, this immense potential in tourism has been under-exploited for decades.
- ii) ASALs have the lowest inbound visitors annually compared to other regions. For example, they have the lowest hotel bed occupancy rate at 4.9 per cent.
- iii) ASALs have rich cultural diversity and host several cultural festivals throughout the year that have immense potential for cultural tourism.
- iv) The tourism potential in ASALs is untapped mainly due to the poor infrastructure such as roads, airstrips, and internet access.
- v) Increasing promotional activities and budget allocations has potential to revamp tourism sector in the ASALs.

### Introduction

Tourism is a critical sector in the country's economy, contributing to nearly 10.4 per cent of Kenya's GDP. The share of employment in tourism sector, notably in accommodation and food services sector activities, was 23 per cent in 2022. The ASALs make up to 89 per cent of the country land area. The region possesses a competitive edge in the tourism industry particularly given its comparative advantage in form of tourism resource endowment. However, the ASALs' immense potential, notably in tourism, has not been fully exploited for decades. The main contributing factors include the regions having been associated with issues of cattle rustling, drought, instability, and poverty, among others. ASALs are home to 90 per cent of the wildlife that sustains the tourism sector and most of the attraction sites such as game reserves and national parks are in ASAL regions. However, the coastal beach remains the most preferred destination for tourists. ASALs record the lowest inbound visitors annually compared to other regions. Northern Kenya has the lowest hotel bed occupancy rate of 4.9 per cent.

### Promoting Destinations and Events in ASAL Counties

#### i) Major attractions in ASALs

Majority of the national reserve attraction sites are found in ASALs of Kenya. Turkana County, for instance, has five national parks including South Turkana Game Reserve, Central Island National Park, Lotikipi National Game reserve, South Island National Park and Sibiloi National Park, which is home to several wildlife species including giraffes, elephants, bushbuck, grants gazelle, gerenuk, lesser kudu, oryx and duiker. The county further shares Lake Turkana (which is the largest desert lake in the world) with Marsabit County. The Maasai Mara national park in Narok County is a popular tourist attraction due to wildebeest migration. Most conservancies are in Taita Taveta County and the Tsavo ecosystem and account for more than 37 per cent of the national elephant range. Garissa County has Arawale National Reserve, Boni National Reserve and Rahole National Reserve. Further, the county has Ishaqbini Hirola Conservancy, which is a refuge and breeding area for the critically endangered Hirola antelope. The Kora National Park in

Tana River County and the Sabuli Conservancy in Wajir County host the endangered Somali giraffe.

ASALs have rich cultural diversity and host several cultural festivals throughout the year. Turkana County, for instance, hosts the annual Tobong'u Lore cultural festivals. Garissa County hosts Garissa County cultural festivals. Isiolo County every year has the Isiolo county cultural festival whereas Lamu County hosts the annual Lamu cultural festivals namely the Shela Hat Contest, Lamu Yoga Festival and the Maulidi Cultural Festival. Further, Marsabit hosts the Loiyangalani Cultural Museum Festival. Samburu County has the annual Maralal International camel derby tourist promotion event. In addition, Kilifi County host a number of events including Kilifi Wellness Festival, beneath Baobab Festival, Rabai Cultural Festival, Malindi Multicultural Festival, Kilifi Got Talent Dance Competition, Kilifi Ngalawa Dhow and Swimming races, Kilifi Gold Triathlon and Mekatilili Cultural Festival.

Although ASALs have most national parks and reserves in existence, public awareness about these national parks and reserves is minimal. In addition, the contribution of tourism to the economy in the ASAL counties is estimated at 12 per cent (KNBS, 2022), which is relatively low compared to the existing opportunities. ASALs have significant untapped potential in tourism that is under-developed.

#### ii) The Tourism competitiveness index

The Tourism Competitiveness Index (TCI) for Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs) based on the four pillars of security, attraction sites, infrastructure, and hygiene provide valuable insights for policy makers to understand the state of tourism in ASALs. The TCI scores range from 0 to 1 whereby 1 indicates best performance and 0 worst performance. The arid regions had the lowest TCI score at 0.30 out of a maximum of 1. The semi-arid counties (of 10-29 per cent aridity levels) and semi-arid counties (of 30-84 per cent aridity levels) also recorded a lower score of 0.39 and 0.38, respectively, which was below average. This implies that ASALs are under-performing in terms of security, attraction sites, infrastructure and hygiene which has an adverse effect on tourism.

On security pillar, on average, arid counties had a score of 0.5 out of a maximum of 1. Mandera and Garissa counties face a high risk of terror attacks while other counties such as Isiolo, Marsabit, Samburu, and Tana River are relatively safer. Further, ASALs had the highest score on attraction sites and cultural tourism activities pointing out the existence of unique attraction sites and the potential of tourism in these regions.

In terms of infrastructure, semi-arid counties were competitive compared to arid counties. Arid counties had an infrastructure score of 0.12 with their hotel

classification index and Internet access index being the lowest at 0.01 and 0.05 respectively. This indicates that the infrastructure in arid counties is less developed, hence hindering tourism activities. Similarly, regarding the level of hygiene in various hotels, semi-arid counties (of 30-84% aridity) performed better with a hygiene index of 0.61 score compared to arid counties which had a score of 0.41.

The Tourism Competitiveness Index highlights that arid counties face significant challenges in terms of security, infrastructure, and hotel hygiene, which hinder the development of tourism in these areas. While there are unique and appealing attractions in ASALs, efforts should be made to address these challenges and create a favourable environment for tourists.

#### iii) Gaps in the Prevailing Policy Framework

A number of significant developments in the tourism sector have taken place since Sessional Paper No. 1 on Enhancing Tourism in Kenya was published in 2010. A new government structure was established that divided responsibility for the country's tourist industry between the National and County Governments. The Tourism Act of 2011 took effect in 2011 and superseded the previous tourism laws. The Act established new institutions and renamed others that were already in existence. National Tourism Blueprint 2030 was created by the government with the aim of facilitating reforms in the tourism sector and its administration. Moreover, there was an establishment of the Tourism Sector Plan 2018-2022, which was geared towards attainment of tourism priorities in the Kenya Vision 2030.

Nevertheless, there are various gaps that exist in the implementation process of the policies in the tourism sector, more so in the ASALs. The Revised National Tourism Policy 2020 aimed at upgrading and maintaining roads, expanding rail networks, developing online tourism portal and providing Wi-Fi in tourist facilities to enhance tourism. However, access to Internet in ASALs is still low and local airstrips in the ASALs are yet to be modernized. Additionally, the policy intended to enhance accessibility to clean water at favourable charges. However, ASALs are yet to attain 100 per cent access to clean water.

The tourism agenda 2018-2022 focused on redesigning and replanning Mama Ngina Waterfront, which was completed and is operational. Further, Amboseli National Park was to be advertised according to the agenda to improve the quality of trips in Nairobi-Nakuru route. The advertisement of the park has aided in attracting more tourists although the park is under unprecedented pressure due to rapid urbanization and infrastructural expansion. The Government of Kenya is heavily investing in infrastructure projects with the aim of achieving the Kenya Vision 2030.

## Policy Recommendations

The main policy recommendations include:

- i) Use of digital marketing by tourism sector. The advent of the Internet and other forms of digital media has made it easy for tourists to organize their trips entirely online and has also changed the way tourism is promoted. Therefore, it is important to use digital marketing strategies to expand the customer base and publicize the unique tourist sites in ASALS.
- ii) The Government with support from the various stakeholders will need to fully implement the Revised National Tourism Policy, 2020. The policy prioritizes development of infrastructure through maintenance of roads and air transport and development of online tourism. Further, the policy aims to ensure that all tourists areas are provided with clean water and sewerage services, which will greatly boost tourism in ASALS.
- iii) Enhancement of security. The National Government needs to update the security measures in ASALS to account for the evolving security threats, particularly in the ASALS.
- iv) Incorporation of ASALS in national policies. Since devolution provides an opportunity to tailor development interventions to specific regions, it is crucial to identify the unique features in ASALS. This can be achieved by involving the local communities in the policy making processes to have a clear understanding of their culture and unique attraction sites in the regions.
- v) Availability of funds to cater for unpredictable times. The tourism sector was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and most businesses around tourism attraction sites were adversely affected. It is recommendable to establish a readily available fund to aid tourist stakeholders and cushion them financially in the event of either internal or external shocks.

---

## References

- Kinoti, S. K., Mutinda, M. N., & Ogonda, J. H. (2022), *Livelihood diversification influence on socioeconomic wellbeing of Maasai women in Isinya, Kajiado County, Kenya*.
- KNBS (2022), Statistical abstract [Review of Statistical abstract]. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.
- KNBS (2023), Economic Survey [Review of Economic Survey]. Kenya National Bureau of Statistics.
- Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife (2020), Enhancing resilience and sustainable tourism in Kenya. Available at: <https://www.tourism.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/28th-August-National-Tourism-Policy-Review.pdf> (Accessed: 24 October 2023).
- Ministry of Tourism and Wildlife (2020), *Enhancing resilience and sustainable tourism in Kenya*. Available at: <https://www.tourism.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/28th-August-National-Tourism-Policy-Review.pdf> (Accessed: 24 October 2023).
- Ojwang, W., Obiero, K. O., Donde, O. O., Gownaris, N. J., Pikitch, E. K., Omondi, R., Agembe, S., Malala, J. and Avery, S. T. (2018), *Lake Turkana: World's largest permanent Desert Lake (Kenya)*. The Wetland Book, 1361–1380. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4001-3\\_254](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4001-3_254).
- Sessional Paper No. 8 of 2018 on National Policy for the Sustainable development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands [Review of Sessional Paper No.8 of 2018 on National Policy for the Sustainable development of Northern Kenya and other Arid Lands]. Ministry of state department of Northern Kenya and Other Arid lands. <https://www.adaconsortium.org/images/publications/Sessional-Paper-on-National-policy-for-development-of-ASALS.pdf>.
- State Department the ASALS and Regional Development (2019), Home. ASALS. <https://www.asals.go.ke/>.
- TRI (2022), Kenya Annual tourism sector performance report [Review of Kenya Annual tourism sector performance report]. Tourism research Institute. <https://www.tourism.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ANNUAL-TOURISM-SECTOR-PERFORMANCE-REPORT-2022-2.pdf>
- WRTI (2021), National wildlife census report [Review of National wildlife census report]. Wildlife Research & Training Institute.

## Acknowledgements

This Policy Brief was prepared by Faith Kimaiyo and Winfred Gatwiri (Young Professionals) based on a Discussion Paper on "Unlocking Tourism Potential in ASALs Counties of Kenya"

### About KIPPRA Policy Briefs

KIPPRA Policy Briefs are aimed at a wide dissemination of the Institute's policy research findings. The findings are expected to stimulate discussion and also build capacity in the public policy making process in Kenya.

KIPPRA acknowledges generous support from the Government of Kenya and Development partners who have continued to support the Institute's activities over the years.

### For More Information Contact:

Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis  
Bishops Road, Bishops Garden Towers  
P.O. Box 56445-00200, Nairobi  
Tel: 2719933/4, Cell: 0736712724, 0724256078  
Email: [admin@kippra.or.ke](mailto:admin@kippra.or.ke)  
Website: <http://www.kippra.or.ke>

 @KIPPRAKenya