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Nawiri



Building Shared Value in Kenya's Livestock Markets:

A CASE STUDY FROM NAWIRI

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COVER PHOTO

Ezra Millstein / Mercy Corps

ABOUT NAWIRI

Nawiri is a US State Department funded Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA) implemented from 2019-2025 by a Mercy Corps-led consortium of international, national, and local partners. The goal of Nawiri was to sustainably reduce persistent acute malnutrition (PAM) in Kenya's arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), specifically across Turkana and Samburu counties. Nawiri aimed to reach 598,475 participants with a set of sequenced, layered and integrated (SLI) interventions, and reduce PAM to 12% by 2027.

DISCLAIMER

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CITATION

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Background

Livestock are the economic backbone of arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), vital for food security and climate resilience. Growth in national and regional export demand for goat meat, particularly for Middle Eastern markets, creates clear market opportunities for historically marginalized livestock producers able to offer consistent, quality-compliant, and traceable production and trade—bringing profits to traders and producers alike.

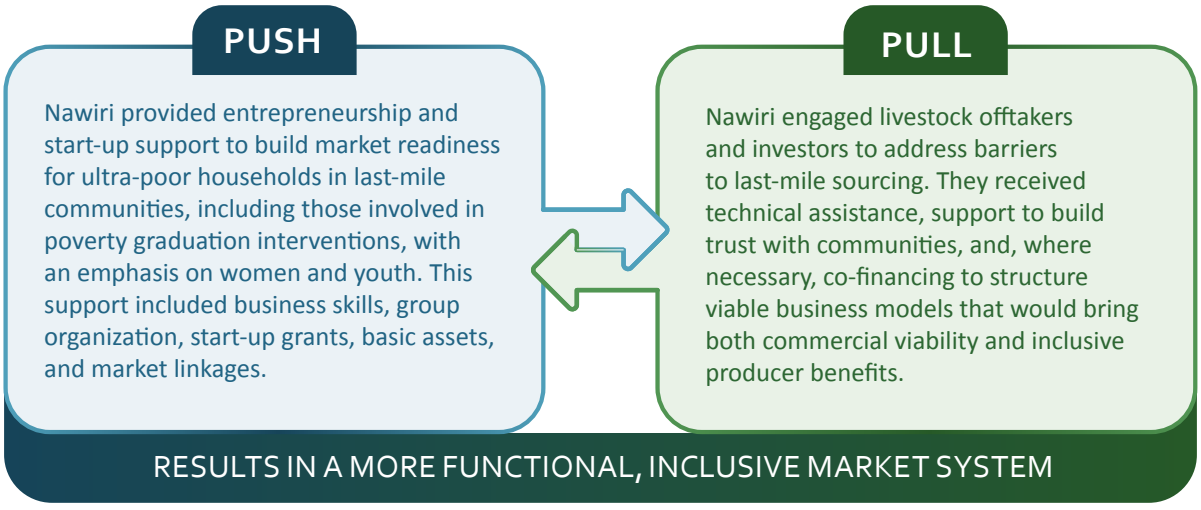
Yet livestock markets in Kenya's ASALs are thin, fragmented, and characterized by high transaction costs, weak last-mile services, and limited price transparency. The profitability, efficiency, and environmental potential of the livestock trade is undermined by many chronic challenges. Producers' reliance on open pasture and mobility for animal nutrition creates deep vulnerability in the face of increasing drought. Long treks to markets and poor access to quality veterinary services and inputs reduce animal quality and market value. In the absence of established exporters, rural producers rely on informal middlemen for trade outlets, and they face high information asymmetry, often operating at low profit margins or outright loss. Women, who typically trade in high-demand goats and sheep, are further constrained by restrictive social norms and weak capital. They face opaque, ad hoc pricing and are often unaware of final sale values.

Meanwhile, established traders and exporters are disinclined to invest in ASAL communities due to inconsistent volumes and quality of livestock, weak aggregation, and gaps in animal-health compliance. Their low-risk tolerance, coupled with weak community relationships and poor understanding of the local context, undermines their ability to profitably engage in last-mile livestock markets.

Together, these constraints limited producer profits, market participation, and opportunities for women and other marginalized producers. Nawiri's approach therefore focused on reducing the costs and risks of market participation, increasing transparency and producer bargaining power, improving access to animal-health and fodder services, and creating more inclusive pathways for women and youth to participate directly in livestock markets.

Nawiri's Approach

To address these challenges and build on the unmet potential of last-mile livestock production in the ASALs, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded the Nawiri Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA). Implemented by a Mercy Corps-led consortium between 2020 and 2025 in Samburu and Turkana counties, Nawiri leveraged Mercy Corps' deep experience strengthening market systems in dryland environments across East Africa to develop an effective private sector engagement model: the push-pull approach. This approach aimed to address the interconnected challenges facing producers and traders, ultimately strengthening the capacity of last-mile producers while facilitating inclusive market linkages with offtakers and investors.



The push-pull model works because it simultaneously facilitates two sides of the market. Producers organize, meet standards, and sell transparently. The private sector secures reliable supply. Their market relationship becomes mutually beneficial and more likely to last. Deep community ties and a large operational footprint are key to operationalizing this approach—something Nawiri adeptly leveraged. Below are some key steps Nawiri took to implement this push-pull approach, which led to improved sales for producers, strengthened supply for offtakers, and sustainable market linkages for both.

Strengthening Capacity of Livestock Producers in Market Participation and Capture

Nawiri spent years working alongside women and youth in Samburu who relied on small ruminants for their livelihoods yet were still largely excluded from the historically male-dominated livestock market. Through an adapted poverty graduation approach, Nawiri supported women and youth to form village savings and loan associations (VSLAs), develop business and financial skills, craft enterprise plans, and access targeted coaching and asset support. Yet opaque pricing, reliance on adult male brokers, unpredictable market conditions, and long distances to weekly markets still limited profits for those aiming to sell livestock.

Nawiri recognized that to properly include women and youth, it would need to shift the market architecture. This would require producers and offtakers to co-design solutions that would bring market access closer to the homestead and make transactions more reliable and transparent. The recognition of this need was the catalyst for reimagining how established traders and buyers could partner with local producers in a way that genuinely shared value.

Identifying Viable Market Investors

Nawiri began by identifying private-sector partners willing to engage in the process, assessing the readiness of four potential offtakers to build new trade linkages in last-mile communities. This assessment led to a formal partnership between Nawiri and GENCO Livestock & Fresh Meat Export Ltd., an established exporter of carcasses and chilled goat meat interested in capitalizing on the untapped and extensive supply of livestock from historically marginalized dryland economies.

Nawiri and GENCO partnered through a co-investment model. Nawiri invested in the push side of the model by building the production and financial capacity of suppliers and facilitating their linkages to offtakers. GENCO, in turn, worked with Nawiri to find solutions to high transaction costs and low trade transparency for rural producers.

Addressing Transaction Costs and Information Asymmetry in Offtake Markets

This model directly addressed three major barriers Nawiri identified in the traditional market system: opaque and inconsistent pricing, the cost of transporting animals long distances without a guaranteed sale, and women's dependence on male brokers to complete transactions. Traditional livestock trade in Samburu was dominated by informal middlemen and unpredictable prices. Pastoralists often trekked their animals for miles only to return home when prices were too low, and women often relied on men to manage transactions with little visibility. To address these challenges, GENCO agreed to test a transparent weight-based purchasing model at ward-level aggregation centers with guaranteed offtake. GENCO hired three field-based agents, each based in a different ward of the county, to work side by side with Nawiri community mobilizers. Together, they identified and trained local aggregators who showed promise in livestock trading, including many who had already received Nawiri entrepreneurship training.

Community-level aggregators learned how to assess goat quality, use digital weighing scales, and understand the standards required for export. Traders then organized themselves into self-selected goat aggregation groups, pooling resources to buy goats from neighboring pastoralists. GENCO agents provided continuous technical support, including guidance on animal health, feed improvement, and quality standards, to ensure animals were export-ready. Nawiri complemented this technical support with ongoing training in financial management and business development, helping aggregators manage their earnings and reinvest in their enterprises. Collectively, these activities reduced transaction costs while giving producers—particularly women—greater visibility and control over sales.

Strengthening Trade Infrastructure

The ward-level aggregation model also required investment in trade infrastructure. With funding from the Gates Foundation, GENCO established aggregation centers in three wards, complete with fenced feed lots, fodder storage, weighing equipment, and water points—making it easier and safer to gather livestock and maintain or increase body condition before transport. Once animals were aggregated at ward level, GENCO field agents verified weight, issued delivery notes, and processed payments directly to group bank accounts. The use of mobile banking for payments enhanced transparency and safety. The goats were then taken to a sub-county level holding center to be prepared for onward transport. This system ensured that producer group sales transactions were transparent, timely, and traceable.

Developing Viable Private Sector-Based Delivery Models for Animal Health

Meeting GENCO's export standards required pastoralists to access affordable and timely animal-health services. Yet Samburu's last-mile veterinary ecosystem—as in much of the ASALs—was thin, expensive, and unreliable. Nawiri built on its community disease surveillance system and community-based networks of trained animal-health providers, working with GENCO to adapt this model by adding fee-based vaccination and deworming services through government and private-sector service providers. GENCO's guaranteed prices and offtake for animals that met export standards meant that producers were willing to pay for these services. This model directly addressed limited access to affordable, reliable veterinary services—one of the key barriers to maintaining livestock quality and market value. By linking affordable vaccination and deworming to a reliable buyer, Nawiri helped make preventive animal-health services economically worthwhile for all parties: (a) producers received accessible, professionalized health services that protected herd value; (b) GENCO secured healthier, more consistent goats aligned with export requirements; and (c) community-based providers gained new business opportunities and a more stable client base. In addition, producers who previously saw animal-health services as an emergency expense were able to plan for them as part of a functioning, reliable market system.

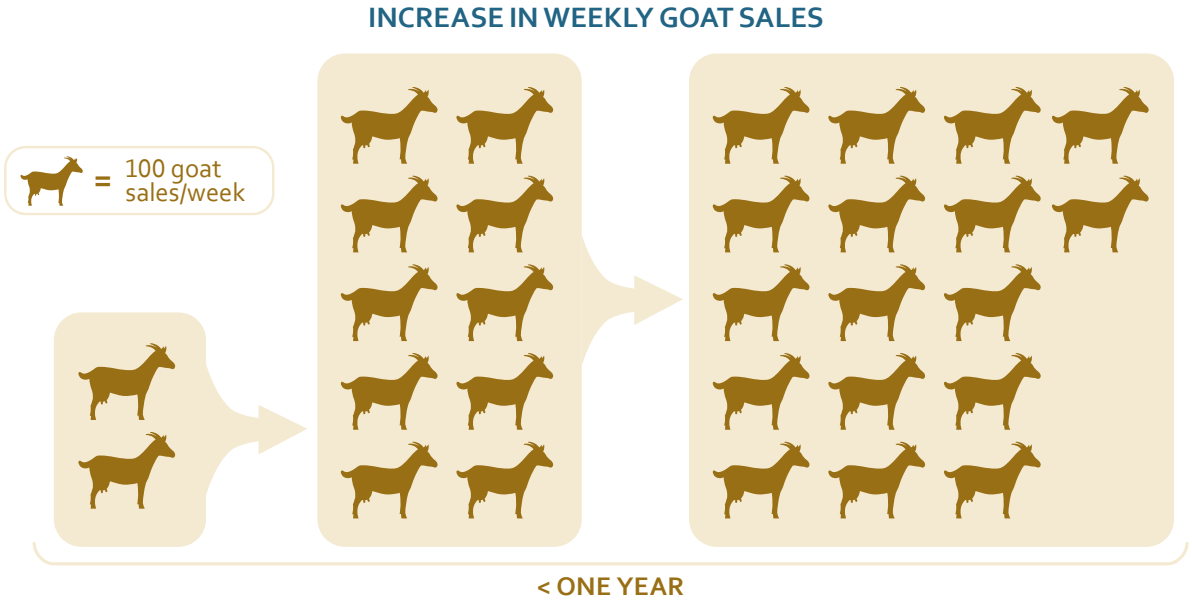
Ensuring Consistency of Feed and Fodder Supply

Recurrent drought in Samburu makes feed availability a perennial challenge, undermining animal quality and causing significant weight loss during aggregation. Nawiri worked with GENCO to expand its fodder cultivation intervention among producer groups selling to GENCO's aggregation centers. Regenerative fodder production was already helping Nawiri households maintain milk supply during lean periods and herd migration, and GENCO leveraged the approach to ensure livestock producers could consistently access fodder when needed to meet the weight standards. Regenerative production also helped GENCO maintain sufficient fodder in its own holding pens.

Nawiri supported GENCO in identifying additional community fodder production sites, replicating Nawiri's community organization model, and delivering training through GENCO agents. GENCO also purchased fodder seed from the initial Nawiri-supported incubator sites, ensuring that new areas had access to the most resilient, nutritious fodder species. Fodder storage was also incorporated into the community production and sales model. By reducing seasonal feed shortages and weight loss, this intervention addressed one of the principal constraints to consistently meeting buyer quality standards and helped producers maintain the value of animals presented for sale.

Results

The results suggest that these interventions addressed several of the market barriers identified at the outset and made a meaningful difference for households in remote pastoralist communities. Bringing aggregation and guaranteed offtake closer to communities expanded market participation to more than 1,100 registered pastoralists, 60% of whom were women, and engaged 225 female livestock traders as of October 2025. Transparent, weight-based purchasing and stronger producer-to-buyer linkages were accompanied by an increase in the average farm-gate price of a young goat from KES 3,800 in 2023 to KES 4,500 in 2024—approximately 18%—while weekly goat sales increased fivefold, from 200 to nearly 1,000. GENCO purchased more than 15,000 goats at an average price of KES 4,593, generating over KES 71 million for pastoralists in Samburu and demonstrating the commercial viability of sourcing from remote pastoralist communities.



Improvements in supporting services also helped address constraints related to livestock quality and market readiness. GENCO now works with six animal-health service providers—two private and four government—who have vaccinated and dewormed more than 70,000 animals, while the aggregation centers provide weighing, water, holding facilities, and technical support. Producers' willingness to pay for animal-health services indicates that these services are becoming embedded in a commercially functioning livestock market. Trade between Nawiri-supported producers and GENCO continued without support during the USAID stop-work order for Nawiri in 2025, another indication of local embeddedness of the model. Meanwhile, the model has already attracted new market actors to these remote communities. Savanna Herds Ltd. has replicated the weight-based offtake model in Isiolo and Marsabit counties, as well as in Samburu, where it is now a competitor of GENCO.

Recommendations

Nawiri's partnership with GENCO helped transform livestock marketing in Samburu from an informal, exploitative system into a structured, inclusive value chain. As efforts continue to make livestock market systems in the ASALs more inclusive and resilient, opportunities exist to expand this model.

Identify and facilitate opportunities to align business incentives and community priorities. The partnership between Nawiri and GENCO was possible because GENCO had a commercial interest in consistent supply. In turn, GENCO's willingness to offer predictable pricing and guaranteed markets incentivized producers to invest in better livestock practices. Yet this mutually beneficial model was only possible thanks to Nawiri's role as a trusted broker capable of building linkages and making investments that addressed risks and facilitated partnership. Ultimately, the partnership demonstrated that when business incentives align with community priorities, both sides can thrive.

Build local ownership. The success of the goat aggregation model stems from a strong sense of shared responsibility held by village-based groups. Organizing producers into self-selected aggregation clusters built trust, improved coordination, and fostered accountability. It also strengthened negotiating power, ensuring that profits circulated within communities rather than leaking to intermediaries. In short, local ownership creates staying power.

Invest in expanding the use of proven service delivery models. Shifting from sales on a per-animal basis to a weight-based model required education and demonstration to overcome initial resistance due to weight and cost differences between live animals and carcasses. Introducing mobile payments at aggregation points reduced the security risks of cash transactions. Community-managed fodder cultivation helped smooth fodder availability and consumption during dry seasons. All of these elements were essential to the success of the producer-exporter partnership, and they all required support to enable market actors to successfully implement them. Continuing investment will be needed to bring these solutions to more communities and expand the push-pull model.

Encourage competition among lead firms. While innovative lead firms that develop and test new business models can become monopolies, lack of competition often leads to complacency. Indeed, prior to the entry of Savanna Herds Ltd., GENCO's turnaround time for payment to aggregation groups had gone from 2 days to 3 weeks. Savanna's entry, with immediate payment upon weighing, led GENCO to move to payment on delivery to maintain new market relationships. On the "pull" side of the push-pull approach, it is essential to continuously identify new firms to adopt and iterate business models; this ensures healthy competition and keeps lead firms accountable to producers.

Center gender and social inclusion. Involving women and young people as active participants—not just beneficiaries—has unlocked new energy, efficiency, and innovation in the livestock trade. Women aggregators have emerged as credible business leaders, and youth have found meaningful employment as trekkers, aggregators, and transporters. This inclusive approach has not only strengthened livelihoods but also reshaped local social dynamics, placing women and youth at the heart of economic decision-making.

A Win-Win for Livestock Market Actors

Through Nawiri's partnership with GENCO, trade that was once dependent on middlemen has now become a structured and thriving value chain that connects remote pastoralists directly to an export market. For families in Samburu, this means steadier income, improved household nutrition, and reduced vulnerability to drought and conflict shocks. This model has proven especially powerful for women and youth inclusion. Female aggregators who once spent entire days trekking goats to distant markets now conduct business locally, where they receive guaranteed payments through group bank accounts and make independent financial decisions. Youth have been engaged as trekkers, transporters, and aggregation assistants, creating a ripple effect on employment and enterprise across communities. For GENCO, the result was a consistent supply of higher quality goats that met export standards. For the community, it was the beginning of a new kind of market—one that rewarded hard work, respected local knowledge, and shared value more equitably across the supply chain. Ultimately, this collaboration has shown that with the right partnerships facilitated by trusted brokers, dryland communities can move from survival to sustainability. When private-sector incentives align with community-driven goals, markets can become powerful engines of food security, dignity, and resilience.