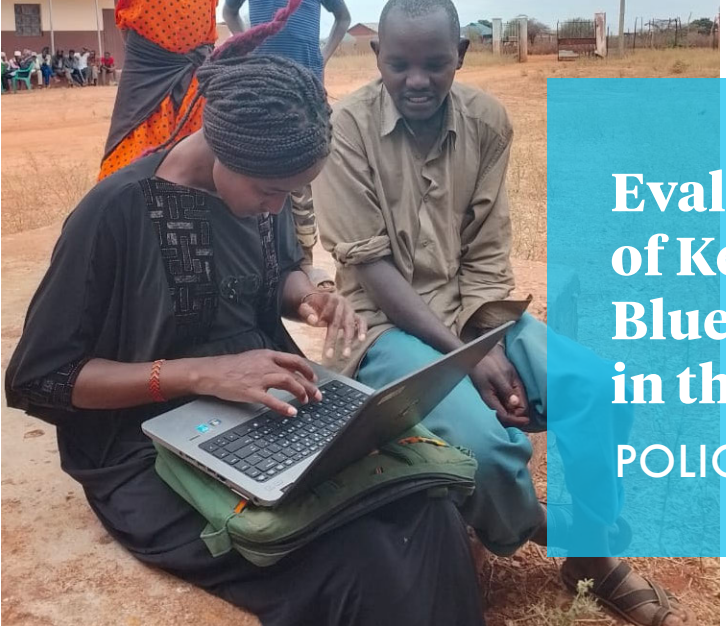

SEPTEMBER 2025

Evaluating the Contribution of Kenya's Digital Economy Blueprint to Economic Change in the Rangelands

POLICY BRIEF

KEY FINDINGS

1. Despite high connectivity, pastoral livelihoods remain underserved by digital infrastructure, creating a "high connectivity/low development" paradox. This is despite 133% mobile SIM penetration and 95% 4G coverage.
2. The expanded role of the digital economy promises to generate higher investment returns, but how these advancements translate into equitable benefits remains uncertain.
3. For pastoralists and other disadvantaged groups at the bottom of the digital pyramid, Kenya's digital achievements are tempered by entrenched socioeconomic constraints that exacerbate inequality and limit broader economic participation. The Digital Economy Blueprint (2019) and Digital Master Plan (2022–2032) overlook the specific needs of pastoralist regions and realities, offering no tailored implementation.
4. Potential disruptions emanating from the digitally-driven model risk the emergence of "digital pastoral peasants" inhabiting rangeland "data deserts." Without targeted investments in infrastructure, robust data rights, and digital literacy initiatives, pastoralists risk becoming "digital peasants in data deserts."
5. The digital economy policy framework fails to build upon successful sector-specific interventions like livestock and conflict early warning mechanisms, and the need for preventative responses to the impact of climate change in arid and semi-arid land (ASAL) regions. Digital innovations like Index-Based Livestock Insurance (IBLI) and climate alert platforms exist, but they lack visibility, scale, and long-term, consistent evaluation.

Introduction

Kenya's push for digital transformation has yielded impressive gains – financial inclusion via mobile money now reaches over 82% of the population. The government's positioning of the country as a regional hub for international technology vendors is attracting significant data center investment, contributing to the ICT sector's 10% growth per annum over the past decade. Widespread use of M-Pesa and related fintech innovations made Kenya the world's leading country in financial inclusivity.[1] The government of Kenya

1 Financial inclusion at record high in Kenya, Central Bank survey reveals 4 December 2024 https://www.afi-global.org/news/financial-inclusion-at-record-high-in-kenya-central-bank-survey-reveals/

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built upon these achievements and instituted progressive policy frameworks like the Digital Economy Blueprint and the National Digital Master to expand Kenya's digital economy.

However, the narrative is different in the ASALs, where traditional livelihoods like pastoralism intersect with long-standing structural inequalities. While the Digital Economy Blueprint promises inclusive growth, it fails to explicitly mention pastoralists, relegating them under vague "others" without targeted strategies. Despite high mobile penetration, digital uptake remains low in these regions due to structural constraints such as a lack of infrastructure and identity documentation, low literacy, and weak institutional trust. Kenya has shown how new technologies can help overcome long-standing infrastructure challenges. But more needs to be done to fully unlock the potential of its rapidly growing ICT sector. While the digital economy promises to generate higher returns on investment, how these advancements translate into equitable benefits remains uncertain.

For the pastoralists, Kenya's celebrated digital achievements are tempered by entrenched socioeconomic divides, which exacerbate inequality and limit broader economic participation. This oversight may lead to policies that unintentionally reinforce exclusion. Reaping the benefits of a sustainable and equitable digital economy, however, will require affordable access to electricity and bandwidth, greater digital literacy on the ground, and governance reforms. This depends on a holistic policy approach that integrates connectivity investments, enhanced local skills, respect for community data rights, and inclusive digital services.

This policy brief examines the impact of the digital economy on pastoralism and policy implications. SPARC researchers conducted a desk cross-referential analysis of key policy documents, including the Kenya Digital Economy Blueprint, Kenya Digital Masterplan, and pro-pastoralist development policies like V2030, The Draft National Policy for the Sustainable Development of Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (2004), programmes like the Common Framework to End Drought Emergencies (EDE), and regional frameworks like the IGAD Drought Disaster Resilience and Sustainability Initiative (IDDRSI). We complemented these with Key informant interviews (KII). These policies, programmes, and models confirm concerns touched on by expert interviewees.

Kenya's Digital Policy Landscape

The Digital Economy Blueprint (2019) defines five pillars, including Digital Government, Digital Business, Infrastructure, Innovation-Driven Entrepreneurship, and Digital Skills & Values. The National Digital Master Plan (2022–2032) introduces timelines and local partnerships but again applies a generic, top-down national approach. The Data Protection Act (2019) and National Cybersecurity Strategy attempt to safeguard users, but their implementation in peripheral regions is patchy. These digital policies complement policies initiated as far back as 2004 that recognized that pastoralism in the ASAL region is economically important but has been neglected. The policies coincide with the shifting onset of a new policy cycle for pastoralist areas. Previous policy cycles describe a trajectory from the neglect and social exclusion of the post-independence period.[2] Despite this recognition, previous policies do not appear to have translated into meaningful outcomes. Issues like poverty, low education levels, and weak infrastructure persist. Drought and conflict further complicate these.

The Digital Economy Policies

BOX 1: KEY ELEMENTS OF THE KENYA DIGITAL BLUEPRINT (2018)

Element	Description
Objective	Identify the foundations for a digital economy framework, define the necessary steps for transition, and pinpoint strategic areas of intervention for digital transformation.
Overarching Goal	Position Kenya as a regional and global innovation leader, leveraging digital solutions for sustainable economic growth and improved societal well-being.
Foundational Pillars	1. Digital Government: Enhance service delivery through e-government solutions 2. Digital Business: Promote digital entrepreneurship and market access 3. Infrastructure: Invest in broadband, data centers, and reliable energy. 4. Innovation-Driven Entrepreneurship: Foster an enabling environment for startups and tech innovators 5. Digital Skills & Values: Build capacity through ICT training and digital literacy programs.
Implementation Focus	Provides a broad roadmap without specific, time-bound targets; emphasizes multi-stakeholder collaboration and ongoing policy refinement.

2 Goldsmith, Paul (1999). Participation and the Dynamics of Social Exclusion and Poverty. Concept Document for the World Development Report 2000: International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Africa Region Consultation, Dakar Senegal.

BOX 2: KEY ELEMENTS OF THE KENYA NATIONAL DIGITAL MASTER PLAN (2022–2032)

Element	Description
Vision	Identify the foundations for a digital economy framework, define the necessary steps for transition, and pinpoint strategic areas of intervention for digital transformation.
Strategic Priorities	1. Digital Skills Development: Train a digitally literate workforce, including advanced ICT professionals. 2. Cybersecurity: Develop strong regulatory and technical frameworks to safeguard infrastructure. 3. Infrastructure Expansion: Prioritize high-speed internet and ICT facilities across all regions. 4. Public Service Delivery: Extend e-government services and automate operations nationwide. 5. Innovation & Entrepreneurship: Encourage startups, research, and local tech solutions for global markets
Implementation Approach	Outlines a ten-year timeline with defined milestones, emphasizes county-level cooperation, and seeks international partnerships to mobilize resources for full digital integration

While the national digital frameworks are visionary, they don't align with the daily realities of pastoralist life; nomadism, informal economies, and infrastructural isolation. Without this alignment, digital strategies will miss the mark. Despite this, the spread of ICT infrastructure in the rangelands[3] has brought significant benefits. Mobile phones enabled pastoralists to connect with others and access global information, receiving instant market information, identifying livestock selling locations, performing quick financial transactions, and participating in livestock insurance schemes. ICT adoption has also facilitated access to information on water status and location.[4] Furthermore, advancements in ICT offer opportunities for increased livestock production, management, and marketing by improving access to markets and price information, reducing financial transaction costs through mobile money transfer services, and enabling cattle traceability using RFID chips, which helps in monitoring animals, reducing theft risks, and controlling diseases.[5] Despite these benefits, prospects of the digital economic transformation continue to face many of the constraints symptomatic of the region's legacy of systemic inequalities.[6] Kenya's digital success is, therefore, qualified by long-standing structural issues.

3 Makokha, C., Jaquez, C., & Reid, E. (2022). Innovations for pastoralists and agro-pastoralists in fragile and conflict-affected settings. SPARC, Mercy Corps. https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/publications-resources/innovations-pastoralists-and-agro-pastoralists-fragile-and-conflict-affected

4 Jenet, A., N. Buono, S. Di Lello, M. Gomarasca, C. Heine, S. Mason, M. Nori, R. Saavedra, K. Van Troos. 2016. The path to greener pastures. Pastoralism, the backbone of the world's drylands. Vétérinaires Sans Frontières International (VSF-International). Brussels, Belgium.

5 de Leeuw, J., Osano, P., Said, M., Ayantunde, A., Dube, S., Neely, C., Vrieling, A., Thornton, P., & Ericksen, P. (2019). The pastoral farming system: Balancing between tradition and transition. In J. Dixon, D. P. Garrity, J.-M. Boffa, T. O. Williams, T. Amede, C. Auricht, R. Lott, & G. Mburathi (Eds.), Farming Systems and Food Security in Africa: Priorities for Science and Policy Under Global Change (pp. 318–353). Routledge

6 Mwaura, J. (2024, July 15). Kenya's digital divide: Pastoralists are key to the country's economy, but they're being left behind. The Conversation https://theconversation.com/kenyas-digital-divide-pastoralists-are-key-to-the-countrys-economy-but-theyre-being-left-behind-231021?utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=bylinecopy_url_button

The largest transformation has largely been around information flows. But numerous studies have pointed out that information alone is not sufficient, and there is a need for accompanying non-digital efforts; digital tools and processes cannot solve the structural barriers.[7]

A wide body of research continues to highlight the persistent challenges facing Kenya's pastoralist regions, including poverty, low education levels, recurrent droughts, insecurity, and poor infrastructure. These structural issues help explain why, despite widespread mobile network coverage, many ASAL communities remain excluded from the benefits of the digital economy.

Historical research by Ensminger (1992) shows how reduced transaction costs helped Orma pastoralists engage more effectively in livestock markets, transforming labor and governance structures.[8] Similarly, today's digital tools, such as mobile money and market information systems, are beginning to lower transaction costs for pastoralists.

However, for this transformation to be sustained, digital inclusion must be aligned with broader policy support. The five pillars of Kenya's Digital Economy Blueprint – Digital Government, Digital Business, Infrastructure, Innovation, and Skills – provide a useful foundation, but these must be adapted to the specific realities of ASAL regions.

Barriers to Digital Inclusion in the ASALs

Connectivity in the rangelands is relatively high, but much like in fintech, inclusion often masks the limited range of services actually available to the poor. Key barriers such as poor transport, lack of ID documents, low digital literacy, and fragmented financial systems undermine meaningful economic participation. These constraints limit the ability of the digital economy to truly "leapfrog" pastoralist regions past traditional development hurdles.

Infrastructure Gaps

While 3G/4G coverage reaches 98%, this masks major rural-urban divides. In counties like Marsabit, Wajir, and Mandera, computer access is as low as 1%, compared to 21% in urban areas. Electricity access remains sporadic, especially in settlements beyond main towns. Despite recent investments in green energy in ASAL counties, major barriers remain. Access to electricity and broadband is still limited in many rangeland areas, making digital participation difficult. Digital literacy programs often fail to reach these regions, especially outside major towns.

Without power or devices, even free Wi-Fi becomes meaningless because limited device ownership and digital literacy restrict usage.

Identity and Access

Many marginalized groups in Kenya, including pastoralists, struggle to access official identification

7 Daum, T., Ravichandran, T., Kariuki, J., Chagunda, M., & Birner, R. (2022). Connected cows and cyber chickens? Stocktaking and case studies of digital livestock tools in Kenya and India. Agricultural Systems, 196, 103353

8 Ensminger, Jean (1992). Making a Market: The Institutional Transformation of an African Society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

documents, a major barrier to joining the digital economy. Lack of an ID is the second most cited barrier to financial inclusion.[9] This is part of a wider problem across sub-Saharan Africa, where over 55% lack official ID. In ASAL counties, complex and slow bureaucratic systems like vetting committees slow down the issuance of ID cards. Without IDs, people can't register for mobile money, access loans, or benefit from digital programs. In light of the region's problematic record of state security and human rights abuses among indigenous communities, people do not trust public institutions and are wary of products and services that require they register personal details. The resultant lack of institutional trust jeopardizes the success of the adaptation of certain digital products, like digital Identity cards.[10] This forces residents to rely on "informal networks" for basic services, exposing them to fraud and exploitation.

Digital skills development efforts like Ajira Digital and DigiSchool have a limited presence in ASALs. Only nine out of 142 Ajira Centres were in pastoralist counties during the piloting phase. This reflects structural neglect in upskilling efforts. Despite this, a nationwide scaling up of the Ajira centers is taking place, which manifests problems around a lack of proper contextualization and adaptation or tailoring such centers to the needs of the pastoralists. It is important to focus on participation in piloting national digital literacy projects in ASAL counties to foster representation and inclusivity.

A risk of deepening digital inequality is pressing, even as overall national access improves. A lack of tailored interventions to address infrastructure, access, and digital literacy gaps persists in ASAL regions.

9 Mwaura, J. (2024, July 15). Kenya's digital divide: Pastoralists are key to the country's economy, but they're being left behind. The Conversation.
10 Smart Africa Alliance. (2020). Blueprint: Smart Africa Alliance – Digital identity (Post Benin workshop, Edition 2020). Author. https://www.smartafrica.org

Digital Skills and Literacy

The Digital Economy Blueprint document reports that the Government will continue to improve skills through the various initiatives that include digital literacy in the primary schools, developing curricula, and creating centres of excellence in all levels of the education system. The digital infrastructure problem, however, deems promoting digital literacy in the primary schools a non-starter in most areas outside major settlements.

Under the Digital Skills Pillar, the digital economy pillar focuses on developing skills of mostly ICT professionals to "meet the competencies and expertise required for the digital economy.[11] There is a genuine risk that the push for enhanced digital skills could widen the divide if training is not directly relevant to the unique needs of pastoralists, whose priorities often include livestock management, market access, and mobile financial transactions. Some studies have proposed the simplification of user interfaces, technical jargon, and using visual learning tools such as audio and video elements to address some of the skill gaps and to match the low literacy levels and oral knowledge traditions in ASAL regions.[12]

Past efforts suffered from top-down assumptions that resulted in a mixed record of success, and included failures (despite being well-intentioned) like the school laptop program and remote learning for nomads.

Data Governance and Trust

Concerns about surveillance, especially in cross-border areas, create institutional mistrust. Community data collected through digital finance, livestock tracking, or mapping apps can be used for unintended purposes, including state surveillance or commercial extraction.

In marginalized pastoralist areas, often on the peripheries of the state, concerns about privacy and data rights reign supreme. Digital finance in places like Somalia, for example, leaves data trails that the state has utilized for surveillance and state-building projects like revenue generation and security. These create loopholes that have been exploited by sub-national armed groups to generate and move international revenue.[13] There are significant gaps in the digital economy policies and frameworks in the development and enforcement of relevant legislation and regulations. A securitization agenda has led to targeted and intentional network disruptions in borderland areas, affecting vulnerable groups like small-scale traders in places like Mandera.[14] As the digital economy brings in numerous digital platforms, the entry of apps and researchers on remote sensing and resource mapping, livestock movement, and herder locations, concerns about such data being used by big companies and the unintended consequences (like resource extraction or other forms of control and access to critical resources) are rife.

Kenya's digital economy blueprint recognizes that "Experiences of and concerns about digital fraud and cyber harassment are common in Kenya and increase with more advanced use of digital services. Understanding how people perceive the safety of digital services can highlight areas where the government and private sector can collaborate on building a stronger supporting ecosystem, including a comprehensive regulatory framework, as well as directing resources towards enhancing cyber resilience."[15]

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11 Digital Economy Blueprint

12 Daum, T., Buchwald, H., Gerlicher, A., Birner, R., 2019. Times Have Changed: Using a Pictorial Smartphone App to Collect Time–Use Data in Rural Zambia. Field Methods 31 (1), 3–22.

13 Chonka, Peter. Digital Governance and Security in the Horn of Africa. Rift Valley Institute, 2025. https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/RVI-250328-XCEPT-Chonka-Digital-Governance_Final.pdf

14 Abraham, Dalle. Legally informal: Women, conflict and cross-border trade in the Mandera tri-border area. Rift Valley Institute, 2025

15 Kenya Digital economy Blueprint

Emerging County Innovations

Despite national gaps, some counties are making bold moves. A review of Kenya's ASAL counties' integrated development plans (CIDP) increasingly reflects a trend toward embedding digital tools and infrastructure into their development agendas. The county-level drive to automate operations and digitize services underscores a growing recognition of ICT as both a developmental enabler and a tool for economic inclusion. This trend aligns with national digital economy frameworks. Counties offer an opportunity to ensure that digital solutions are relevant and accessible to pastoralist communities. They can equally leverage their access and proximity to the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) to improve digital literacy and solve some of the access variables.

However, the pace and scale vary widely, with infrastructural deficits, low digital literacy, and limited institutional capacity posing persistent challenges. These county-level initiatives reflect a decentralized, adaptive model of digital inclusion. However, without national support, they risk fragmentation and duplication. Coordinated investments, policy harmonization, and targeted support for counties lagging in digital integration will be essential to fully realize the benefits of Kenya's digital transformation in pastoralist regions.

Risks, Gaps, and the Path Forward

While the Digital Economy Blueprint and Master Plan offer a broad and forward-looking strategy to deepen Kenya's digital ecosystem, including issues like AI, e-waste, and data regulation, they fall short in addressing the specific needs and risks facing pastoralist regions. The policy gap lies not in what is said, but in what is left out: the exclusion of rangeland realities from implementation frameworks and the risk of reinforcing historical inequalities.

Operationalizing Kenya's Digital Economy Blueprint in the rangelands raises critical questions about equity, local benefit, and unintended exclusion. There are concerns that digital expansion could attract outside actors, displace traditional livelihoods, and deepen existing inequalities if not carefully managed. While the Blueprint aspires to inclusion and innovation, it risks reinforcing historical power imbalances unless adapted to local contexts.[16] Ensuring that the digital economy complements, rather than disrupts, pastoralist systems requires grounded, participatory approaches, continuous policy updates, and institutional commitment beyond project cycles.

These concerns reflect a broader pattern in Kenya's development trajectory,[17] where large-scale projects have historically overlooked their social and political impacts, such as with the Lake Turkana Wind Farm and the Turkwel Gorge Dam. In the digital age, this raises fears of "surveillance capitalism", where data generated from marginalized communities could be extracted and monetized without their consent or benefit. Without safeguards, the digital economy may not only bypass pastoralist communities but also exploit their data as a new frontier of inequality.

Kenya's digital transformation must shift to flexible, co-created systems that incorporate indigenous knowledge and empower pastoralists as active agents of innovation. Technologies like real-time rangeland data, livestock tracking, and mobile-based services can reinforce, not replace, pastoralist resilience if deployed with equity, respect, and partnership at the core.

Building on past efforts, the state has long sought to integrate pastoralist regions through institutional expansion. However, these initiatives were often hampered by low technical capacity, poor coordination, limited financing, and the failure to adopt adaptive, locally grounded policies. As outlined in *Restoring Kenya's Rangelands: The Way Forward*,[18] these systemic weaknesses have left pastoralist areas underserved and skeptical of new interventions. This history reinforces the growing consensus that pastoralists must define and lead their own development narratives, grounded in their flexible, adaptive ways of life. Digital tools, if designed inclusively, can support this shift by strengthening local decision-making, enabling timely access to information, and reinforcing the adaptive strengths that already exist within pastoralist systems.

The recently launched World Bank DRIVE Project is an example of an intervention embodying this approach.[19] The concept of pastoralists as reliable professionals hinges on the ability to recognize patterns, formulate contingency scenarios, and transform these into reliable provision of services (e.g., livestock products) despite environmental turbulence. Digital technologies can significantly enhance these capabilities through real-time data on rangeland conditions, availing tools for tracking livestock, managing grazing patterns, predicting potential risks, and strengthening the "networked" aspect of the new narrative to enhance collective reliability.

16 Abate, G. T., Abay, K. A., Chamberlin, J., Kassim, Y., Spielman, D. J., & Tabe-Ojong, M. P. J. (2023). Digital tools and agricultural market transformation in Africa: Why are they not at scale yet, and what will it take to get there? Food Policy, 116, 102439. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2023.102439

17 Michael Ochieng Odhiambo, 2014, The Unrelenting Persistence of Certain Narratives: An Analysis of Changing Policy Narratives about the ASALs in Kenya. IIED Country Report. IIED, London. http://pubs.iied.org/10081IIED

18 November 2022, RESTORING KENYA'S RANGELANDS: THE WAY FORWARD WEBINAR SUMMARY REPORT https://regreeningafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/RESTORING-KENYAS-RANGELANDS-THE-WAY-FORWARD.pdf

19 Horn of Africa De-Risking, Inclusion and Value Enhancement of Pastoral Economies (DRIVE) https://projects.worldbank.org/pt/projects-operations/procurement-detail/OP00323086

Conclusion

Kenya's digital economy has immense potential, but only if it's inclusive. The risk of leaving ASALs behind is not just a missed opportunity; it's a reinforcement of systemic inequality. The success of Kenya's digital transformation will not be judged by innovation alone, but by who it reaches and empowers.

The digital economy can contribute to economic diversification and reinforce the stability of rangeland production. This can be done through facilitating access to a wide array of markets beyond traditional livestock sales. Already, new tourist circuits fueled by aesthetic visual appeal spurred by digital communication have given many women and youth in counties like Marsabit, Turkana, and Samburu new clientele. Equally important is skills development, with digital tools offering new mechanisms for distance learning, some of which provide pastoralists with relevant skills to diversify their livelihoods. Our interviews and literature review cover the range of issues contributing to the digital dimension of this process.

County-level actors should ensure a secure environment to minimize disruptions from vandalized communication infrastructure by subnational armed groups like Al-shabaab. It is important that pastoralist professionals and their colleagues chart their own digital economy agenda, especially concerning the ownership of data.8 To do this, they should take their cue from the Silicon Valley model and its contrasting set of orientations and methods, which gave rise to the digital economy in the first place. Despite the catchy moniker, it remains to be seen if the transformative influence of Kenya's Silicon Savanna will extend beyond the country's major urban centers.

Recommendations

1. **Bridge the digital gap in ASAL regions:** Address persistent exclusions caused by poor infrastructure, limited device access, and a lack of tailored digital services. Reliable electricity and internet access are foundational to any digital inclusion effort.
2. **Strengthen digital skills through localized training:** Develop culturally relevant, audio-visual digital literacy programs that reflect pastoralist realities. Training must build on existing knowledge systems and be accessible to women, youth, and low-literacy populations.
3. **Secure legal and financial access through identity systems:** Fast-track the issuance of national ID cards in pastoralist areas to unlock access to mobile money, digital services, and social protection programs.
4. **Safeguard community data and build trust:** Establish clear data governance frameworks that prioritize community consent, transparency, and protection from misuse or surveillance, particularly in cross-border and high-risk areas.
5. **Scale up successful innovations and local solutions:** Support local innovations such as Index-Based Livestock Insurance (IBLI), climate alert systems, and e-extension services through funding, documentation, and evaluation.
6. **Promote inclusive policy frameworks and partnerships:** National digital policies must recognize and actively include pastoralists as "real-time reliability professionals" leveraging their expertise to co-design adaptive, climate-smart digital ecosystems that strengthen traditional livelihoods rather than replace them.
7. **Monitor implementation and align with local realities:** Establish mechanisms for participatory monitoring of digital policy outcomes in ASAL counties to ensure ongoing learning, accountability, and adaptive course correction.

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