

Tharaka Nithi County's Fire and Rescue Knowledge Exchange Transforms Emergency Response

County:	Tharaka Nithi		
Sector/s:	Disaster Management	Risk	Sub-sector/Theme: Preparedness and Response
Keywords: (for search in the online platform)	Tharaka Nithi, Fire and Rescue, Strategic Partnerships, Intercounty collaboration, Maarifa Centre, success stories		
Target Audience:	County Government, development partners, Community safety experts, County-based researchers in disaster management		
Authors (contacts and their institutions can be included as well)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mercy Gatabi – CoG, Maarifa Centre • Rachel Kimani – Knowledge Management Champion 		
Resource Persons (include their designations)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eng. Julius Giti - CECM in charge of Roads • Faith Kalunda - Chief Officer, Roads and Public Works • Alex Mugambi – County Chief Fire Officer • Ryan Phillips – Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Crew Commander and Project Team Leader • Kayleigh Jean – Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Community Safety Officer • Lee Atwood – South Central Ambulance Service Paramedic 		

Introduction

In recent years, the world has witnessed an alarming surge in natural and human-induced disasters. According to the State of Wildfires 2023–2024 report by Copernicus, wildfires alone accounted for 16% of global carbon emissions, causing hundreds of deaths and catastrophic losses in Chile, the U.S., and parts of Europe. Kenyan urban centers and rural communities also continue to suffer from frequent fire outbreaks, often aggravated by delayed emergency response, inadequate equipment, and a lack of technical expertise.



COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS



Nationally, reports by the National Disaster Operations Center (NDOC, 2024) indicate that cities such as Nairobi have recorded over 130 arson-related incidents since early 2024. Markets, schools, and residential buildings remain highly vulnerable, particularly in informal settlements where poor urban planning, limited infrastructure, and insufficient funding hinder the development of structured disaster management plans.

Counties across Kenya face similar challenges in disaster management, including insufficient firefighting personnel and equipment, with many relying on skeletal teams and outdated or donated fire engines. Compounding this issue is the limited training available to responders, as most lack formal fire and rescue skills, leading to inefficiencies during emergencies. Additionally, weak inter-county coordination persists despite disasters often crossing borders, resulting in fragmented response efforts that hinder effective crisis mitigation.

Tharaka Nithi County has experienced its share of fire incidents, particularly in markets and schools. Recognizing these gaps, the County took a proactive step toward resilience by forging a partnership with the Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (UK). This collaboration established the Fire and Rescue Knowledge Exchange Program, equipping local responders with the skills, tools, and networks needed to mitigate disasters and save lives.

Implementation of the practice

This collaboration began in 2019 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Tharaka Nithi County and Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Service, spearheaded by H.E. Governor Muthomi Njuki, EGH. It aimed to strengthen local disaster response capacity through knowledge transfer, equipment donations, and institutional development.



COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS

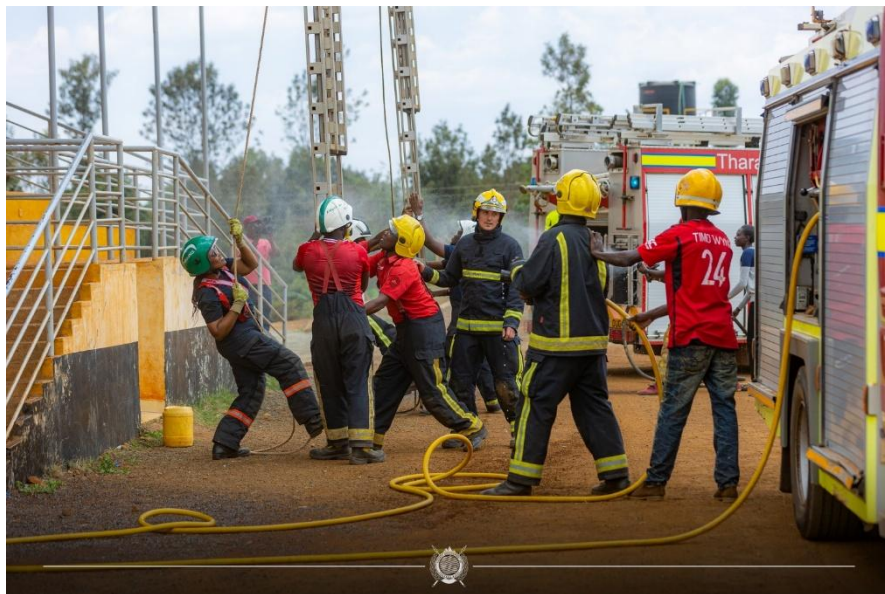


Figure 1: Bedfordshire trainers demonstrating hydraulic rescue tools during a fireman training session

Prior to this collaboration, the County's fire response capabilities were severely limited, operating with only two full-time personnel and no dedicated fire engines. The support from the UK delegation included two modern fire engines, protective gear (helmets, suits, and breathing apparatus), emergency medical kits, and hydraulic rescue tools ("jaws of life").

These donations enabled the County to establish a fully functional Fire and Rescue Department that has since expanded to 22 trained personnel, transforming emergency response capacity.

Recognizing that disasters transcend boundaries, the County extended the program's benefits to neighbouring Counties; including Isiolo, Meru, Embu, Wajir, Nyeri, and Marsabit through cross-county training workshops. These collaborative efforts led to the adoption of standardized response protocols across the region which fostered a unified and more effective approach to disaster management that has strengthened resilience in Eastern Kenya.

A key factor in the program's success was its strategic partnership with the County Department of Public Health to integrate Emergency Medical Services (EMS) into fire response operations. Firefighters received comprehensive training in trauma care, Basic Life Support (BLS), and Mass Casualty Incident (MCI) management. This integration ensured that first responders could deliver immediate medical aid at emergency scenes which has significantly improved survival rates and transformed the County's overall emergency response effectiveness.

Results of the practice

The fire and rescue program has significantly enhanced the County's emergency response capabilities, expanding from two personnel to a fully operational 22-member team equipped with modern skills and tools. This growth has enabled the County to provide full-time emergency coverage, ensuring rapid response to incidents in both urban and rural areas. The program has gained national



COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS



and regional recognition, fostering collaboration across six neighboring Counties and establishing partnerships with international agencies. This model's success has attracted Kisumu and Mombasa Counties, which have joined training workshops and replicated the partnerships.

The introduction of a toll-free emergency line (1513) has modernized public access to help, with call volumes rising to an average of 20 emergency responses per month, a 200% increase from pre-program levels. Dispatches now occur within minutes, drastically reducing property damage and saving lives.

Since 2019, the partnership has secured 31 emergency vehicles through donations, saving Counties an estimated KES 279 million. This cost-effective approach has allowed budget allocations to be redirected toward training, capacity building, referral services, and community preparedness programs.

The program has also promoted gender inclusivity by recruiting and training seven female firefighters, a first in the region, who now serve as role models and inspire more young women to join the profession.

Enhanced medical response capabilities, including training in trauma care, CPR, and emergency triage, have led to a 40% reduction in fire-related fatalities according to the Tharaka Nithi County Emergency Services Department's incident reporting data (2023), with survivors recovering faster due to timely interventions. Additionally, the program's success has impelled cross-county collaboration, with six neighboring Counties adopting joint training and response frameworks. Regular simulation exercises and shared resources have created a unified disaster management network which has improved resilience across Eastern Kenya.



Figure 2: The official handover of donated emergency vehicles to the County Government of Tharaka Nithi

Lessons learnt:

1. International and inter-county collaborations provide critical resources, expertise, and funding, accelerating capacity development.
2. Ongoing, practical drills in firefighting and medical response ensure teams remain prepared for real-world emergencies.
3. Counties must develop autonomous, well-equipped units to reduce reliance on overstretched national agencies.
4. Community sensitization in schools, markets, and high-risk areas has proven vital for early fire detection and prevention.



COUNCIL OF GOVERNORS



5. Enforcing building codes, land-use regulations, and disaster policies is crucial to reducing risks in informal settlements.

Recommendations

1. Advocate for national and donor funding to replicate the program in all 47 Counties.
2. Establish functional interconnected emergency numbers linked to County response teams and hospitals.
3. Integrate fire safety and basic emergency response into school curricula to build a culture of preparedness.
4. Invest in Kenyan-made firefighting equipment to cut costs and boost sustainability.
5. Include psychological first aid and trauma counseling in responder training to support both victims and emergency teams.

Further reading:

Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue (2024). Bedfordshire Fire and Rescue Team returns after successful training mission in Kenya Article available at <https://www.bedsfire.gov.uk/news/bedfordshire-fire-and-rescue-team-returns-after-successful-training-mission-kenya>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=399856353834117&set=pcb.399857097167376>

Jones, M. W., Kelley, D. I., Burton, C. A., Di Giuseppe, F., Barbosa, M. L. F., Brambleby, E., ... & Xanthopoulos, G. (2024). State of wildfires 2023–24. *Earth System Science Data Discussions*, 2024, 1-124.

https://www.researchgate.net/figure/A-summary-of-the-major-fires-disasters-in-Kenya_tbl1_228509872

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/health/opinion/article/2001502698/how-impunity-and-corruption-fuel-disasters-and-claim-kenyan-lives>

Marete, G. (2024). UK experts train Kenyan firefighters in six counties. Article first published in the Daily Nation on 30th September 2024.

Mutembei, P. (2024). Fire fighters and rescue crews receive training. Article retrieved from the County Review newspaper on 20th September 2024.

Tharaka Nithi County Government: www.tharakanithi.go.ke

Photo Gallery

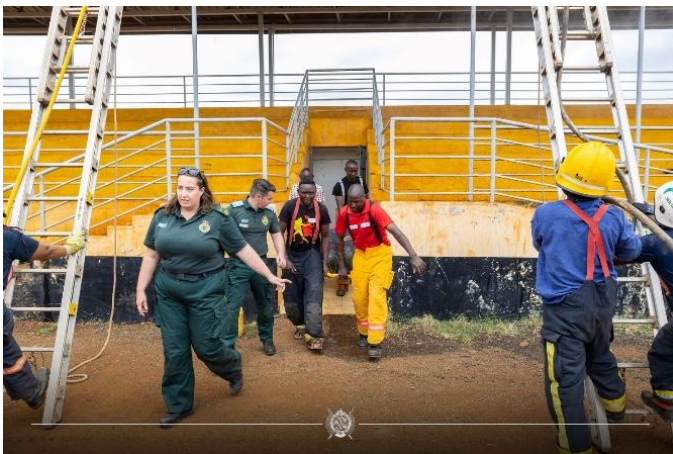


Figure 3: Responder Training session during the 2024 Firemen Training

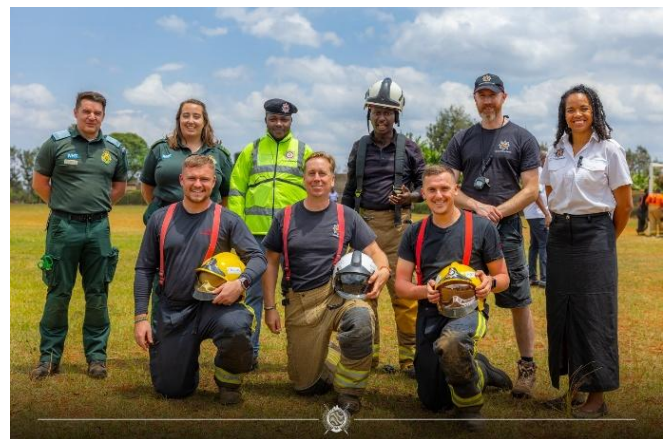


Figure 4: A photo of Bedfordshire team during the responder firemen training held in 2024



Figure 5: The public Launch of the Disaster Management Unit in Chuka Municipality