



Power, equity, gender and decision-making in pastoralist natural resource management

Drylands make great frontiers. Mobile pastoralists, who inhabit these regions, have found their land divided across international boundaries. They live in lands at the margins of human existence, geographically marginal from the seat of government, and often form an ethnic minority within their country. They are usually physically, socially, economically and politically marginalised. This marginalisation has had profound consequences for the way that pastoralists manage their natural resource base. Historically it has shaped their customary institutions and fostered their extraordinary resilience, but more recently it has led to weakening of those adaptations in the face of powerful competition from neighbours and new leaders.

Within pastoralist societies, the use of labour is highly gender specific and women have traditionally played important roles in the management of natural resources. Recent decades have seen important internal and external power shifts, with pastoralists losing power to non-pastoral groups through new forms of administration and government, and with the power of different customary institutions shifting, for example from women and youths to elders. For pastoralists to fulfil their role as custodians of the drylands, they need all actors within the system to be empowered to make decisions over resource use and to capitalise on their traditional knowledge. Important policy issues that can address this gap include:

- **Create an environment for empowerment** policy makers need to create an enabling institutional environment at state and local government levels that is sensitive to local needs and constraints, and provides the space and authority for decision making; and
- **Ensure equity through empowerment** inclusive and empowering approaches are needed for pastoral policy development and planning which are equitable across pastoral society (including all ages, gender, and wealth groups) as loss of power and equality leads to loss of control and loss, or marginalisation, of knowledge for conservation.

Power, equity and gender in pastoral decision making

Many pastoralist societies are considered highly egalitarian, with strong institutions through which decisions are negotiated collectively, rather than imposed by a select group of leaders. Amongst the Karimojong of Uganda for example there is no central customary authority, although the authority of the elders in different localities operates according to a shared set of procedures. In Karamoja society, power is appropriated by men as they go through a series of age and generation sets. Junior age sets lead decision making in the kraals, but rather than impose decisions on kraal members like a chief or “big man”, they lead the process of decision-making. However, egalitarianism is clearly a subjective view, and some are more equal than others, as in most pastoral societies, women have a subordinate role to men.

In Karamoja, the elders’ advice is sought on decision making, although they may not make any final decisions since they no longer move with the kraals and therefore lack first hand knowledge of the situation. Nevertheless, their knowledge is of paramount importance. Similarly, the ability of Maasai elders to recall where to go to find the best grasses for milk production is of great importance to the herders in supervising and monitoring grazing.

Roles over different resources are often inter-related. For example, Maasai elders have decision making authority over burning of pastures as well as mobility patterns. However, the warriors are tasked with digging dry season wells and identifying the location of homesteads and thus they must know which trees are useful for this, whilst women do the construction and are ultimately responsible for harvesting construction materials. Certain trees are preferred for construction and their use is closely managed by the elders.

The role of women in pastoralist societies is usually clearly distinct from that of men, and pastoralist women often have limited decision making power (except in rare examples, Box 1). Nevertheless, the gender distribution of labour roles ensures that women play an important role in the use of certain natural resources and therefore in sustainable rangelands management. Women usually harvest raw materials for housing and for fuel, they manage stock around the homestead, they possess knowledge on plants for medicine or food and they harvest high-value products from the rangelands.



Box 1: Example of women asserting their rights

The Barbaig distinguish themselves from other East African pastoralists by having a very strong council of women (girgwaeda gademg) which has significant powers over the management of natural resources. The girgwaeda gademg can pass decisions of the highest order including against men in authority. It has powers over land and especially on matters related to the spiritual aspects of natural resources. This council has been bitterly opposed to the ploughing of land for farming, and fought strongly for its retention within the pastoralist system.

Power relations and sustainable resource management

Power relations in pastoral societies are in a constant state of flux which is an attribute that facilitated the widespread distribution of pastoralism throughout the African continent. However, while power relations in pastoral societies have always been inherently dynamic, there have been significant widespread changes in recent years. These changes have been influenced by many factors, including emerging state authority and inappropriate development interventions.

The authority of elders, for example, is changing in many pastoralist societies, sometimes in very different ways. In Ethiopia for example the creation of Pastoral Associations has led to a growing disobedience of the youth and a challenging of customary authority, so that elders are losing their ability to reach consensus. Amongst the Karimojong, the egalitarian and all encompassing character of the elders’ authority has been affected by the rising of a few militarist kraal-leaders who gained more success than others through banditry and raids. However, at the same time, there are concerns that the overt empowering of elders, for example through selective approaches to participation, has distorted the power balance in their favour and excluded youths and warriors from decision making.

In recent years the gender balance has also been changing and there are many cases of shifting gender roles and divisions of labour between men and women (Box 2). In many pastoral societies women are traditionally responsible for the allocation of milk and other livestock products (usually not including meat), and this is crucial for cementing social bonds and strengthening the networks and obligations that maintain the integrity of the pastoralist system. However there are many cases where men have seized control over dairy produce when its cash value has risen through increased access to markets.

Box 2. Shifting gender balance in Uganda

In Karamoja, women, children and the elderly usually take care of the homestead and the adjacent gardens, but increasingly men are found engaging in cultivation. The differentiation in gender roles and the division of households has been reduced to some extent by the advent of modern transport in pastoral areas, which allows easier movement between kraal and homestead.

Customary institutions are usually highly dynamic and can be responsive to external forces, although there are fears that the rate of change in recent decades is straining their resilience. In recent years the balance of power and equity of pastoral society has changed,

sometimes resulting in the undermining of customary resource management and conservation cultural rules along with the adoption of unsustainable resource use practices. There are several key factors causing these shifting power balances:

One sided state interventions - heavy handed State intervention has distorted power relations within and between pastoralist communities, and between pastoralists and their neighbours and compatriots. Government can be very one-sided in dealing with pastoralists, as in Sudan where illegal logging by business is condoned, whilst pastoralists are punished for the sustainable lopping of branches to satisfy their traditional need for construction and fuel. Enforced government settlement programmes have also weakened customary institutions, as in the case of the Group Ranches in Kenya or trust lands that have conferred power on the trustees, who instead act as private owners and keep the revenue from the land;

Elite capture of pastoral power - a common phenomenon in pastoralist societies is the gradual transfer of power away from 'pastoralists' often towards self-styled 'pastoral elites' those of the same ethnic group who have gained a formal education and have much greater understanding of, and access to, modern governance institutions. This can be a force for good, as in the case of those 'elites' who actively represent the needs of pastoralists and uphold their rights and voice, or it can be a force for bad as in the case of those who have been alienated from the pastoral setting and do not have the interests of pastoralists at heart. Many elites have also been educated in a system that is strongly opposed to pastoralism and reinforces old fallacies that pastoralism is backward, irrational, and a cause of under-development;



Exclusive property regimes - the delimitation of pastoral zones, or the establishment of group ranches under territorially exclusive property regimes, has been broadly unsuccessful. These policies have led to overuse of the resource base, lowering the drought resilience of communities, and have increased conflict between nomads and farmers, and among nomadic groups;

Territorial identities - in many pastoralist societies, territorial identity has become increasingly prominent over recent decades. In some cases this has been imposed in an effort to sedentarise pastoralists, but in other cases it is a defence against appropriation of land by outsiders. In Sudan for example, farmers carry out 'preventive

clearing' to stop pastoralist returning to claim their ownership rights. This is compounded by legislation that states that land which is left fallow for three years is forfeit. Some Maasai meanwhile, have resorted to farming as a means to protect their land from encroachment; and

Armed conflict - war leads to rapid and significant social change, although such changes may not always be detrimental to pastoralism. The independence struggle in Eritrea led to a disruption of the pastoral economy and amalgamation of aristocratic and serf classes together, who joined forces in the liberation struggle. Conversely, relations between the Baggara and the Dinka and other pastoralist groups of Sudan, which were historically marked by peaceful relations through shared institutions of cooperation and conflict resolution, have clearly deteriorated as a result of war.

Empowerment opportunities for sustainable development

Many of the internal shifts in power within pastoral society are caused by external forces, many of which are under the authority of governing states. These changes are increasingly reducing the capacity of customary institutions to govern their natural resources, yet opportunities are also available to readdress this situation:

Decentralisation - perhaps the most significant opportunity for pastoralists comes with the recent emphasis being placed on devolution, decentralisation, and accountability of local government. However such localised opportunities can also destabilise power. It is very easy for external agents to buy into the concept of participation and consultation, but to then stop at a simple level of application, only conferring with a select few: usually elders or educated elites, and not, for example with women (Box 3).

Box 3: Gender in empowerment.

Unless there is a specific emphasis on empowering women in pastoralist societies, participatory approaches risk further marginalising them from decision making processes. This has implications for their social development, but also for their capacity to sustainably manage the natural resource base. This rationale applies equally to other marginal groups, such as youths, artisans and ethnic minorities within pastoralist areas.

Rebalancing power between pastoralists and arable farmers - the relationship and complementarity between pastoralism and farming is old and focuses on the mutual exchanges of different products. Pastoralists trade high value livestock and drylands products for grain and other goods with their cultivating neighbours. In addition pastoralist livestock convert crop residue into manure and livestock biomass. However, relationships between pastoralists and their neighbours have, in many cases, been better in the past and can be restored, but attention must be given to rebalancing power. Solutions are too often one-sided, usually against the interests of the pastoralists, which does not offer much hope for durable relationships. However herding contracts between pastoralists and cultivators can be mutually beneficial, offering asset diversification to the cultivators and productive inputs and exchange goods to the pastoralist.

Rebalancing power between pastoralists and conservationists -

power relationships between pastoralists and conservationists are less easily balanced than those with sedentary farmers (Box 4). Despite the loss of massive tracts of prime rangeland to National Parks and Reserves, pastoralists are beginning to recoup part of the loss, indicating a new shift in power back towards pastoralists. The wildlife industry is beginning to recognize the interests of local communities in the management of wildlife resources and in the disbursement of profits from these resources, and there is a growing movement whereby landowners and community groups are setting aside part of their land as game sanctuaries and conservancies, based on community land use planning. Group ranches in Kenya that have set aside land for such purposes include Elerai, Koiyaki, Kamana, Eselenkei, Lumo and other group ranches that border the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

Box 4: Conservation in pastoral lands

In East Africa, it is estimated that about 70% of wildlife populations, are dispersed outside protected areas, mostly on lands that overlap with pastoralism. Some of these wildlife reserves, such as the Tarangire-Manyara and the Serengeti-Mara Ecosystems, are famous for the sheer quality and quantity of wild animals found there. The creation of gazetted conservation areas is responsible for the alienation of pastoralist's lands more than all other factors combined: for example, 95% of Monduli District in Tanzania has been set aside for conservation.

Conclusions

Customary institutions and decision making powers are changing, indeed are probably always in flux, but these changes are not uniform and different pastoralist communities are affected differently. However, the capacity of customary institutions to govern natural resource management appears to have weakened almost universally. Yet opportunities are steadily being created to redress this situation, particularly as policies shift away from the outmoded conservation paradigm of 'fortress conservation' towards conserving with and for rural communities.

This series of five policy briefs has sketched out a range of inter-related factors that impinge on pastoralists' capacity to sustainably manage their environment. The ecological and economic logic of mobile pastoral systems in the drylands is now beyond reasonable doubt, but major challenges remain in acting on this new knowledge. The necessary steps remain unpalatable for some policy makers, and untried and unsettling for others.

However, if the logic of mobility is understood then it becomes clear that pastoralists understand their environment exceptionally well. They have the knowledge and skills to manage it sustainably, and they have institutions that to enable them to do so. However, even with these factors in place, pastoralists need to be empowered to make their system work. Policies and attitudes need to be broadly supportive of pastoral systems and pastoral institutions to enable those institutions to function effectively for natural resource management.

Through their marginalisation, pastoralists have lost power and through this they have lost the capacity to make and enforce decisions over their economy and their environment. This applies also to marginalised groups within pastoral society, notably women, but also include youths and sub-castes. Inclusive and empowering approaches, along with an enabling institutional environment, are needed for developing and executing pastoral policy that is sensitive to the needs and constraints of pastoralists and the drylands.

Governments are beginning to recognise the important roles that pastoralist customary institutions must play if drylands are to be conserved. Efforts are being made to reverse the trend of weakening customary institutions, though there is still much to do. Trying to undo the changes of past years would be inconsistent with the dynamic nature of customary institutions, but recognising and enhancing the role they play is essential for sustainable rangelands management.