

Maasai Pastoralists: Diversification and Poverty

K. Homewood, E. Coast, S. Kiruswa, S. Serneels, M. Thompson, P. Trench

Introduction

Sub-Saharan African pastoralism involves highly fluid production systems responding flexibly to variable and unpredictable arid and semi arid rangeland environments. Consequently, a critical feature of the pastoral production system is access to extensive public land offering potential grazing and water resources that affords pastoralists the necessary flexibility to relocate their livestock when local rangelands fail. As such, increasingly restricted access to key resources of pasture, water and through-passage in East Africa has increased pastoralist vulnerability to drought herd loss and threatens the sustainability of the pastoral production system.

The research summarized in this brief highlights the consequences of changing land tenure to pastoralist livelihood strategies. In particular, it explores the patterns, scale and trends of livelihood diversification among the Maasai pastoralists of Maasailand who have been particularly affected by the loss of access to key dry season land and water resources. Maasailand, split between Kenya and Tanzania, has witnessed the extensive reallocation of rangelands from open commons accessible to pastoral production to conservation through the gazetting of protected areas and commercial cultivation, capturing key resources for both large-scale cereal farming and intensive irrigation. Remaining rangelands are themselves increasingly privatized through sub-division (Kenya) and allocation of rights for ranching, farming or wildlife enterprises (Tanzania). High rates of internal population growth and in-migration have added to both real and perceived pressures on key resources. Together, the confluence of these events has fueled the increasing livelihood diversification of Maasailand pastoralists.

Cross-border Comparison

The study focuses on the Maasai populations living in the protected area-adjacent zones on either side of the Tanzania/Kenya border. The contrasts between Kenyan and Tanzanian lands potentially offer a controlled comparison, with related issues and factors operating in essentially similar ecological, ethnic and socio-economic circumstances, but radically different macro-economic and political contexts.

This analysis of livelihood diversification among the Maasai draws on detailed data from the Mara (Kenya) and Longido (Tanzania), building on a large scale cross-border comparative survey from Narok and Kajiado Districts (Kenya) and Ngorongoro District (Tanzania).

Diversification Patterns

The large-scale privatization of Maasailand for both commercial and conservation purposes has placed a considerable constraint on the capacity of the rangelands to support pastoralism as a viable livelihood option for the majority of households in the area. As a natural response to the decreasing returns of pastoral production in the area, the Maasai are beginning to diversify their income source portfolios in an attempt to avoid or

alleviate poverty as well as to spread the risks associated with the increasingly vulnerable pastoral livelihood. Diversification often involves a change along one or more of the following dimensions; an expansion of the set of income sources, a change in the key sources of income, and/or a change in location.

Across the study sites in both Kenya and Tanzania, livestock continues to feature as a source of income with 100% of the Mara households, 98% of Narok, Kajiado and Ngorongoro households, and 95% of Longido households having some livestock. Furthermore, for a majority of households in all areas, livestock continues to be the main source of income. Nevertheless, despite the enduring importance of livestock, the pattern of livelihood portfolios indicate that the Maasai are beginning to diversify into other activities.

Wealth-differentiated diversification and the enduring value of livestock

While Maasai pastoralists across the wealth spectrum are diversifying in response to the changes in land tenure, diversification trends are demonstrably different across different spheres of wealth. Due to the reduced capacity of the rangelands to support pastoralists, poorer households who lose their livestock are less able to recover the losses during favorable periods. As such, the poor are forced to engage in other income earning activities out of necessity. Better off households, on the other hand, diversify in order to balance risks, buffer shocks and spread investments across a wider portfolio to maximize earnings potential. Every household in Mara and Longido is diversified to some extent, but income from non pastoralist, non-livestock activities make up an increasing proportion of overall gross annual income as households get poorer. In the more prosperous Mara site, mean annual incomes are much higher across the board than for Longido, and the proportional composition of household income is dominated by livestock revenues. Within Longido, mean annual household income is closely related to the proportional contribution from livestock, and the two poorest clusters of households have no livestock income at all.

For both Mara and Longido, despite their very different circumstances, it is clear that wealth is primarily associated with livestock. Across these two study sites, livestock are not simply culturally important but are shown by our regression analyses to be a central dimension of economic wellbeing.

After livestock, non-farm activities form the next most important contribution to household incomes. Cultivation is of little importance to most Mara households, though a few do get major returns from commercial cultivation. While two-thirds of Longido households cultivate (out of necessity, despite the lower agroecological potential of this area), few households harvest and returns are low.

In Mara, despite the very high earnings associated with conservation, there has been a rapid concentration of this income in fewer hands following land subdivision. Longido by comparison has virtually no conservation income. However, the setting aside of village

land for Wildlife Management Areas mean people are losing access to the natural resources on which they depend for their poverty-driven livelihoods.

Conclusion

The confluence of international conservation pressures as well as considerable commercial and State interests in Maasailand is driving the rapid privatization and enclosure of the rangelands. As a result of these processes, poorer households in the area are particularly vulnerable to poverty as their traditional pastoralist livelihood is threatened.

Three clear points emerge. First, diversification is widespread, and follows pathways which are directly comparable to patterns of diversification among other, non pastoralist, rural African populations. Second, however important diversification has become, livestock remain the most important component of secure livelihoods. Finally, the evidence suggests that conservation income is performing poorly for poverty reduction across widely contrasting conditions of conservation-earning potential, policy environment and land tenure.

Policymakers need to support opportunities for diversification in pastoral areas and to develop people's ability to take up those opportunities. At the same time they need to recognize the lasting ecological and economic rationality and importance of livestock and support the pastoral enterprise. Finally, they need to be strongly aware of the poverty implications of conservation interventions under prevailing policy and governance environments.