

Women's Groups in Arid Northern Kenya: Origins, Governance, and Roles in Poverty Reduction

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Introduction

Collective action is well known as a positive force for improving risk management in many rural communities of the developing world. Group formation can contribute to building social capital, and this, in turn, can have positive effects on human welfare, especially as a result of income generation among the poor. For sub-Saharan Africa, Kenya is noteworthy in having a long history of formal cooperative movements involving smallholder farmers. A wide variety of other, less formal, self-help groups that have recently emerged in rural sites of the Kenyan highlands is also documented. These groups, often numerically dominated by women, undertake many activities that include income generation, asset building, commodity marketing, and social/cultural functions.

There is far less evidence, however, of similar forms of collective behavior occurring among rangeland inhabitants in Africa. This is logical given the vast expanse of rangeland areas, the low densities of pastoral populations, and the loosely structured social organizations that have evolved among pastoral societies to accommodate a need for more household-level independence and opportunism to exploit patchy, harsh environments. In recent decades, however, some trends towards sedentarization in higher-potential rangelands may help create subpopulations that are more suitable or amenable to collective action. This prominently includes the swelling numbers of former pastoralists, or semi-settled active pastoralists, now residing near small towns and villages.

The main objective of the research summarized here was to document and explore a sample of varied women's groups that have sprung up across northern Kenya. The authors sought to know how such groups have been formed and governed, what activities they pursue, and what efforts have been successful and what have failed.

Women's Groups of Northern Kenya

Extensive qualitative interviews for 16 women's groups residing in Moyale and Marsabit Districts in northern Kenya in early 2005 were conducted. The groups were purposively selected from key locations that were readily accessible to data collectors. To promote confidentiality of interview respondents, the names or locations of the groups are not reported. Interview questions were typically open ended and elicited monologues, discussions, or other forms of qualitative responses. Ranking methods were also used in some cases. Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili. While the women we interviewed represented dominant pastoral ethnic groups in the region (i.e., Boran, Rendille, etc.) they pursued sedentary lifestyles and resided in towns and villages. They and their families are linked to a variety of agro-ecological production systems. One women's group was in a farming area while three other groups were in an arid area wholly devoted to livestock production. The remaining 11 groups were in mixed, agro-pastoral locations.

At the time of interviews, the groups had existed for an average of 10 years, with two being 18-19 years old. Charter memberships averaged about 24 women, 20 of whom were typically illiterate. Half of the groups had been formed after facilitation by a GO or NGO partner and half formed spontaneously. Groups are governed under detailed constitutional frameworks outlining rights and responsibilities of members. All groups have eventually been registered with the Kenya government. Chairladies of the groups are typically elected to two-year terms. Group applicants and candidates for office are carefully screened.

Objectives and Activities of Women's Groups

The large majority of the groups indicated that the key reason for organizing was to improve living standards of the members. Major objectives across all groups prominently included the reduction of poverty by increasing incomes via micro-enterprise development and livelihood diversification. Groups undertake a wide variety of social and economic activities founded on savings and credit schemes and small business development. Across all groups, livestock continues to play a vital role. Commercialized livestock activities provide capital for small business ventures and vice-versa. Secondary objectives, largely pursued by more established groups, include the expansion of education, health service, and natural resource management functions.

Groups also serve as a form of social insurance, often supporting members faced with unexpected hardship. Groups appear to vary in their effectiveness of responding to drought. Several mature groups were able to offer drought mitigation assistance to their members. While most of the sampled groups register prolonged periods of hardship, many have weathered the storm and respondents generally indicate improved welfare as a direct result of group membership.

The greatest threats to the sustainability of these women's groups come from external factors such as drought, resource scarcity, poverty, and political incitement as well as internal factors such as unfavorable group dynamics and illiteracy. Principles of good group governance and wisdom in business creation and management were repeatedly stated by respondents as the key ingredients for long-term success; making linkages to external development partners is also vital to secure access to technology and small grants.

Policy Implications (Supporting collection action in pastoral areas)

Groups have ambitious plans to further improve their social and economic circumstances. Evidence is shown that rates of group formation in the region appear to be increasing. In a highly risky and poverty-stricken environment such as northern Kenya, such groups help create relatively deep pools of social, human, and diversified economic capital. Many of these processes fill large gaps in public service delivery and should be encouraged by policy makers.

What policies are needed to support and encourage the efforts of productive, grass-roots organization in pastoral areas? At the micro- and meso-levels, groups need support that

runs the gamut from provision of small grants and technology to various forms of capacity building that involve training for people in the areas of leadership, group dynamics, gender dynamics, micro-finance, micro-enterprise, and commercial and non-commercial aspects of pastoral livestock production. Meetings involving women's group representatives and facilitators from GO and NGO partners should be held to directly inform policy makers on the details of priority interventions. At the macro-level, policies that promote investment in rural development—prominently including improvements to physical infrastructure, reducing insecurity, increasing access to education, improving governance, and promoting cross-border trade, could yield many local benefits by widening the economic niches to allow for sustainable growth and proliferation of self-help groups.

Increased prospects for regional and international trade could help justify mergers of local groups into larger cooperative associations with possible benefits in terms of the bargaining power of groups and successful market penetration. One recent example of impact that illustrates synergism among the inter-related roles of local group capacity building, aggressive regional networking of buyers and sellers, and involvement of policy makers is provided by the creation of a northbound marketing chain for small ruminants that largely occurs in pastoral Ethiopia. Animal supply originates in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, with animals processed in Addis Ababa and products then exported to the Gulf States. Such models illustrate how local social capital in the form of group collective action can be transformed into larger benefit flows via connections to outside markets.

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