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

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Road Map

- Background and Study Area
- Research Objectives and Methods
- Results and Conclusions
- Policy Implications
Background

- Pastoral risk management focus
- Facilitating opportunistic behavior in the face of ecological and economic shocks
- Income and asset diversification one means to this end
UMOJA-WOMEN'S GROUP

Umoja na Maendeleo.
Objectives

- Exploratory, qualitative study to describe attributes of women’s collective-action groups in Moyale and Marsabit Districts
  - How are groups formed and governed?
  - What priority activities do groups pursue?
  - Group roles in drought, poverty mitigation?
Methods

- 16 groups interviewed
- Purposefully selected (accessibility)
- Semi-structured questionnaire
- Review of group records, assets, finances
Results (1)

- Avg group age = 9.7 yrs (range: 2-19 yrs)
- Avg charter members = 24 (range: 7-42)
- Avg illiteracy rate = 85% (range: 60-100%)
- Avg 17% (wealthy), 31% (middle class), 52% (poor), with marked variation
Results (2)

- 80% of groups formed with intent to improve livelihoods of members

- Half of groups formed spontaneously; other half formed as result of GO/NGO initiative (initial inputs variable but modest)

- All groups eventually made partnerships
Results (3)

- Charter members selected from open public meetings; some had activity focus; membership often restricted over time.

- Selection criteria include character, need for “team players,” special skills or access to resources; applicants voted on; probation.
Results (4)

- All groups have written constitutions and by-laws; details memorized
  - Leadership and administrative procedures;
  - Rights and responsibilities of members;
  - Community service philosophy
Results (5)

- Responsibilities include: attending meetings; active participation; labor contributions; regular payments to group accounts; duty to be well-informed

- Privileges include: profit sharing; shared technology; support for children, health, funerals, weddings, asset building, training
Leaders ("chair ladies") typically elected every 2-3 yrs;

Leaders selected based on character, reputation, and "development vision;" most groups had access to leadership training;

Secretaries, treasurers appointed; minutes kept for meetings;
Results (7)

- All groups have been legally registered with GOK; admin and resource access benefits of registration noted
- Inter-group relations inconsequential
Objectives included poverty reduction via micro-enterprise development and livelihood diversification

Initial income earners: farming, dairy, poultry, honey, livestock processing, bakeries, handicrafts
Results (9)

- Initial profits deposited in group accounts; invested in livestock or technology;
- Group accounts grow via other member contributions (Harambee) and accrued interest
- Larger disbursements for larger projects (emergency needs for vulnerable people; construction; water rehab; schools; sanitation)
Results (10)

- In older groups, shifts in priority focus over time:
  - From water quantity to water quality;
  - From general education support to education for girls
  - From general health support to HIV/AIDS
Results (11)

- Groups noted complementary roles of micro-enterprise and livestock production

- Livestock production less focused on numbers for traditional subsistence but more on commercialization (fattening, higher turnover)
Most common recipe for success: Women diversifying to combine commercial livestock activities with small-scale retail ventures (kiosk, hotel, butchery…)

Successful women can “handle details, keep records, save money, and possess good business sense”
Results (13)

- Overall, the critical cornerstones of collective action have been:
  - Ability to manage micro-finance activity
  - Ability to improve living standards
  - Ability to improve access to education
  - Ability to diversify incomes
Patterns of group capital accumulation from 2000 to 2004

Nine groups reported a net increase in capital accumulation for at least 4 of 5 years

One group reported an increase in only 2 of 5 years
Results (15)

- Challenges to Group Sustainability
  - Drought (early 1990s): Few actions taken
  - Drought (1999-2000): Much more action taken
    - Buffer neediest members (food, loans, restock)
    - Promotion of petty trade, emotional support
Results (16)

- What promotes long-term sustainability?
  - Unity of purpose, good leadership, diverse and sound business decisions
  - Ability to secure development partnerships
Results (17)

- What are the greatest threats to groups?
  - Internal (ranked): Negative group dynamics; illiteracy; agitation from men
  - External (ranked): Drought; poverty/resource scarcity; poor infrastructure; political incitement; physical insecurity
Results (18)

- What are viewed as the vital interventions?
  - Ability to secure major funds
  - Ability to build the skills of members
  - Ability to implement key technology and penetrate markets
Results (19)

- The 16 groups listed 63 others that have formed in their areas. Of these 63:
  - 4 were formed in the 1980s
  - 24 were formed in the 1990s
  - 35 were formed after 2000

- Of the 63, only 2 have reportedly failed. The key elements of failure were seen as group dynamics and political incitement
Future plans for the 16 groups are ambitious and diverse

- Desire to build homes, halls, shops, schools, and water supplies

- Desire to purchase vehicles and technology
What advice do groups have for others who contemplate forming new groups?

- Focus on good group governance

- Unity of purpose, dedication of the members, exemplary leadership, value collaboration
Conclusions

- Findings are consistent across large distances.
- People are very capable and partners are having impacts.
- Opportunity for co-creation of human, social, and financial capital.
- Fills gaps in public service delivery.
Policy Implications

- Craft policies that help support grass-roots, collective action in pastoral areas
- Provision of small grants, technology, and training
- Invest in infrastructure, improve security, reduce tolerance for incitement, and expand trade
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