

Contextualising Conflict: Introduced Institutions and Political Networks combating Pastoral Poverty

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Introduction

Conflict and poverty are a self-perpetuating cycle in East Africa. Scarce resources and an unbalanced social structure lead to disputes, often resulting in inappropriate management and damage of these scarce resources.

This paper focuses on a conflict over forest resources in the Loita Maasai area in Narok District, Kenya. The Loita forest holds a wealth of natural resources, as well as a plethora of local species, making it an extremely valuable region for tourism. The forest also holds deep cultural meaning for its people, being the site for many traditional beliefs and rituals. Though the Loita Maasai are still very poor, they have consolidating their social capital, or institutional wealth, to increase their political muscle and protect their land.

Previous theories consider an 'indigenous-conservation' model. Using traditional institutions for scarce natural resources can help to fairly allocate resources, and to lessen friction by implementing distribution systems beneficial to all. However, this model cannot control the outside factors of the community at large competing for resources, or corruption within the institutions. And when the perceived legitimacy of mediating government institutions is limited, an essential base for the success of allocation institutions is lost. A solution to this is to merge current traditional institutions that have been very successful in managing the Loita forest upward with government institutions to validate the process of resource management. These traditional management systems limit the forest to use in the dry season, to maximize its water retention potential, and facilitate the sharing of forest grazing with neighboring pastoralists.

Loita Institutions: Pastoralists and Politicians

There are several actors involved in policy decisions and actions surrounding Loita forest. Traditional leaders, NGO staff, appointed government officers and elected leaders have in various constellations grouped themselves in higher-level institutions: Narok County Council (NCC) and the group of Concerned Loita Citizens (CLC) on the one hand, the Loita Council of Elders (LCE) related to the Ilkerin Loita Integral Development Project (ILIDP) on the other. The most influential of these groups is the Loita Council of Elders, established in the past by ILIDP. They currently manage forest use. In addition, ILIDP aims to improve education, livestock and agriculture production, and help the local communities adapt to the economic, political and cultural changes in the region.

Loita Forest Conflict

The conflict began in the late 1890's, when government officials and the then Councilor of Loita conspired to gazette the Loita forest into a National park to profit from tourism revenues. When the ILIDP learned of this, they contacted the Loita Council of Elders. Although these two groups recognized the Narok County Council, represented by the Loita Councilor, as having the formal authority to decide on the future of the land based on a 'bureaucratic-development' model of interference, they felt they had to respond to try and save their right to use the land. The Loita Council of Elders arranged to meet with

the Minister for the Environment, who they convinced that the forest should remain accessible to the Loita Maasai. The next step was to establish a legal entity to represent the local peoples, which was difficult as not all the residents supported the Council of Elders. A trust was set up to finance and advertise the cause of the Loita peoples who wished to remain with the forest. A legal battle started between the elected Narok County Council and the LCE, supported by ILIDP who had organized the LCE and the trust to fund them. The ILIDP, though acknowledged to have few legal rights in the situation but exploiting the 'indigenous-conservation' model, gained support through their attention to the traditions and attitudes of the local peoples. Eventually elections took place, and the power structures in the region were altered. Competing forces in the government sidetracked the main political forces interested in tourist revenue, and when the Loita Ward was divided into 5 for maximum representation, the Loita faction succeeded in agreeing with the LCE to withdraw the case from court. Plans for a comprehensive and representative management plan were made.

Conclusions

This conflict had a large impact on the pastoral communities in the Loita forest region and on the politicians who fought them. Though the Loitans managed to retain use of the land, the conflict left mistrust, and all new project proposals are treated with caution, court cases and even violence. The LCE has risen in power, and maintains control of resource management decisions in the region. This affords the local peoples more input, but has started a process of expansion of the council, impeding its efficiency.

The key component to this conflict, and its eventual settlement, was the formation of the Loita Council of Elders, a "neo-African governance" institution. Its ability to consolidate many community perspectives and concerns and bring them to the institutional level where powerful decisions are made was crucial to the continued success of local natural resource management.

This paper calls attention to these new institutions and explores their legitimacy. It provokes discussion of their largely undemocratic formation, and tries to reconcile this with its significant support by the local people. These neo-African institutions often come into conflict with the established (formally democratic) government in the region, which leaves few systems in place to mediate this friction.