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Collective Action by Women's Groups to Combat Drought and Poverty in Northern Kenya

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Collective action can be an effective means of local development and risk reduction among rural people, but few examples have been documented in pastoral areas. We conducted extensive interviews for 16 women's groups residing in northern Kenya. Our objectives were to understand how groups were formed, governed, and sustained and what activities they have pursued. The groups we interviewed were 10 years old, on average. Charter memberships averaged about 24 women, 20 of whom were illiterate. Half of the groups formed after facilitation by a development partner and half formed spontaneously. Groups are governed under detailed constitutional frameworks with elected leaders. Groups primarily form to improve living standards of the members and undertake a wide variety of activities founded on savings and credit schemes, income diversification, small business development, education, health service delivery, and natural resource management. Groups have evolved means to buffer members from drought and poverty. The greatest threats to the sustainability of the groups come from internal factors such as unfavorable group dynamics and illiteracy, while external challenges include drought, poverty, and political incitement. Principles of good group governance and wisdom in business are reportedly the key ingredients for long-term success.

Background

Collective action is well known as a positive community-development force. Group formation can build social capital and enhance income generation among the poor (Grootaert, 2001). Place et al. (2004) describe a variety of self-help groups recently emerging in the Kenyan highlands. These groups, often dominated by women, undertake many social and economic activities. There is far less evidence, however, of similar collective behavior occurring among rangeland inhabitants. In 1999, a routine reconnaissance conducted by the PARIMA project in north-central Kenya revealed the existence of very dynamic women's groups living in some settlements. Preliminary interviews suggested that these women, though largely illiterate, were highly organized and engaged in a wide variety of innovative activities. Our main objective for this work was to explore attributes of a broader selection of women's groups across northern Kenya. We wanted to know how groups were formed and governed, as well as what activities they successfully pursue. Can such groups cope with drought and reduce poverty? Are the groups sustainable, and what most threatens their survival?

A large (i.e., 70-question), semi-structured questionnaire was administered to representatives of 16 women's groups in Moyale and Marsabit Districts in northern Kenya in early 2005. Interviews were conducted in Kiswahili and took about one day per group. At the conclusion of each

interview, group administrative and financial records were inspected and physical assets inventoried to confirm interview claims. While the women we interviewed represented dominant pastoral ethnic groups in the region (i.e., Boran, Rendille, etc.) they all currently pursued sedentary lifestyles.

Major Findings

Group Formation and Governance. Here we report a brief overview of major findings. The 16 groups we interviewed were an average of 9.7 years old (range: 2 to 19 years). The number of charter members per group averaged 24 (range: 7 to 42), with 100 percent females. About 85 percent of charter members were illiterate (range: 60 to 100 percent). On average, the distribution among "wealthier," "intermediate," and "poorer" charter members was 17, 31, and 52 percent, respectively. Most groups were formed to improve livelihoods of the members (80 percent of responses). About half the time groups were formed after people got the idea from a government organization (GO) or non-governmental organization (NGO); these could provide guidance on how to create effective groups as well as give material or financial support. The other half of the time people largely decided to form a group from observing the success of existing groups. Charter members for groups were often selected following public meetings with minimal

screening criteria. In other situations, however, charter members had well-defined, common goals—such as a desire to engage in dairy marketing, for example—or were bonded by specific religious affiliations.

Most groups have gradually restricted their recruitment of new members over time. Applicants are carefully screened based on trustworthiness and aptitude for teamwork. The ability to bring new skills to a group can be important for an applicant. Applicants are interviewed and a vote of the membership is often taken for final admittance; there may also be a probationary period. Entry fees are common and range from KSh 500 to 6,000 (e.g., USD 6 to 80) per person. There are formal procedures if a person dies or wants to leave a group.

All groups are self-governed with reference to a constitution and by-laws. In most cases groups received assistance from GO or NGO partners to help draft such documents. Despite a high rate of illiteracy among members, groups take pride in having detailed memorized knowledge of their constitutions and by-laws that outline leadership structures, personal rights and responsibilities of members, the philosophy in serving the community at-large, and administrative and operational procedures. Group officers typically include a chairperson, secretary, treasurer, and a management committee. Responsibilities of members focus on attending meetings, contributing labor to regular group activities (i.e., operating a farm, lodge, grain mill, dairy, shop, etc.) and any other irregularly assigned duties, making monthly payments to group accounts, and actively supporting important community functions. Less commonly mentioned responsibilities include assisting the poor or infirm and helping with group record keeping.

Members have a duty to be informed voters with respect to the election of leaders and their participation in group decision-making processes. Privileges of members focus on their participation in profit sharing and savings and credit (micro-finance) activities. Members acquire loans at negotiated repayment terms and can have reliable access to supplemental funds to help cover costs for child education, medicines, hospitalization, child birth, funerals, weddings, and restocking animals. Group membership allows for assistance with home construction and access to group-owned technology as well as employment at group-owned businesses. Group members have priority access to training and other capacity-building events.

Activities, Sustainability, and Future Plans of Groups.

Major objectives of groups included reduction of poverty by increasing incomes via micro-enterprise development and livelihood diversification. Initial activities often focused on group involvement in farming; respondents noted that farm produce could be sold quickly and was profitable. Dairy marketing, poultry marketing, and a variety of

micro-enterprises (butchery, hides and skins, honey, bakery, handicrafts, etc.) were also pursued as initial income-earners. Profits from all of these activities were then deposited into the group accounts or invested in livestock production or purchase of key technologies like grain milling equipment. Sums in group accounts were also increased via regular personal contributions and accrued interest from group members. After a few months pooled funds could start to yield loans for more and larger spin-off activities.

Group members also coordinate public fund raisers (*Harambee*) to accumulate larger sums of money to support emergency needs of orphans, the elderly, and infirm; such funds could also be used to construct group meeting halls, lodges, and school facilities. Groups are indeed able to accumulate large sums of money over several years of careful planning and investment. Group efforts to mitigate drought impacts have also evolved over time; these have included provision of water and food for the neediest members, goat restocking, and extending low-interest loans (Table 1). Group characteristics that promote sustainability reportedly include unity of purpose, transparency and accountability of leadership, and making good business decisions that lead to diversified micro-enterprises. The ability of a group to secure external funding, training, or technical support from development partners was also regarded as important for sustainability.

The factors that most readily lead to failure of a group include negative internal dynamics such as poor leadership, uncooperative members lacking shared vision, and mismanagement of group funds. One negative external factor of note was political incitement or interference.

Future plans of groups are diverse but ambitious. Aspirations are dominated by hopes to create more physical structures, be they improved houses for members, meeting halls, shops, schools, training centers, health centers, or water tanks. Entrepreneurial actions are prominent, and include plans to purchase vehicles, draught oxen, electric generators, and even a photocopy machine. There were several instances where groups seek to expand savings and credit operations. Our groups noted that good group governance is the key to success.

Practical Implications

We have been impressed by the achievements of these women's groups. Groups are very similar despite great distances that separate them. The important roles of collective action, micro-finance, micro-enterprise, and income diversification were repeatedly observed. Although the economic impact of building social capital via these groups was not quantified, we would speculate that it seems to be enormous. A synergism exists among efforts to build social, human, and economic capital in these groups.

Such collective action has important roles in community risk management, especially when government is unable to provide safety nets or insurance. We believe that development agents should support these group efforts whenever possible. Groups need small grants and technology as well as capacity building in leadership, group dynamics,

micro-finance, and micro-enterprise. 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, would also benefit groups at the local level by expanding economic opportunity.

Table 1. Summary of the most important collective actions taken by women's groups in northern Kenya to mitigate effects of the 1999-2000 drought.

GROUP NO.	GROUP AGE IN 1999	MOST IMPORTANT COLLECTIVE ACTIONS DURING 1999-2000 DROUGHT
1	2 years old	Provision of water for members. Gave KSh 20 for the poorest members of the group to buy water.
2	Newly formed	No group support was provided.
3	5 years old	No group support was provided.
4	8 years old	Provision of loans to members to enable them to buy household commodities
5	4 years old	Provision of water for members. Saved KSh 20 for members who would otherwise have to buy water.
6	Did not exist yet	Not applicable
7	2 years old	No group support was provided
8	11 years old	Members were each given loans of KSh 2000 for small business activity
9	8 years old	Members were assisted in the harvest of standing hay for their animals. Most needy members were assisted in provision of water for domestic use. Financial support was provided for the neediest members and loans were given out with repayment delayed until after the drought was over.
10	5 years old	Only the most needy members were assisted by provision of cereal grains.
11	3 years old	No information provided
12	14 years old	Thirty members were restocked with female goats to assist in drought recovery
13	3 years old	No formal group support was provided, but on an informal basis the most needy members were assisted whenever there was a problem. Harambee were also conducted.
14	Newly formed	The group did not take formal action during this drought, but the group formation benefited members since many had improved their income.
15	7 years old	Members assisted each other by harvesting standing hay, managing milking herds, and supporting each other's children with milk. Revenue from milk sales were used to purchase grains and sugar for the neediest households.
16	4 years old	The group bought one member a donkey to assist her family by selling charcoal and firewood. Five other members were assisted in paying their child's school fees after they had lost their livestock.

Further Reading

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The GL-CRSP Pastoral Risk Management Project (PARIMA) was established in 1997 and conducts research, training, and outreach in an effort to improve welfare of pastoral and agro-pastoral peoples with a focus on northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. The project is led by Dr. D. Layne Coppock, Utah State University, Email contact: Lcoppock@cc.usu.edu.



The Global Livestock CRSP is comprised of multidisciplinary, collaborative projects focused on human nutrition, economic growth, environment and policy related to animal agriculture and linked by a global theme of risk in a changing environment. The program is active in East Africa, Central Asia and Latin America.

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