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Collective Action Among Agro-pastoralists in Baringo District, Kenya: Identifying and Nurturing the Entrepreneurs

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The rural population of Baringo District in the Rift Valley of north-central Kenya faces numerous challenges including widespread environmental degradation and poverty. The region has endured decades of failed development projects, proliferation of food aid, and has been studied extensively. We have recently undertaken a different approach focused on bottom-up participatory action research and outreach among the Il Chamus and Tugen ethnic communities. The objective is to explore new ways to empower local people via provision of information, novel experiences, and initial access to resources to allow them to envision an alternative future and implement their own activities to better-manage risks. Here we report on the first phase of this activity. Twelve potential entrepreneurs (six from each of the two ethnic groups) were carefully selected and sent on an extensive training and educational tour to Mwingi District in eastern Kenya. There they visited a variety of successful, community-led development projects. The tour helped convince the entrepreneurs of neglected opportunities in Baringo. They have since taken a lead in assisting their communities to form collective-action groups. The groups are now registered with the Kenya government and pursuing work plans aimed at improving their circumstances.

Background

Participatory action research and outreach, unlike conventional academic research, aims to create knowledge as well as positive impact in local communities via strong collaborative partnerships among researchers, rural people, and development agents. This process can be time-consuming but has long-term advantages in terms of translating ideas into effective interventions, stimulating innovation, and building capacity among stakeholders (Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Ashby, 2003).

Empowering the poor, however, is difficult for many reasons. One avenue where success has been observed is in terms of collective action whereby groups of local people join together on a voluntary basis to help address social and economic problems (Grootaert, 2001; Desta et al., 2006). While not all groups are guaranteed success, certain features may facilitate sustainability and the ability of groups to solve problems. Some desirable group characteristics may include cultural and economic homogeneity. Institutional features that enhance prospects for group effectiveness include provision of agreed and enforceable rules governing the sharing of costs and benefits, forums for resolving conflicts, ways of punishing deviators, methods of monitoring, and relating individual costs to the benefits one receives from group resources. Other investigators have noted the importance that group members receive basic education inputs and be well trained in the management of group dynamics, micro-finance, and small business development; groups also need to avoid political meddling (Desta et al., 2006).

The Baringo District of north-central Kenya has endured decades of resource abuse and high rates of population growth (Little, 1992; Herlocker et al., 1994). Many of the traditional systems of natural resource management have broken down long ago. Provision of food relief is common and some contend that the local people are mired in a dependency syndrome with little motivation to improve their circumstances (Aboud, personal observation).

The PARIMA project initiated a participatory research and outreach activity in Baringo during 2006 to explore whether local communities could be effectively stimulated to better address local challenges for their livelihoods. New partnerships were formed among researchers, local agro-pastoral communities, and development agents towards this end. The researchers included an interdisciplinary team from Egerton University representing the Departments of Natural Resources, Agricultural Economics & Marketing, and Human Nutrition & Pre-Clinical Studies. The local communities included members of the Il Chamus and Tugen ethnic groups that reside in the lowland flood plains and the rocky hills, respectively, in the vicinity of Marigat town. Development agents included government agencies and local NGOs. The project step-wise activities have included: (1) Identification of potential local entrepreneurs; (2) helping instill in the entrepreneurs an ability to visualize alternative futures; (3) facilitating access of the entrepreneurs to some initial key inputs and advice to implement their ideas on a pilot basis; and (4) monitoring how the entrepreneurs fare and the

extent that other community members follow or otherwise become engaged via independent initiatives and/or collective action.

The participating communities of Kibingor (Tugen) and Ng'ambo (Il Chamus) were identified via use of key informant interviews and focus group discussions with community leaders. Six entrepreneurs from within each of the communities were identified based on face-to-face interviews. We were looking for people with the following personal characteristics: (1) those with limited financial and livestock resources; (2) those having self-motivation, illustrated by at least preliminary involvement in local enterprise or community endeavors; (3) those having new ideas; (4) those with an ability to serve as community role models, namely innovators with the aptitude to deliver results and build trust; (5) those willing to commit some personal resources (money, time, labor, land, livestock, etc.) to cost-share in the early stages of an entrepreneurial activity;

and (6) people with energy and a youthful orientation that also had evidence of basic literacy.

We interviewed 169 people overall, about evenly distributed over two rounds between Kibingor and Ng'ambo. After the first round 42 people remained, and they were interviewed again. We selected 12 finalists from among the 42. The 12 were comprised of four men and eight women ranging in age between 20 and 56 years. They were taken for a five-day training tour of Mwingi District in eastern Kenya; the ecological conditions in Mwingi are similar to those of Baringo. Mwingi District is inhabited by the Kamba ethnic community and is very advanced in terms of the creation and management of collective action projects. It was specifically selected as the tour destination for these reasons.

Preliminary Findings

Table 1 illustrates aspects of the Mwingi tour. Nine major

Table 1. Local community development projects in Mwingi District visited by the Baringo participants during 2007.

Activities Observed	Description	Knowledge Acquired
Commercial Mango and Citrus Farming	Various small-scale farms and use of soil conservation practices	Value of mangoes and citrus crops as possible new cash crops for Baringo
Water Development Projects	Old earthen dams renovated by communities using locally available materials	Value knowing that communities can help themselves with minimum inputs from government
	New earthen dams built by communities	Value of group work
	Improved management of community water facilities	Value of group ownership and responsibility for community water resources; value of fencing and special watering troughs to exclude animals from human water sources
	Rules governing use of water	Value of water use rules
Women's Handicraft Production	Women's groups engaged in making handicrafts for export	Value of some traditional skills for income generation
Bee Keeping and Honey Processing Plant	Groups engaged in apiculture and adding value to products	Value of income diversification via local natural resources
Silk Production	Groups engaged in wild harvest, production, and processing of silk	Value of income diversification via local natural resources
Reclamation of Denuded and Eroded Land	Soil conserved using terraces and re-planted with grass species	Value of, and need to reclaim, Baringo lands
Irrigation	Using buckets to individually hand-water horticultural crops	Value of individual effort and simple technology
Vegetable Production	Small vegetable plots	Value of vegetable gardens for food production and income generation
Livestock Production	Larger, healthier animals compared to those in Baringo	Value of improved livestock breeding and management
	More male cattle than female cattle in local herds	Value of male cattle for ploughing and drought sale

activities are summarized in terms of what was observed and the value of the observations for the participants. It was interesting to note that production and management actions seemingly routine in Mwingi were new ideas for the Baringo travelers.

The Baringo participants realized that although the Mwingi residents were basically even poorer than themselves, the latter were way ahead in terms of local development processes. The participants noted that individual hard work and collaborative group actions were major factors in the success of activities at Mwingi. The Baringo entrepreneurs also noted that their communities indeed seem to possess a “dependency syndrome” and expect government to do nearly everything for them, unlike the situation in Mwingi.

The Baringo travelers were very motivated based on what they experienced at Mwingi and they were subsequently instrumental in forming collective action groups back near Marigat. These groups have been officially registered with the Kenyan Ministry of Social Services, opened local bank accounts, and proceeded to create work plans with prioritized activities for their home areas.

The Baringo travelers were also able to appreciate the contribution that women can make to development projects, something that was previously taken lightly within their home areas. The female entrepreneurs from Baringo realized that they could play a major role in enhancing their livelihoods. Overall, a process of innovation diffusion has been stimulated (Rogers, 2003).

The project has provided the entrepreneurs with further training and access to resources to help them get their new projects started in their home areas. This included formal training in forming and managing voluntary groups, preparation of a group constitution and by-laws, drafting of project action plans including budgets, group registration with the Kenyan Ministry of Social Services, and technical training in the management of tree seedlings, bee keeping, etc. Finally, we provided some seed funds for the purchase of five bee hives and the raw materials for handicraft production. Development agents have participated by assisting with each of the registration and training activities above.

What is the future role of research in this activity? We contend that research has a vital role to play in terms of systematic monitoring of the new Baringo activities and noting the factors that most threaten, or assist, the sustainability of interventions. Another novel aspect of Action Research is the idea that in the process of monitoring, researchers can collaborate with communities and development agents to prescribe and implement corrective measures to promote success. This way, the entire process engages all in a cycle of mutual learning and advancement.

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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