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Global Livestock CRSP

Diffusion of Collective-Action Innovations Among Pastoralists in Liben District, Ethiopia

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In 2001 PARIMA and her partners began to create collective-action groups among illiterate, settled pastoralists in Ethiopia. These groups—soon dominated by women—focused on savings-led microfinance, small business activity, and livestock marketing to increase incomes and diversify livelihoods. Fifty-nine groups with over 2,100 members were formed using intensive training methods, and they have subsequently merged into legally recognized cooperatives. We regard this approach as successful and sustainable. We were curious, however, if "the word has spread" and collective-action has spontaneously arisen beyond our immediate project area. Preliminary findings from recent surveys of settlements in Liben District indicate that diffusion of collective-action behavior has occurred. For example, nine of 20 settlements visited in a 2006 survey had groups that formed without project assistance three years earlier; these groups had 10 to 45 members each and included men only, women only, or women and men combined. These groups occur within a 10-kilometer radius of the orginal center of PARIMA activity in Liben and group members pursue settled lifestyles. In contrast, collective-action innovations do not appear among traditional, mobile pastoralists in more remote areas. Uptake of collective-action innovations may offer many development benefits for new adopters, but sustaining the process requires vigilance and continued investment in awareness raising, training, strengthening of partnerships, and attention to peace building and natural resource management.

Background

The Borana pastoral system of southern Ethiopia has been traditionally viewed as an excellent example of sustainable range livestock production in east Africa. However, beginning in the 1980s, population growth for people and livestock, periodic droughts, growing insecurity, and lack of development investments began to take their toll. The traditional pastoral system is no longer sustainable (Desta and Coppock, 2004). One option to improve pastoral risk management involves efforts to diversify pastoral livelihoods and better connect producers to livestock markets (Desta et al., 2006). We have chipped away at the problem using participatory methods and collective action. Pastoral women's groups were discovered in northern Kenya during 2000 that had made remarkable achievements in terms of wealth accumulation, livelihood diversification, and provision of social services. These women had been destitute and pulled themselves up in inspiring ways (Desta and Coppock, 2002). Ethiopia was more isolated and lacked such initiatives, so female leaders from Ethiopian pastoral groups were brought to northern Kenya in 2001 to learn from their peers during a short tour sponsored by the PARIMA project. One result of the tour has been a mushrooming of collective-action groups across the Borana Plateau. A total of 59 groups with over 2,100 members (76% female) were established in just a few years. One important aspect of success has been the careful mentoring of group members provided by the PARIMA project and her partners. We have incorporated efforts to reduce illiteracy via informal education, promoted a culture of savings–led micro-finance, assisted in the management of complex dynamics of voluntary groups, instilled principles of good group governance, exposed members to principles of small-business management, and facilitated links with emerging livestock markets. When combined with new options to trade small ruminants for export, many groups flourished and entered market chains in effective ways (Desta et al., 2006). Groups have subsequently been formed into legally recognized producer cooperatives.

Despite the success of this approach, resources to create more collective-action groups are limited. We therefore have been interested in the extent that ideas and practices embodied in collective-action have been spontaneously adopted elsewhere in the pastoral population. We commissioned a consultancy study to independently assess the extent that collective-action has diffused across the Borana Plateau since 2001. Here we present preliminary findings from Liben District. Data were collected during 12 days in 2006 using interviews and focus groups (Getachew Kassa, unpublished report).

Liben District has urban and rural features. The town of Negelle has a population of 30,000 and is located at a higher elevation. Farming and agro-pastoralism

are practiced in the vicinity of Negelle. Smaller towns include Bittata. Elsewhere in Liben there are extensive rangelands, and the pastoralists living in these remote locations are more traditional than urban dwellers in terms of culture and continued reliance on mobile livestock production. Efforts by PARIMA and her partners to stimulate collective action among people in Liben District have been focused in and around Negelle.

An innovation is a new idea, practice, or technology (Rogers, 2003). Innovations may spread easily, spread with difficulty, or fail to spread altogether. Many factors influence rates of innovation diffusion. They include features of the innovation such as cost, complexity, and compatibility with the local culture and how far an innovation must travel. Early adopters can quickly pick up innovations, while others may never pick up innovations (Rogers, 2003). In the case of the collective-action practices promoted by PARIMA and her partners, the core innovation is the savings-led micro-finance activity, along with associated aspects of livelihood diversification.

Findings

Twenty settlements (ollas) in Liben District were visited that occurred within a 20- kilometer radius of where PARIMA project activity was initiated in 2001 (Getachew Kassa, unpublished report). Settlements were located within six administrative units called kebeles. Settlements were located in a peri-urban zone of influence surrounding Negelle and Bittata. Although the people encountered in the survey were largely pastoralists, they had mixed livelihoods that included livestock production, crop cultivation, and petty trade.

Of the 20 settlements visited, nine were identified that had spontaneously formed strong collective-action groups based on the PARIMA model, starting in 2003. Informants reported that these groups formed as a result of hearing about the success of the PARIMA groups in the Negelle area. The main focus of the newly discovered groups was the savings-led micro-finance component. On average, the nine groups had 10 to 45 members each. Three groups were for men only, three were for men and women combined, and three were for women only (Getachew Kassa, unpublished report).

The PARIMA model was not created anew by the early adopters; rather, elements of the PARIMA model were adapted to strengthen local forms of mutual-assistance networks, referred to as *idir* or *iqub*. These include rotating savings and loan operations and some redistribution of livestock. With the adoption of organizational principles, structures, and income-generation activities from the PARIMA model, most of the new groups have become better-organized and more entrepreneurial. Small business involvements have expanded to include more kiosks, small restaurants, trade in livestock and livestock products, and cash-crop vegetable farming. With these improvements in income group members have been able to improve their homes with tin roofs, purchase sheep and goats for fattening, acquire milk cows, and invest in their children's education and health care. They also claimed that they are now more food secure and less vulnerable to risk as compared to before the addition of the PARIMA model to their lives. Interviewees noted that the PARIMA collective-action model was compatible with local culture. The need for early adopters to be located near markets, towns, banks, and offices of development agents has been essential in helping create economic opportunity. New groups attracted members from among the poorest of the poor. Respondents often noted several advantages of collective action. They included (1) the potential to increase community visibility in attracting external development resources; (2) improvement in bargaining power for marketing purposes; (3) nurturing a culture of savings and the building of assets; (4) strengthening of cooperation, solidarity, self-reliance, and self esteem among group members.

Nine of the 20 settlements having spontaneously formed groups occurred within 10 kilometers of the epicenter of PARIMA project activity starting in 2001. Once the radius during this particular survey exceeded 10 kilometers from the PARIMA epicenter, however, no other collective-action groups were encountered. It appears as though diffusion has been limited to peri-urban areas. The collective-action model is not well adapted to conditions of traditional, mobile pastoralism that occurs in more remote locations.

In addition to the 2006 survey by Getachew Kassa, there has been other evidence of the diffusion of collective action in Liben. For example, another nine spontaneously formed groups have been recently seen up to 20 km from Bittata town (Seyoum Tezera, personal observation). These groups were reportedly encouraged to form by one outside individual who had been trained by PARIMA in 2001. Therefore, even a single person can accelerate the diffusion process. More research on diffusion is on-going in other districts of the Borana Plateau. The whole picture has yet to be fully documented.

Practical Implications

In the peri-urban area of Negelle and Bittata in Liben District, the spontaneous emergence of collective-action innovations is pervasive, especially among women. The innovations appear to diffuse readily because they are easily communicated, the impacts are readily observed, they are not too complicated, and they fit the local culture. Overall, the collective-action model appears to be strengthening social capital and has started a foundation for diversified livelihoods, improved incomes, and enhanced human welfare, especially among settled pastoralists and displaced persons.

To promote further diffusion of the collective-action model promoted by PARIMA and her partners, the following are important, according to study respondents: (1) Launch more effective awareness-raising campaigns concerning the benefits of collective action using various media, seminars, and workshops; (2) enhance the capabilities of the spontaneously organized groups and use them as entry points to further diffuse the initiative; (3) strengthen collaborative partnerships among groups, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations; (4) build capacity of extension agents; (5) invest in conflict mitigation, peace building, and efforts to restore or rehabilitate natural resources on the rangelands, because this can reduce resource competition, facilitate marketing, and reduce wastage (deaths) of livestock assets; and (6) investigate other non-pastoral income and credit-generating alternatives of broader relevance to all pastoralists in Liben District.

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 the welfare of pastoral and agro-pastoral people with a focus on northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. The project is led by Dr. D. Layne Coppock, Utah State University. Email: 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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