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Achieving Real Development Impact among Pastoralists: Lessons from Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

The world's rangelands have magnificent landscapes that provide vital ecosystem services. The rangelands are home to vast wildlife populations and yield valuable livestock products. Despite these accolades, however, rangelands also have some unpleasant secrets—they are places where many of the world's most marginalized people live—people that suffer from high rates of poverty, illiteracy, and hunger (Seré et al., 2008). Typically lacking political power, access to education, and adequate knowledge about the outside world, pastoralists are often victimized by outsiders who take their land and traders who cheat them in the marketplace. Seeing their societies slide downwards into poverty and despair, pastoralists can express fear and anxiety about the future (Coppock, personal observations). Hans Jahnke, in his 1982 book on tropical livestock development, recognized that the greatest opportunity to make rapid progress on the African rangelands was not via livestock or forage technology, but rather in fortifying the human capabilities of the pastoralists themselves. In the recently concluded Pastoral Risk Management (PARIMA) project in eastern Africa, we witnessed the hugely positive and transformative effects of capacity building on thousands of pastoralists living on Ethiopia's remote Borana Plateau (Figure 1). Here we share some of those observations and end with a call to promote more human capacity building—both from research and outreach perspectives—in settings where most of the scholarly attention has been paid to the plant and livestock sciences.

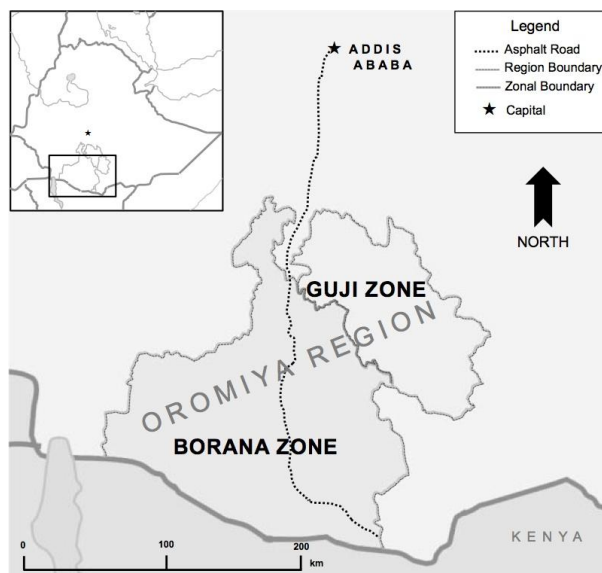


Figure 1. Map of the study area.

Traditionally, African pastoralists have depended on large herds of livestock that roamed widely over diverse areas. Livestock yield food, fiber, and a means for wealth generation. In recent decades, however, it has become more difficult for pastoralists to subsist largely on livestock because of human population growth, fragmentation of landscapes, loss of herd mobility, high rates of animal mortality during droughts, and environmental change. The ratio of milking stock to people has often been observed to be ratcheting downwards in pastoral systems; this is the underlying cause of heightened food insecurity. Drought can decimate livestock herds, contributing to destitution and famine (Desta and Coppock, 2004).

Livestock can no longer be the only economic engine for pastoral societies. Today pastoralists often seek ways to diversify their livelihoods away from a heavy reliance on livestock. Cultivation and wage-seeking behavior have increased. Pastoralists have become

more interested in livestock marketing and gaining access to formal education. Mixing livestock and non-livestock investments could reduce risk for income streams and asset accumulation (Desta and Coppock, 2002).

The PARIMA project had several components and operated in southern Ethiopia and north-central Kenya from 1997 to 2009. The main goal of the project was to investigate how pastoral risk management might be improved in this region. Risk management has several dimensions, including diversification of income and assets, as well as improved use of information and increased access to productive resources. Here our focus is on an outreach and action-research activity that started in southern Ethiopia in 2000. We decided to use participatory methods to learn more about local development needs and discover the capabilities of pastoralists to help themselves. At the start of this activity we already knew that the traditional pastoral system was under intense pressure as poverty and hunger were common (Coppock, 1994). We hypothesized that livelihood diversification would be an

important means to improve the situation. However, we had little idea as to how it might be done, and whether it could be sustainable. The Boran pastoralists had been very isolated. They had virtually no exposure to banking, small business, collective action, or formal education (Desta and Coppock, 2004.) Our overall approach on this project is described in detail elsewhere (Coppock et al., 2009). It is briefly summarized here as follows.

MATERIALS & METHODS

First, we discovered innovative pastoral women's groups in remote villages of northern Kenya during 2000. These groups had pulled themselves up from extreme poverty via creation of highly disciplined, small-scale savings clubs. Money so accumulated was carefully invested in a variety of small-business opportunities. After a few years groups were on a sound financial footing and their ambitions soared. They began to serve as social support networks for their communities and created complex systems for drought management based on clever investing in livestock and non-livestock enterprises. They built small hotels, grain mills, and women's meeting halls. They financially supported local school children, health clinics, and water development projects.

Second, we began a series of participatory rural appraisals (PRAs; Chambers, 1994) in a dozen communities across the Borana Plateau, also in 2000. The PRA process is often misunderstood and poorly implemented. At its best, a PRA is an in-depth collaborative process between a community of beneficiaries and change agents. The process begins with identification of ranked problems, followed by a thorough discussion of solutions. It can take a week or more of effort and involve many people in public gatherings. Problems to be tackled are prioritized, in part, based on the sustainability of the proposed solutions. The first stage of PRA ends with preparation of a community action plan (CAP) that commits the ideas on paper. The CAP may be edited further and then sent to donors for funding consideration. In our case the main problems identified by the pilot communities focused on a lack of food and water—not just seasonally, but all year. The solution arrived at was livelihood diversification; the people recognized that the system was overcrowded with people and livestock, and doing “more of the same” would not work. The key constraints overall were seen as the lack of education and business skills.

Third, fifteen Ethiopian women leaders—identified because they had “stepped forward” in the PRAs—were taken on a 10-day cross-border tour in 2001 to meet their forward-thinking Kenyan peers. The Ethiopians—who were still in the embrace of a very traditional lifestyle focused on child rearing and the drudgery of domestic chores—expressed shock and admiration in response to what the Kenyan women had achieved. Only 100 kilometers of road had separated what seemed like 100 years of human progress between these communities. Upon returning home the Ethiopians ignited a tidal wave of social change that swept over the southern region for the next few years. We struggled to keep up. The Ethiopians had a powerful new vision of an alternative future.

Fourth, the project, in full partnership with Ethiopian community members, created a stepwise capacity building effort founded on the results from the PRAs and cross-border tour. The effort included micro-finance, collective action, non-formal education, and livestock marketing. The micro-finance was based on models of grass-roots savings and credit systems (Yunus, 1999), while collective-action groups were formed by aggregating savings and credit units in many locations. Collective action is defined by Meinzen-Dick and DiGregorio (2004) as “a voluntary action taken by a group to achieve common interests.” Non-formal education largely consisted of a series of demand-driven adult education courses—delivered in the settlements—that focused on literacy and numeracy, group dynamics, group leadership, small-business management, conflict management, book-keeping, livestock marketing, value chains, globalization, and other topics. Non-formal education has recently been referred to as participatory education (Rogers, 2004). Short courses were designed by project partners that specialized in training illiterate people. Courses were supplemented with local and regional tours for community members to observe all aspects of livestock marketing chains up-country and to allow exchange of new ideas.

Fifth, once the capacity building was well underway, we implemented a monitoring and evaluation process whereby newly formed groups were visited quarterly by project staff and mentored over the next eight years. The project also facilitated creation of a north-bound marketing chain, book-ended by pastoral suppliers and recently commissioned export abattoirs in Addis Ababa (Desta et al., 2006). An iterative process of problem solving was imbedded in the monitoring and evaluation process that can be referred to as action research (Greenwood and Levin, 2000). The key intervention components are summarized in Figure 2. All five components, namely peer inspiration, education, micro-finance, market access, and collective action, were needed. A synergism was the result. Successful implementation of the process required that we partner with dozens of collaborating organizations including community-based organizations (CBOs), governmental organizations (GOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This is called an innovation system (Coppock et al., 2009).

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Achievements

Fifty-nine collective action groups—having over 2,300 founding volunteers (76 percent women)—were formed between 2001 and 2005. When the family members of founding members are considered, the target population of direct beneficiaries was about 13,800 people. Total savings accrued by the micro-finance program was the equivalent of US \$93,000 from an initial base of zero. Over 5,360 micro-loans (averaging \$120.00 per loan) were extended over eight years with 96 percent repayment, at a minimum interest rate of 10.5 percent. The cumulative loan value was the equivalent of US \$647,600.00.

Micro-loans were used in many different ways. Most (57 percent) were used to support small-scale livestock trade, while others supported business ventures such as starting up kiosks, small restaurants, bakeries, butcheries, donkey rentals, and cash-crop production involving vegetables and dairy products. Loans have been used to build over 400 houses serving as primary or secondary residences and rental properties. Loans have also capitalized trade in seeds, poultry, cereal crops, honey, and the local stimulant called *khat*. The most ambitious forms of diversification have involved the creation of sand and gravel enterprises in several locations—in support of public and private construction projects—that have generated very large revenue streams.

Illustrating the local impact from opening new livestock markets, 11 collective-action groups sold over 25,600 head of sheep and goats to two export firms in Addis Ababa during 2004 and 2005 (Desta et al., 2006). Smaller numbers of cattle and camels were also traded. Much of this trade has successfully been continued.

The combination of collective action plus micro-finance and access to livestock markets improved lives in many ways compared to those of peers who had never become involved in the project (Coppock et al., 2007; Coppock et al., in preparation). Survey results based on interviews of 180 randomly selected people—with 120 from collective-action groups and 60 from adjacent control communities—illustrate dramatic improvements in nearly all facets of life that have accrued from the intervention package. Enhancements occurred in such diverse areas as improved business skills, improved human health, heightened quality of life, increased confidence in the future, greater ability to solve problems, increased adoption of production innovations, and increased income generation. Members of groups enjoyed greater food security compared to traditional peers, attributable to simply having more money.

The project has also led to important changes in relations between men and women. Initially, stress in the home was reported when Ethiopian women began to assert themselves when they joined collective-action groups. Some husbands were concerned that traditional duties in the home could be neglected. A few men responded with violence towards their wives. This tension had been predicted by the Kenyan women; the Kenyans mentored the Ethiopian women on how to enlist their husbands as “partners in change.” The vast majority of gender-based conflicts have been peacefully and productively settled. In fact, an improved economic status for women seems to then enhance their status among men. Wives have become money managers for their households and have a larger voice over livestock transactions, which were traditionally in the domain of men.

In summary, we have no doubts that this approach has been successful. And the benefits are not simply in terms of dollars, but in terms of the intangibles that have resulted from giving people the power to shape their lives. The process has been founded on building human and social capital, and collective action has been the core. Collective action, however, is not an end in itself. It is expected that there are periods in life when people benefit most from collective endeavors. Collective action is only one phase in the growth and development of a rural community. We expect over time that group memberships will be dynamic as people come and go.

Overall, it took an average of three years to transform raw, illiterate recruits into functional and sustainable collective-action groups, capable of solving their own problems and undertaking a process of livelihood

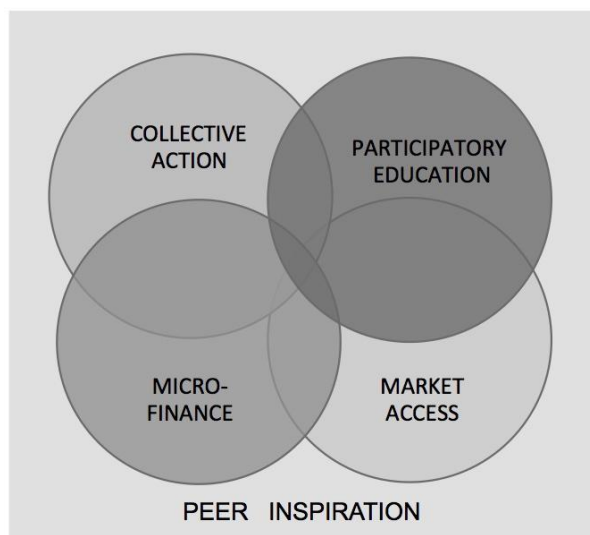


Figure 2. The five intervention components.

diversification. This time frame is broken out into several phases, including a group establishment phase (three to six months), a growth phase (8 to 12 months), and a maturation phase (12 to 16 months). The total cost of the program—considering the 13,800 project beneficiaries—was US \$1 per person per month. The low cost is due to the high emphasis on education.

Best Practices

Begin interventions on a small scale. We began to form collective-action groups by establishing small primary cells of five to seven members each for the initiation of savings and credit activities. Five to seven of these cells, in turn, were aggregated into secondary groups with 25 to 49 members overall. Secondary groups were then the basis for collective action and they received several years of strategic investments and education from the project. Smaller units are more adaptable, self-replicating, and cost-effective, and they are more likely to sustain themselves in remote places. Larger associations can be built-up in a step-wise process. Associations begun under previous private or public initiatives that have deteriorated or become dormant can be renovated using small-scale rebuilding efforts. Small groups are encouraged to include friends or relatives deemed trustworthy; memberships are thus voluntary and new members must be carefully screened. Membership was never dictated or top-down. Small, trust-based groups have been observed to diffuse rapidly throughout our project area.

Create a framework for authentic community participation and aim for real impact. We used a genuine participatory approach that empowered communities to identify felt needs and develop community action plans to guide their development. In this process we were the facilitators that brought communities, donors, and technical collaborators together. We did not advance our own agenda. The space created for community participation enhanced the sense of community ownership of the process and increased the local capacity to solve problems. Importantly, a well-conducted PRA is not a one-hour group interview that ends up with a laundry list of superficial wants and needs; rather, it is at least a week-long engagement with detailed analysis between facilitators and community members. It takes time to build communication channels and trust. The process also needs ready access to donor funds to support development initiatives so that a tangible outcome occurs for each PRA. When a PRA happens and no real follow-up occurs, communities can easily have “PRA burn-out” and the trust of change agents erodes. Communities must also provide in-kind match to confirm their commitment.

Create genuine partnerships. We worked with many partners to create impact under conditions where project beneficiaries were widely dispersed and development actors were limited in number with scant resources. Partners learned to share experiences, knowledge, and resources. Sustaining such partnerships is difficult, but necessary. Transaction costs must be endured. Credit for success must be widely shared.

Emphasize women in development. We gave special attention to involve pastoral women in all phases of our efforts. The Ethiopian collective-action groups had both women and men. The women-dominated groups were the most cohesive under times of stress, even when they possessed a high level of ethnic diversity—for example, including Muslims, non-Muslims, etc. Such group members have demonstrated a high level of mutual respect and support for one another. They also have been “peace makers” during times of local ethnic or political conflict. Women have been more creative, responsible, and entrepreneurial than men. Moreover, women have typically used the profits from their endeavors to improve the well-being of their families. Overall, the program has helped empower women and bring change to the household decision-making structure. Women’s position in the communities has improved tremendously in just a few years.

Build capacity for community members and other stakeholders. Capacity building was one of the key components of the PARIMA risk-management model. All training was demand driven. Capacity building was conducted for pastoralists as well as for the staff of partner organizations. Such staff members were typically deficient in their training background, or they were new to the job. The high turnover of government personnel in remote districts of Ethiopia has been a major impediment to sustained capacity building for institutions. In contrast, the composition of the community membership almost never changed. This led PARIMA to focus more on investing in building capacity for community members.

Promote “peer to peer” learning among project beneficiaries. Compared to the pastoral women of southern Ethiopia in 2000, the pastoral women’s groups observed in northern Kenya were far better off in terms of asset accumulation, livelihood diversification, and general welfare. Hence we linked both together via cross-border educational tours and mentoring visits to share experiences and transfer knowledge. The cross-border tour was inexpensive and led to enormous impacts in Ethiopia. These efforts facilitated a process of “peer to peer” learning that led to quick and lasting impacts on the attitudes of the Ethiopians towards the value of cooperation, market involvement, savings, diversification of income sources, undertaking community investments, and

improving natural-resource management. It has also helped the Ethiopians to learn the consequences of improving family health, managing social conflict, avoiding ethnic discrimination, and eradication of harmful health practices. The Ethiopians learned the value of educating themselves and their children. In addition to cross-border tours, numerous in-country tours were organized to take group leaders to the central Ethiopian highlands where they observed major livestock marketing facilities, dairy farms, cooperatives, and urban life. Outstanding leaders from selected groups were also taken to mentor other groups who were lagging behind. Peers modeled and conveyed important messages very well among themselves.

Help form market linkages and encourage networking. Creating reliable market linkages and business alliances has been important for the collective-action groups to survive and flourish. Important livestock market linkages that involved collective-action groups and abattoirs were created to facilitate domestic and export livestock trade. Livestock marketing, combined with micro-finance, allowed people to learn how to de-stock when needed and diversify investments. Proceeds from livestock sales generated the core capital for diversification. Such initiatives help pave the way for improved use of market information, cell phones, and other innovations.

Use local culture to facilitate impact. We respected the local culture and used it to help frame and facilitate implementation of our intervention package. The deep-rooted culture of the Boran to manage risk for grazing and water was easily translated into the usefulness of saving money for future use. Similarly, the process of extending and repaying small loans within an agreed time frame was reinforced by local cultural practices involving the temporary loaning of livestock. Other social-support and resource management functions of traditional society have been important in facilitating more collective-action activities.

Build conflict-management skills. Social conflict among members was commonly observed in the early growth stages of all groups. Groups bring people together from different personal, cultural, and religious backgrounds. People also have different communication and decision-making styles. Thus, internal conflicts are likely. Internal conflicts also can increase over time as groups become better established and members entertain different aspirations. Lack of conflict can mean that important problems lie dormant and unresolved. If conflicts are not managed properly they can cause group disintegration. By documenting issues, creatively helping mediate conflicts, and building trust, the PARIMA team helped groups manage a positive outcome for each and every conflict encountered. This all illustrates the long-term commitment from mentors that is needed to promote sustainability. Our training courses focused on leadership, transparency, and conflict-management techniques.

Facilitate careful transitions of informal groups into legal cooperatives. In some cases, informal collective-action groups can be aggregated into legally recognized cooperatives to take advantage of scale benefits. Larger cooperative associations having hundreds of members can combine human and financial resources to be more successful. However, the transformation of informal groups into highly regimented cooperatives must be voluntary and carefully managed. If this process becomes coerced the chance increases that cooperatives will fail. Other ingredients for failure include having poorly trained people in sensitive posts and an inability to effectively screen new members for trustworthiness and talent. Cooperatives can improve personal access to loans, markets, and legal protections. The downside of cooperatives, however, includes higher local visibility, and if a cooperative is very successful they become known and can be vulnerable to political hijacking and meddling. There are also costs incurred from added layers of bureaucracy typical of cooperative formation.

CONCLUSIONS

The process we facilitated has led to widespread and sustained impacts in this pastoral population. Far from being a cookbook approach, we had no roadmap at the start and simply adapted to changing circumstances. The process required time, patience, and skill. We learned together by doing. We are impressed by what the community members can accomplish.

Had we committed a similar amount of resources in attempting to improve grazing management or livestock production, we are confident that we would not have achieved nearly as much in transforming the pastoral system. We now have a target population of clever and resourceful herd owners who have more and better tools to cope with an ever-changing world. This confirms the views of Jahnke (1982).

How to enhance human welfare in the world's rangelands embodies a series of legitimate research questions as well as a broad array of exciting outreach and development opportunities. Large impacts are indeed possible, even in very difficult environments. We extend a call to action for rangeland professionals to pursue more projects with tangible improvements in human welfare as the leading objective.

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