



Trip Report: Rural Markets, Natural Capital, and Dynamic Poverty Traps in East Africa

Kenya: 8 December - 21 January 2002

By Andrew G. Mude

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Objective: The purpose of this trip was to familiarize myself with the operations and research methodology of the BASIS CRSP project on “Rural Markets, Natural Capital and Dynamic Poverty Traps in East Africa.” In my capacity as a research assistant for the project’s principal investigator, Dr. Christopher B. Barrett, we felt that my effectiveness would be greatly enhanced by a more intimate understanding of the phenomena under study and the questions being asked that is only possible by a visit to the location. My specific objectives, in no particular order, were (1) to meet with key players of the project based in Kenya, (2) to travel to several pertinent project sites and witness the process of data collection which I will later be analyzing, and (3) to collect the information needed to begin work on a codebook for the data collection being undertaken by the USAID Global Livestock CRSP project (which will also be used as two of the BASIS projects sites.)

Results: 1) Of the two project’s Co-PI’s stationed in Kenya, I was only able to meet with Dr. Frank M. Place. Dr. Festus Murithi was off on sabbatical and was unreachable. Dr. Place briefed me on the various components of ICRAF and its general mandate as well as its involvement with BASIS which lies principally in its western sites of (Siaya/Vihiga). He mentioned a concern with the present weakness of variables present in the various data sets on the Western Kenya sites to deal with issues of risk which are important contributors to poverty traps. Dr. Place also talked about the difficulties that he foresees in bringing together the various data sets for use in the principal objective. He felt that more thought was needed at the top levels to hash out the central goals and questions in terms of the econometric functions and insights the data are to give. Indeed these issues will be in the agenda of the upcoming BASIS meeting in Kenya late this February. Dr. Place also gave a general overview of ICRAF and his responsibilities and introduced me to other pertinent individuals with whom I had discussions with. These included his research assistant, Mr. Justine Wangila, and Dr. Ad e Freeman of ICRISAT whose present research interest is on rural livelihoods and poverty reduction policies.

2) One of the most successful and useful parts of this trip was the exposure that I got to the data collection work that is carried out in some of the sites. I traveled with Dr. John McPeak who directs the survey work at the Northern Kenya sites. Dr. McPeak’s rich experience of the area and his expertise on survey design and implementation afforded

me an invaluable opportunity. We visited the Suguta Marmar, North Horr, Kargi and Marsabit sites. I found the experience very valuable in terms of bringing the data closer to me and endowing the survey responses with greater meaning. I also got to meet several of the enumerators, witness how they work, get some feedback from them, and generally get a picture of what it takes to put together a survey. Frequent conversations with Dr. McPeak also made me aware of some of the difficulties and problems that arise in collecting data that need to be taken into account for a greater level of efficiency as well as for cleaner data. Building a working relationship with Dr. McPeak was also valuable as it is likely to facilitate more efficient communication between us that will be necessary as I continue with data cleaning and begin analysis. Another colleague, Winnie Luseno, was training enumerators for her survey on livestock markets which gave me an idea of the initial stages of putting out a survey.

3) I was able to work with Dr. McPeak to make significant progress on setting up the framework for the codebook of the USAID Global Livestock and BASIS CRSP data on Northern Kenya and Southern Ethiopia. His knowledge of all aspects of the data collection – from survey design, to picking suitable sites, to training enumerators and fielding the questionnaire was a tremendous resource and he provided much of the necessary input.

Summary:

I believe the trip to have been productive. One aspect of the trip not designed as an objective but that ultimately proved one of my greatest accomplishments was an affirmed and heightened desire to focus my graduate education on understanding and finding solutions to the economic hardships that befall African nations in general and, more specifically, Kenya. As a Kenyan citizen who has lived abroad for most of his formative years, being back, especially in my capacity as a researcher and student of economics, was extremely enlightening and inspiring. Kenya is at a crucial point at the moment with the national elections coming up, the constitution review process underway, and the economy in a precarious situation. Indeed, in the paradigm of the poverty trap literature, Kenya as a nation stands to make decisions that will either lock it in a downward spiral trajectory toward a devastating equilibrium or set the path for an optimal – or at least improved – equilibrium. I therefore also took the opportunity to tune into the major debates on social, economic and political issues in the country which gave me a broader and clear foundation upon which to situate the work I will be doing for the BASIS project.

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