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POLICY BRIEF

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SOCIAL ASPECTS OF DYNAMIC POVERTY TRAPS: CASES FROM VIHIGA, BARINGO AND MARSABIT DISTRICTS

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COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVES

Although economic factors are certainly significant in explaining the poverty levels among rural agricultural households, they fail to account for all causes of household poverty and why some households become and remain poor while others come out of poverty despite operating within the same economic environment. Sociological factors are also significant and for some groups, like pastoral communities, may even outweigh economic considerations. Furthermore, in many cases, non-economic factors of social identity and networks establish the context in which economic factors become significant. Clearly, the economic environment, though necessary is not sufficient to account for the dynamics of the poverty experienced by rural households in Kenya.

This report draws on qualitative research conducted in Vihiga, Baringo and Marsabit districts of Kenya. Using qualitative research techniques, such as household case studies based on oral histories and community workshops, the research identified both community and household level factors affecting welfare change in the three study sites. Findings from this study indicate that poverty is not only an outcome of economic processes, but also an outcome of political, environmental and social processes that interact with each other and frequently reinforce each other in ways that exacerbate the conditions under which poor people live.

Poor people are not passive to their predicament but have time-tested coping and survival strategies and institutions, some of which can on occasion even enable some households to escape from poverty. Such strategies and institutions can be integrated into innovative poverty reduction programs because they offer potential for bottom-up approaches to poverty alleviation.

COMMUNITY LEVEL FACTORS AFFECTING WELFARE CHANGE

In Madzuu, the study site in Vihiga district, soil fertility has declined as people have overused the land through continuous cultivation during the past twenty years. Rapid population growth has led to growing demand for construction materials and fuel wood, leading to removal of tree cover, resulting in soil erosion. The agricultural sector is also under pressure due to lack of alternative employment opportunities and shrinking farm sizes. The collapse of the coffee market in the 1980's affected the livelihoods of many, spurring a shift to tea farming, which took off when a new tea factory opened in the late 1990's. Currently half of the farmers in Madzuu are tea farmers. The introduction of high-yielding dairy cattle in the early 1980's also brought great change, enabling a few households to escape poverty through milk marketing. This is made possible by good market access. Vihiga benefits from its proximity to two urban centers, Kisumu, Kenya's third largest city, and Kakamega, the provincial capital.

HIV/AIDS and other illnesses, especially malaria, add to the pressure on agriculture, and are major causes of poverty in Madzuu. The seasonality of malaria attacks compounds its detrimental effects on labor productivity, as malaria peaks while farmers' grain stores are empty, labor demand in farmers' fields is peaking and maize prices are high. The high mortality rates also contribute to deforestation and loss of livestock, which are customarily sacrificed to provide fuel wood and meat for funerals.

In Ng'ambo, our research site in Baringo district, droughts had more devastating effects twenty years

ago than they do now, due to NGO relief efforts, increased labor mobility, and local income diversification. In the past, people with no livestock produced millet and sorghum to exchange for small ruminants, mainly goats. The advent of the Perkerra Irrigation Scheme improved crop farming, helped provide more wage employment and stimulated the growth of non-farm enterprises to meet the local population's increased demand for goods and services. Introduction of the livestock auction centre in Marigat in the late 1980's has facilitated livestock marketing, especially in times of stress. The natural resource base on which the agropastoralists of Ng'ambo depend, however, is increasingly under threat. Water pans and Lake Baringo suffer silting due to soil erosion, which occurs during the frequent floods along the Perkerra River. Grazing lands are under threat due to an invasive weed *(Prosopis spp*.) inadvisedly introduced into the area in the early 1980s as a feed to goats. The weed is allegedly damaging animal health as well as crowding out other, more palatable forage species.

In the study site in Marsabit district, Dirib Gombo, on the shoulder of Marsabit mountain, increased human and livestock populations have ratcheted up pressure on resources, particularly pasture and water. The population is increasing rapidly due to immigration from other, more remote – and often insecure – areas. Productivity of the land is declining because of continuous use without soil nutrient replenishment or soil conservation investments to prevent soil erosion on the area's sloping lands. People are increasingly moving away from pastoralism to mixed crop-livestock farming. This provides synergies as crop residues provide valuable livestock feed, but it also sedentarizes the population, leaving them vulnerable to localized climate shocks that were historically accommodated through herd migration.

Systems of social support from relatives, clan members, and friends appear to have weakened in Dirib Gombo. The wealthy less frequently accommodate the poor within their homesteads. Women's and youth groups have begun to emerge in response. Youth groups are concerned with constructing water pans and keeping improved poultry breeds. Members of women's groups are involved in soil and water conservation and in vegetable cultivation, and also support one another during times of distress by providing modest loans.

Insecurity is another major factor that has contributed to poverty among households in Dirib Gombo. Ethnic clashes have resulted in loss of life, property and goodwill among different ethnic groups. Cattle theft often accompanies the clashes. However, in the past few years the government has improved security by providing armed guards.

Another factor that has retarded development in Marsabit is the high illiteracy rate, especially among the poor, which limits people's ability to secure well-paying jobs.

HOUSEHOLD LEVEL FACTORS AFFECTING WELFARE CHANGE

The household case studies reveal a striking relationship between education and welfare. In Baringo, some informants blamed poverty on the schooling of their children, because these children were not working and school fees are a major drain on limited household resources. But in all sites, households with educated adult children were wealthier, underscoring that households have to be prepared to invest for the long-term in educating children, making short-to-medium term sacrifices of cash and labor in order to enjoy later opportunities for better paying employment or simply increased on-farm productivity. Educated adult children are a valuable source of remittances to less well educated family members. In all sites, the nonpoor plowed non-farm earnings back into livestock operations or into irrigated farming along the Perkerra irrigation scheme in order to increase the family's agricultural productivity. Education is not enough, however, to secure well-paid employment; it is also necessary to be socially well connected. The supply of well-educated workers outstrips demand, making social relationships critical to finding steady, remunerative employment.

One of the key findings of this study is that in all three sites the factors that enable people to escape from poverty or to remain non-poor differ from those factors that cause people to fall into poverty or to remain poor. We now turn to these differential causal dynamics.

Escaping Poverty or Remaining Non-poor

Income diversification, both on-farm and off-farm, was the chief strategy used to remain nonpoor by households who had escaped poverty twenty years ago. In Vihiga, the non-poor used off-farm earnings to diversify farm operations, investing in cash crop farming and high-yielding dairy operations. In Baringo, the non-poor adopted mixed farming, combining livestock operations with irrigated crop farming: horticultural production and maize seed production for Kenya Seed Company within the Perkerra Irrigation Scheme. Proceeds from these activities were used to buy livestock and to pay children's school fees. In Marsabit, no households successfully escaped poverty over the period of our

team's data collection, but some were non-poor in both periods. Just like in Baringo, the non-poor households in Marsabit were the ones that had incomes from wage employment and ploughed the proceeds back into improved mixed farming.

Importantly, the livestock auction market in Marigat, Baringo, served as an asset insurance mechanism, as it enabled livestock owners to sell livestock at reasonable prices during droughts and to restock with the proceeds from these sales when weather conditions returned to normal.

Falling Into Poverty or Remaining Poor

In the semi-arid sites in Baringo and Marsabit, frequent droughts contributed to both human and livestock diseases, as well as to catastrophic livestock losses, plunging households into poverty, sometimes irreversibly. In Baringo, flash floods also had the same effect. In Marsabit, many of the poor were landless immigrants from more remote parts of northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. In all three sites, limited social networks and low levels of education were cited as causes of poverty, making it difficult to find well-paying jobs. In Vihiga, several similar reasons emerged as to why households fall into poverty. The principal cause was the loss of income following death of a breadwinner, often compounded by the funeral expenses associated with this death. Households often had to sell off valuable assets (e.g., livestock) in order to pay for funerals, leaving them doubly injured, not just by the loss of a prime age adult worker, but also by the liquidation of other assets to pay for the funeral. Loss of employment due to retrenchment or to illness or injury was another common cause for households to fall into poverty. Likewise, medical expenses incurred due to poor health among household members often compounded the adverse effects of employment loss. Conflict over land and declining farm size and soil quality also contributed to declining productivity and some rural households' slide in poverty.

ASSETS AND POVERTY

People's perception of poverty was found to differ somewhat from one study site to another, in line with the mode of livelihood strategies that they pursue. Pastoral communities' perception of poverty is closely related to the number of livestock owned, while non-pastoral communities perceive poverty in terms of land sizes and assets other than just livestock. According to the *Il Chamus* of Baringo district, poor households possess less than five head of cattle or less than five sheep and five goats. The *Boran* in Marsabit district define a poor person as one with less than eight cows while their agropastoral counterparts, the *Burji*, define a poor person as one with less than four acres of land. The *Maragolis* in Vihiga district define absolute poverty as a situation where one has no money, no source of income or wealth, or is unable to educate one's children.

Natural Resources Management

Improved natural resources management practices are likewise common among the non-pastoral communities concerned with arable farming. They are more concerned with soil and water conservation and with the planting of trees than are the pastoral communities. Individuals who have escaped from poverty and individuals who have remained non-poor were more concerned with natural resource management than were individuals who fell into poverty and those who have remained in poverty. Concern for the natural resource base on which their future incomes depend indeed appears a luxury poor households in all three areas cannot afford.

In the event that there are no alternative employment opportunities, poor households in these communities commonly exploit natural resources, for example through harvesting trees for charcoal making or mining soils to make bricks. These uses of the natural resource base are unsustainable, as there is no re-investment in reforestation or soil nutrient replenishment. But households lack alternative, superior means to cope with the acute pressure they suffer due to extreme poverty and food insecurity.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study shows that different communities perceive poverty differently and that the meanings they attach to poverty likewise differ by context. This is partly due to agroecological variation in the assets on which people depend and partly, and relatedly, because the factors that lead people into poverty can vary somewhat from place to place. This implies that interventions aimed at poverty alleviation must necessarily also vary from site to site. Kenya is a country with a rich diversity of agroecological zones and ethnicities. It is essential to take this into consideration in appropriate targeting of interventions and technologies aimed at alleviating poverty. Such interventions can be developed in partnership with local residents through participatory designs that learn from successful local strategies for escaping from poverty.

This site specificity notwithstanding, there are also some very general patterns that appear in this

comparative study of household and community level poverty dynamics. First, fighting poverty through agriculture alone is impossible, especially where farmers depend on rainfed agriculture and where land pressure is such that soil fertility and range quality are degrading in the absence of direct investment in natural resource management. Other, non-farm sources of income must be sought. Second, education is critical to enable people to acquire the skills necessary (albeit not sufficient) to secure such remunerative off-farm employment and to enable increased on-farm productivity through more knowledgeable crop production and animal husbandry practices. Third, asset security needs to be improved. In the predominantly pastoralist communities in the semi-arid areas, people need protection against livestock thefts and they need market access to facilitate timely offtake of animals when range conditions decline due to drought or flooding. Among sedentary crop farmers, especially in the high-potential areas, land conflicts are a problem. And among all households, preventive and curative health care to reduce illness, injury and mortality are essential to preventing households' collapse into poverty.

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Further Readings

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