



Decentralization and its' Effects on Pastoral Resource Management in Northern Kenya

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Decentralization is commonly advocated as a means to improve democratic involvement in local governance systems, leading to more effective allocation and management of natural resources. However, devolving decision-making authority to lower levels of government and new community institutions does not guarantee progress in public participation, natural resource management, or equity. Our study of changing land use in the Hurri Hills of Marsabit District, Kenya, illustrates how decentralization can promote the interests of settled cultivators and negatively affect the interests of pastoralists.

Background

The Kenyan government's policy focus on rural development, initiated in the mid 1980's, as well as the advent of multiparty democracy in the early 1990's, created an impetus for devolving decision making to local levels. Discussions about and initiatives towards decentralization of governance at the district, division, and location levels have significantly progressed during the past decade. Simultaneously, governmental and non-governmental organizations have often targeted community-based groups to implement development projects and promote transparency and accountability. This has spawned a multitude of community groups, some of whose existence depends on donor funding. In pastoral areas this decentralization process does not automatically foster well informed, equitable, and representative decision-making. Such alternative institutions sometimes displace traditional bodies that derive their legitimacy from local people. This problem can be especially acute when new forms of governance give more power to settled residents and diminish the influence of important, but transient, traditional resource users such as pastoralists. This research explored these issues in the Hurri Hills area of Marsabit District where externally imposed changes in governance have combined with a World Bank Global Environmental Facility project to alter local patterns of natural resource management. We used a combination of research approaches including focus group methods and key informant interviews. Seven community groups were involved, including two women's groups, two environmental management committees, one youth group, and two groups of traditional elders. In addition, some staff members of various governmental and non-governmental organizations were interviewed.

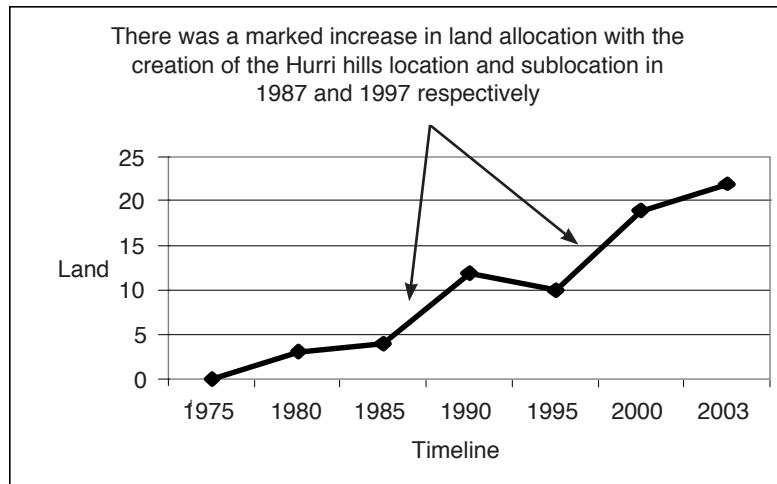
Preliminary Findings

The Hurri Hills of northern Kenya provides an example of how the effects of decentralization can unfold. Traditionally, the Hurri Hills were used by nomadic Gabra pastoralists and their herds who only visited the area at certain times of the year. Desitute Borana and Gabra households could settle in the Hurri Hills, but this was typically on a temporary basis and land allocation had to be negotiated with the Gabra nomads.

The Kenya government established the Hurri Hills "location" in 1987, and a "sub-location" was designated in 1997. These administrative units were intended to bring governmental decision making closer to the people. One major outcome was the establishment of a new Land Allocation Committee at the location level. This Committee provided a new mechanism to provide plots to individual applicants and the rate of land disbursement rapidly increased (Figure 1). Over 60% of our survey respondents had been allocated land via the Land Allocation Committee, compared to less than 30% who had been allocated land by the traditional system.

People who received plots from the Land Allocation Committee were also given permanent and legally defensible rights to the land. In contrast, allocation under the traditional system always remains subject to periodic review. This process has therefore given greater legitimacy to the settled people in the Hurri Hills and has been associated with dramatic increases in the area under cultivation (Figure 2). While there may be dual causality in this relationship—in other words, pressure to increase cultivation could help increase demand for legal empowerment of the Land Allocation Committee—the

Figure 1. Land allocation trend in the Hurri Hills, 1975-2003. Note the increase in numbers of people allocated land in 1987 and 1997.



impacts of this process have negatively impacted resource use and land-use planning influence of the traditional Gabra pastoralists. Permanent settlement has compromised the access of Gabra herds to seasonally important forage resources. In this case decentralization has not taken into account the spatial and temporal variability of rangeland resources.

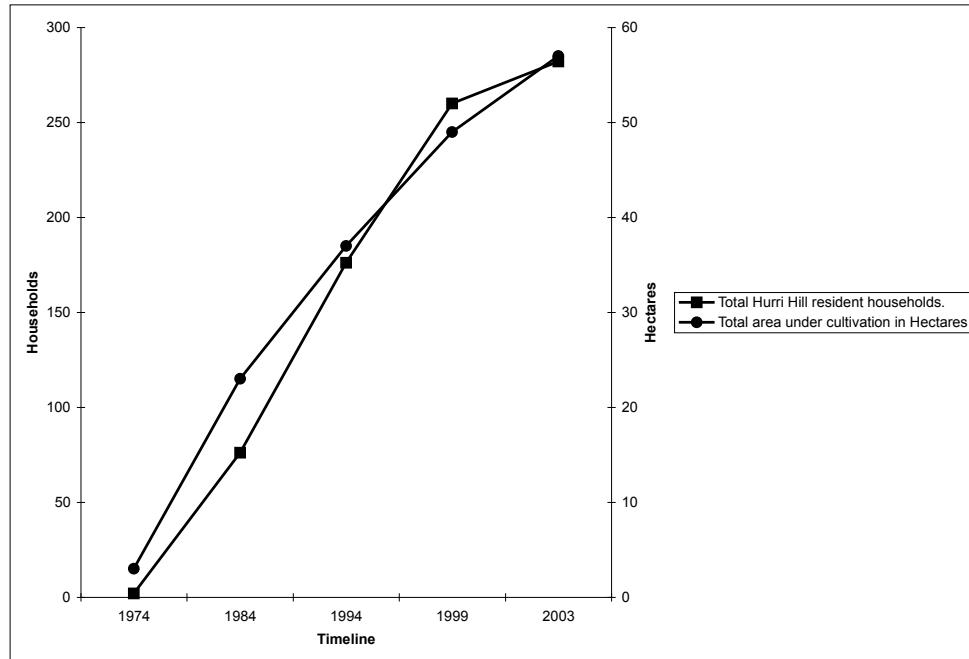
Decentralization has created artificial resource-use boundaries that have complicated administrative processes and fueled conflict among local people. Decentralization has enabled government to extend its control over local communities while at the same time gaining political mileage through the rhetoric of bringing government services and development closer to the people. Natural resources in the Hurri Hills have traditionally been managed in a communal fashion; decentralization has created new decision-making bodies officially sanctioned by government and endowed with legal authority to wield extensive power.

The creation of entities such as Land Allocation Committees has occurred within a wider framework where more and more community-based groups are emerging. For example, the number of community groups officially registered in the Hurri Hills has increased from virtually nil in 1975 to 25 by 2003. On the positive side, some groups have provided a voice for otherwise voiceless groups—especially women and young people—in an otherwise highly paternalistic pastoral community. But some groups have also created alternative centers of power within communities, thereby eroding the effectiveness of traditional community institutions. The recent emergence of a better educated, more politically aware class of elites among local communities on one hand, and the weakening of traditional institutions on the other, has been a source of conflict and ambiguity in most community-based resource management efforts in the Hurri Hills. This is because most initiatives in decentralization and community empowerment treat these two categories of people as a single entity, and this disregards their varied sources of legitimacy.

In such cases, enforcement of community sanctions fails to achieve very much because the two groups differ in terms of cultural norms and legal status despite overlaps in resource-management mandates.

Another example from the Hurri Hills is the formation of an Environmental Management Committee (EMC) intended to spearhead environmental management and biodiversity conservation efforts. The EMC concept, introduced in the area three years ago, drew inspiration from experiences of GTZ working with the pastoral Rendille in southwest Marsabit District. Through the Marsabit Development Program (MDP), GTZ pushed for the establishment of EMCs to deal with problems of natural resource management and localized environmental degradation caused by overstocking and settlement at water points and trading centers (Haro et al., 2005). Ideally, the EMC membership is comprised of traditional leaders, women, and youths within an identifiable neighborhood based on shared resources. The EMC is charged with mobilizing and raising environmental awareness for user groups. It does this by helping organize meetings to elaborate and disseminate environmental management protocols aimed at minimizing natural-resource related conflicts and facilitating participatory assessment of implemented actions and measures. In most other parts of Marsabit District where this model is used, the EMC mainly deals with pastoralists and settled communities near water points and trading centers that comprise only one ethnic group. In the case of the Hurri Hills, however, the presence of ethnically diverse resident cultivators (Boran) and non-resident pastoralists (Gabra) greatly complicates the EMC's work and undermines its perceived legitimacy. In addition, as noted by Haro et al. (2005), the limited cultural precedence for a body such as an EMC to define new rules for resource use has led some community members to refuse to accept the final authority of the EMC. The EMC's dependency on elders or the authority of a local chief to enforce sanctions for non-compliance with conservation by-laws has also been a problem. In addition,

Figure 2. Trend of population and area under cultivation in the Hurri Hills, 1974-2003.



its inability to offer incentives for compliance has seriously compromised its effectiveness. Traditional enforcement of resource use restrictions has relied on community elders, and compliance may occur as a result of fear of being ostracized or cursed. Thus, in cases such as that of the Hurri Hills where support of the elders is not assured, the effectiveness of community-based efforts becomes doubtful.

Overall, decentralization in the Hurri Hills seems to have had several unintended and undesirable consequences. Increased settlement and cultivation has impeded traditional pastoralists' access to customary livestock migration routes and displaced them from critical wet-season grazing areas, thereby increasing the vulnerability of pastoral herds to drought. Conflicts over water and crop damage by livestock have also occurred. Increased settlement has accelerated localized environmental degradation due to greater demand for fuel wood and building timber as well as increased soil erosion due to cultivation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Case studies from around the world indicate that decentralization intended to improve poor peoples' livelihoods and better conserve critical natural resources is often inadequately implemented. Many such reforms result in resource privatization, dilution of traditional authority, and a transfer of local power to central government (Ribot, 2004). The creation of new, powerful institutions thus can complicate resource management, much as they did in the colonial era.

In the Hurri Hills the presence of traditional pastoral elders in new resource management organizations has been a compromise aimed at building community consensus in natural resource management. But in reality the influence of the elders in these settings is minimal. Rather, the interests of the settled residents have proven decisive in determining the outcomes of resource management decisions.

The capacity of local communities to self-govern their natural resources in ways that promote conservation and equity cannot always be assumed (Barrett et al., 2001). Community-based approaches normally work best when there are strong local systems of social control to enforce access restrictions. The persistence of the Gabra traditional institutions, such as the Yaa Council of Elders, despite years of government-sanctioned competition, attests to their resilience. The overarching influence of entities such as the Yaa Council of Elders in the socio-political and economic life of the Gabra community is a testament to their credibility. Linking political and development decentralization strategies to existing community institutions will not only strengthen these institutions, but will also enhance the legitimacy of such strategies.

In the case of northern Kenya in general, and the Gabra in particular, the on-going national constitutional review process can be used to advocate for proper implementation of the devolution of state authority to local peoples. The experience of pastoral communities elsewhere has shown that when critical decisions are made at the local level the needs of pastoralists can be addressed promptly and meaningfully. Yet governments and development agencies must pay closer

attention to the array of local interests and the prospect for competing centers of power within local jurisdictions and what this could imply for changing land use patterns, equity, and security. Support for decentralized resource management will require a re-conceptualization of the role of the state and other local institutions in resource management. In many cases traditional or grass-roots institutions may be more successful than those imposed by the state (Finke, 2000). In some cases, however, state intervention is necessary to address the needs of otherwise marginalized groups in local communities. Creating bottom-up processes from existing top-down initiatives is difficult as communities are socially heterogeneous and prone to domination by local elites. Decentralizing governance of natural resources requires central government support and positive action in terms of policy and institutional reforms.

Influencing the policy environment is complex and highly dependent on the willingness of government to listen to its citizens (IIED, 2003). The highly disenfranchised nature of many pastoral communities makes this even more critical. In addition, a deeply ingrained bias against pastoral communities and pastoral regions militates against the ability of pastoral advocates to effectively lobby for policy change.

While there are many examples of successful decentralization strategies at the local level, the challenge remains how to disseminate and scale-up these successes in a sustainable manner. Wider appreciation of pastoralism as a viable livelihood system that is very well-suited to the ecology of rangelands may better inform attempts to decentralize natural resource management in arid and semi-arid lands.

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.