

Traditional pastoralist decision-making processes:
Lessons for reforms to water resources management in Kenya

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The Background: Reforms to Water Resources Management in Kenya

Kenya is in the midst of reforming governance of its water resources under the overall guidance of the 2002 Water Act. The Act attempts to establish the foundation for a system in which a significant degree of authority is devolved to the local level and in which civil society organizations and communities rather than the central government bear most of the responsibility for provision of water services and management of water resources. It is envisioned that the primary institutional mechanism for management of water resources at the local level will be Water Resource Users Associations (WRUAs), and much of the work of the Water Resources Management Authority (WRMA) at the local level is to be focused on facilitating the formation of WRUAs and providing support to WRUAs. An issue that must be considered is

whether this strategy will be the most effective way to ensure meaningful participation by pastoralists.

Our Research

The purpose of our field research, conducted from 2006-2008, was to consider the vision for public participation in water resources management embedded in Kenya's Water Act as it relates to pastoralists and to the endemic forms of deliberation and decision-making used among Gabra nomadic pastoralists of north-central Kenya. The field research had two broad components. The first component was essentially conducted at the institutional level, involving semi-structured interviews with personnel from the Water Services Board, Water Resources Management Authority, and other government agencies; and with personnel from the private sector, NGOs, and donor agencies working in the





water sector in Kenya. The second component of the research involved investigation into institutions and decision-making processes among the Gabra, and involved interviews with Gabra elders, focus groups sessions and community meetings, and participation in traditional Gabra meetings.

The Institutional Model of Participation

In participatory approaches to water resources management, participatory development practice generally, and mainstream participatory development literature, a great deal of emphasis is placed on formal structures and how participation can be embedded within these structures. The mobility of pastoralists can present difficulties for formal sector agencies using this kind of institutional model of participation. For example, representative committees in the study area tend to be dominated by people who have left the nomadic lifestyle and have made homes in permanent settlements.

NGO and government agency personnel whom we interviewed were essentially unanimous in admitting the difficulties they face in involving mobile pastoralists, sometimes expressing the issue as involving a tension between inclusivity and continuity. When efforts are made to emphasize inclusivity, for example by involving mobile pastoralists at the outset and having them select representatives to serve on a committee, the next time that development agents want to meet with that committee





they are likely to find that many of its members have, quite literally, moved to greener pastures. And in the kind of vast territories that many dryland pastoralists inhabit—ultra-rugged terrain poorly served by even the most basic roads—expecting personnel from NGOs or governmental agencies to seek out particular individuals who have been selected as committee members is hardly realistic.

Traditional Pastoralist Decision-Making

Yet the Gabra and other mobile pastoralist groups can and do make collective decisions. In these kinds of societies, much of the deliberation and collective decision-making takes place in occasional meetings. Among the Gabra, important decisions are made by korra, meetings that are organized at various levels of social organization, from the nomadic camp, to the cluster of camps, up to the clan and the phratry, and the entire Gabra “nation”. Other pastoralist groups have similar institutions: Maasai enkiguena, Pokot kokwo, Rendille ur'uuri mejel.

Pastoralist ethnic groups do have corporate institutions, such as have clan councils, but among the Gabra for example, the role of an institutionalized process—the korra meeting—is at least as important as these institutionalized bodies. By scheduling such meetings as the need arises and as is appropriate for people's seasonal movements, and by distributing decision-taking authority among various institutions such as traditional



councils, traditional meetings, and others, Gabra nomads are able to meet the need for both inclusion of and continuity.



Recommendations

Not all institutions are organizations, and not all participation need take place within and through organizations. Deliberation can take place within, and decision-taking authority can be accorded to, other types of deliberation processes such as conferences, annual general meetings, and traditional meetings such as the Gabra korra. Programs promoting community-based water resources management among mobile pastoralists are unlikely to be genuinely participatory if they are based on a form of institutional development that is borrowed in a rigid way from work among settled agricultural populations, and in particular if the linchpin of the strategy is the creation of organizations based in the permanent settlements. In the reforms being carried out in water resources management in Kenya, the singular emphasis on an institutionalized body, the WRUA, is not likely to serve mobile pastoralists well. Our argument is that attention must also be given to promoting deliberation processes at various levels.

A key element of the strategy being suggested here is that, in regions such as northern Kenya, nested deliberation processes

Core Messages:

- The approach to participation being pursued in the ongoing reform process of Kenya's water sector assumes that participation takes place within and through organizations such as representative committees
- In endeavours aimed at promoting community-based water resources management, attention must also be given to promoting deliberation processes
- Deliberation processes promoted by formal sector agencies should work with traditional deliberation processes

promoted by formal sector agencies should connect to and work with traditional pastoralist deliberation processes. And while we have identified some misgivings about the vision embedded in the ongoing reforms to Kenya's water sector, the above discussion is not meant to suggest that mobile pastoralists in the arid and semi-arid parts of Kenya should never form WRUAs. Rather, what should be primary, both in time and importance, are ongoing, systematic processes of nested deliberation.

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