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Collective Action by Women’s Groups to Combat Drought and Poverty in Northern Kenya

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Abstract

Collective action can be an effective means of local development and risk reduction among rural people, but few examples have been documented in pastoral rangeland areas. We conducted extensive qualitative interviews for 16 women’s groups residing in settlements in northern Kenya during early 2005. Our objectives were to understand how groups were formed and governed, what activities they have pursued, and to what extent such groups can mitigate drought crises and reduce poverty for their members. The groups we interviewed had existed for an average of 10 years. Group size averaged about 24 women, 20 of whom were typically illiterate. Half of the groups had formed after facilitation by a GO or NGO partner and half formed spontaneously. Groups are governed under detailed constitutional frameworks. Leaders are typically elected. Groups primarily form to improve living standards of the members. Groups undertake a wide variety of social and economic activities founded on savings and credit schemes, income diversification, small business development, and expansion of education, health service, and natural resource management functions. Groups have also taken an active role in mitigating drought impacts on their members. There are many examples of group members that have lifted themselves up from destitution. The greatest threats to the sustainability of these women’s groups come from external factors such as drought and political incitement as well as internal factors such as unfavourable group dynamics and illiteracy. Principles of good group governance and wisdom in business creation and management were repeatedly stated by respondents as the key ingredients for long-term success. Groups have ambitious plans to further improve their social and economic circumstances; rates of group formation in the region appear to be increasing. In a highly risky and poverty-stricken environment such as northern Kenya, such groups help create relatively deep pools of social, human, and diversified economic capital. Many of these processes fill large gaps in public service delivery and should be encouraged by policy makers.

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