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“Resilience of agricultural systems against crises”

Natural Resources Governance in Northern Kenya: Implication of Institutional Changes on Environmental Management

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Abstract

Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) has gained some popularity in the recent past as a panacea for resource governance in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, including the arid and semi arid environment of northern Kenya. In most of the places, community groups were created by external environmental conservation agents to address resource degradation. In these cases, customary laws and management practices based on traditional institutions and in-depth knowledge of the environment have been replaced by rules and regulations developed by the environmental management groups. Alienation of traditional resource governance institutions is partly said to be due to poor understanding of how they operate, including decision making and rules enforcement. We studied the implication of these changes among the Borana and Rendille pastoralist communities in northern Kenya. We conducted semi-structured interviews with the members of environmental management groups, elders who were the custodians of the customary laws for resources management, and also held focused group discussions with key informants. In both pastoral communities, contemporary community based approaches to environmental conservation are effective only in areas where active monitoring and guarding of environment by community scouts was present. Elders who were the custodians of traditional institutions are not consulted for important decisions such as development of new land use plans and access to the grazing resources. Furthermore, we observed that traditional institutions had an elaborate system for making environmental management decisions and their enforcement. It is evident that contemporary approaches to participatory environmental management touted as successful model need to be reconsidered in light of problems pointed out. We recommend that a more accommodative model that adequately caters for the roles of traditional institutions, resource use regimes, production strategies and knowledge of local communities be adopted in the arid and semi- arid environment of northern Kenya to enhanced genuine participation.

Keywords: Community participation, indigenous institution, natural resource management, Northern Kenya