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Adapting or Coping? Analysis of Pastoralists’ Responses to Climatic Stressors in Kenya’s Drylands

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Abstract

The livestock-based livelihoods in the vast drylands of Africa are among the most vulnerable systems to climatic-related risks due to their over-dependence on natural resources that are subject to bio-physical variability. This has been exacerbated by weakening of pastoral risk management strategies and inadequate supportive policies. For centuries, however, pastoralists have demonstrated tremendous ability to cope with climate variability, often employing sophisticated and continually evolving processes and practices to take advantage of new opportunities. That notwithstanding, the present concern is that the adaptive capacity of pastoralist communities may not be sufficiently robust to respond to the shocks associated with the contemporary climatic and environmental dynamics.

The traditional adaptive strategies are being undermined by increased population pressure leading to conversion of grazing lands to other uses, thereby restricting pastoral mobility. This is aggravated by increasing climatic anomalies (*e.g.*, frequent and severe droughts and floods), limited livestock marketing opportunities, changing land tenure and unclear property right regimes. Other constraints include rising socio-political conflicts and breakdown of traditional social and resource governance institutions. These factors work in concert to weaken pastoral resilience against otherwise ‘normal’ climatic variability as shown by large scale livestock losses during droughts and subsequent impoverishment of pastoral households.

Over the last two decades, the climate change challenge has elicited several studies in Kenya’s drylands, most of them focusing on the impacts of climate variability on pastoral livelihoods and existing risk management mechanisms. However, little attention has been paid to the sustainability of the existing coping strategies. Questions that arise amid these efforts are: 1) Are pastoralists adapting or just coping with the changes (are the responses reactive or proactive)? 2) Are the current coping strategies capable of enhancing or undermining adaptation in the future? 3) What can be done to strengthen the existing coping strategies and ensure that they form the basis for future adaptation?

The paper examines existing pastoral responses to climatic and environmental risks, their sustainability, and discusses how their capacity can be enhanced to ensure effectiveness, and compatibility with pastoralism and future adaptation strategies in Kenya’s pastoral areas.

Keywords: Climatic variability, coping strategies, Kenya, pastoral resilience