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Socio-Cultural Foundations and Characteristics of Well-Functioning Pastoral Community Groups in Northern Kenya: The Emic View

RAPHAEL ARASIO¹, BRIGITTE KAUFMANN², DAVID OTIENO³, OLIVER WASONGA²

¹*University of Nairobi, Dept. of Land Resource Management and Agricultural Technology, Kenya*

²*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

³*University of Nairobi, Agricultural Economics, Kenya*

Abstract

Socio-cultural context is often ignored when crafting community groups and this has far-reaching effects on their growth and sustainability. Up to now, there is dearth of information about the extent of socio-cultural embeddedness in the way pastoral community groups are organised and governed. This study aims to assess from an insider’s perspective whether such linkages exist and if they have any influence on group performance. The study also sought to assess the social and governance factors that pastoralists perceive as important to the functioning of groups. This information was gathered from participatory likert-type scale rating exercises with 153 income generating groups (IGGs), key informant interviews with 9 head chiefs and officials of 10 IGGs, and semi-structured interviews with 18 IGGs.

The study reveals that pastoralists are drawing from and adapting cultural and social collective practices and norms to new purposes such as income generation. There is a glaring blend between cultural collective activities and the current income generating groups in the way they are organised and governed. Out of the many social factors that are described in literature, only some such as age, gender, education and wealth are considered by pastoralists as important to the functioning of groups. Although these social factors are considered as necessary in the admission of a member to a group, the sufficient criteria lie in the personal character features such as interest and willingness to cooperate such that those with such features are finally admitted. Contrary to the expectation that heterogeneity of social factors may negatively impact on group performance, the converse was found to be true for most factors and reasons for these were well articulated by pastoralists. With regard to governance, pastoralists consider oversight committees, weekly meetings, all-inclusive decision making, by-laws, transparency and accountability related to finances and decision making as fundamental to performance of income generating groups.

Based on these findings, it is important that development efforts to craft or strengthen community groups should take into consideration the socio-cultural dynamics as well as group members’ perceptions on the importance of specific social and governance factors if sustainable group activities are aimed for.

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