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Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihoods of pastoral communities in the Kenyan rangelands

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic declared in March 2020 resulted in an unprecedented economic slowdown with social disruptions across communities. In the arid and semi-arid lands (ASAL) of Kenya which comprise more than 60% of the national land mass, the resultant restrictions on movement of people with closure of markets for different products greatly affected pastoral communities whose livelihoods depend on mobility of their livestock herds. A rapid assessment tool was used to determine the impacts of the restrictions among pastoral communities participating in a program aimed at improving productivity of sheep and goats in Isiolo, Marsabit and Turkana counties of Kenya. Additional information was obtained from key stakeholders involved in activities related to livestock production in each county. 140 households provided information on dynamics within their sheep and goat flocks and costs and availability of inputs and services during the national “lock-down”. Likert scale statements each with three responses were used to collate information that was subsequently analysed using principal component analyses. The binary response variables were weighted to derive a variable measuring the overall effect COVID-19 the livestock enterprises. A higher value of the derived scale variable represented a positive effect while a lower value represented negative effect of COVID-19 on the farmer’s sheep and goat enterprise. Across the three counties, COVID-19 significantly ($p < 0.005$) affected the acquisition of breeding animals, availability of food for household use, availability of farm labor and animal prices when marketed. Inputs and services supporting sheep and goat production were also difficult to access resulting in increased animal mortalities due to diseases. Communities in Isiolo and Marsabit that are located closer to the capital city Nairobi, and community members who had a higher level of education were more negatively affected by the pandemic than others. Countries need to more optimally define restrictive measures to protect the livelihoods of pastoral communities whose survival depends on mobility rather than implementing nationwide movement restrictions.

Keywords: COVID-19, livelihoods, pastoral communities