



Tropentag, September 11-13, 2024, hybrid conference

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Identifying information needs among pastoral livestock keepers: Insights from scouting practices in northern Kenya

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Abstract

In northern Kenya, the strategic mobility of herds allows herders to utilise grazing areas that are characterised by high temporal and spatial variability. To make grazing decisions, herders rely on site-specific data. Before moving to a new grazing area, they need to inform themselves about the current situation by visiting and inspecting the grazing area (scouting). The aim of this study is to investigate the information needs of pastoralists, focussing on their grazing management. In particular, the following research question is to be answered: What are the information needs of pastoralists during their scouting activities and how do these needs influence their decision-making processes? The analysis is based on qualitative data collected through focus group discussions and narrative interviews with the Borana and Rendille communities over a period of four months in northern Kenya. The activity and knowledge analysis approach was used to identify key themes and knowledge embedded in scouting practices. The results reveal a wide range of information needs that influence the mobility decisions of pastoralist communities. These include indicators of pasture and water availability and quality, as well as livestock health and behaviour. Concerns about safety, weather conditions and the nature of the land are among the factors that influence mobility decisions. This information is usually gathered and passed on by trusted scouts. The introduction of motorbikes and mobile phones over the last decade has helped to make this information sharing more efficient. Understanding the diversity and interplay of factors that influence grazing decisions helps to better understand pastoralists' utilisation of grazing areas. Currently, information from visual inspections is shared verbally, which can lead to the loss of important information and misunderstandings - revealing the potential of information and communications technology (ICT) with visual aids. However, ensuring the trustworthiness of the information shared remains paramount to minimise potential loss and disruption.

Keywords: Decision making, Eastern Africa, grazing itineraries, mobility