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“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

“carbon feels like cash cropping” pastoralists’ perceptions of rangeland carbon projects in Kenya

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Abstract

Sustainable rangeland management has the potential to mitigate livestock-related greenhouse gas emissions and is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in the face of climate change. Across the globe, various initiatives, such as rangeland carbon projects, have emerged to create financial incentives for communities to adopt and maintain sustainable land management practices, such as rotational grazing. One such example is the Northern Kenya Rangeland Carbon Project, the largest soil carbon initiative of its kind and a pioneer in engaging communities for rangeland restoration through carbon markets. The project targets pastoralist communities with a long tradition in livestock keeping, and introduces practices aimed at improving rangeland conservation and restoration. Pastoralists receive monetary and non-monetary benefits by adopting rotational grazing and are supported to implement restoration practices such as reseeding of grasses and removal of invasive plant species. While previous research has focused on the technical and quantitative assessment of carbon project benefits, there is limited understanding of how pastoralists perceive these projects, particularly regarding their economic value and how they align with cultural views of land and livestock. This study adopts a case study design, focusing on the Northern Kenya Rangeland Carbon Project as its primary case. Five of the fourteen conservancies involved in the project were purposively selected for in-depth study, based on criteria such as land governance systems and ethnic representation. Pastoralists’ perceptions were assessed through focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and other qualitative methods, including the net-maps and process net-map tools. Preliminary results suggest that pastoralists’ perceptions of the project are largely influenced by information provided by key stakeholders during training, institutional coordination, project benefits, and historical land governance systems in the areas. In communities without land titles, results show that the project is not only perceived as a revenue stream but as a long-term pathway to financial autonomy and a buffer against external interference. Policies aimed at establishing carbon projects should consider community perceptions, as this is relevant to shaping inclusive government regulations, standard development, and upscaling similar efforts, especially since rangeland management is largely unexplored and underrepresented in agricultural carbon projects.

Keywords: Carbon governance, carbon projects, pastoralism, pastoralist perceptions, sustainable rangelands