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## Evolving resource governance in pastoralist societies: the enduring power of elders despite emerging institutions in northern kenya

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### Abstract

Pastoral communities have longstanding customary systems that govern resources for successful livestock production in their highly variable environments. In Northern Kenya, these systems are led by community elders, who provide stewardship on how resources are accessed, used, and managed over time and space. However, recently, through state policies, multiple institutional frameworks, including resource-specific committees and government-appointed administrative authorities, such as chiefs, have emerged, creating overlapping mandates and shifts in power dynamics.

This study examined the emerging challenges and problem-solving actions in governance changes among the Borana and Rendille communities in Marsabit County, Northern Kenya. Drawing on qualitative data collected over six months between March 2024 and April 2025, that includes 10 narrative interviews, and 9 Activity Knowledge Analysis sessions.

Findings reveal several emerging challenges. The introduction of new actors, such as water management committees, has led to the commodification of common-pool resources, misappropriation of collected revenues, and over-reliance on external actors for infrastructure repairs. Financial incentives have led committee members to disregard long-standing norms governing resource use. Elders uphold community order and customary codes of conduct by holding committees accountable and replacing members when necessary.

Another challenge involves water development projects implemented without community consultation. These projects attract new settlements and disrupt established grazing systems. In such cases, elders actively oppose these interventions to protect customary arrangements.

While chiefs' have gained influence through government policy—creating a dual system of governance that can reinforce adherence via state connections- they can also undermine customary systems, particularly when decision-making is influenced by external incentives such as bribery.

Despite these challenges, elders continue to serve as Custodians of customary law- playing a central role in governance. Their local knowledge guiding practices amidst emerging institutions, highlighting how old institutions adapt to new realities shaped by customary practices.

Overall, this research underscores the enduring authority of elders in rangeland governance and calls for recognition of community-based institutions in policy and development

planning. Supporting these systems is key to promoting sustainable and equitable resource use and enhancing resilience of pastoralist communities.

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