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Competition or complementarity? Institutional arrangements and interactions in rangeland carbon projects

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Abstract

This study explored how rangeland carbon projects interact with and transform resource governance in pastoral landscapes. Longstanding debates on pastoralism have shaped interventions aimed at sustainable rangeland management. While some of these interventions support restrictive approaches such as sedenterisation, others recognise the role of mobility and customary governance as adaptive strategies. Recently, rangeland carbon projects have emerged as a tool to strengthen governance and provide financial incentives to improve rangeland management for climate change mitigation. However, the structure of these projects is likely to reinforce existing governance tensions and debates that characterise this ecosystem. Drawing on qualitative data from 19 pastoral communities and other stakeholders, the study analysed the institutional arrangements and actor interactions in the world's largest rangeland carbon project situated in northern Kenya. Findings show that the project operates largely through institutional layering by building on existing community rangeland governance structures rather than replacing them. The project introduces new objectives for collective rangeland management, new actors, and monitoring requirements while maintaining core elements of pastoral governance such as negotiated mobility, reciprocity, and community-based rangeland rule-setting within the project area. This suggests a degree of complementarity. However, our results also indicate that compliance with standard requirements in the project may alter existing reciprocal arrangements between project and non-project communities. These findings highlight that the effectiveness of carbon projects in supporting sustainable rangeland management is not dependent only on financial incentives from the sale of carbon credits or formalised rules but also on the project's continued alignment with the fluidity inherent in pastoral systems.

Keywords: Carbon projects, institutions, pastoralism, rangeland governance

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