Changing Livelihoods in the Drylands of East Africa: A Summary Analysis

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This brief paper on changing livelihoods in the drylands of East Africa mainly draws on a recent report, titled *Resilience and Risk in Pastoralist Areas: Recent Trends in Diversified and Alternative Livelihoods*, which includes chapters by Dawit Abebe, Peter D. Little, Hussein A. Mahmoud, Kristin Bushby, and Elizabeth Stites, and was produced by Tufts University under the USAID East Africa Resilience Learning Project (see [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00m1pz.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pa00m1pz.pdf)). The author was responsible for editing the final report, reviewing and contributing comments on different contributions to the report, and writing the report’s overview and concluding chapters. This summary paper is prepared as a background note for the upcoming “Livelihoods in Transition” Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, September 8-9, 2016, and is based largely on materials included in overview and concluding chapters, as well as other work that the author has conducted.

Introduction

Livelihood diversification among pastoralists in eastern Africa has been common for the past 50 or more years, but has been especially prominent since the regional droughts of 1979–80 and 1984. The increased complexity and prevalence of commercial livestock markets, the growth of local and regional towns, and increased incidences of drought and conflict are factors that drive and shape current livelihood diversification and alternative livelihoods, and differentiate it from earlier periods. The report highlights households and communities that are combining pastoralism with other livelihood activities or have moved out of pastoralism and are involved in an alternative livelihood. It is demonstrated in this and other studies that there is no “magic arrow” or technology for enhancing resilience in drylands. Rather, there are multiple, incremental options, including livelihood diversification, that, when adapted to local contexts and circumstances, can increase probabilities for improved livelihoods and resilience.

Different levels of risk, both short term and long term, and different endowment requirements are associated with varied livelihood options and social groups in the drylands of East Africa (for example, female/male, young/old, and better-off/poor households). In particular, women diversify into petty trading, casual waged labor, food/drink sales, and, recently, labor migration to towns where they face risks of physical insecurity and discrimination. Empirical materials also highlight several common factors that drive different patterns and options for diversification, including cumulative effects of drought-induced livestock loss, violence, loss of land and reduced land productivity, animal disease, and depletion of herds to buy food. Opportunity or “pull” factors that impact diversification include better employment and business prospects, education, security, and health. Increased urbanization and associated business developments in the larger towns attract wealthier herders who seek investments in business and occasionally in

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1 An alternative livelihood represents an extreme form of diversification and departure from pastoralism. For brevity purposes, the term diversification is used to capture partial diversification (combining pastoralism with other livelihood activities) and complete departure from pastoralism (i.e., an alternative livelihood).
real estate. In the conclusion, the report addresses policy and program opportunities for building resilience in the drylands.

**Framework for Understanding Diversification and Livelihood Transition**

Attempts have been made to conceptualize the process of diversification and livelihood transition among pastoralists and the factors that explain it. One model is based on the work of McPeak, Little, and Doss (2012) and differentiates households according to those with: (1) low cash, low cattle, called “left out” of pastoralism and trapped in lowly remunerative employment; (2) high cash, low livestock, called “moving from” a dependence on pastoralism to some alternative livelihood; (3) high livestock, low cash, called “staying with” pastoralism with minimal diversification outside of pastoralism; and (4) high livestock, high cash, called “combining” non-pastoral activities (cash) and pastoralism (ibid.: 87). A second related framework is based on Catley and Aklilu (2012) and classifies households as: (1) “moving up” and capable of earning considerable cash from livestock-based activities; (2) “stepping out” and engaging in non-pastoral activities but maintaining a degree of reliance on livestock; and (3) “moving out” and leaving pastoralism all together. The “stepping out” stage reflects pastoralist diversification where non-pastoralist activities are used to supplement the pastoral/livestock component, while the “moving out” strategy represents alternative livelihoods where individuals and families have left pastoralism. We draw on both of these frameworks, with a focus on those households in the “moving out” or “stepping out” stages (the “moving from” or “left out” phases in the McPeak, Little and Doss model) where we observe transitions in dryland livelihoods from specialized pastoralism to pastoralism combined with an activity (s), or a complete exit from pastoralism. As evidenced by the rapid growth in towns and settlements in the drylands, those “staying with” pastoralism on a full-time basis are increasingly a minority compared with the large numbers that have exited the system, often because of drought and/or conflict.

**Contemporary Patterns**

The frequency of climate and conflict-induced events accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, which diminished herds, reduced usable lands, and made pastoralist diversification even more a necessity. The collapse of the Somali state and of Ethiopia’s Derg military regime in 1991 increased the flow of destructive weapons and violence, thereby encouraging additional population movements to towns as safe havens. Rainfed agriculture as a diversification strategy also picked up momentum, both in areas where conditions were generally favorable and where they were unsuitable. Migration to towns grew as well, with a small minority of educated pastoralists seeking salaried employment with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government, and private companies.

What has changed in the past 15–20 years is the scale, range, and persistence of diversification strategies, as well as the pressures that pastoralist communities currently confront. Globalization is now very apparent in many communities, especially in the areas of trade, labor markets, and new technologies, such as mobile phones and internet. Movements to towns by pastoralists and transitions to agro-pastoralism have become more permanent than in the past, although many ex-pastoralists continue to maintain ties to the pastoral sector and invest in livestock. Along with
immigration by farmers and others from outside the drylands, this trend increased the size of towns and the number of ex-pastoralists. Each of the case studies in the Tufts report highlight significant urban growth in recent years, which create opportunities for diversification and alternative livelihoods but also social and ecological problems as households become trapped in poorly remunerative petty trading and causal labor, as well as environmentally destructive charcoal making and firewood gathering.

The cumulative effects of drought-induced livestock loss, violence, loss of land and reduced land productivity, animal disease, and depletion of herds to buy food are poverty-related “push factors” that motivate pastoralists to pursue supplemental livelihood activities. There are immediate shocks, such as drought, that impoverish herders, as well as gradual forces, such as the repeated need to market livestock to buy food or continual losses of grazing lands to alternative land uses, that over time also are important explanatory factors. Other factors, especially for women, include divorce and widowhood that force women to seek options for diversification and alternative livelihoods, which because of their poverty and powerlessness often are poorly remunerated or illegal and even dangerous (miraa [khat] trade, sex trade, and sale of alcohol).

Opportunity or “pull” factors related to towns that impact diversification include better employment and business prospects, education, security, and health. Investment in formal education by pastoralists has greatly increased during the past 15 years, although it still remains low relative to settled agricultural and urban populations. Increased urbanization and associated business developments in the larger towns are also opportunity factors that attract wealthier herders who seek investments in business and occasionally in real estate. For the wealthiest herders, diversification into urban-based businesses is a risk-mitigating strategy in the event of a drought or an animal disease outbreak. For example, it is important to remember that successful town-based businessmen in such towns as Garissa, Kenya and other dryland towns often earned their initial investment capital from pastoralism and still maintain a heavy “foot” in the sector.

It is important to identify positive (adaptive) forms of diversification that improve incomes, welfare, and resilience to shocks without damaging the environment and/or conflicting with the predominant livelihood (pastoralism). In many cases, these kinds of positive diversification activities often support and/or complement livestock production, including sustainable collection and sale of aloe, natural resins, and gum arabic; bee keeping; dairy sales and processing; and livestock-related businesses (butchereries, hides and skin processing, and retail of veterinary inputs). Salaried employment by pastoralists also can have positive effects on pastoralist livelihoods and economies through remittances for family expenditures (especially food, education, and health) and savings (Little et al. 2009). However, the lack of marketable skills, education, and a positive policy environment restrict many pastoralists and ex-pastoralists to low-paying casual work.

Negative (maladaptive) forms of pastoralist diversification are widely documented and usually are pursued out of necessity (Little 2009; Fratkin and Roth 2004). They include activities that

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2 Khat is a mild stimulant that is grown and consumed in parts of Kenya and Ethiopia.
damage the environment (charcoal making and firewood gathering) and/or undermine pastoralist livelihoods themselves, such as farming in key grazing areas and water points. Firewood gathering, for example, involves special risks to women who can be subject to violence and sexual attacks when engaged in this activity (see Garissa and Karamoja case studies in the Tuft report). Moreover, major environmental costs are associated with firewood collection and charcoal making that are especially evident around settlements and towns.

Different levels of risk are associated with various diversification options, and many of these already have been discussed. The availability of irrigation as in the case of Garissa, or adequate rainfall for arable farming as in parts of Karamoja, Uganda diminishes the risks of rainfed agriculture, although as the Garissa case study shows irrigation pumps can break and, in the long term, fields can be made unproductive due to salinization. It should be noted that only in small parts of the study areas is rainfall sufficient or irrigation available to significantly reduce farming risks.

**Program and Policy Implications**

To conclude, several development policy and program areas, have the potential to enhance resilience in the context of livelihood diversification and transition at household, community, and regional scales. These include:

- **Land tenure and land use policies**: Ambiguities over land rights in these areas allow mining companies, “natural product” merchants, and outside investors in agricultural schemes to extract valuable commodities with minimal economic benefits to communities. More secure land rights for residents and assistance to develop equitable and efficient land tenure policies, are areas where development assistance can play effective facilitating roles.

- **Urban and peri-urban planning and infrastructure in drylands**: Urbanization and sedentarization, especially in dry rangelands, have major environmental impacts on surrounding range areas and their resources (water and trees), sanitation and health, which require land use planning, protection, infrastructure, and, in some cases, environmental rehabilitation.

- **Education and skills training**: Minimal levels of education and skills training mean that pastoralists and ex-pastoralists often enter the labor market at the bottom rungs. For development practitioners, two challenges about education remain unresolved: (1) the difficulty in reconciling the need for livestock mobility with settlement-based methods of education delivery; and (2) the lack of curriculum appropriate for pastoralists (Little and McPeak 2014:12). However, these education challenges need to be met as a basic precondition for other diversification activities, and current pilot efforts in adult literacy and mobile schooling shows promise.

- **Support for women-owned enterprises, employment programs for youth**: Youth, widows and female-headed households comprise a significant majority of ex-pastoralists in towns and settlements. Vocational skill training, including in small business skills, is an area of potential support, but also facilitating low-capital start-up enterprises in trade and
services through formation of local savings and credit groups both for youth and women is an equally important area that would benefit from support.

- **Value-added activities around livestock production and trade (e.g., fodder production, meat processing, and local fattening enterprises for trade):** In East African drylands, employment and enterprises still revolve mainly around livestock production and marketing activities, and this pattern likely will continue in the future. Keeping more value in the pastoralist areas from livestock production and trade not only promotes beneficial diversification for households and communities, but also enhances regional multipliers and productive linkages between towns and the pastoral sector. Important value-added activities include fattening operations, meat processing, fodder production, milk processing and trade, and livestock transportation enterprises.

- **Natural product extraction, processing, and marketing (gums, resins, aloe, and other wild products):** Although natural product extraction likely will continue to be a supplemental and niche activity in drylands, the growth in its trade and its uses in a range of pharmaceutical, food, and other industries point to a promising future with minimal costs and increased benefits for local communities. An immediate step would be to examine legal and policy issues surrounding the activity, including any existing revenue-sharing and resource extraction laws that affect benefits to local communities. A second step might be to look at the organization of the collection, storage, and processing of these products, as well as possible technologies in the sector that could be improved or low-cost alternatives that could be developed.

- **Nutritional extension and support for settled/ex-pastoralist communities:** Serious nutritional and child health problems often are associated with town-based diversification strategies and with pastoralist migration to towns and agricultural settlements, including malaria and schistosomiasis. Without access to milk and dairy products and with increased dependence on starchy cereals, child health and nutritional problems often occur. Best practices for supporting nutrition among ex-pastoralists and those transitioning from pastoralism, in terms of diet diversity, production of leafy vegetables and sweet potatoes where possible, and other possible interventions, should be encouraged.

To conclude, pastoralists in the drylands of East Africa continue to diversify their livelihoods out of necessity and/or economic opportunity, with some transitioning out of pastoralism. It has demonstrated that all diversification strategies come with costs and risks. I have summarized those livelihood options where risks and costs are exceptionally high versus those where they are low relative to potential benefits. By differentiating between short-term benefits versus long-term risks and costs, the report has shown that some survival-type livelihood options, such as charcoal making or cultivation of grazing zones, may yield short-term benefits but have long-term environmental and economic costs that make communities less resilient to shocks. Finally, the paper has shown that there is no single “magic arrow” or technology for enhancing resilience in drylands, but there are multiple, incremental options, including livelihood diversification, which, when adapted to local contexts and circumstances, can increase probabilities for improved livelihoods and resilience.
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