

SESSION 3 CASE STUDY 3

Challenging dominant narratives on development approaches in the drylands

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ABSTRACT



The drylands of the horn of Africa, home to millions of mainly pastoralist communities, has remained on the margins of development; it has unacceptably low levels of development indicators and high poverty levels. This partly resulted from development narratives, which disregarded the potentials of the drylands, designating it an area not worthy of investment. Additionally, pastoral production system, the main livelihood system, was not recognised as viable but rather was branded as environmentally destructive and inherently vulnerable to the impacts of the changing climate. Consequently, the main theme of development in the region centered on diversification out of pastoralism. Recently, however, there is shift in the narrative with increased recognition of the pastoral production system as the most viable livelihood in the drylands and local communities' knowledge appreciated in the development sphere. There is also recognition that communities are not just passive victims of the impacts of the changing climate but are active first-line responders, where local actors working in networks make significant contribution to averting disasters. In this regard, the Center for Research and Development in Drylands (CRDD) with funding from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) is implementing a research project, 'Exploring local constructs of "Resilience" in the face of chronic uncertainty in the Drylands'. It aims to create a deeper understanding of the role of local actors applying 'high reliability management' in order to influence the framing and practice of resilience in development projects. The expected outcome will be grounded, locally relevant perspectives on the opportunities for resilience building and climate adaptation.

The Centre for Research and Development in Drylands (CRDD) in Marsabit, northern Kenya, is a non-profit organisation initiated by scientists from the region. Our organisation specialises in people-centred research and development, and its vision is to be a centre of excellence for research, capacity development and advocacy that serves communities in the drylands. I will talk briefly about how narratives have shaped development in the drylands, and also reflect on what we are doing to contribute towards challenging this dominant narrative.



To start with, I provide a brief context, in terms of the livelihood system in the region and this development narrative that has influenced how projects are conceptualised and implemented in the region.

The communities in the drylands of the Horn of Africa are pastoralists, and they produce various livestock species on naturally occurring pastures, and this remains their main livelihood system. Livestock are also kept for various other uses which are social and cultural requirements. The narrative about this area does not recognise this important production system

as a viable system, and the land upon which these pastoralists produce is often viewed as empty lands that are not being used and are ready for conversion. This results in rampant land losses.

This system also contributes quite significantly to the national and global economies, but because of how it is perceived it remains unappreciated, and therefore is not seen as worthy to invest in. Therefore it has been kept to the periphery by mainstream development policies, both at national and at regional levels.

Even in the current climate debate, with raging climate impacts, the production system is viewed as inherently vulnerable; that it needs to be saved. Hence, the focus of development is not mainly in terms of how to support this production system, but rather to see how it can be replaced by something else. This results in disconnects between how pastoralists perceive what they do, and how external entities perceive what pastoralists do.

For example, external interventions push pastoralists towards sedentarisation – having people settled – but the communities themselves use mobility (see Figure 1). They need to move because that is what the environment demands and that is how they produce. Another example is that external initiatives try to control the variability that is seen in the system and the environment, but pastoralists practise by embracing the variability and using it to produce.

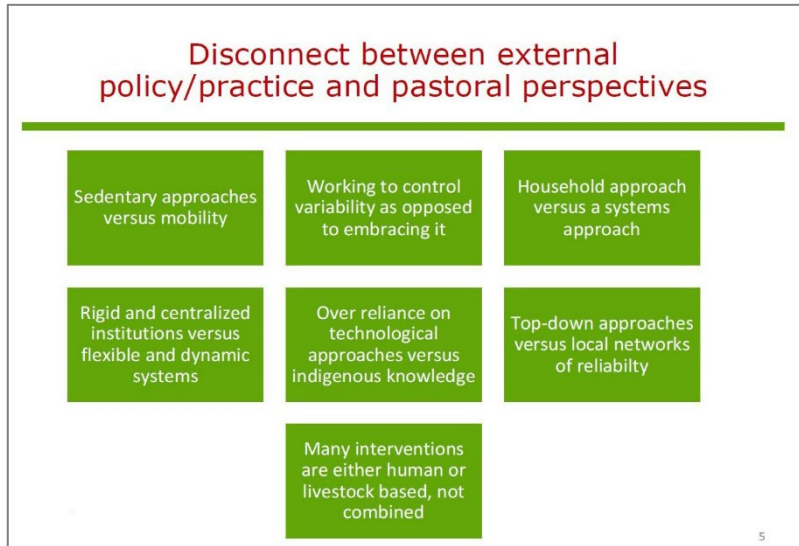


Figure 1. Influence of the dominant development narrative in drylands

- Pastoralism seen as vulnerable, requiring recurrent relief and diversification.
- Overlooks the reality and the potential of the drylands.
- Resulted in failed development interventions – more vulnerable communities.

Additionally, external entities promote rigid and centralised institutions, while pastoralist communities rely on flexible and dynamic systems (see Figure 1). As a result of these contradictions in how they are perceived, we see numerous failed development projects in this region, and the communities remain highly vulnerable to the crises that face them. Therefore, there is need to rethink our intervention.

- Pastoralists - long-established repertoire of ways of responding to crises and shocks
- Not patterns of passive ‘coping’ but an active process of deliberate, well-planned response and adaptation
- Existence of High reliability management by pastoralists and their networks is skilled and usually avert disasters – but not recognized
- Akin to those managing critical infrastructure – there are ‘high-reliability professionals’ among the pastoralists

Figure 2. Rethinking interventions in the drylands.

It is important to acknowledge that despite this dominant narrative, there are changes in perceptions, and there is acknowledgement of how pastoralism has long-established repertoires of ways of responding to crises and shocks (Figure 2). Furthermore, there is recognition that these responses by local people are not passive

coping responses but an active process of deliberate, well-planned, adaptive responses. Among the pastoralist communities, there are individuals, groups, institutions acting in networks that undertake actions that usually avert disasters. These people are equivalent to what we call 'high reliability professionals', which needs to be recognised. In this system, the higher level professional is someone similar to those who manage critical infrastructure: for example, complex supply of electricity, where, of course, there are numerous actors in the background to ensure that the supply of electricity is not interrupted.



Taking this into consideration, and towards contributing towards challenging this dominant narrative, our centre, in partnership with ACIAR, is implementing a four-year research project, called 'Exploring Local Constructs of Resilience in the Face of Chronic Uncertainty in the Drylands' (photo at left). This was conceived after observing that although the drylands in the Horn of Africa has received interventions aimed at building resilience, particularly with the frequent droughts, there have been minimal or no commensurate results in people being resilient to drought.

This project looks into identifying and exploring emerging alternative narratives towards resilience and climate adaptation in drought-affected areas in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. It aims to gather evidence of an alternative approach, embracing variability in the region and

acknowledging the uncertainty that is there, rather than trying to manage or control these factors. Secondly, the project prioritises understanding of existing local practices and governance processes that exist outside external interventions.

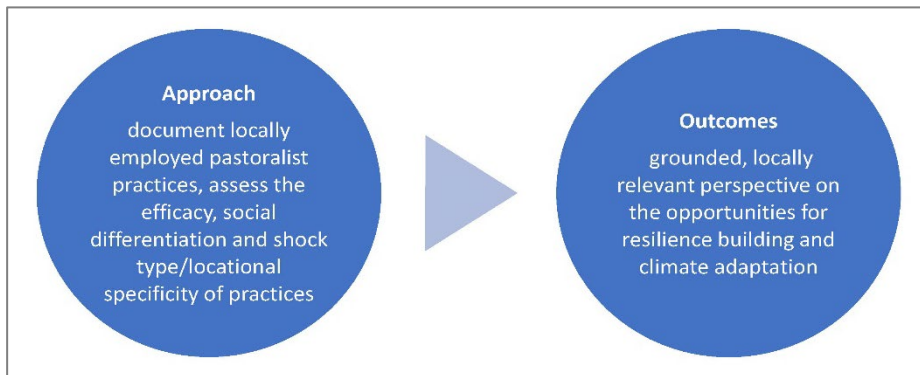


Figure 3. Our research approach: 'Resilience from Below'.

Our project approach is to document locally employed pastoralist practices (Figure 3), looking at the actors within the system who respond to different crises, the actions they undertake, and the networks in which they act. The project additionally assesses efficacy of the actions undertaken, how the actions are socially differentiated by differences of types and by specific localities. Further, it analyses how the actions and the networks of local actors correspond with the external interventions by governments and development partners. We will also look at how resilience is framed, and develop interventions. The expected outcome from this is a grounded, locally relevant perspective on opportunities for resilience building and climate adaptation, possibly proposing a new way of looking at resilience in the drylands.

Policy, of course, is central in determining the directions of development interventions; resilience building being one of them. So, our project is looking into policy disconnects that have affected how development interventions have been conceived, and how resilience from the perspective of the pastoralist can be infused into policy landscapes (Figure 4). Also, through continuous and collaborative efforts the project will look at how integration of pastoralists’ resources, networks and assets can be deployed in resilience-building efforts. The project also plans to inform policies at county, national and regional levels, and also engage international initiatives: for example, the International Year for Rangelands and Pastoralism (IYRP), which is coming up.



Figure 4. Potential policy direction.

This project is one year old and we have recently started implementation.

In conclusion, definitely it is not easy to reverse the influence that has been created by these dominant narratives, and therefore it requires concerted effort – not short-term but rather long-term. Also, knowing our experiences and looking at the theme of this conference that looks at issues around partnerships, consultation and collaboration for co-designing and delivering high quality agricultural research, I see resonance with what we are doing. Also, as previous speakers have said, valuing communities – and particularly community knowledge – is central in what we are doing, in order to achieve a local on-ground outcome. And having locally embedded research institutions that understand the issues better, is really important.



We also appreciate the partnership that we have with ACIAR and look forward to achieving this locally grounded outcome. And we are pleased that in our work we also managed to host a student from the Crawford Fund in our project here who did a lot of our research work with us.

We are so pleased to be in this forum and engage in what it takes to work with local Indigenous communities to better their lives and their livelihoods.

Hussein Tadicha Wario has a Bachelor of Science degree from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, an MSc in Natural Resource Management and Sustainable Agriculture from the Norwegian University of Life Sciences and a PhD in Agricultural Sciences from the University of Kassel (Germany). He is currently Executive Director of the Centre for Research and Development in Drylands (CRDD), a non-profit research and development organisation created by scientists originating from northern Kenya and trained in trans-disciplinary and social-ecological research. His main areas of research interest are in the socio-ecological systems in the drylands of Africa. He currently leads implementation of a number of ongoing research projects that include enhancing women’s agency in navigating changing food environments to improve child nutrition in African drylands, local constructs of resilience in the phase of chronic uncertainty, and increasing efficiency in rangeland-based livestock value chains through machine learning and digital technologies.