

Rural Development and Marginalisation: The Drylands of Northern Kenya

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I. Back-Drop

Kenya's arid and semi-arid regions are characterized by sparse vegetation and low rainfall, receiving annual average amounts of between 500mm and 800mm. Covering 82% of Kenya's entire territory, it also contains 50% of Kenya's total livestock herd. The land is communally owned by the pastoralists groups inhabiting these areas, the major ones being the Somali, Samburu, Rendille, Boran and Turkana. Livestock is individually owned and economic life revolves around the household unit which usually consists of an extended family organized on kinship basis. The main drainage features are the Tana, Uaso Nyiro, Turkwell and Dawa rivers. The economy is characterized by the pastoral mode of production where different types of livestock such as camel, cattle, sheep and goats are raised for subsistence and increasingly, commercial purposes. The stock is moved within a natural ecological region that has fairly well-set boundaries. Traditional patterns of land use are adhered to following cyclical variations in rainfall (Campbell & Migot-Adholla, 1981:1).

The history of marginalization in Northern Kenya can be traced back to the colonial era when Britain established a colonial protectorate in the East African country at the turn of the nineteenth century. Nominally, their rule covered a vast stretch of land in northern Kenya that they called the Northern Frontier District (NFD). Due to its remoteness, aridity and resistance by the Somali inhabitants, the British colonial government largely ignored the area in terms of development.

They occupied themselves with policing the region and establishing rudimentary administrative structures. For the duration of their rule, the area remained underdeveloped (Turton, 1972:119–143).

The problem was compounded by the insistence of the Somalis to be a distinct nation and their right to self-determination, a policy they pursued peacefully in pre-independent Kenya and forcibly after independence in 1963. The first decade of Kenya's independence was marked by government efforts to suppress the guerilla warfare that was being carried out by Somali secessionists in the NFD. By 1970, the secessionist movement was defeated militarily and, except for isolated and ill-equipped bands roaming the countryside, the guerilla war had come to an end. Despite this, the NFD remained relatively underdeveloped with the independent state of Kenya pursuing policies that were reminiscent of colonial times. The region remained closed from the rest of the country and, arbitrary and discriminatory laws were often applied (Markakis, 1987:185).

II. The Role of the State

Why does the state intervene? In most cases in the developing world the rationale for state intervention stems from the need to “modernize” indigenous modes of production with a view to increasing efficiency and productivity. Furthermore, and ideologically, whether in statist or capitalist inspired countries, the idea is to transform the peasant from a subsistence based pre-capitalist mode of production to one that will ensure a surplus. The underlying philosophy is that what is “traditional” is antiquated, inefficient and incompatible with modern life. Therefore, since the people are not willing to change, thus presenting obstacles to development, the state has to be the major actor in bringing about change (Gefu, 1992:35).

The state has invariably blamed the underdevelopment of northern Kenya on the scarcity of resources, aridity, remoteness, local resistance and insecurity. The identification of these problems has been accepted by the state as the most rational and realistic explanation for the marginalization of northern Kenya. There is no denying that these are important factors in explaining and propagating state policies vis-à-vis the underdevelopment of this region or its disparities with other regions in Kenya.

However, it is sometimes ignored that the state, having monopoly over a country's resources and their redistribution can, and often

does, use this power to restrict or stem undesirable tendencies manifested by a segment of the population. This forms the political aspect in the study of regional development or disparities in a heterogeneous state like Kenya. It is arguable that the past history of the NFD, the desire for self-determination and secession, has shaped to a significant degree subsequent state policy with regard to development or non-development of this area. As a response to earlier threats on state sovereignty and territory, it is conceivable that the Kenyan state has set up policies and institutions that inhibit development of this area. State ambivalence may not be spelled in black and white, but it is tacit and manifests itself in the administration of the region, now known as the North-Eastern Province of Kenya, and the policies pursued by the state with respect to development issues in the area (Markakis, 2011:153).

The overwhelming presence of the state in pre and post-colonial Africa rendered the rural and urban masses virtually powerless and at the mercy of state policies that hardly incorporated their views. A core of elitist state planners set the agenda for development to tailor their peripheral economies to the core capitalist economies. Thus, the rural folk became marginalized and alienated from their governments. But rather than become pliant victims of a much more organized institution such as the state, the rural communities exhibited their feelings through the subtle presence of social struggle (Taylor & Mackenzie, 1992:1).

In areas where the state was able to suppress organised communal resistance, there emerged passive forms of that gave voice to the marginalized rural poor. Thus, what the state came to term as obstacles to development viz apathy and the presence of obdurate and antiquated customs “could easily be translated by the rural folk as defense mechanisms against the overwhelming presence of the state.” Popular resistance to the violence meted out by the postcolonial Kenyan state against the pastoralists manifested itself as banditry, cattle rustling and disorder. This form of rural violence was often a response to state or ruling class violence (Crummey, 1986:1). These manifestations of violence against the central state have persisted for much of the post-colonial history of Northern Kenya.

State policies that encourage the settlement of pastoralists without offering them a viable alternative contribute to the increasing impoverishment of these inhabitants of the dry lands. Land use practices engaged in or encouraged by the state, such as irrigation, have only served to alienate pastoralists from their prime grazing lands. Most of

the irrigation schemes that have been set up in the dry lands of Kenya do not benefit the indigenous inhabitants as migrant farmers are settled in these schemes. Large tracts of land have also been set-aside as game parks and national reserves with the attendant restrictions on pastoralist use of these lands.

Encouraging crop production in marginal areas has only served to aggravate land degradation in already fragile environments. At the same time, there has been a significant neglect of the livestock sector in dry lands, especially camel pastoralism, as the state pursues agricultural policies designed to increase crop production in an effort to promote local self-sufficiency. The problem with dry lands in Kenya, therefore is one that can easily be traced to state planners and bureaucrats who design policies from their insulated positions at the center while disregarding traditional practices of dry land management (Hogg, 1987: 47).

III. Environmental Desiccation

The economic problems of sub-Saharan African countries have been compounded by the rapid degradation of their environment. Problems like soil erosion, deforestation and desertification have had a great impact on land use and agricultural production, often leading to adverse and seemingly irreversible conditions. Environmental degradation has had its greatest impact on the inhabitants of these threatened lands i.e., the rural poor. Their conditions of life have plunged below the poverty line and their survival is often precarious (Hope, 2008:2).

The stress on land resources has been blamed on a variety of factors like excessive grazing, competition for increasingly scarce land, cutting of trees for fuel wood and general misuse of land resources. These factors all stem from the human pressure on renewable resources in the environment (Southgate and Disinger, 1985:1). Planners have been quick to apportion blame for the ecological disasters to the perceived agricultural malpractices of the rural poor.

Undoubtedly, the rural poor have played some role in the environmental mess we find ourselves in today. However, in many instances, the state and its planners have been the major cause of environmental disaster in arid lands, and the rural peasantry has merely acted in response to state policies that are in themselves adverse to traditional agricultural practices and sustainability of the environment. These pol-

icies have evoked responses from the rural poor that have been interpreted as being threatening to the ecology. This situation not only applies in Northern Kenya, but also in the Sahelian states of Africa, where the human and physical condition of the dry lands is very similar.

One of the major areas of concern has been the rapid rate of desertification in many African countries. The rate of forest and woodland clearing has been alarming. It has been estimated that the forest areas in developing countries are being cleared at the rate of 17 million hectares a year (Sitarz, 1994). The loss in vegetation cover results in accelerated soil erosion and its attendant problems. There is no doubt that desertification is taking place at an accelerated rate. The impact of this rapidly degrading rural environment in many sub-Saharan African countries has been compounded by periodic bouts of drought. The drought cycles of the 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s are significant in this respect. They have led to a greater stress on the land and have accelerated the disruptive effects of human activity in fragile ecosystems. The resultant degradation has led to soil erosion, absence of firewood for energy and the persistent problem of creeping deserts.

IV. Development Paradigms and the Roots of Marginalization

The approach of development from below is usually criticized as neo-populist and utopian (Taylor & Mackenzie, 1992:28). Local communities are seen to be diverse in composition and interests. Empowering the people means a transfer of power from the state. The presence of predatory states in Africa clearly showed the contradictions of maintaining state power and empowering the people at the same time. The response of the state in Kenya, and indeed in much of Africa, has been to place the blame on the pastoralists' patterns of land use in marginal areas. Overgrazing and overstocking of herds on marginal areas have been cited as major culprits. (Hogg, 1987: 47) The answer to land degradation in dry lands then obviously becomes the management and improvement of these pastoralist practices, with a view to eliminating or substituting harmful use of the land.

The state in Kenya therefore has instituted measures which include rural afforestation schemes, soil conservation measures, animal grazing restrictions and the settling of pastoralists. Some of the activities are laudable in their intent, but they do not often achieve results. Range development practices assume that technology and new range

practices will improve traditional pastoralism. As Morris notes in his study of the Maasai Range Development Project initiated by USAID, this premise is fundamentally wrong (Morris, 1981:99–113). His study shows that the range management project among the Maasai failed after ten years in operation and had to be abandoned. It illustrated the chasm between official project and state policy and the actual situation on the ground. It highlights the loss of prime grazing lands by pastoralists to farmers. The study concludes that the pastoral problem is essentially a systems problem (Morris, *ibid.*:12). The state also assumes that the pastoralists cannot take care of their own rangelands, a common notion stemming from the “tragedy of the commons” concept (Hardin, 1968:1244). However, pastoralists do behave in an ecologically sound manner and adhere to age old principles of land management and use. State interference increasingly limits their ability to continue practicing ecologically sound land management policies (Hogg, *ibid.*:47–58). The government emphasizes destocking as a means of curbing overgrazing and soil erosion. This is a resort to treating symptoms instead of preventing the causes.

While to the centrist state it is the most inimical feature of pastoralism, the most significant strategy, from the viewpoint of pastoral life, is mobility (Toure, 1988:34). The pastoralist moves his herd of livestock from one designated area to another according to the dictates of the weather. In his movement, the pastoralist seeks to maximize the utility of his scarce resources i.e., water and pasture. In order to do this, he must be equipped with a keen knowledge of his environment. Thus, it is a mistake to say that pastoralist move from one area to another haphazardly. It implies that the pastoralist is not fully aware of his environment. As is evident in many studies, the movement of pastoralist is closely regulated and their range of territory remains defined, albeit that a certain measure of fluidity is allowed to take into account the unpredictability of the weather. At any local level, rangelands are identified and categorized as dry or wet weather pastures and movement is organized according to seasons. Pastoralists have evolved patterns of migrations to coincide with dry and wet season patterns. These movements take place within well-defined ecological boundaries that contain a diversity of vegetation and topography (Pratt & Gwynne, 1977). The greatest asset a pastoralist has is his ability to move.

Besides environmental consequences, pastoralists also move as a response to social or cultural factors such as the attendance of ceremonial rituals, adverse political conditions and war. Unfortunately,

the last two reasons are becoming more and more the reasons why pastoralists move. The implications of conflict for the pastoralist are particularly grim, especially when coupled with adverse environmental conditions like drought. Displacement of pastoralist peoples often assumes tragic proportions under such conditions.

The problem with dry land management practices in Kenya is not the pastoralists inhabiting them but the state planners in the urban cities who dish out ill-advised prescriptions. This is in line with the diffusion model that the state adheres to as a matter of ideology and practice (Gefu, 1992, *ibid.*). In order to study the problem of rural development in Northern Kenya, it is necessary to examine the important and often conflicting roles played by the two major actors i.e., the state and the people at the grassroots. From one perspective, it is necessary to examine the policies of the state, the underlying issues and assumptions that dictate or shape these policies. From the other perspective, it is necessary to examine the socio-cultural, economic and ecological imperatives that provide the basic impetus and motivation of the pastoralists and is often a critical determinant in gauging their reactions to the state or outside players in their life.

In the background, shadowing these two players is perhaps the third major player: the environment. Both the pastoralist's way of life and the government policies are designed to mitigate the effects of an otherwise harsh climate. The loss of power and ability to cope with the harsh environment has made pastoralists even more susceptible to adverse weather and drought. This loss of power can be traced to inappropriate outside intervention. The affected pastoralists are mired in poverty with its attendant problems of poor health, illiteracy, voicelessness, insecurity, humiliation and the lack of basic infrastructure (Narayan et al. 2000: 4–5). Attendant to this is the loss of traditional resource bases and a decline in traditional survival strategies. Thus a study of the ecology of the pastoralists and their reactions to it is imperative in order to situate the problem of rural development in marginal lands in its proper context (Brokensha, Horowitz and Scudder, 1977).

It is also important to highlight who determines the discourse of development in these arid lands, especially in, light of some of the current debate on rural participation, and who the active or passive players are. The emphasis on participation may degenerate into building institutions that have more form than substance. Closely tied to this is the transfer of inappropriate technology to the rural area that

often results in further degradation of the environment that leads to more serious and longer-term implications. All in all, the picture that emerges is one of outside players determining the fate and future of areas they poorly understand. The dilemma of intervention is that it can be positive and negative, depending on whether the donor dictates to the recipients or whether it's a mutually agreed approach.

V. Deconstructing the Path of Development

In order to have a more sustainable approach to developing marginal lands, it is necessary to avoid the pitfalls of previous policies and plans. It is also necessary to incorporate alternatives based on the experience of the people involved. It is imperative to re-examine these policies, their impacts on the pastoralists and suggest alternative approaches to rural development in arid lands.

In analyzing policies, it is important to note that policy goals and their interpretation are often accompanied by value judgments. Thus, the goals outlined on paper may reach the grassroots in distorted fashion. This distorted version is crucial because it is the basis of intervention on the ground, and thus far outweighs the original blueprint. It is difficult to pin down such distorted policy versions, but perhaps the best indicators are gleaned from the actual running of development projects and the reaction from the people directly affected by them.

The roots of marginalization in Northern Kenya run deep if viewed from both a historical and ecological perspective. There have been fundamental weaknesses in the paradigms that have been the model for undertaking development in the pastoral lands of northern Kenya. A critical evaluation of these paradigms should be the basis for deconstructing long-held myths about pastoralists who have not only shouldered the burdens of failed interventions, but also the blame. The lack of political will on the part of the state to mitigate its neglect of this area is almost concomitant with the willingness to blame the victims. State policies per se, as outlined in government documents, do not tell the whole story.

Initially, the Kenyan state approached development from a neo-classical point of view, with emphasis on the center as opposed to the peripheries. Government policy makers felt that the growth of the center would automatically lead to a spatial diffusion of growth to the peripheries (Stohr & Taylor 1981). Government's refusal to deal with internal problems like nationalism among ethnic groups within the ter-

ritory, have led to a blanket treatment of regional differences, thereby exacerbate instead of reducing the problem (Seers, 1983).

Experience has shown that this centrist ideology not a wholly accurate vision. The experience in much of colonial and post-colonial Africa has been a strong centralized state. This resulted in a centralizing of development planning that would later be criticized as remote and inaccessible to the majority of the rural poor. Strong centralized governments emerged in post-independence Africa, usually dominated by a single party. Due to the strong pull of centralization, the last vestiges of rural power that remained in the local or district councils were removed and governments stepped in to take over the provision of social services and infrastructure. Under this commandist approach, Kenya achieved a high rate of economic growth with an annual average real growth rate of seven percent (Godfrey, 1986). The government had placed stress on and encouraged the growth of the productive sectors in the country. Thus, areas growing prime commodity 'crops like coffee and tea witnessed rapid growth while the rest of the country lagged behind. There emerged widening regional disparities in the country despite the fact that there was a high rate of economic growth (Nyongo, 1987).

The centralist approach has also been reproached for concentrating on economic goals at the expense of other equally important social needs. Regional and income inequalities emerged in countries pursuing a purely centralized form of development planning. The trickle-down effect never materialized and large segments of the rural population continued to live in poverty. Even the shift from this paradigm in the early 1990s to one that emphasized development from below and the current district based devolution shift came too late and has had little impact on the life of pastoralists in Northern Kenya. Consequently, there has been no substantial effect on the development of the dry lands of Northern Kenya to date.

The path of "development" that the government has followed include the settling of pastoralists in towns and villages, ostensibly to provide them with the necessary government services such as health and education, as well as instilling in them a sense of "nationhood." Sedentary agricultural practices are also encouraged as a way of increasing food production, combating desertification, and improving the standard of living among the inhabitants of these dry lands. The ultimate goal is to make them "self-sufficient," the assumption of course being that pastoralism promotes dependency on the state. The

irony is that these misguided policies have made the once self-sufficient pastoralists even more dependent on the state, as the widespread and continuous use of famine relief aptly illustrates (Hogg, 1983:64–168).

These policies, however, ignore the basic fact that rotational pastoralism has evolved as the best possible response to the adverse ecological conditions that prevail in the dry lands, and that, to a large extent, the mobility of pastoralists is motivated by sound ecological considerations that permit the regeneration of denuded lands and optimal use of prime grazing lands (Dahl & Hjort, 1979). Efforts to develop Kenya's dry lands and combat environmental degradation address themselves to the symptoms rather than the causes. A radical shift is needed in government policies in order to reverse environmental degradation and promote sound use of the dry lands. The state has to recognize the values of nomadic pastoralism by adopting policies that foster and improve this indigenous system of dry land management, instead of imposing alien and pre-packaged models that produce more harm than good.

Moreover, the state must encourage the participation of people in the development processes affecting them. Advocates of development from below emphasize these points: self-reliance among the rural populace and the use of appropriate technology at the grassroots level and to define a new strategy whose objective is "no longer economic growth but social development, with focus on specific human needs in congruence with the ecological constraints. In such a context, planning for rural development must become decentralized, participatory and deeply immersed in the particulars of local settings. Here, qualitative judgments, as much as quantitative techniques, must be creatively and transactively combined (Friedman & Douglas, 1978:163–192).

Despite decades of experimentation with various development approaches, the problems of poverty and decline in economic well-being persist. The rural poor are becoming more marginalized and powerless to change their adverse conditions. The path of "development" that the state has followed include the settling of pastoralists in towns and villages, ostensibly to provide them with the necessary government services such as health and education, as well as instilling in them a sense of "nationhood." Sedentary agricultural practices are 'also encouraged as a way of increasing food production, combatting desertification, and improving the standard of living among the inhabitants of these dry lands. The ultimate goal is to make them "self-suf-

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