

Livelihood diversification and enhanced food security through agro-pastoralism: Socio-cultural and other challenges among Maasai pastoralists of Narok North district of Kenya

Nkurumwa, A.O.¹, Mwangi, J.G.¹ & Kathuri, N.J.¹

¹Egerton University, P.O. Box 536, Egerton, Kenya

Corresponding author: aonkurumwa@yahoo.com, aoywaya@egerton.ac.ke

Abstract

The Maasai of Narok North District Kenya have started adopting agro-pastoralism as a livelihood diversification strategy. This study sought to determine the socio-cultural challenges faced in agro-pastoralism and the relationships between these challenges and level of agro-pastoralism. The dependent variable was level of agro-pastoralism, while the independent variables were attitude towards pastoralism, attitude towards crop cultivation, land ownership system and contact with agricultural extension. No statistically significant relationships were found between the variables. Socio-cultural challenges affected only 31% of respondents, while all respondents experienced economic, technical and climate change challenges. The study concluded that socio-cultural challenges did not present major obstacles to agro-pastoralism and recommended that development partners should help the Maasai to address the general challenges identified.

Key words: Maasai, livelihood diversification, agro-pastoralism, socio-cultural challenges

Résumé

Les Massaï de Narok dans le district Nord du Kenya ont commencé à adopter l'agro-pastoralisme en tant que stratégie de diversification des moyens de subsistance. Cette étude visait à déterminer les enjeux socio-culturels rencontrés dans l'agro-pastoralisme et les relations entre ces défis et le niveau de l'agro-pastoralisme. La variable dépendante était le niveau de l'agro-pastoralisme, tandis que les variables indépendantes ont été l'attitude envers le pastoralisme, l'attitude envers les cultures, le système de propriété foncière et le contact avec la vulgarisation agricole. Aucune relation statistiquement significative n'a été observée entre les variables. Les défis socio-culturels ont affecté seulement 31% des répondants, alors que tous les répondants ont connu les défis du changement climatique, économique et technique. L'étude a conclu que les défis socio-culturels ne présentaient pas d'obstacles majeurs à l'agro-pastoralisme et a recommandé que les partenaires de

développement devraient aider les Maasai pour relever les défis généraux identifiés.

Mots clés: Massaï, diversification des moyens de subsistance, agro-pastoralisme, défis socio-culturels

Background

Pastoralism serves as the bedrock of livelihoods and culture in the arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs), which constitute most of the land mass in East Africa (ILRI, 2006). The Maasai, who are found in both Kenya and Tanzania, are the largest and most widely known pastoralist group in the region. They have traditionally lived as pure pastoralists, with their culture and livelihoods being centred on livestock. Pastoralism however, is currently faced with a lot of pressures, which are threatening the pastoral livelihoods and subjecting many to increasing poverty and food insecurity. Many pastoralists are therefore being forced to look beyond pastoralism for their continued survival (OXFAM, 2008). An increasing number of the Maasai are engaging in agro-pastoralism, as one of the means of coping with their adverse conditions and improving food security. This livelihood diversification strategy however, is not without challenges.

Given the pastoralist background of the Maasai, there are challenges associated with their adoption of agro-pastoralism, which if clearly highlighted and dealt with, could help them to engage in agro-pastoralism more effectively and gain greater improvements in food security and general livelihoods. The aim of this study was to determine the socio-cultural challenges the Maasai of Narok North face as they adopt agro-pastoralism as a livelihood diversification strategy, and also determine the relationships between these socio-cultural challenges and the level of agro-pastoralism being practiced. Five hypotheses were investigated in the study. The dependent variable was the level of agro-pastoralism, which was measured as the ratio of income from crop cultivation to income from livestock cultivation. Four independent variables were investigated, namely; attitude towards pastoralism, attitude towards crop cultivation, land ownership system and contact with the agricultural extension service.

Literature Summary

As is characteristic of pastoralists worldwide, the Maasai have traditionally had a close relationship with their animals, and based their identity on the close association with their livestock, that formed a key component of their social and spiritual life (League for Pastoral Peoples, 2009). They traditionally associated

livestock with wealth and regarded those without livestock as being poor and subsequently look down on them. Pastoralism however, is facing increasing pressures. These include; the effects of climate change, increasing population pressure, decreased pastureland and increasing sedentarisation. Pastoralists are increasingly settling, both in response to 'pushes' away from the pastoral economies, represented by the pressures on pastoralism, and to 'pulls' of urban or agricultural life (Fratkin *et al.*, 2005).

According to Bonfiglioli (2003) there are advantages and challenges associated with agro-pastoralism. It offers a refuge and a survival choice during times of drought by ensuring that pastoralists have food reserves to see them through periods of drought. It also widens the sources of income and contributes to risk reduction. One challenge is that crop cultivation among pastoralists introduces in each system new constraints and a new way of life. The adoption of agro-pastoralism by the Maasai therefore, involves not just changes in economic activities, but also adjustments in related non-material social and cultural aspects of their lives. According to William F. Ogburn's Theory of Cultural Lag, non-material aspects of culture are more difficult to change than material aspects, and may therefore present greater challenges in the adoption of agro-pastoralism by the Maasai.

Study Description

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey research design and was conducted in three divisions of Narok North District, located in the southern parts of the Rift Valley Province of Kenya, between August 2006 and June 2007. The sample size consisted of 240 household heads, who were selected through a combination of multistage cluster sampling and simple random sampling. Of these, 153 were male while 87 were female. Data were collected through interviews. For purposes of triangulation, data were also collected from agricultural extension officers and key informants. The data were analysed using SPSS.

Research Application

The Maasai in Narok North District had a positive attitude towards crop cultivation and, although they still value livestock, they preferred agro-pastoralism to pure pastoralism. The scores for attitude towards pure pastoralism were notably lower than the scores for attitude towards crop cultivation. No statistically significant relationships were found between any of the four independent variables (i.e., attitude towards pastoralism, attitude towards crop cultivation, system of land ownership and contact with the agricultural extension services). Only 31% of the

respondents reported experiencing social and/or cultural challenges. These included communal land ownership, communal living, negative attitude towards crop cultivation by other community members and gender bias against women. However, other challenges of economic/technical/environmental nature were reported to affect all the respondents. The challenges reported included adverse weather conditions, lack of capital and/or credit, marketing problems, poor infrastructure and inadequate technical information on crop cultivation.

Most of the Maasai agro-pastoralists of Narok North District have largely succeeded in adjusting the social and cultural aspects of their lives to agro-pastoralism, and these aspects appeared not to present significant challenges to them. The most pressing challenges were economic, technical and environmental in nature. These challenges can form intervention points for development partners to help the Maasai be more effective in agro-pastoralism.

There is need to discard the stereotype about the Maasai not being able to effectively engage in crop cultivation due to their strong pastoralist background. Given the right support, they can fully exploit the benefits of agro-pastoralism and contribute significantly to food security in their community and even beyond.

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