



Recommonisation secures pastoralist production, livelihoods and ecosystem integrity in Olgos, Kenya

A project initiated by the Pastoralist Development Network of Kenya investigated and documented the community initiative in the Olgos area of Narok county to reverse the perilous effects of the fragmentation of Maasai rangelands and fencing off of individual parcels. It was essentially a reflection on the functional experiential learning of the Olgos community and their action about 20 years ago that helped to secure their livelihood and production systems, restore ecological

health and biodiversity, and reduce conflicts in the area. The objective was to understand the impacts that externally driven policy actions had on pastoral land ownership and management practises; the relationship between people, livestock, ecosystems and biodiversity; and the interactions between pastoralism, wildlife and environment. The project lasted from November 2017 to January 2018. This case study is the result of that project.

1. Background on the Maasai in Olgos

Nestled between the northern highlands and southern lowlands of Mau Division in Narok County, Kenya, is the Olgos. The area is characterised by savannah, valleys, plains and hills and is home to about 500 people, mainly the Maasai, comprising 18 families owning 10,000 hectares of land registered under the Olgos Community.

Olgos has historically been recognised as the interface between the dry season and wet season grazing ecosystems that have ensured the existence of an extraordinary number and diversity of animal and plant species across Maasai lands in both Kenya and Tanzania. The Olgos landscape is characterised by an array of such plant species as oloirien (*Olea europaea* ssp. *Africana*), olkiloriti (*Acacia nilotica*), oleleshua (*Tarchonanthus camphoratus*) and olmisigiyoioi (*Rhus natalensis*), and perennial grass species which are most suitable for milk production. Among the common



wildlife species are: lions, giraffes, leopards, buffaloes, elephants, antelopes, wildebeests and birds.

Olgos represents the diverse ecosystems of Kenya's South Rift that provide the natural resources and ecological substructure that underpin the complex interactions among wild fauna and flora, and livestock and people, thereby maintaining a delicate balance between these and their physical environment. This landscape also provides numerous other ecosystem services that are essential for the sustainable economic growth and social development in not only Narok County, but Kenya in general.

Maasai pastoralism

Maasai pastoralism encompasses livestock keeping, grazing, mobility and dependence on natural resources for people and livestock. It is a way of life and households manage land, labour and capital. Being a pastoralist is a demanding occupation, requiring the ability to withstand physical hardships, walk long distances, enter strange territories with out fear and work as a team with large numbers of people and livestock. The keeping of livestock acts as an intermediary between man and his natural environment. Livestock is the source of milk, meat, fat and blood for human consumption, and provides an indirect source of income through the sale or barter of animals and their produce including wool, hides and skins, manure, hooves and horns. Pure nomadism is a system where the whole household moves long distances during the year, often returning to the same general area in the dry season. Transhumance nomadism is a system where men move a large part of the herd and leave behind women, children and the elderly with a small herd to provide for their daily needs, and when the

situation improves, the large herds return back to the settlement. Transhumance pastoralism was introduced with colonisation and is currently being practised among the Maasai of Kenya especially in Narok County where there are highlands for dry season grazing and lowlands for rainy season grazing.

Gender roles

There is a clear division of labour on gender basis. Men are responsible for herding the livestock, scouting, defence, making rulings over access to land and other resources, and conducting dispute resolutions and negotiations with neighbouring communities and disputing parties. Women are in charge of the family's food supply and household affairs. They are responsible for milking, processing, collecting domestic water, collecting firewood, cooking, making utensils, making leather, beadwork, and the building and repairing of the enclosures, huts and fences of the village or settlement. Young girls assist their mothers and also graze sheep and goats near the homesteads. These days, however, with the advent of education, the Maasai are sending most of their children to school and women are filling the void of herding livestock in situations where outside labour is unavailable.

Maasai land management

The Maasai rangelands include diverse ecological zones that vary in rainfall and fauna and flora, and form the main grazing resources for the Maasai production system which made the this ethnic group one of the most dominant and wealthiest in East Africa prior to colonization. The concept of communal ownership, access and utilization of land and natural resources was critical to survive droughts and other natural

occurrences like epidemic diseases, and also to protect the ecological integrity of the rangelands. Successful pastoralism was hinged on participatory rangeland management as a land use planning and management tool that took into account the needs, aspirations, and interests of individuals, families, clans, communities, and regions of the entire Maa Nation.

Historically, Maasai lands and resources were managed according to customary governance systems which served them well until the introduction of western land tenure and management systems in the early 1900s upon the colonization of Kenya.

The traditional governance systems comprising elders, age-set¹ leaders, warriors and spiritual leaders had worked well for millennia, making pastoralism the most successful mode of livelihood and production in the savannahs.

The Maasai fencing concept

According to Olgos community members and elders, there are traditionally only two forms of fencing: an outer fence that surrounds the settlement or village, and inner fences that corral the livestock within the stockade of the village or settlement and are also used to enclose cows for overnight breeding by pedigree bulls. These fences are meant to keep thieves and marauding predators at bay.

Other forms of fences are mostly thorn hedges that are used to secure 'grass banks' or 'set-asides,' areas protected specifically to provide grazing during drought periods. Elders insist that there are no gates in Maasai land; entrances to villages, homes, settlements or grass banks are closed using thorn bushes.

2. Fragmentation of land culture

Before the advent of transhumance pastoralism in the early 1900s which emerged due to restrictions that came with colonisation, the Maasai practised pure nomadic pastoralism that is credited with the existence of biological and biophysical diversity and complexity within their lands. Among the Maasai community, customary land rights did not amount to ownership of land by entities such as clans or moieties.

In 1968, Olgos formed part of a new Land (Group Representatives) Act. The Act defined community land as land lawfully held, managed and used by a specific community. Ultimate ownership was vested in the community; and individuals and families had the right to use the land to perpetuity. The Act stated that "each member of the Group Ranch shall be deemed to share in the ownership of the group ranch in undivided shares". Group Ranches were consolidated parcels of lands communally owned by groups of villages or families across Kenya's Southern rangelands.

Subsequently, in the 70s, the national government embarked on a campaign for the sub-division of commonly held lands to promote market-oriented livestock keeping in Maasai pastoralist areas. The process of individualisation of tenure continued through land adjudication and/or consolidation and the eventual registration of interest, title and rights to land under the **Land Registration Act of 1968** that was otherwise called Chapter (Cap) 300 and the **Land Adjudication Act of 1970** that was also referred to as Chapter (Cap) 284).



What resulted was an intense clamour for the sub-division of land under the belief that individual titles to land would translate to financial prosperity. Upon the sub-division of the land into individual parcels in the early 1980s, most of the individual title owners started to fencing off their land parcels to keep wildlife, people and neighbours' livestock at bay. Some fenced off corridors were essential for the movement of livestock and wildlife as well as access to common resources like salt licks, water sources and strategic grazing areas. Within five years of the sub-division and fencing off, the area had undergone more extensive modification and degradation than at any other time in history. Livestock numbers decreased by about 60%, wild animals especially large game moved to other areas.

¹ 'Age-set' refers to men of the same circumcision group.

An upsurge in population also increased the demand for natural resources including land for agricultural intensification to compensate for diminishing livestock. This pressure was further compounded by human-wildlife conflicts that ensued when wild animals, especially elephants, destroyed crops and structures as they retraced their traditional migratory routes through fenced landscapes. Cases of people being attacked by elephants, lions, leopards and buffalo increased as competition for diminishing resources intensified. The impacts of fragmentation and fences also affected community cohesion as disagreements ensued over water and other resources, destruction of drought reserves, trespass, breakdown of social order, illegal hunting of the remaining wild game, and serious

soil erosion due to land fragmentation. Maintaining pastoralism and crop-based livelihoods along with biodiversity and ecosystem functions became an increasingly complex and challenging task.

The Group Ranch concept represented a new approach to pastoral development and was a first attempt at drastically transforming the Maasai nomadic subsistence production system into a sedentary and ostensibly commercially oriented system. However, this system failed to take into account the critical pillars of communal governance, common space, access and mobility. The Olgos became one of the district's most critically endangered ecosystems and a recipient of food aid.

Painful lessons learnt – Quotes by Olgos community members

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“Traditionally, the Maasai people considered ‘sharing’ an important pillar of their existence. Fencing off land created boundaries of mind and body and undermined the bonds that had kept our community as a single unit for centuries”

- 36-year-old, Nayang'ayang'unye ele Ole Saigilu Kiken Village

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“No individual is in control of the amount of rain that pours on his piece of land or the amount of fodder that shall grow on an individual's parcel of land, therefore, if it does not rain on your plot, you expect to be supported by your neighbours and other people. This makes fencing off individual parcels a perilous affair. As we have painfully learnt here at Olgos, the perils of fencing off parcels of land outweigh the benefits”

- 78-year old Kereta Ole Rinyai-a member of the Iseuri, the most senior age-set.



Painful lessons learnt – Quotes by Olgos community members

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“Olgos has historically been part of the migratory corridor for large herbivores especially elephants. The corridor stretches from Amboseli in Kajiado County to the Maasai Mara in Narok County. When we fenced off our individual parcels, we did not factor in the fact that for thousands of years, elephants had used this area to migrate from East to West and vice versa, and that some parts were sources of cactus which is an essential source of nutrition for elephants. Upon the fencing off of these areas, elephants and buffalos became notorious for breaking down the fences to access cactus and maize fields. The land owners resorted to individually trying to drive away these animals which resulted in many cases of injury and death of both humans and wild animals”.

- Chief Sammy Tarakuai

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“There is no cure for ignorance. In our minds we thought that fragmentation of land would bring wealth and prosperity, but we learnt the hard way. After the sub-division of the group ranch, the future of this community was put to risk because all the pillars that initially held us together disintegrated because everybody minded their own business, greed and self-interest crept in, social harmony broke down, the environment degraded, wildlife disappeared, and the ecosystem started disintegrating and took with it large numbers of livestock. Adversity and grief became the embodiment of Olgos”.

- 56 year old Nooloiretu Tarakaui



3. Community intervention: recommonisation of Maasai land

The dire situation prompted elders to call for meetings to deliberate on ways to address the emergent challenges. The first step was shared observations among elders in terms of the emergent risks attributable to the fragmentation of land and erection of fences at Olgos. This was followed by a series of consultative meetings presided over by senior elders of the Ilnyankusi and Iseuri age-sets, the most senior Maasai leaders, aimed at seeking a solution to the challenges.

Most of the common views revolved around the breakdown of social networks and cohesion, human wildlife conflicts, reduction in livestock herd sizes, reduction in production and the resulting food insecurity, degradation of the ecosystem, and bleak future prospects for the community. One underlying cause of most of the challenges was identified as the fencing off of land which inhibited: (i) mobility of

people, livestock and wildlife, (ii) reduction of requisite space for pastoralism, (iii) interaction between livestock and wildlife, (iv) regeneration of the land and plant species, and (v) communal governance and resource management.

The deliberations continued over four months and eventually a decision was arrived at to reconsolidate the Maasai commons. A small part of the community was not supportive of the idea of reconsolidation, but the majority favoured the proposition. Therefore, it was resolved that all the fences be brought down and the land revert to the initial form of open space or commons that were accessible to all without boundaries, and managed through traditional governance structures.

While each member retained his/her title deed, the recommonisation of Maasai land in the Olgos, and the reversion to communal management and access, stands out as the key aspect of the intervention that helped to solve the problems facing the Olgos community.

4. Outcomes of the tecommonisation

Despite the demographic changes at Olgos, the reversal of the land to open fields in the early 1990s has been credited with a 40% increase in family herds, a return of wild animals, environmental regeneration including the re-emergence of hitherto disappearing plant species, and the restoration of social cohesion over time.

Currently at Olgos, a localised form of land use planning and strict adherence to informal protocols are maintaining production and biodiversity patterns and ecosystem functioning in an increasingly changing climate regime. The recommonisation of tenure has achieved the following outcomes:

- Traditional governance structures have been reinvigorated.
- Reciprocity has been re-introduced.
- Social cohesion and networks have been re-established.
- Common tenure and common resource rights have been re-established.
- Migratory corridors and common resources such as water sources, salt licks and dry season grazing areas have been secured.
- Degraded areas have regenerated.
- Livestock numbers have bounced back to population levels prior to fencing.
- Wildlife herds that had fled the area have returned.
- Human-wildlife conflict has decreased.
- Production has increased and dependence on food aid has reduced.

5. Opportunities and challenges

The opportunities for upscaling recommonisation lie in empowering communities in the implementation of the Community Land Act 2016, the 2010 African Union Policy Framework for Pastoralism in Africa, and wildlife conservation strategies, and in addressing climate change through indigenous/traditional knowledge. The Community Land Act 2016 consolidates all the previous legislations governing community land in Kenya into one. The African Union Policy Framework for Pastoralism in Africa provides policy guidance on how to promote pastoralism within member countries of the African Union with special emphasis on recognition and protection of land as the basis of pastoral production.

Recommonisation could be used as leverage for the calling for better services and recognition of the pastoral sector. In particular, Maasai communities should advocate for the following:

- To be consulted and included in mega infrastructure and extractive projects involving them and their lands.
- To integrate their community knowledge in addressing pastoralist issues including rangeland and wildlife management and ecosystem protection.
- Common tenure as key to pastoral production
- Adequate investment in pastoralism as the ideal production and livelihood option for arid and semi-arid lands.
- To integrate pastoralism into the education curriculum as an economic pillar of the region and nation.
- There are, however, some challenges to the upscaling of the recommonisation process.
- Lack of community consultations, involvement and inclusion in processes that directly affect them.
- Lack of recognition of existing traditional frameworks that have served the communities for millennia.
- Lack of investment in pastoralism as a production and economic pillar/sector.
- Targeting of pastoralist lands for extractive and mega infrastructure projects.
- Weak tenure security in pastoralist rangelands.
- Land sales within the rangelands.
- Vagaries of climate change.
- Lack of enthusiasm for the implementation of the Africa Union Policy Framework for Pastoralism by member countries



6. Conclusions

The extraordinary biological diversity, natural integrity of landscapes and rich cultural identity of the Olgos were a source of tremendous pride to the Maasai for generations. The Olgos, however, underwent extensive degradation owing to the fragmentation of communally owned lands in the 1970s and 80s without first undertaking community risk and benefit analyses. This was compounded by a burgeoning population, increasing livestock herds, increased demand for natural resources to sustain local community needs, increased demand for land to set up social amenities and infrastructural projects, and the intensification of agriculture (namely; wheat, maize, beans and vegetables), all of which caused the Olgos to become a critically endangered ecosystem.

Through unity of purpose, however, the Olgos pastoralists demonstrated that it was possible to reverse the negative effects of wrong decisions of the past. Their timely intervention revived traditional governance, secured and availed space, revitalised herd sizes, and re-engineered key natural assets and the ecosystem services that flow from all these aspects combined.

The key pillars of pastoralism are: (i) land and natural resources, (ii) traditional governance institutions, and (iii) livestock herds which are protected for future generations. Common tenure is key to pastoral production, food security, and the survival wild fauna

and flora. Mobility ensures resource utilisation and management in pastoral areas.

The Maasai pastoralist system has ensured the existence of a wide array of wildlife and serene landscapes for generations, thereby making it the most suitable production and livelihood system for arid and semi-arid ecosystems. If this system is not protected, however, ecological degradation will ensue, wild fauna and flora will be depleted, and dependence on food aid will grow due to lack of viable alternative production and livelihood options.

Governments (both national and local), non-state actors and pastoralist communities must collectively develop strategies to secure the pillars of pastoralism by addressing the clamour for space by infrastructural projects, extractive activities, increasing competition over resources, climatic changes, and burgeoning populations in pastoralist areas.

Communities have the capacity to solve the problems confronting them and are the true vanguards of the ecosystems within which they live. Community-conceived and driven initiatives rooted in the Maasai culture are therefore key to successful interventions. Reasoning and acting together helps in the distribution of labour and the sharing of skills, and maintains security, social cohesion and community harmony.

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Author: Michael Tiampati, Pastoralist Development Network of Kenya.
(ole_tiampatim@hotmail.com)

Editor: G. Clare Westwood, Third World Network
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