GLOBAL LIVESTOCK CRSP

Can Collective Action and Capacity Building Reduce Vulnerability Among Settled Pastoralists?

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Pastoral Risk Management Project (PARIMA)

Research Brief 07-08-PARIMA December 2007

In 2001 PARIMA and her partners began to create collective-action groups among illiterate, settled pastoralists in southern Ethiopia. These groups—dominated by women—focused on savings-led microfinance, small business, and livestock marketing to increase incomes and diversify livelihoods. Fifty-nine groups with over 2,100 members were formed using intensive capacity-building methods. After six years we wanted to compare group members with their neighbors who never participated in the PARIMA program. We surveyed 180 individuals from groups and paired control (traditional) communities. Respondents were asked to assess the extent that they perceived positive, negative, or no change in their lives over the past three years in terms of a variety of social, economic, and ecological attributes. Considered overall, an average of 81% of the sampled group members perceived that their lives had improved in everything from income and quality of life to personal confidence and human health. In contrast, an average of only 16% of control respondents felt the same way. These preliminary results suggest that collective action can be a viable development strategy here, especially among poor, settled, or displaced people living in peri-urban areas of the rangelands. However, collective action will be most sustainable when accompanied by intensive training, technical support, an effective legal framework, and growing market opportunities.

Background

The Borana pastoral system of southern Ethiopia has been traditionally viewed as an excellent example of sustainable range livestock production in East Africa. Beginning in the 1980s, however, population growth for people and livestock, periodic droughts, growing insecurity, and lack of development investments began to take their toll. Many hundreds of thousands of livestock have died from droughts and natural-resource degradation. The human population, on the other hand, continues to slowly grow resulting in increasing rates of poverty. The number of destitute pastoralists living on perimeters of local towns and settlements has increased. The Borana pastoral system has thus deteriorated (Desta and Coppock, 2004). One option to improve local circumstances for pastoral risk management has involved efforts to diversify pastoral livelihoods and better connect pastoralists to emerging livestock markets (Desta et al., 2006). We have chipped away at the problem using participatory methods and collective action. Pastoral women's groups were discovered in northern Kenya during 2000 that had made remarkable achievements in terms of wealth accumulation, livelihood diversification, and provision of social services. These women were destitute and pulled themselves up in inspiring ways (Desta and Coppock, 2002). Ethiopia was more isolated and lacked such initiatives, so female leaders from Ethiopian pastoral groups were brought to northern Kenya in 2001 to learn from their peers during a tour sponsored by the PARIMA project. One result of the tour has been a mushrooming of collective-action groups across southern Ethiopia. Fifty-nine groups with over 2,100 members (76% female) were established in a few years. These tend to be concentrated near towns and villages.

One important aspect of this process has been careful investment in and mentoring of group members. PARIMA and her partners have been reducing illiteracy via non-formal education, promoted a culture of savings–led micro-finance, assisted people to manage group dynamics, instilled principles of good group governance, exposed members to principles of small-business management, and have helped link the groups to livestock markets (Desta et al., 2006). As the groups have matured the level of project investment in them has leveled off and declined after 2005. Groups have subsequently merged and formed legally recognized producer cooperatives.

Despite the apparent success of this approach, we still lacked hard evidence as to how participants who have undergone collective action differ from their traditionally minded peers. Does group membership really confer advantages in terms of social and economic benefits relative to those for people who never participated?

We used structured surveys to interview adults selected randomly from collective-action groups as well as from paired controls (traditional peers). Across two districts, we ended up with a total of 180 survey respondents. Of this total, 120 were group members while 60 were traditional neighbors.

The survey had several components. One component contained questions that clarified whether or not the traditional pastoralists had ever been involved in collective action or had received education or special training. If they fulfilled these characteristics then they would not provide a valid comparison for the group members. Another component of the survey dealt with quantifying the perceptions of respondents with respect to household-level changes in their social, economic, and ecological circumstances over the past three years (2004-7). A third component included questions that pertained to the perceived incidence or severity of household hunger over the previous six months, as well as what respondents planned to do in the coming five years with respect to their coping strategies. We wondered if respondents and their families intended to intensify or diversify their production, migrate out of the system, or merely continue with traditional behaviors.

For this brief we emphasize data patterns for answers to 12 of the survey questions that relate to perceptions of social, economic, and ecological circumstances. The possible responses to each of the 12 questions came from a five-point scale. For example, a typical question would be formatted as follows:

Over the past three years, the quality of life for my household members and me has: (a) Improved a lot; (b) Improved some; (c) Not changed; (d) Worsened some; or (e) Worsened a lot

Findings

Of the 180 respondents, 161 were women. The mean age was 35 years old. Most respondents were married (87 percent). They had average household sizes of seven people with about one-third being children. Group members tended to reside closer (average of 10 km) to the main district towns of Negelle or Moyale compared to their control neighbors (average of 21 km). Nearly all respondents were "livestock poor" with only a very few livestock per household. Most respondents appeared to be functionally illiterate, although about two-thirds felt they had a trusted, literate confidant to rely upon when dealing with problems that required reading, writing, or simple calculations.

Results confirmed that the control respondents were indeed unaffected by collective action or any special capacity-building opportunities in their home areas. They had virtually no knowledge of micro-finance or banking, little exposure to small-business endeavors, and no mentoring or educational experiences from the PARIMA project or her partners. These were important findings because they indicated that differences in perceptions between group members and the controls (below) could be attributed to collective-action interventions. Other research indicates that spontaneous diffusion of collective-action innovations has occurred on the Borana Plateau independent of PARIMA project activities. Locating traditional respondents for surveys who have not been affected by collective-action innovations can thus be increasingly difficult (see Research Brief 07-06-PARIMA).

Table 1 illustrates trends comparing the stated perceptions of group members versus control respondents for the 12 circumstances. For all 12, a large majority of respondents (70 to 90 percent) that were affiliated with the collective-action groups reported that positive changes had occurred for themselves or their household members over the past three years. In stark contrast, only a minority of respondents (5 to 21 percent) from the controls reported positive change in their circumstances over the same period. The only exception to this broad pattern was for the human health issue, where 52 percent of control respondents said their health situation had improved. This was still far less, however, than the 87 percent of group affiliates who perceived that their health situations had improved.

Perhaps the most unexpected contrast in Table 1 was provided by the livestock marketing issue. While 70 percent of group-affiliated respondents said their involvement in livestock marketing had increased during the past three years, only 8 percent of control respondents said the same. This is particularly striking because—in theory—all pastoralists of the same wealth class, residing in the same general location, should be able to sell or trade animals to a similar degree. It suggests that collective action has been especially influential in stimulating livestock trading behavior among group members as compared to their neighbors.

Collective action may also have implications for hunger alleviation. While only 8 percent of control respondents noted that their households had not experienced hunger over the past six months, for the group members this was 26 percent. Accordingly, 75 percent of the controls said that the incidence of hunger had been "common to severe" over the same time frame. For the group members this declined to 23 percent.

Group members indicated that their livelihood strategy for the next 5 years would be focused on diversification (63 percent) or intensified production (24 percent). In contrast, the dominant responses of the controls were either to continue with traditions (55 percent) or they did not know what they would do (22 percent).

Practical Implications

Comparing group members with their traditional peers attempts to assess the cumulative impacts of collective action and capacity building among this target population. Overall, the perceptions of survey respondents clearly indicate that positive impacts of collective action have occurred.

Table 1. Percentage of respondents from collective-action groups or from among traditional peers that perceived (a) positive change, (b) no change, or (c) negative change for various social and economic circumstances during the period 2004-7 on the Borana Plateau. Sample sizes were 120 for the group members and 60 for the traditional peers.

CIRCUMSTANCES	COLLECTIVE ACTION GROUPS			TRADITIONAL PEERS (CONTROLS)		
	Positive Change	No Change	Negative Change	Positive Change	No Change	Negative Change
Skills/Knowledge	90	6	4	12	88	0
Human Health	87	5	8	52	40	8
Community Reliance	82	8	10	15	53	32
Cash Income	72	13	15	7	78	15
Personal Confidence	83	3	14	22	62	16
Ability to Solve New Problems	82	7	11	17	68	15
Access to Credit	85	7	8	5	93	2
Home Comfort	80	9	11	12	57	31
Access to Livestock Marketing	70	9	21	8	87	5
Involvement in Small Business	78	13	9	10	80	10
Interest in Educating Children	74	20	6	23	47	30
Quality of Life	85	3	12	12	50	38

We conclude that collective action and capacity building can improve livelihoods and promote human welfare in this particular setting involving settled pastoralists in southern Ethiopia. However, collective action will be most sustainable when accompanied by intensive and long–term training, technical support, an effective legal framework, and growing livestock market opportunities.

The PARIMA project and her partners have invested six years of effort in careful supervision and mentoring to create strong and sustainable collective-action groups in southern Ethiopia. Collective action is thus not a "quick fix" but a long-term investment to create human and social capital. A reliable legal and policy framework must be in place to support the rights and responsibilities of people who join collective-action associations or the producer cooperatives that evolve from them. Livestock production will continue to be the main economic engine of the rangelands. Thus, development of sustainable livestock markets can provide an important impetus to support and expand viable collective-action initiatives in this region.

Further Reading

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The GL-CRSP Pastoral Risk Management Project (PARIMA) was established in 1997 and conducts research, training, and outreach in an effort to improve welfare of pastoral and agro-pastoral peoples with a focus on northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia. The project is led by Dr. D. Layne Coppock, Utah State University, Email contact: Lcoppock@cc.usu.edu.

The Global Livestock CRSP is comprised of multidisciplinary, collaborative projects focused on human nutrition, economic growth, environment and policy related to animal agriculture and linked by a global theme of risk in a changing environment. The program is active in East Africa, Central Asia and Latin America.

This publication was made possible through support provided by the Office of Agriculture, Bureau of Economic Growth, Agriculture and Trade, under Grant No. PCE-G-00-98-00036-00 to the University of California, Davis. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID.

Design by Susan L. Johnson