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# Pastoralists' perception of poverty: A case of the Somali and Turkana of Northern Kenya

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## Abstract

Poverty is a complex phenomenon, without a single definition or standard methods of reducing it. Income based methods of assessing poverty have been shown to have limitations that undermine their application in measuring and attacking poverty among pastoral households. Stages of progress method of poverty assessment was used to assess poverty among pastoral households in Turkana and Mandera Counties of Northern Kenya. Three hundred and three hundred and fifty-four households in Mandera and Turkana Counties respectively were sampled across three different livelihood zones: pastoral, agro-pastoral and off-farm. Accumulation of livestock was regarded as a key indicator of wealth among pastoral households. The two pastoral communities used different pathways to escape poverty, meaning that no single blanket poverty reduction approach may be applied across different pastoral communities.

## Introduction

Pastoral Counties of northern Kenya, just like all other pastoral areas, tend to be poorer compared to other parts of the country. These areas have low development indicators and high incidences of poverty (Republic of Kenya, 2012). This makes alleviation of poverty in the dry lands a key policy issue (Nyariki *et al.*, 2002). Peoples' individual strivings for economic advancement, and their view on public policy is greatly influenced by their perception about causes of poverty and availability and opportunities of wealth creation (Kluegel and Smith, 2017). People may view wealth as a product of individual effort or as a result of selective access to opportunities for a few due to structural barriers (Hunt, 2004). Peoples' beliefs about causes of poverty will have a practical implication for the legitimacy and viability of anti-poverty policies (Van Oorschot and Halman, 2000).

Different reasons have been advanced to explain pastoral poverty, but these are not empirical. There are those who hold the view that poverty among nomadic pastoralists is due to an outdated way of life that is inconsistent with the demands of the modern world, hence the need to transform or even abandon this system of livestock production (IRIN, 2006; Sandford, 2006). This line of thinking is supported by the 'culture of poverty' paradigm that argues that poverty itself breeds a way of life that forms a unique subculture. The poor are depicted as a cause of their own pathetic state since they continue to misbehave and live a reckless life, remaining perpetually chained to poverty through generations (Lewis, 1966). The 'culture of poverty' paradigm has been however rejected on the ground that it places the blame of poverty on victims, ignoring exogenous factors that may be responsible for existence of poverty. Fincher and Wulff (1998) go further to discredit the 'culture of poverty' paradigm by stating that poverty is produced by circumstances, not by individuals. For instance, pastoral poverty in Kenya is partly attributed to a deliberate move by the post-colonial Kenya government to favour non pastoral areas in allocation of resources, through the implementation of Kenya's sessional paper number 10 of 1965, with the assumption that the latter would give better returns (Republic of Kenya, 2012).

This study applied the stages of progress method (Krishna 2010) to establish how pastoral households perceive poverty in Turkana and Mandera Counties. This is an inexpensive method of tracking temporal household poverty levels as it does not require use of panel data, data that is unavailable for most pastoral communities.

## Methods and Study Site

The study was conducted in Turkana and Mandera Counties. Turkana County is the largest of the 47 Counties of Kenya, with a land area of 68,680 km<sup>2</sup>. It borders Uganda to the West, Sudan and Ethiopia to the North,

Samburu and Marsabit Counties to the East, and to the South it borders Baringo and West Pokot Counties. It lies between latitudes 0°51' and 5°30'N and longitudes 34° and 30°40'. Turkana County is arid, with rainfall average ranging between 120 mm and 430 mm. Apart from being very low, the rain is also erratic. Long rains are received between April and August and short rains occur in October and November. The average daily temperatures range between 24°C and 30°C. A combination of high temperatures and strong winds makes the area have one of the highest evapotranspiration rates in the country. Poverty level for Turkana was reported to be 94.3% (KNBS, 2006). The main livelihoods are pastoralism, which is taken up by 60% of the County population, agro-pastoralism along riverine areas has been taken up by 20% of County population, fishing by 12% and other livelihoods are taken up by 8% of the population. The main ethnic community in the County are the Turkana, although the major towns and trading centres are relatively cosmopolitan.

Mandera county is situated in the North-Eastern part of Kenya and covers an area of 26,474 km<sup>2</sup>. It borders Ethiopia to the North and Somalia to the East. On the Western side it borders Wajir County. The county comprises of four constituencies that also double up as sub-counties: Mandera Central, Mandera East, Mandera West and Mandera North. Mandera county falls under the Arid and Semi Arid Lands (ASAL) of Kenya. It is characterised by low lying rocky hills, with plains rising gradually from 400m from the south of Elwak to 900m in Malkamari area to the North (Republic of Kenya, 2002). It is an arid area with low irregular precipitation. It receives bimodal rainfall that averages 255 mm per annum. Mandera County had a human population of 1,025,756 (Republic of Kenya, 2010) and a poverty level of 87.8% according to the 2009 human census report.

The County is inhabited by the Somali tribe comprised of three sub clans: Garreh, Degodia and Murrule. The County is an extensive rangeland generally viable for nomadic pastoralism. About 5% of the County can be put under irrigated crop production along River Daua. However, a greater portion of the County consist of sandy soils that are poor in fertility and water holding capacity, thus have limited capacity for crop production.

### **Determination of household poverty dynamics using the stages of progress method**

'The stages of progress' is a participatory method that relies on community focus group meetings to delineate locally applicable 'stages of progress' that poor households are assumed to follow as they make their way out of poverty (Krishna 2010). This is a rapid method that captures data that would otherwise require a longer time and more resources if panel data were to be used. These stages are then used to create 'yardsticks' by which households' welfare was measured at different points in time.

Focus Group Discussion was done in each of the 23 villages in both Counties. The local chief was asked to assist identify between eight and ten individuals who had been residents of the village for at least the previous twenty years. This group had to have a mixture of resourceful men and women and one literate young man who was to assist in interpretation and recording. To ensure that the participating community members gave correct information, the objectives of the exercise were stated and it was emphasized that their participation was voluntary with no material benefits. The Participants were guided to define collectively what it meant for a household to be poor. The participants were then guided to develop a 'stages of progress' ladder that was used as a scale of categorizing households into wealth strata (see Table 1).

## **Results**

**Table 1: Stages of progress among Turkana and Mandera pastoral communities**

Wealth category	Turkana	Mandera
Poor	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Buys food</li> <li>2. Buys clothes</li> <li>3. Buys one goat</li> <li>4. Increases goats up to 20</li> <li>5. Marries a wife</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Afford one meal a day</li> <li>2. Buy clothes for the family</li> <li>3. Own few animals (some chicken, 3 goats or 3sheep)</li> <li>4. Take children to primary school</li> </ol>

	6. Builds a shelter 7. Buys one donkey 8. Buys camel 9. Buys one cow	5. Make your own makeshift house ( <i>Herio</i> ) 6. Make an improved better house ( <i>Harish</i> ) 7. Buy a donkey or young cow
Average	10. Increases sheep/goats up to 150 11. Increases number of camels up to 5-10 12. Increases number of cows up to 6-8 13. Marries the first wife officially according to Turkana custom 14. Marries out the first daughter	8. Take children to secondary school 9. Buy a farming land along the river 10. Buy a plot in Mandera town 11. Take children to paid tertiary colleges
Rich	15. Increases number of sheep/goats up to 400 16. Increases number of camels up to 15 17. Increases number of cattle up to 15 18. Increases number of donkeys up to 10 19. Marries a second wife	12. Buy a second hand vehicle 13. Buy and transport livestock to other markets for sale 14. Make pilgrimage to Mecca 15. Buy modern high class vehicle 16. Settle the family in urban centre

In both communities, livestock holding was regarded as the major determinant of wealth. For the Turkana, the levels of poverty were described as *Ekabaran* (rich), *Ekebotonit* (middle), *Ekalokan/Ekilokit/Ekadilan* (the poor) while the Somali of Mandera County used the term *qoole* to describe a poor person and *dures* to describe a rich person. The communities then described the progression path that households would normally follow to move from poverty to prosperity.

Accumulation of livestock to create wealth became a priority only after the requirements for food and clothing were met. Construction of a shelter and purchase of a donkey marked the beginning of transition of a household from poverty to prosperity. Once a household crossed the poverty line, there was a marked difference in progression for households in the two Counties. In Turkana, emphasis was placed on accumulation of livestock whereas in Mandera, households looked for diversification opportunities and acquisition of own plot of land around major trading centres. Individual land titling was thus gaining prominence in Mandera than Turkana. After households passed the poverty line, progression of wealthy households in both Counties was also very different. The Turkana still emphasized on livestock accumulation while in Mandera wealthier households diversified into business and bought modern vehicles. Majority of Mandera households were Muslims and so making pilgrimage to Mecca was a priority for wealthy households. Although communities in both Turkana and Mandera can be regarded as pastoralists, they had different priorities and followed different wealth creation pathways.

### **Discussion [Conclusions/Implications]**

Pastoral households in both Turkana and Mandera followed similar pathways to move out of poverty, especially through accumulation of livestock. However, once they passed the poverty line, the two communities pursued different pathways. The Turkana emphasized on accumulation of livestock through all the stages of progression from poverty, while the Somali of Mandera diversified from livestock immediately they crossed the poverty line.

The Turkana will be more responsive to restocking interventions at all stages of their progression, whereas the Somalis are likely to be responsive only at the lower levels. Once they cross the poverty line, Somalis are likely to diversify out of livestock. While undertaking poverty reduction interventions, a blanket strategy may not work across all the communities. Peculiarities of the community and their perceptions should guide successful poverty reduction strategies.

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