

Avenues for enhancing traditional livelihoods from grasslands: income diversification among pastoral women's groups in southern Ethiopia

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Introduction The rangelands of Africa remain home to millions of people who try to make a living by raising livestock on natural forage. Recent increase in human and livestock populations, however, along with a lack of economic development, has relegated many people to poverty and vulnerability. The semi-arid Borana Plateau of southern Ethiopia is a case in point. About 250,000 people herd one million head of livestock there. Thousands of animals die in periodic droughts and people are food insecure. It has been proposed that one way to better manage risk in this system is through economic diversification to reduce vulnerability (Desta & Coppock, 2002). The need to better address problems requires that local human capacity be built and solutions carefully targeted. To this end some members of the USAID-funded Pastoral Risk Management (PARIMA) project have adopted participatory research methods where scientists, communities, and development agents share power in a process of problem solving.

Materials and methods Work reported here has been conducted with five, semi-settled pastoral communities in southern Ethiopia since 2000. The approach involves community problem diagnosis and formulation of solutions referred to as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA; Lelo *et al.*, 2000). This involves an initial, week-long assessment of a community, with researchers as facilitators. This is followed by preparation of a community action plan (CAP) by the community in partnership with a development agent wherein intervention priorities are set based on relevance to priority problems and the ability of the community to make a sustainable contribution to solutions. The role of the PARIMA project has been to help select communities and development agents, conduct the PRA, solicit funding for CAPs and engage in monitoring and evaluation. Constraints and the means to overcome them involves another process called "action research" (Brown & Tandon, 1983). The PARIMA project has also become involved in linking pastoralists across the Ethio-Kenya border as well as networking various players in livestock marketing chains.

Results Community priority problems from several PRAs conducted in peri-urban settings indicate that shortages of food, water, health care, and lack of education are prominent. The CAPs have focused on the problem of lack of livelihood diversification that underlies these issues, and hence creation of non-formal education (NFE) centres, grass-roots micro-finance (savings and loan) operations, and training in small-scale business skills have been most in demand. Females and males are active participants, but newly formed women's groups tend to take leading roles. Several hundred people have received loans after sufficient savings were generated. Loan repayment has been 100% over the past two years. Most loan recipients have made profits, and the common approach has been to engage in livestock trade, although successes have also been observed in areas of petty trade. Provision of NFE permits people to achieve a base level of literacy and numeracy that accelerates their performance in entrepreneurial endeavours. Efforts by PARIMA to promote livestock marketing have involved networking among pastoral producers, development agents, and exporters. Recent successes in having pastoral groups supply small ruminants for export have been achieved.

Conclusions Use of participatory action research has yielded relatively quick benefits to pastoral communities, but requires researchers to change their values and approaches. Mentoring communities to help them achieve a novel vision of future possibilities is a major ingredient of success. Attempts to strengthen livelihoods helps create enhanced opportunities to better manage forage and other natural resources.

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