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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE PERIPHERY: IS THERE A WAY OUT FROM FOOD RELIEF FOR THE TURKANA IN KENYA?

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Sustainable development is hard to achieve, especially if the target is food security in drought-prone, economically and ecologically marginal pastoral areas such as the Turkana District in Kenya. A brief historical account is given of the famine relief and development efforts in the area and their impact is analysed from a local point of view. The main conclusion is that previous activities have largely ignored the existing social basis for development and thus they have failed to create a sustainable institutional framework. Although there are presently some encouraging signs that new, locally based efforts are taking root, their success will depend on the creation of an enabling socio-political environment by the national authorities and international aid organizations. This paper is based on field data collected in Turkana in 1987, supplemented by research reports and other project-based secondary data.

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INTRODUCTION

It is often stated that the expansion of productive power during the last few centuries has made it possible to guarantee food for all, or that hunger has become a political issue (e.g. Sen, 1988: 5). However, I find this argument flawed for two reasons. Firstly, hunger has since time immemorial been a political issue, as it is unavoidably linked to the unequal distribution and ensuing conflicts over entitlements. Secondly, the proposed understanding of the political issue is too narrow, for even the protection of entitlements, as the problem is now conceptualized, is basically an instrumentalist strategy which often ignores the goals and priorities of the target populations.

The Kenyan Government's food policy during the early 1980s has been hailed as a show case for the modern famine prevention strategy which operates through determined state support to complement existing market mechanisms (Dreze, 1990: 136–144) and it provides an interesting context for a case study. However, although food security has previously been treated as a national issue, in this paper the focus will be on the local community. I am interested in the interplay (or conflict) of the local versus national practices to cope with the hazards of nature, especially in the role of traditional social institutions in successful adaptation to a changing socio-political and natural environment.

My case study is about a periphery in the periphery: Turkana District is an economically marginal area in the north-western corner of present day Kenya, which we habitually categorize as an underdeveloped (and thus a peripheral) country. In the first part I briefly review the

historical process whereby the area was integrated into the present state formation and in the second part I analyse more closely the impact of this process on the local level survival strategies. Lastly, I try to answer the question: what did we learn?

COLONIAL PERIOD: LIMITED MOBILITY AND ECONOMIC STAGNATION

Turkana is a semi-arid region bounded by Uganda, Sudan and Ethiopia to the west and north and Lake Turkana to the east. The climate is characterized by erratic and variable rainfall, whereas the landscape consists of mountain ranges and scrub plains which are crossed by seasonal rivers. The pre-colonial economy of the Turkana was based on pastoralism (cattle, camels and small stock), which was supplemented by other forms of production such as sorghum growing, fishing and collecting wild fruits. The remarkably efficient way the Turkana have adapted to the harsh natural environment has been documented in a number of monographs, notably in the classic works of Gulliver (e.g. 1951). The traditional herding strategy was based on three components: in addition to nomadic mobility, herd diversity and dispersal helped to minimize losses and maximize the use of scarce natural resources. Fluid frontiers with the neighbouring ethnic communities also increased the flexibility of the socio-economic system.

For the Turkana the establishment of British colonial rule in the northern pastoral areas and subsequent border disputes with Ethiopia in the early 20th century meant increasing disorder and the loss of crucial economic assets. The imperial wars and punitive expeditions destroyed the existing institutional relationships with neighbouring ethnic groups, making the basis for inter-ethnic relations insecure. At the same time it threatened to undermine the group's political unity as different sections were identified with opposing belligerent parties. In material terms it meant increasing violence and the loss of thousands of human lives and hundreds of thousands of heads of livestock. The war conditions also facilitated the spreading of diseases and thus contributed to further losses (Lamphear, 1976: 230–243).

Once the conquest phase was over, the colonial administration set to establish firm boundaries between the grazing areas of different pastoral groups and towards the areas of emerging settler agriculture. Consequently, 'tribal grazing areas' were demarcated for different groups within the Northern Frontier District, whereas separate districts were allocated for the Turkana and Samburu. All these were further declared 'closed districts'- that is, the movement of people in and out of them was strictly controlled (Zwanenberg and King, 1975: 88–97).

Movement of livestock was likewise prevented by imposing rigorous quarantine regulations on African pastoral areas. As a means of restricting the spread of disease the policy generally failed, but instead it provided a means to confiscate much of the land with the highest agricultural potential for the settlers. The delimitation of reserves also prevented the pastoralists from following established patterns of migration designed to maximize the use of available pasture, while some of the richest grazing land was excluded (Spencer, 1983: 114–132).

On the other hand, practically no measures to develop the remaining pastoral area or to integrate it with the rest of the colony were taken before the First World War. Even by the late 1940s there were only two native dispensaries and schools in Turkana District, whereas the local administration, which operated through government-nominated headmen, remained relatively inefficient (Gulliver, 1951: 158–161). During the 15 years up to 1960 the share of the northern pastoral areas in the colonial government's main development programme for the African population (ALDEV) was only 2%. In Turkana the development efforts were limited to experimental flood irrigation at Turkwell River and small-scale fishing at Lake Turkana (Ministry of Agriculture, 1962: 228–231, 304–305).

Gradually, it also became evident that the establishment of 'Pax Britannica' had largely failed in the northern pastoral regions. In Turkana the relatively peaceful period that followed the Second World War was soon disturbed by increasing violence across both national and international administrative boundaries (Zwanenberg and King, 1975: 108). By independence the colonial project of law and order had practically collapsed, whereas the policy of isolating pastoralists economically and politically had led to economic stagnation and ecological maladaptation (Soja, 1968: 113).

INDEPENDENCE: THE BUILDING OF A NATION STATE

The situation in Turkana changed drastically during the early 1960s, when a serious famine developed in the district as a result of an unusually severe drought in 1959–1960. Several famine camps were established and by 1961 over 10 000 Turkanas were registered as destitute (Dames, 1964: 11). This was followed by another drought in 1965 and by the end of that year the number of destitute Turkana rose again to 13,000. By this time the famine

problem was diagnosed as chronic and the newly independent Kenya Government, with support from various international development agencies, was eager to introduce new, supposedly more reliable sources of livelihood for the Turkana (*Turkana District Annual Report*, 1966: 3–4, 12).

These measures were based on the acceptance of a neo-malthusian understanding of the situation. Both national and international agricultural specialists claimed that only one-fifth of the district's population could base their subsistence on livestock, whereas the remainder should be absorbed into settled activities. The development of irrigated agriculture and fisheries was considered as the only viable solution to the 'population problem', as the situation was defined (Brown, 1963: 1–4, 11–14, 24–25; Dames, 1964: 2–3, 7–8).

This approach was well in line with both the government's nation-building project and the prevailing modernization strategy for development. The new economic activities, and the related efforts to develop a modern infrastructure with roads, hospitals and schools, were an integral part of the new government's determined effort to incorporate the 'backward' northern pastoralists more fully into Kenya (*Turkana District Development Plan*, 1979–1983: 95–98). At the same time the development of the livestock sector in these areas was deliberately neglected and, for example, the first two phases of the important Kenya Livestock Development Project from 1969 to 1981 ignored Turkana District completely (Livingstone, 1986: 251–252). This was despite the fact that up to 1979 almost 90% of the Turkana were engaged in pastoralism, whereas less than 7% relied on fishing and only a little over 2% on cultivation (Ochieng'-Akatch, 1993: 8).

The problem with this strategy was the lack of sustainability. The planners thought that they could modernize the economy from above simply by introducing modern production technology and encouraging economic differentiation. However, they seem to have ignored the inherent instability of such marginal ecosystems, as the example of the Norad-funded Lake Turkana Fisheries Development Project indicates. In the planning phase the lake's fish stocks were assumed to be relatively constant in terms of abundance, density and location, so that sufficient quantities would be available for a large-scale market-oriented scheme involving about 20,000 people (Watson, 1985: 7–9). This security was merely assumed: there was no comprehensive data on the fish stocks, production costs, markets or other key factors.

Although it soon became evident that the resource base was subject to large fluctuations, it seems that the planners of the fisheries interventions were misled by a boom involving a four-fold increase in catches in one year (1976) into believing that such quantities were constantly available, and that the main limiting factor was production technology. On this basis a fish processing plant for the production of frozen fish was built during the late 1970s (*Aid to Fisheries at Lake Turkana*, 1980: 29–34). By then the catches had begun to decline despite the intensified fishing effort and after a short trial period in 1981 the US$2 million plant was closed down for good (Watson, 1985: 26, 42, 56).

Similar problems hampered the other development schemes and by the early 1980s it had become clear that in terms of preventing famines, the strategy of specialized alternative economies had failed. After 20 years of externally induced development the people in these schemes were worse off than the average pastoralist and many had become completely dependent on international aid.

THE CREATION OF DEPENDENCY IN THE PERIPHERY

In 1979 a new national development strategy was prepared for the arid regions (Arid and Semi-Arid Lands Development in Kenya, ASAL). As the main components of this strategy were subsistence-oriented production, the conservation of natural resources, food relief and basic social services (that is, activities which consume funds rather than yield revenue), it came to depend largely on donor funding. (Livingstone, 1986: 288–292). When combined with the prevailing lack of planning and implementation capacity in these districts, the strategy soon led to a situation whereby the bilateral donors were in charge of practically all development activities in the peripheral areas.

In Turkana this process was institutionalized into two separate programmes. The Turkana Rural Development Programme (TRDP) provided from 1980 a framework for expanding Norwegian involvement, and by 1988 Norad assistance through TRDP accounted for over 70% of the district's development expenditure. The programme covered a variety of activities from agriculture and forestry to community development and social services. Providing relief for famine victims was also the initial justification for a bilateral agreement between Kenya and the Netherlands/EEC, which established the Turkana Rehabilitation Project (TRP) in 1980. From the original objectives it soon expanded into a multi-sectoral development programme in parallel with the TRDP. A common feature of both these programmes was their development into virtually autonomous externally funded planning and implementation systems which largely

replaced the Kenyan district administration (Sorbo *et al.*, 1988: 6–9, 16–19, 82–83).

Parallel with the new preventive programmes the conventional famine relief efforts continued, but with rather ambiguous results for the northern pastoralists. During the two major droughts of the 1980s the Kenyan Government chose to secure food availability (and thus political stability) in the economic centre-that is, in the most productive agricultural areas and the main urban centres. The strategy was to stabilize food prices by controlling the inter-district movement of food (Bates, 1987: 76–78). With regard to the periphery this meant that the recently re-established trade in livestock and cereals between Turkana and the southern districts was disrupted. As the droughts also coincided with an outbreak of endemic cattle diseases which killed thousands of livestock, altogether about 80 000 Turkana were reduced to destitution and rapidly became dependent on external relief. By the late 1980s the famine relief efforts in most of Kenya's peripheral areas were almost totally dependent on international grant aid. (Sorbo *et al.*, 1988: 1–2).

Since then the situation has further deteriorated. In 1991 Norwegian development co-operation with Kenya was discontinued due to political conflicts with the Moi administration. During new droughts in the early 1990s up to 70% of animal stocks were lost in the northern pastoral areas, rendering an estimated 800 000 people dependent on relief food for survival by the end of 1993. In addition to this the area was simultaneously flooded by about 400 000 refugees from neighbouring countries (DHA News, 1994: 30). The situation has clearly become totally unsustainable in both economic and ecological terms.

LOSS OF SUSTAINABILITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

The loss of sustainability becomes more tractable if we descend to the local level and analyse the situation from the point of view of the Turkana. We can take as a starting point Table 1, which is based on some quantifiable data abstracted from a study by a Norwegian anthropologist, Broch-Due (1986), who studied the lakeside communities for the Norad fisheries project. I have rearranged the data to reflect the role of traditional social institutions in three localities on the lakeside: Todenyang represents the northern area, Kalokol the central area and Kerio the south. An analysis of each local situation reveals an interesting linkage between the existence of viable traditional social institutions, the prevalence of externally controlled development interventions and sustainability of the local production systems.

As noted earlier, the Turkana have never relied solely on livestock for their livelihood. Other sources, notably cultivation, fishing and gathering, have always had an important role, although there is great variation between different sections.

In Todenyang in the northern lakeside region the pastoralists have traditionally supplemented their basic diet of milk and blood with fish during the dry season, when they grazed their livestock on the plains bordering the lake. In periods of drought fish provided an important addition to their diet and reduced the consumption of livestock products. They were also quick to adapt their strategies to the new economic opportunities provided by the fisheries project in the form of modern equipment and marketing, and by the mid-1980s the northern fishermen profited from the most lucrative fishing on the western shore. As a result of the nearly optimum size of crews and adequate fishing gear they were able to exploit the high productivity of the northern waters by moving to the best areas according to seasonal fluctuations, while most of the catch was sold and thus provided cash income which could be re-invested (Broch-Due, 1986: 29–30, 35, 111–112).

Paradoxically, this situation emerged mainly due to the absence of permanent change agents (either NGOs or the government) in the area, because this enabled the local population to control the access to natural resources. According to the data presented by Broch-Due, recruitment to the fisheries operated through traditional institutions and most fishermen were members of extended households and thus maintained close links with the pastoral economy.

Table 1: The social basis for successful adaptation. Values are percentages of the population.

	Passed initiation ceremony*	Contracted traditional marriage†	Relatives in fishing sector	Member of extended household	Member of local section
Todenyang	95	80	100	85	95
Kerio	70	40	90	30	70
Kalokol	45	25	55	30	10

*Percentage of adult male population (over 15 years).
†Percentage of adult population (over 15 years).
Source: Broch-Due (1986: 26, 49–51, 107).

The viability of traditional values is also indicated by the prevalence of traditional forms of marriage and initiation ceremonies (Table 1). In this social context the new developments in the fisheries sector enabled more individuals to turn to full-time fishing without losing the possibility of investing profits in livestock and of maintaining their membership of the political community.

For those sections which traditionally occupied the central and southern shores, the situation was rather different. Among these people those family units which were involved in fishing or flood plain agriculture on the lakeside had during the 19th century developed into separate sub-groups for whom fish and cereals became the staple food. Although the small size of livestock herds which could be kept in the vicinity of the lakeshore were secondary from the nutritional point of view, livestock still had a major role in the formation of social relationships and in maintaining the common Turkana political identity based on pastoral values. At the same time, however, their relative poverty in terms of livestock tended to encourage social differentiation because it made them unpopular partners in institutionalized relationships with the pastoralists (Broch-Due, 1986: 35–37).

With the expansion of modern fisheries in the late 1960s the southern and central areas were soon invaded by the new development schemes. However, due to the internal differentiation and low social status the existing groups of fishermen were unable to maintain their traditional exclusive usufruct rights over the lakeside resources. In consequence, the fisheries quickly developed into two competing sectors, one operated by the local fishermen and one by newcomers from outside (Interviews 27–30 October 1987, Ille).

At the same time, recurrent droughts and increasing development aid continued to bring new groups of destitute pastoralists to the emergent lakeside settlements, where many of them were introduced to fishing. However, their interest in fisheries usually turned out to be temporary and many moved to more lucrative informal sector occupations (e.g. petty trade, production of charcoal or beer). For example, the 'outsider' crews I interviewed in 1987 consisted of people who had left the pastoral sector only after the 1984 drought (Interviews 28–30 October 1987, Ille). Many have also resorted to food aid, while only a few have accomplished a successful return to pastoralism (Broch-Due, 1986: 131–159).

The organization of production was also different in the two production groups. For the local fishermen kinship remained the main means of organizing the crew. They were also well integrated into the traditional community: many of them had established a traditional marriage, owned some livestock and resided in the village when their boat was on the western side. On the other hand, non-local crews only seldom included close relatives and extremely few were married, owned livestock or had any institutionalized ties with the local community. Membership in the same inland section was often the only common factor (Interviews 27–30 October 1987, Ille; 4 November 1987, Kerio; Table 1).

However, in terms of the opportunity situation the key factor seems to be control over local resources. In the south (Kerio, Ille), where the impact of change agents was moderate or subsided after the initial period, the local groups managed to maintain their predominance. In the central area the emergence of Kalokol as the main entry point for the famine prevention schemes had the opposite effect on the fisheries: by 1984 only a handful of the fishermen came from the local section or had established a culturally recognized marriage, and less than half of the men had passed the initiation ceremony (Table 1).

In Kalokol the traditional fishermen were quickly marginalized and lost control over the resources as the newcomers from famine camps enjoyed the administration's favour in terms of access to modern equipment. At the same time sedentarization increased the pressure on grazing and forest resources which had become subject to open access. This encroachment of traditional territorial rights soon became a source of recurrent conflicts between members of the local section and the newcomers. Similar disputes over resources have also led to a number of clashes between Turkana fishermen and the members of neighbouring ethnic groups in the northern and eastern parts of the lake (Henriksen, 1974: 19–20; Broch-Due, 1986: 19–22, 40, 115).

The structure of these conflicts can be seen as a sign of advanced disintegration in the Turkana political community and in the institutional basis on which relations between members of different sub-groups and with neighbouring ethnic groups have been maintained. In contrast with the traditional, largely self-sustained entity, the emerging new group is dependent on the national authorities for enforcing the new social norms and on external aid agencies for maintaining a livelihood.

THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

So far the external interventions in Turkana have had a predominantly disruptive overall impact in terms of local food security and sustainable development. The existing social institutions have

been destroyed or at best neglected, while the local economy has gradually become almost totally dependent on continuing international aid.

However, although some reports still regard the traditional social institutions as an obstacle to development which must be overcome (e.g. Ochieng'-Akatch, 1993: 13–14), their viability is finally also being recognized in action and not only in rhetoric, as previously. On the other hand, we should not fall prey to conservative romanticism, for the old ways are useful only if they are constantly adapted to the ever-changing social reality. Contrary to our popular stereotype image, the East African pastoral people have shown remarkable flexibility and openness to new economic opportunities, provided that they can be incorporated into the existing socio-cultural framework (e.g. Broch-Due, 1986: 131–159; Virtanen, 1994: 2–10).

Following the most recent famine of 1990–1991, relief activities in Turkana have taken a different shape. Some international NGOs have developed new food distribution systems whereby the people are encouraged to remain in the pastoral system and build on the existing social structures. Through the dispersal of food distribution points large concentrations of people, which tend to cause environmental degradation and generally lead to economic dependency, can be avoided. Also the crucial role of women in the provision of food is more widely acknowledged and they have been allocated a key role in the new distribution strategy (Watson, 1994: 27–28).

This approach supports the view of many anthropologists who have repeatedly advocated for the respect of indigenous social institutions which have proved to be flexible enough to also provide an efficient way to organize production in the new economic activities. For example, the traditional kinship-based herding unit has developed into a successful model for organizing the crews in the fishing boats (Broch-Due, 1986: 120–129). Instead of imposing new institutional models from a totally different socio-economic context, the new development efforts should help the local population to adapt the existing, already tried and thus familiar institutions to the new situation.

By now it has become evident that most developing country governments (along with many developed country governments) do not have the financial and administrative capacity to provide the kind of public sector interventions needed to guarantee the equal distribution of food in a crisis situation. In practice, food aid to peripheral areas has become totally dependent on external aid, whereas attempts to diversify the production system from above have merely destroyed the existing system. Sustainable food security can be built only if we take the existing local social organization as the starting point and allow the targeted people to take the leading role.

However, in many areas (including Turkana), the recent degradation of the security situation due to escalating civil wars and new outbursts of ethnic violence have lead to a situation whereby even locally based development initiatives have become non-viable. Political stability and the maintenance of law and order have again become the key prerequisites. However, if we look back in history, we should recognize that political stability cannot be achieved through colonial-type rule of force from above, which ignores the local population's cultural values and established priorities. Sustainable security, as well as development, can only be achieved with the people, not for them.

INTERVIEWS

The interviews were carried out by the author in Turkana District, Kenya during September–November 1987. Reference to interview data is indicated by date and place of the interviews.

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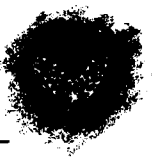

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