

Cross-Level Governance of Common Property Rangelands: Three Cases from East Africa

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1 Introduction

Over the past two and half decades a body of scholarship on the governance of commons has expanded and evolved. However, although rangelands in developing countries are in large part commons, there are concerns, about the applicability of commons scholarship in these settings. One such concern is that commons scholarship has tended to emphasize local (village-level) resources, whereas the appropriate level at which to manage rangeland resources may instead be the *landscape*. The other relates to the relevance of identified “design principles” for effective governance of commons (Ostrom, 1990; Dietz et al., 2003) to rangelands. In particular, the first of these principles, *the need for well-defined resource and group boundaries*, runs up against “the paradox of pastoral land tenure”, which is the challenge of defining “spatial and social boundaries around resources and user groups in situations where spatial and social flexibility are intrinsic and essential characteristics of resource use patterns” (Fernandez-Gimenez, 2002: 50). In this paper, we consider the implications of three case studies from East Africa where attempts have been made to foster effective landscape governance in dryland pastoralist settings. We pay particular attention to challenges of governing common rangeland resources across scales and levels.

2 Methods and Study Sites

Case study research was carried out in connection with three rangeland landscapes in pastoralist settings where attempts have been made to foster effective governance of rangeland resources. The case studies were Il’Ngwesi group ranch and conservancy and Garba Tula *dheeda* in Kenya and Gomole rangeland unit in Ethiopia. In each of these three cases, non-governmental organizations and other external actors worked with local communities to create and/or strengthen local institutions and to facilitate resource planning at a landscape scale.

The methods were qualitative, involving review of planning and other documents, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (see Table 1). The data were analyzed according to a common framework which identified for each case key characteristics relating to the distribution of governance powers, the way in which the spatial

Table 1: Methods—No. of interviews and focus group discussions conducted

Rangeland Landscape Case	Method	
	Key informant interviews	Focus group discussions
Garba Tula	24	18
Gomole	18	8
Il’Ngwesi	12	3

extent of the landscape for governance and planning purposes was defined, the approach to planning at different spatial levels, and so on.

3 Findings

In each of these three cases, there was a pre-existing, socially relevant landscape which afforded a geographic scope for the interventions. These pre-existing landscape definitions provided a history and logic for working at scale that seemed to correspond to the needs of pastoralist livelihoods. Moreover, in all three cases the external agents worked with local communities using a participatory approach. Each case has shown promising signs of community support for the landscape institutions and processes, and two of the three were in operation long enough to witness some success in managing pasture resources.

Yet in all three cases, governance structures for the landscape have been facing great difficulties in being able to exercise management authority. For example, the Gomole rangeland council has struggled to receive recognition or support from the Ethiopian government, as the government meanwhile has instituted its own grazing committees at a much smaller scale. At Garba Tula, the community's seasonal grazing plans have not been recognized or respected by either neighboring communities or the county government. In Il'Ngwesi, twice during the course of our field research in 2015 herders from another ethnic group brought huge herds of cattle into sections of land reserved by the group ranch/conservancy for wildlife and dry season grazing. These challenges relate to the relationships beyond the rangeland landscape, both vertically to higher levels of decision-making and horizontally in relation to other communities. The actual governance powers that the landscape institution(s) are able to exercise are insufficient to allow them to manage their resources, to exclude outsiders, or even to require outsiders to observe the same rules which local resource users follow, such as following seasonal grazing patterns. In the Gomole case, the government has never recognized the right of the Rangeland Council to make management decisions for the rangeland. Similarly at Isiolo County, attempts to formally legitimize the Gabra Tula system of management at the County stalled. At Il'Ngwesi, while the tenure rights of group ranches are formally established, higher levels of government have been either unwilling or unable to consistently protect those rights when faced with an influx of livestock herds from other counties.

4 Discussion

Commons scholarship, despite much of it having focused on local level resources, has noted that local level commons should not be seen as discrete, self-contained “islands”; they are embedded within larger landscapes and exist within a multi-level world (Berkes 2009). Landscapes too, it must be remembered, are embedded within larger watersheds, bioregions, and jurisdictions. The broader governance context is critical, because without its support, any mechanisms for management and governance at the landscape level may not be seen as legitimate by other communities and stakeholders. Moreover, the non-equilibrium dynamics of dryland ecosystems and the imperative for mobility provide an impetus “from the bottom up” against the strengthening or consolidation of governance powers, and against any neat resolution to the paradox of pastoral tenure.

For any initiatives aimed at strengthening governance powers of community-based mechanisms at a landscape level, a caution is in order. Doing so in a way that results in less permeable borders will run up against the bottom-up impetus for flexibility and fluidity. In dryland pastoralist settings, governance arrangements needed to foster effective management will not be a replication of local level commons only larger. Effective landscape level governance cannot be accomplished only through action at the landscape level; it is a task that must be pursued at multiple levels and in relation to the connections across scales and levels. Rather than entrenching fixed and comprehensive management authority within a series of discrete, non-overlapping territories each with its well-defined membership—as suggested by the first of the eight design principles proposed by Ostrom and others—fluidity, negotiation and overlapping rights are likely to be key features of effective landscape governance arrangements for pastoralists.

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