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Changing landscapes and livelihoods in Turkana County, Kenya

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Abstract

Turkana County has decades-long history of drought and development interventions, and remains one of the poorest counties in Kenya. Local Turkana livelihoods are increasingly under threat because of the changing land use and management, climate change and conflict. The question addressed here, therefore, is, how have external development interventions contributed to the changing landscapes and livelihoods in Turkana County from historical and contemporary contexts? The context of this question was explored through the dryland regions of Turkana, northwestern Kenya. This article examines external development interventions from colonial, postcolonial and contemporary periods to reveal the land use and livelihoods changes across these periods. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews, oral histories, participant observation, archival materials, methods were used to collect primary and secondary data. This research reveals that Turkana land is under threat from growing population, displacements and dispossession of grazing areas. The recent discovery of oil, two huge water aquifers and major infrastructure projects are adding to the multiple problems in the region. The new set of development interventions have failed to address livelihoods of the local Turkana, but have added more pressure to the old problems of drought, livestock diseases and local raiding. These old and new challenges are putting more pressure on land while the local Turkana remain impoverished.

Key words

Land, pastoralism, irrigation, development, local participation

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, after splitting from the Uganda's Jie group, Turkana who occupied the Karamoja escarpment expanded westwards into Kenya. By 1900, the Turkana had occupied and controlled the territory they use today in the trough of the Great Rift Valley after their territorial expansion that displaced the Samburu, the Pokot, Rendille, Boran, Dassanetch and the Maasai down the Rift Valley (McCabe, 2004, p.48-49; Little and Leslie, 1999, p.27; Lamphear, 1992, p.6; Barber, 1968; Gulliver, 1951, p.2). By the beginning of the twentieth century, Turkanaland (Aturkan) comprised about 24,000 square miles, 61, 700 square kilometres (Collins, 2006; McCabe, 2004, p.40; Gulliver, 1951). Turkana was characterized by scattered mountains, hills and plains vegetation below 2,000 feet, lowest in the East African hinterland (McCabe, 2004, p.40; Lamphear, 1992, p.6). The land was located

to the East of Lake Turkana and was bordered by highland regions occupied by rival communities. Early European observers described the arid condition of Turkana as ‘burning desert of sand and stones with hardly a blade of grass anywhere’ (Lamphear, 1992, p.69).

In the pre-colonial period, early European explorers, travelers, game hunters and African traders had minimal conflict with the Turkana. However, from their first contact with Europeans Turkana were seen as people who refused to accept lightly interference or control. By 1902, in the colonial period, Turkana District was administered by two British Protectorates—East Africa and Uganda Protectorate (Lamphear, 1992). The Turkana were seen as a threat because they were pushing other groups southward into the settlers’ White Highlands. The British East Africa Government aimed at imposing order and containing Turkana territorial expansion (McCabe, 2004, p.50; Barber, 1968, p.171; Lamphear, 1992, p.69). Turkana people resisted the British occupation of their land. As a result, the British launched a series of punitive military raids to break the Turkana resistance and seize firearms (Collins, 2006; Lokuruka and Lokuruka, 2006; McCabe; Lamphear, 1992; Barber, 1968; Gulliver, 1951). But after 25 years of punitive military raids, Turkana was brought under the British colonial rule. By 1926, civil administration was re-established in Lodwar by the British colonial government (Gulliver, 1951).

However, between 1902 and 1962, the colonialists closed Turkana to the outside influence and development activities. Apart from the British military and administration, indigenous local Turkana and a few Somali traders occupied Turkana District. Missionaries were only allowed to travel through the area from 1940s and later permitted to establish medical and education facilities in the early 1960s (Barber, 1968). The Turkana still enjoyed access to their communally-owned and managed land identified by their territorial sections, clans and lineage. By 1950s, Turkana were the single largest pastoralist group in Kenya numbering about 80,000 (Gulliver, 1951, p.2). Turkana population grew from 40,000 in 1900 to 159,300 in 1961(Gulliver, 1951, p.2). Colonial administration ended with Kenyan Independence in 1963(McCabe, 2004, p.52). In the postcolonial period, after Kenya’s independence, Turkana District was opened to external development. During this period, the District suffered a series of 35 severe droughts between 1950 and 2019(Republic of Kenya, 2013, p.46; Republic of Kenya, 2012; Fratkin *et al*, 2011, p.2; SEI, 2009, p.17; Brainard, 1986). These droughts decimated thousands of local Turkana who became stockless.

To answer the question: how have external development interventions contributed to the changing landscapes and livelihoods in Turkana County from historical and contemporary contexts? Oral history, participant observation, archival materials, focus group discussions and key informant interviews methods were used to collect primary and secondary data. Oral history was used to reconstruct major historical events as remembered by local Turkana and ex-development workers from postcolonial to contemporary periods. Archival materials and secondary literature were analysed to triangulate the histories. About 180 respondents, including key informants were interviewed. The author also immersed himself in Turkana for eight months to observe new changes in the contemporary period. The fieldwork covered between September 2013 and September 2014 in the UK and Turkana County.

External interventions

During colonial period, Turkana District was isolated and underdeveloped. Only remained as a closed military buffer-zone. The region suffered droughts in 1924, 1932, 1933, 1952 and 1960 resulting in famine relief. Former livestock keepers who survived famines were recruited into temporary famine relief camps set up along Lake Rudolf (now Lake Turkana) in 1924 and 1932-33. To address the problem of natural disasters, the British saw fishing as best alternative to famine relief in Turkana District. Between 1936 and 1942, about 26 destitute families were settled at Ferguson’s Gulf on Lake Rudolf. While from 1946 to 1955, other external interventions such as controlled grazing schemes with hired guards, to keep off

livestock from permanent water points and irrigated agriculture were started. But failed due to inadequate supervision, poor design and resistance by Turkana.

In the post-colonial period, since 1963, Turkana County has had a long history of droughts and development interventions. For example, from 1963 to 2019, more than 30 droughts have occurred in the region. As a result, Christian missionaries settled destitute Turkana in famine relief camps across the district (Lokuruka and Lokuruka, 2006). These droughts encouraged planners to promote a shift from pastoralism to irrigated agriculture and fisheries in their development agenda (Adams and Anderson, 1988; Hogg, 1987). Some of the destitute Turkana were resettled along Rivers Turkwel and Kerio and on the shores of Lake Turkana to try alternative livelihoods such as irrigated agriculture and fisheries to improve food security. For example, about 1,500 destitute Turkana were resettled in Turkwel irrigation scheme established in 1966. The scheme took about 45 hectares of dry season grazing area with the settlements for labourers occupying another 100 hectares. External developers ignored pastoralism, which was the main economic activity of the Turkana people. Irrigation interventions had limited local participation in their design and implementation. The irrigation programme ignored traditional flood cultivation methods and relied heavily on mechanisation, modern and expensive farm inputs. For example, developers banned cultivation of indigenous sorghum in the Turkwel irrigation scheme and introduced food-for-work interventions, which created dependency on food rations among impoverished Turkana. They also introduced exotic crop varieties and date palm plantations. The irrigation schemes failed to gain buy in by the local Turkana, who referred to them “as the foreigner’s farm.” As a result, the irrigation schemes failed and fizzled out.

These newly introduced irrigation schemes and settlements competed with the existing traditional land use system, livestock keeping. For example, pastoralists were denied access to dry season grazing areas and water points, particularly in the riparian ecosystems along Rivers Turkwel and Kerio as well as Lake Turkana. The competition between pastoralists and agro-pastoralists over traditional grazing areas increased conflicts along the river. The settlements also restricted access to grazing lands by pastoralists and population pressure degraded the land. In 1984, the developers later introduced agroforestry, *Prosopis Juliflora*, to reclaim the degraded land, but it’s invasiveness posed a threat to indigenous vegetation used for grazing, wild foods and medicine by the locals. According to Edmund Burrow, who was involved in developments at the time, the Turkana were knowledgeable about their environment, but external interventions ignored their knowledge and capabilities. In 1993, about 300,000 refugees fleeing civil wars in neighboring countries were resettled in Kakuma, west of Turkana. Since that time, clashes between refugees and host Turkana communities have been reported, particularly over grazing areas and water points.

Following the 2011 Horn of Africa drought, a renewed interest in solving the problem of drought resulted in the restarting of the irrigation schemes that had fallen into disuse. In 2013, UNESCO discovered two huge water aquifers in Lotikipi plains and near Lodwar, estimated to be enough water to supply Kenya for the next 70 years. These discoveries brought enthusiasm among developers, and early 2016, Turkana County Government launched a-65 hectares drip irrigation scheme to utilize one of the aquifers located at Napuu, Lodwar town.

In August 2016, the national government through the Kerio Valley Development Authority (KVDA), a government parastatal working in the north rift region, also launched a-150 hectares solar-powered commercial pivot irrigation scheme to utilize the Napuu aquifer. There is little evidence to suggest, however, that the irrigation projects are going to be any different from those that have gone before, and as such they are unlikely to be more successful. These developments are also in the context of other developments including oil exploration, devolution, large-scale commercial agricultural, conservancies and urbanization. Private investors and land speculators have become common and incidences of land grabbing

and localized land conflicts pitting unsuspecting local residents against land cartels have increased in major towns such as Lodwar, Kakuma, Lokichoggio and Lokichar.

In 2015, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between Tullow Oil and Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT), a conservation organization to start six conservancies in Turkana as a measure to create a buffer zone to secure oil fields. Local Turkana viewed the move as externally imposed and protested against the establishment of the conservancies. NRT was forced to stop setting up the conservancies after local leaders joined the protests. All these external interventions have been established in the dry season grazing areas used by livestock keepers.

Discussion and conclusions

Turkana land is under threat from growing population, displacements and dispossession of grazing areas. The recent discovery of oil, two huge water aquifers and major infrastructure projects are adding to the multiple problems in the region. The new set of development interventions have failed to address livelihoods of the local Turkana, but have added more pressure to the old problems of drought, livestock diseases and local raiding. These old and new challenges are putting more pressure on land while the local Turkana remain impoverished.

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