

Dryland and resource governance

Published: 28 August 2023



Land in dryland areas and associated resources, that can be seen as “wasteland”, are increasingly seen as valuable by government agencies and investors, which causes challenges for the people living in the areas. Photo: James Drew

One area that Drylands Transform, the SLU-led project, is looking into, is the land and resource governance and how to find innovative mechanisms that can address the dependence on both flexible and secure rights to land, as one example. Between October and December 2022, members of the research team carried out over 250 interviews across the four project sites to investigate changing land tenure and resource governance. Here is some insight in the process.

Similar to other dryland regions in East Africa, the Karamoja cluster has endured a history of economic and political marginalisation from national governments. This is changing, however; land and associated resources are increasingly viewed as valuable by government agencies and investors.

Land markets have emerged across the region, driven by the imperative to modernise agriculture, capitalise on mineral wealth, and numerous infrastructure projects. Commons land is being demarcated, bought, and sold, and tenure is undergoing formalisation. This frequently involves

various forms of boundary making and un-making including individual/private plots, administrative areas, and communally owned territories.

Negotiation over boundaries is causing new forms of contestations (sometimes violent) between individuals and communities over rights to control and access resources in places.



Enclosures have become common in some areas and are sometimes restricting the movements of livestock herds. Photo: James Drew



Land markets have emerged across the region, driven by, among other things, mineral findings. Here is limestone. Photo: James Drew

West Pokot

Since the 1980s, West Pokot has been experiencing a 'modernization' of land management and use through a combination of rehabilitation and intensification. This phenomenon began in areas close to Chepareria town and has spread west towards the Ugandan border. At the heart of this 'modernization' are land enclosures and privatization.

Enclosures are a strategy to secure tenure in terms of access and control over land resources and their management in the face of land speculation and land grabbing. For wealthy members of society privatization and enclosures provide an opportunity for intensified land use (primarily livestock production) and investment (buying of land).

However, those who are poor often sell land out of distress and poverty to fund school fees, medical bills, and other emergencies. In combination with rapid population increase, marketization of land can be seen as constituting a 'tragedy of privatization'.

Privatization and intensification of livestock herding do not replace the need for access to communal land resources. Many interviewees testified to the importance of seasonal as well as permanent access to communal grazing land in Amudat District in Uganda and beyond. This has led to incidences of conflict between Pokot herders and other communities in Karamoja and beyond.

To address the loss of communal land, some West Pokot communities are considering banning physical enclosures to enable seasonal communal access to land resources.

Karamoja

Since 2010 and relative peace resulting from government programmes of disarmament of pastoralist communities, there has been an influx of development in Karamoja. The national government want to modernize the sub-region; they are promoting a more productive use of resources, in particular the economic exploitation of mineral wealth and fertile land.

The result has been a scramble for land among a variety of people including investors, speculators, and pastoralist community members. Land markets are emerging around mining, agriculture and infrastructure developments. Similar to West Pokot, buyers take advantage of pastoralists' poverty.

Since 2019, drought and conflict have resulted in multiple failed harvests and diminished livestock numbers. Subsequently, many pastoralists have turned to 'distress land sales' as a last resort for survival. Some other - less vulnerable - rural people feel the need to secure land before others take it. A common practice is to sell off sections of their cultivated plots, invest the money in demarcating private land and building a (semi-)permanent house.

An increasing number of pastoralists that rent plots for cultivation are facing eviction due to their incapacity to afford rapidly rising rents. They, along with 'distress land sellers' and other sellers in search of land to secure and cultivate, are increasingly migrating to communal grazing areas to demarcate a new plot.

This phenomena of cultivating communal land is being encouraged by local and national government as a way to use the rangeland 'more productively'. The trend towards individualised and exclusive land rights including the demarcation and fencing of individual plots, and movements of people to settle communal grazing areas is resulting in the loss of more-customary access rights for livestock grazing and other livelihood activities.

Because of the increasingly fragmented commons, pastoralist communities are becoming concerned about the viability of future livestock herding, which relies on communal land.

An increasing number of Karamojong communities are attempting to secure their land in the face of increasing fragmentation by acquiring communal land titles. For example, in an attempt to resist the covert nature of large-scale land acquisitions by mining companies such as Tororo Cement, and to avoid elite capture of mining company benefits, communities in Moroto District are seeking to title their land.

Similarly, communities in Napak District have joined forces to title and protect an area of communal grazing land from small-scale cultivators and large-scale land grabs.

The rise in individual and communal land titling has sparked conflicts over territorial and resource rights within and between communities. There have been heightened claims to ancestral and administrative jurisdiction, claims that are frequently promoted by leaders as part of their desire to control populations and resources. Conflict often results in violence; many interviewees commented on a new trend in violent attacks that aim to displace them from resource-rich areas.

Governance challenges

Decision makers and communities in the Karamoja Cluster face the challenge of needing to balance the growing appetite for land demarcation alongside the need to safeguard communal resource access for pastoralism. Are communal land titles able to secure communal land access for all? Or will such formalisation of land tenure hasten the privatisation of land and loss of land access?

We argue that alternative means of securing communal resource tenure need to be considered that safeguard mobility and overlapping resource rights among pastoralists. The regional perspective provided by this research project is well-positioned to contribute to such solutions.

Facts:



Drylands Transform

Drylands Transform is a 4-year research project funded by Formas that started up during the Covid-19 pandemic in October 2020. It includes an interdisciplinary research team representing SLU and seven other universities and international organisations from Sweden, Kenya and Uganda.

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