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International Institute for Environment and Development

Drylands Programme

Issue paper no. 114

Taking charge of the future:
Pastoral institution building in Northern Kenya

Isobel Birch and Halima A.O. Shuria

October 2002

Oxfam

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This paper has been adapted by Isobel Birch from *Perspectives on Pastoral Development* by Isobel Birch and Halima A O Shuria first published by Oxfam GB in its *Oxfam Development Casebooks* series, For more information about the publishing programme of Oxfam GB visit www.oxfam.org.uk/publications

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1. Introduction

"Our borehole had yielded little water for years, but when we learned it could produce more, we went to the District Commissioner to complain, and he asked the Water Department to see to our problem. We had to contribute towards it, but that day we realised that we could get what we wanted if we knew where to get it, if we were organised, and if we were ready to do something about it. When Oxfam first came to us, we never thought that people like us could do anything."
Maalim Ronow, Chairman, Hungai Pastoral Association

'We never thought that people like us could do anything' – the words of a Kenyan pastoralist, unaccustomed to the concept of 'development' as being something over which he and his community had some control. But in Wajir district, in the north-eastern corner of Kenya, a process has been underway for the past eight years to foster the growth of strong and accountable organisations through which pastoralists can start to define the kind of future they want for themselves.

Cradled by the borders of Ethiopia to the north and Somalia to the east, Wajir's vast, sandy plain – remote, drought-prone, and periodically insecure – is home to between 300,000 and 350,000 Somali people, most of whom are nomadic pastoralists. Drought and conflict are their most obvious threats – both, if not effectively managed, can sweep hundreds of people off the rangelands and into the district's small towns and trading centres, where they face an uncertain future. However, poverty in Wajir is not simply the consequence of misfortune; it is also the product of decades of neglect and inappropriate policy choices by those in power.

The Wajir Pastoral Development Project (WPDP) has been trying to change this. It began in 1994 as a nine-year programme, funded by DFID, Comic Relief, and Oxfam. At a practical level it addresses a wide range of issues affecting pastoral livelihoods, such as animal and human health care, water supply, conflict and drought management, education, restocking, and credit. But at its heart is a concern to strengthen institutional capacity and leadership within the district – working with community organisations (both pastoral associations, and a network of urban-based women's groups) and with non-government and government bodies at district level.

What the WPDP wants to achieve is a situation in which pastoralists can exercise more control over their lives, and it tries to do this in two ways. First, by working directly with pastoral groups, building up their skills to manage development activities and to organise themselves in ways which will help them pursue their fundamental rights and entitlements. Second, by working with those in power, to help them become more aware of pastoralists' needs and more responsive to their demands.

The project has now reached its third three-year phase, and has learned valuable lessons about the challenges of supporting social organisation and policy change in a place such as Wajir. The first section of this paper looks at how this process developed at community level, and the second at the attempts made to influence district-level policy and practice. The final section summarises some of the main lessons learnt.

A map showing the districts of Kenya that are populated largely by pastoralists. Three-quarters of Kenya's land-mass is arid or semi-arid, and pastoralism is a logical response to the unpredictable environment of these areas. The geographical location of the pastoral districts around the edges of the country could be said to reflect the sense of exclusion and marginalisation felt by many pastoral communities. The national boundaries are in some sense an artificial divide, superimposed on traditional patterns of trade and migration, while insecurity in neighbouring countries inevitably has an impact on pastoral welfare and development.

2. Building community-level institutions

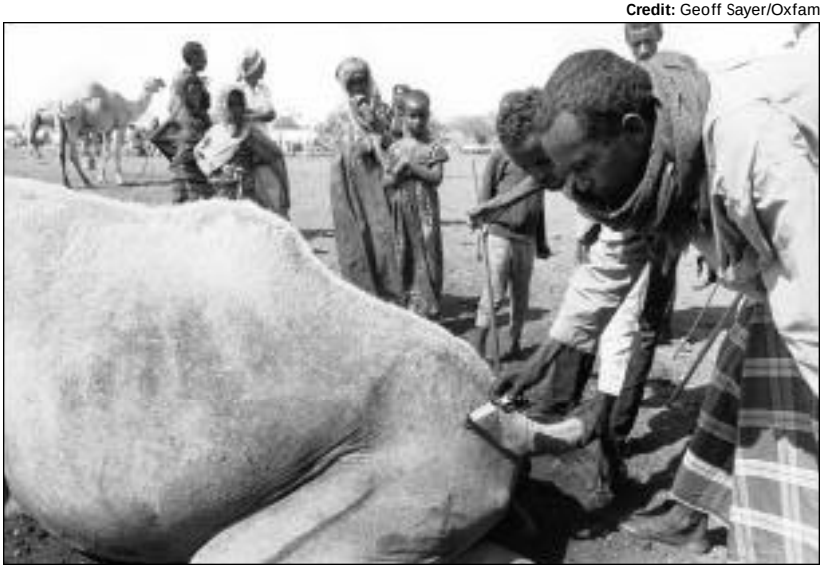
A criticism levelled at Oxfam's work in pastoral districts of Kenya prior to the start of the Wajir project was that concepts such as 'community' were used with little definition or rigour. In the case of Wajir, three broad population groups were identified, each facing different challenges. First, pastoralists still primarily reliant on livestock keeping, whose main concern was to strengthen and diversify that livelihood. Second, pastoralists who had lost their animals but who, with some assistance, were willing and able to return to a nomadic way of life. And third, poorer urban families, predominantly women, for whom a return to pastoralism was not desirable or possible – perhaps because they lacked the necessary labour, or over the years had lost the requisite skills – and who therefore needed to find alternative means of support.

The second of these groups was assisted by the WPDP through a programme of restocking, which in the first two phases of the project helped over 1000 households, many of them women, return to nomadic pastoralism. The first and third groups were the focus of efforts to strengthen community-level skills and organisational capacity.

This work took place in two different social settings: the *baadia* (the rangelands) and the *bullas* (the villages around the edge of towns populated by those who have lost their livestock). The settled population and those in the *baadia* have distinct needs, and sometimes different values and attitudes, but they remain connected through a web of social and economic relationships. Each protects the other's interests: pastoralists tend the herds owned by family members in town, who in return look after the business interests of their nomadic relations. Traditional gifts of milk and livestock pass between the two. As usual, the most vulnerable are those with the weakest networks: pastoralists lacking trustworthy representatives in the town, and women widowed or abandoned by their extended families.

The two types of community organisation supported by the WPDP are pastoral associations and (largely town-based) women's groups, reflecting these two different social contexts. This section focuses on one of these – the pastoral associations – although the fundamental approach to both was very similar.

Credit: Geoff Sayer/Oxfam



**"The camel ..... is one of our most important stock"
(Omar Jibril, Chair of the District Pastoral Association).**

2.1 Pastoral associations: background and purpose

The idea of forming pastoral associations took shape during a year of participatory planning with pastoral communities prior to the start of the WPDP in July 1994. The project team, in discussion with the district authorities, had already decided to start small and focus their work in the first phase in one division of the district – Wajir Bor, on the eastern border with Somalia. Participatory planning sessions were held in five localities, and with different groups – with the elders, with women, and with young people, in the *baadia* as well as in the settlements.

The Somali people have always had associations built upon a sense of community, the most important of which is the clan and its constituent sub-clans. Traditionally, the clan provided protection and support. Its elders also agreed and enforced a set of customary rules which regulated social behaviour and the use of common resources.

However, the clan has been weakened by individuals manipulating it for personal gain – most notably since the introduction of a multi-party political system in Kenya in the early 1990s. Social changes have undermined

the status of the elders and the impact of the sanctions they traditionally exercised. Clan leadership tends to be dominated by town-based elders rather than by those in the *baadia*, and is exclusively male. Moreover, during the project's pre-planning phase in 1993, violent inter-clan conflict broke out across the district. For development purposes, a different kind of organisation was needed – and one which could also incorporate the 'new' skills necessary for pastoralists to engage effectively with modern institutions, such as budgeting, purchasing, monitoring, and lobbying.

An earlier suggestion in some parts of Wajir Bor had been to form herders' groups to manage the purchase and sale of livestock drugs. But the PRA discussions had thrown up a far wider range of issues which pastoral groups wanted to address – water, education, livestock marketing, income and drought. When asked by those facilitating the PRA sessions how they might work together to tackle those issues, the idea of the pastoral association – *shirkada holadaqatadha,* in Somali – was born.

A manual guiding work with pastoral associations in the district produced by the Wajir Pastoral Steering Committee (PSC)[1] suggests some factors which may help to define a community, and thus the association which serves it.[2] These include the level of cohesion, such as the use of shared dry-season grazing areas, and the size of population: too large, and the association may lack a clear sense of shared identity; too small, and it may have difficulty sustaining itself. In the project's first phase, the WPDP worked with five associations in Wajir Bor; in the second, it supported nine more in another area. In the third, it is supporting two local NGOs to carry out much of this capacity building work. In total, there are now close to 40 pastoral associations operating in the district.

Each pastoral association has its base in one of the small trading centres which provide essential services for the pastoral population, such as water and health care. Its members are drawn from that centre and from the herding groups normally found in its vicinity. The pastoral associations define membership in different ways. The most common is that all adults over 18 are eligible to join. Others state that 'a member' means both a man and his wife, while in some cases the *rer*[3] is regarded as the basic unit of membership. Members include both rich and poor (relatively speaking).

1. An inter-governmental body formed in 1995 to oversee pastoral development in the district.
2. Wajir Pastoral Steering Committee, 'Supporting Pastoral Associations in Wajir: A Manual for Development Practitioners', second draft, April 2000.
3. A group of between 5 and 20 nomadic households; the smallest unit of the clan structure.

In the early stages there was little attempt to provide benefits exclusive to members, but as time passed, most associations felt the need to differentiate. For example, pastoral association members would be given preferential access at boreholes and automatically put on the list for watering when returning in the dry season. In the past, watering would have been on a first-come, first-served basis, and it was common for borehole lists to be full.

Most associations manage a similar package of basic services – livestock drugs, education, the work of traditional birth attendants, women's income generation, borehole management, well protection – through an elected committee of up to 12 officials. At one level, then, they are mechanisms through which pastoralists can better manage resources which are commonly owned, or to which collective access is required, as well as services which benefit the group as a whole. More strategically, however, they are channels through which pastoralists can represent their interests to government and other actors. This dual role was recognised from early on. Jim Harvey, Natural Resources Adviser for DFID (then ODA) in Nairobi at the time, remembers:

> *A key aspect of the project was its transformative role – its intention to address policy and institutional change as well as service delivery, and thus have much wider potential impact. Most other proposals by NGOs at that time focused on service delivery, but the key thing which the Wajir project offered was to get a better balance between delivering tangible benefits to poor people and achieving wider-level change.*

One of the main challenges facing the project team was in managing the relationship between themselves, as employees of an external implementing agency (although all were local to the area), and the community – in particular, judging when, how much, and on which issues, to intervene. Three practical illustrations of this dilemma follow: first, in following a participatory approach to planning and development; second, in balancing attention to practical and strategic needs; and third, in dealing with the issue of representation (including that of women).

2.2 The role of an external agency in participatory development

'Participatory planning' is an ideal to which too often only lip-service is paid. In many cases, external agencies initiate a process of analysis with their intended beneficiaries, at the end of which the flipcharts and the diagrams and the rankings are rolled up, taken away, and used as the basis for the agency's project plan. But in Wajir Bor in 1993/94, the primary purpose of the participatory planning sessions was to determine what the community, not the implementing NGO, would be doing. From the very beginning, the principle was established that the pastoral associations were independent organisations in their own right, intended to outlast the lifetime of the WPDP, not simply vehicles to deliver Oxfam's ambitions for Wajir.

That said, the project team clearly initiated the planning discussions in each location and, with the imbalance in skills, awareness, and control over resources, had the upper hand in any negotiations. Nevertheless, they also demonstrated an acute understanding of the complex dynamics at play between an external agency committed to participatory development and the community it wants to assist, anticipating many of the difficulties which were likely to arise.

One obvious difficulty is that the conclusions from participatory planning may well conflict with the mandate and priorities of the implementing agency. The project team in Wajir decided that this tension should be acknowledged and openly discussed, rather than both parties politely trying to pretend that it didn't exist. In drawing up their action plans, each community was encouraged to stick to its own priorities, rather than second guess what Oxfam might fund, and to think of different sources of support. The project team was careful not to lead people to think that they had the answers and the resources for every problem. Mohamed Elmi, project manager at the time, recalls the discussion:

> *We told them that the plans were theirs, and that they should forget about Oxfam. They should draw columns for the things they wanted to do, who would do them, their priority ranking, and what they expected of outsiders. We used the word 'outsiders' to mean people or organisations from whom they would seek help, including us, because we felt that even our support should be given in response to a proposal from them. In other words, they would be asking us to contribute to their plan.*

Credit: Geoff Sayer/Oxfam

Mohamed Mursal of Oxfam (right) with members of the committee of the Kutulo Pastoral Association, checking the accounts of the association's veterinary drug store.

In the event, all the pastoral associations have carried out activities unrelated to the specific objectives of the WPDP – such as building classrooms, or building a mosque. Some of the more well-established associations, such as Khorof Harar, have continued to develop plans and proposals for their members well after Oxfam phased out its presence in their area, securing support for them from a wide range of sources.

An important approach adopted by the project team from the earliest stages was to encourage the pastoral associations to exercise independent judgement. The team's instinct was generally to ask questions rather than supply answers, thus helping people work out problems for themselves. Rahay Hussein, who led the parallel work with women's groups in Wajir town, describes their approach:

> *If we had said 'Do this', people would probably have resisted. Rather, we ask them, 'How do you want to do it?' And when they tell us how they want to do it, we ask them why they want to do it that way. They will tell us the positive reasons behind their choice, but we also*

help them to think about the other side, the negatives. If, after discussing it, we still think that they have come to the wrong decision, we encourage them to think about it for a little longer. The process is always the most important thing, however long it takes.

What the team was doing was encouraging within pastoral communities the habit of critical questioning, of constantly asking themselves whether there might be different and better ways of achieving their goals. The team saw its responsibility as being to agree with an association a clear framework for a particular task, but then to let them decide how they would go about it, challenging them from time to time if they felt that things were moving off-course.

However, the challenging needed to be two-way – the project team allowing themselves to be questioned in return. One of the things which strikes many visitors to Wajir is the way in which staff will deliberately model the kind of behaviours and values they want to foster within the pastoral associations – values of trust, transparency, and mutual respect. Abukar Shariff, one of the project team, explains:

When you first go to a community, people will listen to you but say nothing. They might say a few things just to tell you that they've heard you, and then you leave. This may continue for some while, during which time they will be checking things about you, one of which is the level of consistency in what you say and do. In effect, you are under observation ... If you do what you say you will do, and come and explain things when necessary, and take their advice, then this is how trust and transparency are built. And in turn communities will behave in the same way.

On the other hand, a commitment to participatory development does not mean that an agency has to suspend critical judgement, or refrain from intervening. The crucial point is that there must be transparent agreement about the process through which different opinions can be aired and resolved. In the case of the WPDP it was mutually understood, for example, that major project decisions would only be taken during the three-monthly reviews, when the association and the project team would sit together and discuss progress, using the association's action plan and constitution as their two reference points. This process should also capitalise on the respective strengths of each party. In the case of the implementing

agency, these are usually the ability to bring to the discussion external information and experience, complementing the wisdom and knowledge found within the community.

However, on one issue – financial accountability – the project team now feels that they should have been more directive. For example, the pastoral association in Hungai developed a simple accounting system, which effectively separated the powers of those involved. The team's initial instinct was to insist that all the other associations adopt the same system – but they refrained, preferring to let each find their own solution. Although most managed to cope, one association was weakened when some members misappropriated funds. With hindsight, this was one area in which a more prescriptive stance might in the long run have been more helpful to the young organisations.

2.3 Balancing short-term and long-term goals

Each pastoral association was understandably anxious to see tangible results from its efforts. The project team, on the other hand, understood that the more strategic issue for pastoral civil society was the long-term sustainability of the associations themselves. If they could mobilise resources, if they could develop a clear sense of purpose and direction, and if they could sort out their problems independently, managing the tensions between different parts of their membership which would inevitably arise, then the associations stood a good chance of prospering well beyond the period of their relationship with Oxfam. However, building those skills and capacities would inevitably take time.

In the meantime, the district was just emerging from a period of severe drought and conflict. The project team needed to show that it understood the immediate difficulties people faced. During the project's long gestation – from the first planning sessions in April 1993 to the formal start of the project more than one year later – some relief activities implemented after the 1991/92 drought were still being completed (such as pan digging and well protection). These sent an important signal to people that Oxfam was not just interested in talking. Ebla Sugule, one of the first project staff, remembers:

> *We needed time to explain the process to people, that we were trying to work out their priorities with them in the long term, and that*

the ideas had to come out from them and not from us. But they kept on saying, 'When are you going to come and start the real job?' At the same time, though, we were doing this dam desilting while the participatory planning sessions were taking place. So people knew that something was happening.

The associations needed to address their members' concerns for better health care, education, water, and livestock services. Without improving people's basic quality of life, it would be impossible to move on to tackle more strategic issues. The project team helped the associations manage this tension by focusing on service delivery but in ways which also strengthened their management skills, and which avoided undermining their future independence and integrity. Three examples of this follow.

Cost-sharing and resource management

Cost-sharing has been an important principle underpinning the WPDP. In part this reflected the team's determination not to repeat the mistakes of previous Oxfam projects in pastoral districts of Kenya, which had tended to subsidise recurrent costs, thereby masking the extent to which they were really viable. Reductions in the quantity and quality of government service provision also meant that there was little choice in the short term but to maximise community contributions.

For each activity, the project team and pastoral association would negotiate which items Oxfam would provide (such as cement) and which the community would supply (such as sand and labour). The project staff would not hand over inputs until they felt that the terms under which each was being given – whether credit, training, tools, or materials – had been carefully discussed and were clearly understood. The level of investment made in this kind of preparation and consensus-building is illustrated by the fact that a significant part of the budget for the first phase was not spent until the third and final year (made possible by the flexibility of the WPDP's main donors – DFID and Comic Relief). Although some of the weaker associations were frustrated at what they perceived to be the slow dispersal of funds, the stronger associations came to recognise its value in building their independence.

[A cost-sharing approach was also taken with government. District officials had been closely involved with the WPDP from the beginning, providing valuable technical support. Oxfam might provide fuel for the

Department of Livestock's vehicles for a vaccination programme, for example, while government would provide the drugs and staff allowances. This strategy made effective use of highly skilled but under-resourced government staff, providing opportunities to influence their own thinking and practice and negotiate their responsibilities in supporting the pastoral associations once Oxfam had withdrawn.]

An economic impact assessment of the project, conducted in December 1997, demonstrated the extent of communities' contribution.[4] It estimated that in one centre the pastoral association's members had contributed 65 per cent of the cost of capping wells, 35 per cent of the cost of school rehabilitation, and 7 per cent of the cost of restocking destitute families.

The project team also worked hard to encourage a sense of discipline over the management of project resources. Mohamed Elmi recalls:

> *I remember a discussion about wheelbarrows, which were included in the proposal for clearing sand from the pans. A wheelbarrow costs the price of a camel, and when we told people that … they said, ' … No more wheelbarrows. From today we'll use gunny bags to get the sand out.' Bringing external information to help people make judgements is important … It's good if people know that NGO money is like any other money – that it should be used properly, and that they have the chance to determine how that is done. We were pleased when they called us 'the people who were miserly', even though later on they realised that the level of project inputs was high. But it took them years to realise that.*

An illustration of encouraging debate about the value of things was the process to determine the size and composition of the herd for restocked families. In the first phase, pastoral associations were asked to consider whether to give a larger-sized herd to fewer households, or a smaller herd to more, and what the combination of stock should be. In the second phase, each association was asked to make the most appropriate choice within the resources available. The objective in both cases was to foster a habit of thinking through the likely impacts of different ways of using project resources.

4. O. Odhiambo, S. Holden and C. Ackello-Ogutu (1998), 'Economic Impact Assessment Report, WPDP', unpublished report, Oxfam.

Credit: Geoff Sayer/Oxfam

Twelve-year-old Kamila Kunow, watched by her mother at their homestead in Wagberi bulla, takes her sole meal of the day: a cup of maize porridge. The family had to move into the town after losing their livestock in the 1991/92 drought.

Gradual withdrawal

A second strategy was regularly to review the relationship between the project team and the associations, gradually increasing the latter's level of responsibility. More generally, discussions about phasing out Oxfam's operational role were held very early on with both government and communities, clear signals being sent that Oxfam's direct involvement would last for a fixed period only.

Each association developed in its own way, and at its own pace. The rate of progress was influenced by several factors, such as levels of trust and social cohesion, or the quality of support from chiefs and councillors. Practical and geographical considerations also mattered: those associations situated closer to main roads tended to be more socially diverse, for example, with people's livelihoods as dependent on the passing trade as much as on anything the pastoral association could control.

As the associations became more adept at managing their affairs, the project team would begin to reduce its operational role. Mid-way through phase one, Oxfam also agreed with all the associations that from then on, the relationship between them would be based upon formal written proposals. This was done partly to give the associations practice at negotiating with donors; it also meant that they would start to carry out tasks previously done by the project staff, such as purchasing materials in the town.

As mentioned above, some associations were frustrated at what they perceived to be delays in providing project resources. At a gathering of pastoral associations in November 1995, one delegate commented that he didn't expect any financial support to result from the workshop because 'Oxfam is like a cow which produces little milk'. However, there is evidence that the associations now recognise the value of the careful preparation which was done, and that their organisations are stronger as a result. The Vice-Chair of the Khorof Harar association told the newer pastoral associations in the district in August 2000:

> *At first our idea was simply a business to sell livestock drugs. But what became the most important thing to us over time was the pastoral association itself. While Oxfam was still working with us, they taught us to write proposals, which we sent to them, to government, and to other people. They might have built the foundations of what we have achieved, but we constructed it, so that it became our work, not theirs.*

Choice of monitoring criteria

Lastly, the pastoral associations were encouraged to monitor progress against criteria which moved the spotlight beyond short-term activities and onto the strength of the organisation itself. Five indicators were used: everything which contributed to direct project implementation was considered under one ('ability to implement development activities'), while the other four were more strategic determinants of an association's likely long-term success or failure ('quality of representation', 'accountability', 'cohesion', and 'gender equity'). Again, monitoring was regarded not just as a technical way of assessing progress against a plan but as a means through which the associations could practise their skills in self-evaluation and appraisal.

All three of these examples show that the kind of everyday choices made by a project team – such as which monitoring indicators to adopt, which tasks

to carry out, or which resources to provide – may all potentially reinforce or undermine the ability of a young organisation to manage its own affairs.

2.4 Representation and leadership

In many respects the project team worked in ways which were sympathetic to the values and customs of each community. However, two of the five monitoring criteria – quality of representation and gender equity – were issues on which the project team deliberately set out to challenge dominant values and priorities in order to ensure that all parts of society could really benefit from the project. The two groups most likely to be marginalised were women (because clan leadership was traditionally a male preserve) and nomadic families (because those in settlements would naturally find it easier to gather together and take on roles as association officials).

The extent to which each association was genuinely representative of its members mattered for reasons of financial sustainability (i.e. a critical mass of members paying membership fees, buying drugs, and so on) and institutional credibility (so that it could genuinely claim to be speaking on behalf of the whole community).

'Representation' in this context therefore means both the extent to which the membership of the pastoral association reflects the make-up of the community as a whole, as well as the extent to which the diversity of those members' interests and concerns is reflected in its actions. If both are strong, then the association will have a clearer mandate from which to carry out its 'representative' function to those in authority.

Both these issues needed tackling with care. The team's approach was to make its views clear, through the kind of questions it asked and the challenges it posed, while also respecting the fact that there were strong cultural attitudes opposed to fundamental change, and being pragmatic enough to realise that a dogmatic approach might be counter-productive. Mohamed Mursal, another member of the project team, remembers:

> *During the early days, the chief would tell us that the whole community was gathered and that we could begin the meeting. But we would ask where the women were, or where the pastoralists were. And of course once in a while some of the leaders who had reservations would say things like, 'These people in the baadia don't understand anything. Why do you waste your time with them?'*

Box1. Gender roles and the pastoral associations

In common with most pastoral societies, women's position in Wajir is determined by their connections with male relatives, whether fathers, husbands, or sons. Formal decision-making is traditionally a male preserve, with a clear distinction drawn between the public and private roles of women and men. Women's participation in the pastoral associations has been a subject of continuous debate between Oxfam and the community. On the face of it, the situation looks poor. Very few women are registered as members in their own right, although many more are effectively members as a consequence of their husbands joining. Some associations (Buna, Sarman, and Khorof Harar) have one or two women committee members. And in one (Kutulo), where women's groups were active before the association began, women demanded to be included as officials, and a post was reserved for them. Ahmed Muhumed Omar, chair of the Mansa association, gives an honest assessment:

I know as Somalis we've never valued women's contribution in the way you people feel it should be. Each man will definitely discuss issues with his wife, and many bring their wives' thinking to the meetings. The thing is, he will never say that it is from his wife. These days we invite women to the meetings, but even if they come, they don't contribute much, because they are shy. But then, we don't give them the opportunity or enough encouragement to speak.

And yet the fact that women – however few – are now taking an active role in the business of a pastoral association is, in the eyes of some, a major step forward. Dekha Ibrahim, a well-respected community worker and activist in Wajir, notes:

Even one woman joining the committee of a pastoral association is a really big step, given traditional Somali culture. And she is often worth five men, because other women will be making their voices heard through her. For some women, the older they get, the more liberating it can be. They feel that they have finished delivering children and can now realise their potential. It is these women who tend to participate in the pastoral associations.

However, there is also a sense that some male leaders do little more than tolerate Oxfam's concerns on this issue. Moreover, although women have clearly benefited from the restocking and credit programmes supported by the project, the pastoral associations have until now made little attempt to consider in greater depth the more specific and strategic interests of different parts of their membership, including women.

And so we would use our own way of working as an example, and explain how our whole team takes part in decisions. Slowly, then, you find that people who were traditionally despised, who were never invited to meetings, start to get opportunities to express their opinion ... We were slowly trying to tilt the balance of power from the ones who dominated towards the majority.

The associations thus became testing grounds for new kinds of leadership. Mohamed Elmi describes this as follows:

Traditionally, pastoralists determined their leaders by whether they were honest, or brave when they want to fight. But now we want to know other things about them. Can they manage meetings? Will they be sympathetic to an old woman? If a family came for water, would they chase them away, or would they try to come up with a solution that worked for everybody? One of the Chairs of the most successful association in the district is not from the dominant clan, but he keeps being elected, because of his qualities. That's the kind of leadership which I was hoping would come through.

As a result, the composition of each association does not necessarily follow clan lines. The Wajir Bor association, for example, has members from two of the three main clans in Wajir (the Degodia and the Ogaden). The significance of the associations lies in their emphasis on what unites pastoralists as a group, rather than on what potentially divides them as clans. Maalim Ronow, chair of the Hungai association, describes the divisive impact of the rapid increase in settlements across the district, and the importance of rising above that:

This [i.e. increased settlement] *was an issue on which our ideas were not asked. It is a government policy which has brought about clan conflicts. But one of the behaviours which we have learned from Oxfam is that of working together without looking at the different clans or sub-clans, and rather addressing issues that affect the group as a whole.*

The 'representative' role of the associations – i.e. in articulating pastoralists' concerns to those in authority – and the project team's role in fostering the kind of environment within which that could be done, is the subject of the next section.

3. Building district-level institutions

3.1 Pastoral associations join forces

From an early stage in their development, some of the pastoral associations tried to challenge things which they felt threatened the interests of their members. They wrote to officials arguing against the privatisation of land and the employment of more chiefs (which tends to lead to more settlements, in turn disrupting access to water and grazing), and stopped external agencies (including Oxfam) from drilling emergency boreholes in their area during drought.

It was also quite early on that the associations recognised that their representative role would be stronger if they acted together. A meeting of 11 associations in November 1995 agreed to establish a district-wide association, which became known as the Kulmiye Pastoral Association, or District Pastoral Association.[5] The DPA's purpose was to represent pastoralists' interests to government and other actors, and to help its member associations take collective action when it made sense to do so (such as purchasing livestock drugs or borehole spares in Nairobi).

Participants at a second workshop in June 1996 drew up a constitution for the DPA and elected its officials. By early 2002, 26 of the 37 pastoral associations in the district had become members. However, its capacity to fulfil its purpose is as yet unproven. Lack of financial sustainability, uncertainty about its status, and the difficulties of sustaining a network of community organisations in a district with such weak infrastructure, have all conspired to constrain the DPA's progress. In theory, the pastoral associations give the DPA its mandate and legitimacy; in practice, they are not yet strong enough to provide it with a sound financial base or a strong sense of direction. The DPA's chair is also critical of Oxfam's failure to provide the young organisation with sufficient support:

> *If you plant something ... it needs to be watered and cared for until it can support itself with its own roots. Oxfam is not so good at watering the tree it planted there.*

5. *Kulmiye* is a Somali word meaning 'coming together'.

One of the recent challenges facing the DPA and its members has been to resolve its legal status. Should its vision be to register as a welfare organisation, CBO, or NGO? Should it constitute itself as some kind of co-operative union? Does it see itself primarily as the provider of commercial services to herders, or as an advocate working to further pastoralists' interests?

3.2 Working with government

If pastoral associations in whatever form are to influence the development process in the district – and beyond, at national level – then a strong representative body is essential, and needs to be carefully nurtured. The political environment in the district can be quite hostile to pastoralists. Many government officials come from agricultural backgrounds 'down-country', and are unfamiliar with pastoral settings; the training programmes for technical staff tend not to cover issues specific to pastoralism or to nomadic communities; and turnover can be very high, such that by the time government staff have started to understand the place and their role, they are moved on.

In order to counteract these problems, a few like-minded individuals in the district set up the Pastoral Steering Committee (PSC) in 1995. The PSC is a sub-committee of the District Development Committee, which is the highest decision-making body in the district on development matters. Its role is to co-ordinate the activities of all those working in the pastoral sector, from both government and non-government agencies, and to ensure that a strong pastoral voice is heard within the DDC. It also supports the DPA in training and curriculum development for extension workers, and carries out research and advocacy on issues which affect the pastoral economy. Its members are the heads of government departments and NGOs with an interest in pastoral development.

Some examples of what the PSC has done include the manual on working with pastoral associations (an attempt to minimise the impact of turnover, and to ensure that staff newly deployed to the district work in a manner consistent with the approach already in place), and lobbying to halt inappropriate water development or land privatisation.

One of the PSC's most striking achievements was in influencing the district's development plan – a key policy document. A comparison of the plan for 1994-96 with that for 1997-2001 shows significant differences.

The earlier plan worries about over-stocking, migration, and inappropriate management of natural resources – issues which all too often feature in the minds of those who misunderstand the nature of pastoralism. It notes that the 'migratory nature of the people' is 'one of the major constraining factor [sic] to development in the district'.[6] However, the later document expresses concern that irrigation in the south of the district may harm pastoralists' interests; it notes that herders' main asset (livestock) is not generally accepted as security for a loan; and it states that 'the creation of permanent settlements will be monitored and controlled to ensure that it does [not] destroy [the] current basis of pastoralism'.[7] Both the content and the tone of this later plan are markedly different from the earlier one, and a reflection of the PSC's influence within the DDC.

3.3 Challenges

These examples illustrate the potential impact of district-level bodies. However, both the DPA and the PSC have faced significant challenges. Young institutions are often driven by strong and dynamic individuals, who are instrumental in getting them established and in bringing about change. But when those individuals leave and move on, the institution weakens – it becomes less certain about its direction, and more vulnerable to powerful influences which may conflict with its original purpose.

Another reason for the as yet largely unproven impact of these district-level bodies is that there are powerful actors who fall outside their sphere of influence. MPs, for example, now have greater influence in Kenya, given the more mixed composition of the national parliament under a multi-party system, although the space within which they can manoeuvre is limited by the pressures of a political system still largely driven by patronage. Although political representatives in Wajir have shown their willingness to engage with Oxfam and other development actors, they have not yet used their influence to deliver positive benefits for pastoralists. Some have applied pressure in ways which are actively damaging – such as lobbying the Provincial office to allow more boreholes to be drilled after the district authorities had refused them. This illustrates a widespread problem in Kenya, which is that – regardless of the formal institu-

6. Office of the Vice-President and Ministry of Planning and National Development, 'Wajir District Development Plan, 1994-1996', page 45.
7. Office of the Vice-President and Ministry of Planning and National Development, 'Wajir District Development Plan, 1997-2001', page 54.

tional arrangements in place – powerful individuals may still try to exercise influence behind the scenes to ensure that they get what they want.

The WPDP has also made no significant effort yet to influence the growing number of local councillors. Many of them are town-based, with little understanding of pastoral livelihoods, and instinctively support things like more sub-locations and settlements, which are highly damaging to the pastoral economy. In common with most other pastoral districts in Kenya, the mainstream political system – from the locational committees to the DDC – is thus largely indifferent, or at worst antagonistic, to pastoralism. An evaluation of the WPDP, conducted as part of a review by DFID of its sustainable agriculture programme in Kenya in 2000, noted the following:

> *The mainstream [governmental structure] continues to make decisions that are contrary to the advice of the pastoralists' representatives ... Project staff and most local interviewees maintained that it will be impossible to change the district political structure without broader national change.*[8]

The links between poverty in pastoral communities and the actions (or inaction) of institutions at other levels are clear. Pastoralists' livelihood security is affected by their dependence on markets and exchange mechanisms over which they currently have little control. Their personal security is determined by how seriously government and other bodies take their responsibilities for promoting peace. Addressing these more fundamental causes of poverty is a complex task, given the range of (often conflicting) influences at play.

However, there are some positive signs of change at national level in Kenya, such as the efforts of the Arid Lands Resource Management Project (ALRMP) in the Office of the President to develop a positive national framework for pastoral development, which can in turn inform both sector-specific policies and district-level actions. Another encouraging development, influenced by events in Wajir, is the collaborative work on conflict management, explained in the box below.

8. M. Leach (2000), 'Draft Evaluation of Sustainable Agriculture Programme in Kenya', unpublished report, London: DFID

Box 2. Wajir Peace and Development Committee

After the collapse of Somalia at the beginning of the 1990s, Wajir became increasingly vulnerable to the impact of banditry and the influx of small arms. Horrified by a particularly brutal period of inter-clan conflict in 1993, several groups in the district took spontaneous steps to promote peace. These received formal recognition in 1995 with the creation of the Wajir Peace and Development Committee (WPDC), a sub-committee of the DDC.

The WPDC brought together the district administration, the security forces, and a wide cross-section of people, including women, elders, businessmen, and young people. It showed how traditional approaches to conflict resolution, through the participation of the elders, could be combined with the more formal authority of the State, demonstrating how customary practices and contemporary institutions of governance could find common ground, and thus reinforce and enrich each other. What started as a community-led response to crisis developed into a systematic and institutionalised mechanism for managing conflict, encompassing all those with an interest in peace and security, including the army, under the leadership of the District Commissioner. Its strength was in recognising that everyone in a broad coalition, even apparently disparate groups, had a legitimate stake in building a peaceful future.

This initiative has since spread to other districts. Similar peace-building approaches are now being tried in ten other pastoral districts, under the leadership of the ALRMP and a network of donors and agencies in Nairobi.

4. Lessons learned

The largely positive impact of the WPDP has been captured in a series of reviews and evaluations. The mid-term review of the second phase, for example, carried out in mid-1999, noted that: 'As a result of the formation of the pastoral associations and the effective participation of communities in contributing to and implementing their action plans, there now seems to be a shared purpose among community members, a feeling of empowerment and an awareness that they are agents of their own lives and futures.'[9]

Pastoral association members also reflect on the changes brought by the project. Ahmed Muhumed Omar, chair of the Mansa association, comments:

Before, we didn't know what benefits we could get from forming an association. But now we are able to clearly say that this is good for us and will benefit us, and this will not.

Feelings of confidence and optimism about the future represent arguably the single most important impact achieved by the WPDP as a whole. What the project has been trying to show is that pastoralists have the skills and resources to manage development on their own terms. In doing so, some of the main lessons learned have been as follows.

- A service-delivery approach can be combined with a commitment to address more fundamental inequalities, and can be carried out in ways which also build the long-term skills and capacities of local organisations to address both strategic and practical concerns.

- An important indicator of quality is a self-critical approach – constantly questioning whether another way of working might be more effective or might achieve greater impact. A project team should also be prepared to open itself up to criticism and challenge by communities; if not, their legitimacy is weakened.

- A key area for constant questioning is the appropriate use of project resources. Care should be taken not to fund recurrent costs, which can

9. E.M.N. Wekesa (1999), WPDP Phase 2, Output to Purpose (Mid-Term) Review, unpublished report, BDDEA/Oxfam, Nairobi.

Credit: Geoff Sayer/Oxfam

A woman of the Murule clan, milking goats at dawn in a homestead in the bush near Dambas.

prolong dependence on external agencies and mask the extent to which organisations are genuinely sustainable. Both the external agency and the community should carefully think through the implications and consequences of each funding decision.

- The primary determinant of project quality is the quality of project staff: their skills, judgement, and experience, and the personal values which guide their actions. As such, issues of recruitment, training, team management, and personal discipline become crucial to the success of the project.

- Individuals can bring about positive change, through their skills, patronage, and influence. Yet this needs 'institutionalising' – i.e. embedding in structures which will outlive staff movements or civil service deployments, and which will guard against powerful individuals circumventing the system for negative ends.

- Development workers should not be prescriptive about solutions, but rather let young organisations work things out for themselves, asking critical questions where necessary to guide their thinking. Each association in Wajir determined the direction and pace of activities, even if in some cases this meant moving more slowly than the project team might have hoped.

- However, 'participatory development' does not mean leaving communities to do everything their own way, because this may mask inequities. External agencies can contribute useful knowledge about more effective ways of doing things. The skill lies in mixing local and external knowledge, to get the best possible solutions in each context.

- Pastoral areas tend to be sharply segregated along gender lines, with a clear distinction drawn between the public and private roles of women and men. Apparently minor gains in women's representation can actually be highly significant. Gender inequities should be addressed in ways which recognise that change has to come from within, and cannot be imposed from without.

- Changing the social and political environment within which development choices are made and priorities are set is a dynamic and complex process. Apparent gains can quickly be lost with changes in key personnel, or with challenges from powerful individuals. A clear sense of vision and direction for pastoral development is crucial, but this cannot be pursued in isolation from national development. The broader policy framework must be 'right' – managed in such a way that policy-makers are able to listen and learn from those living in poverty. Strong, representative institutions are the means through which pastoral communities can find common ground, and begin to influence those policy choices on their own terms.

5. Conclusion

The past few years in Wajir have been difficult ones for the pastoral associations. Prolonged drought has put additional pressure on their members and on the natural resource base. Smaller associations have been particularly badly affected, with pastoralists migrating for long periods to cope with the situation. And as the nine-year endpoint of the WPDP draws closer, the long-term sustainability of the associations at both local and district level becomes an ever more pressing concern.

On the one hand, there are positive signs. A recent review of private animal health service delivery in pastoral areas of Kenya found that all the pastoral associations visited in Wajir had recorded growth in their membership and in the income from members' fees.[10] It also noted that the decentralised nature of the delivery system (through the DPA, pastoral associations, and *daryelle*s[11]) meant that animal health services had been extended to very remote areas of the district, thus achieving better control over disease outbreaks.

However, the associations still face considerable challenges: low levels of capital and purchasing power, poor infrastructure, inability to influence the practices of external agencies (such as NGOs distributing cheaper subsidised livestock drugs in the district), and limited administrative capacity. Crucially, none of the pastoral associations has recorded more than 50 per cent of their potential membership.[12] The WPDP is therefore making a concerted effort to strengthen the membership base of the local associations, both directly and by working through local partners.

A lesson from Wajir is that pastoralists need dedicated and professional expertise to support them through the process of institution building. Oxfam has recently funded the work of a consultant, who has been helping the DPA analyse the legal framework for registration in Kenya and

10. 'An Assessment of the Economic Viability of the Private Animal Health Service Delivery in Pastoral Areas of Kenya', Global Providers International Ltd, November 2001.
11. A *daryelle* is a nomadic community worker, who combines the roles of health worker and paravet, and is trained and managed by the local pastoral association.
12. 'An Assessment of the Economic Viability of the Private Animal Health Service Delivery in Pastoral Areas of Kenya', Global Providers International Ltd, November 2001.

choose the most appropriate form of registration. The DPA has also drawn up a constitution, which more clearly separates powers and clarifies the role of the executive. In addition, Oxfam is funding for two years a veterinary doctor and an accountant/administrator, to bring greater technical expertise into the DPA and increase the quality of its support to the local associations and *daryelles*.

Another way in which external agencies can support the process of institution building in districts such as Wajir is by working at provincial or national level to improve the overall environment within which development projects are implemented. One current initiative is to work with the ALRMP, the AU/IBAR, and other animal health service providers to draw up a code of conduct to harmonise approaches to service delivery in North-Eastern Province, thus avoiding the problems caused by different agency practices undermining each other. Oxfam is also working with the ALRMP to facilitate networks of pastoral groups in other arid districts, finding ways in which they might work together more effectively, and offering the manual on working with pastoral associations developed in Wajir, and some small seed money for any pilot activities, as contributions to that process.

For the best part of a decade, the WPDP has been trying to accompany pastoralists in Wajir in their efforts to 'take charge of their future', fostering the growth of organisations which will allow them to manage their immediate development priorities and to influence what is done by others in their name. But all involved are clearly aware that sustainable change will only come about when the links between institutions at different levels – from the pastoral associations to the DPA, or from the DDC/PSC to more senior administrative levels in Nairobi – are strong, and when there is a more genuine sense of accountability between them. In Wajir, even though there has been real progress, most of these institutions are, for a number of reasons, still weak. Even a nine-year programme, with a highly skilled and committed project team, has made only steps on the road towards genuine self-determination. Further investment in skills and capacity, and major attitudinal change among those in power, are still required before pastoral associations can start to exercise significant impact on policy. Moreover, this process must be shaped and driven by the people concerned. External agents can only foster that process by ensuring that it is guided by basic principles of equity and social justice, and by providing carefully judged support to the initiatives of pastoralists themselves.

Additional reading

Birch, I and Shuria, H.A.O. (2001) *"Perspectives on pastoral development: A Casebook from Kenya"* Oxfam Publishing

A. Bonfiglioli (1992) *"Pastoralists at a Crossroads"*, unpublished report, Nairobi: UNICEF/UNSO Project for Nomadic Pastoralists in Africa.

Wajir Pastoral Steering Committee, *'Supporting Pastoral Associations in Wajir: A Manual for Development Practitioners'*, April 2000. (available on the Eldis website, or from Oxfam,
PO Box 40680, Nairobi)

Useful websites

http://www.iied.org/drylands Resources from the Drylands Programme of the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED). These include the bulletin *Haramata*, and a new series of working papers, *Securing the Commons*, discussing the shared management of common property resources.

http://www.odi.org.uk/pdn Resources from the Pastoral Development Network of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) .

http://www.eldis.org/pastoralism Internet resource focusing on pastoralism.

http://www.ossrea.org Website of the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa, whose research activities include issues relating to drylands.

International Institute for Environment and Development

Drylands Programme

The Drylands Programme aims to contribute towards more effective and equitable management of natural resources in semi-arid Africa. It has a particular focus on decentralised management of natural resources, pastoral development, land tenure and resource access. Key objectives of the programme are to strengthen local capacity for sustainable resource management, by building effective and accountable local institutions; identify and promote national policies that legitimise and enable local-level decision making and authority; argue and lobby for global policies and institutions that support the development needs and priorities of dryland peoples.

It does this through four main activities: collaborative research with a range of partners in dryland African countries, training in participatory methods, policy advice to donor organisations, and information networking promoting links and learning between French and English-speaking Africa.

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ISSN 1357 9312