# Pastoralist civil societies: cooperative empowerment across boundaries in borderlands of Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia*

Civil society is generally defined as being neither part of the state nor business but commonly thought of as based on formal organisations like CBOs and NGOs. The aim of the study was to review this notion within the context of specific East African borderlands, analyse characteristics of *civil societies of proximity* beyond the formal sphere and empowering cooperative practices across political and social boundaries.

The study was based on five weeks of fieldwork in Kenya and Uganda in mid-2017, including in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions and stakeholder workshops; a wide range of literature on the area and pertinent issues; as well as the experience and expertise of investigators and collaborators gathered in decades of research and practical work in and on the region.

The Study Region

The study focused on two border regions in Eastern Africa: first, the area where the Turkana people of Kenya border the Nyangatom of Ethiopia und South Sudan; and second, the historical cradleland of the Ateker-speaking communities along the Kenya-Uganda border. In both regions, over 90% of the people are mobile pastoralists, and both are characterised by utmost spatial and cultural distance from the political and economic centres of each of the neighbouring states. This finds expression in widespread disinterest of local populations in national politics and a stark mutual lack of understanding between the study regions' pastoralists on one side and national majorities and international actors on the other. Although oil exploration in Turkana, mining (mainly limestone) in Karamoja, and the development of commercial farming schemes in Ethiopia's Lower Omo valley are growing economic sectors besides mobile livestock economies and organic agriculture, (agro-)pastoralism, evolved to use dryland resources sustainably, remains the major source of local livelihoods. The lack of awareness of the value and potential local economies and knowledge have leads crisis management and development efforts into directions that exacerbate the crisis instead of containing it. The best chance to change that lies in much more intensive and systematic involvement of pastoralists –as experts of the sustainable use and management of their environment– and those versed in tapping their knowledge and capacities. The study analyses local and regional contexts as conditional framework for doing so.
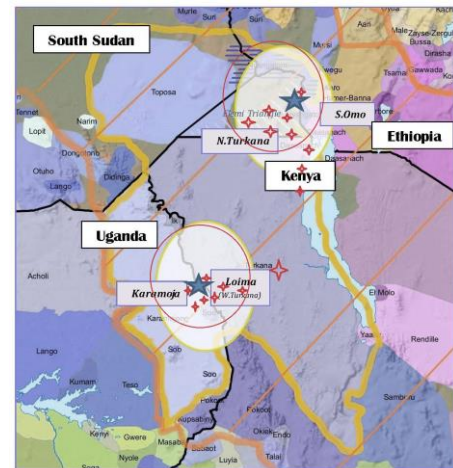
Civil Society: a pool of autonomous agency

Working efficiently with 'informal' civil societies in this region requires an enhanced understanding of the socio-cultural institutions and principles with which the pastoralist majority of the study region regulates their affairs, as well as the ethics and values, ideals and aspirations, interests and preferences, forms of socialisation and education on which they are based. Through these institutions, locals ensure individual and collective rights and opportunities, protection of and equitable access to key resources, organise migrations across socio-geographical boundaries and cross-boundary resource sharing. The study provides evidence that existing well-functioning sustainable practices are often based on *social proximity*, which in turn appears to be strongly correlated with *spatial proximity*. While there is also partial overlap with *cultural proximity*, it remains important to note this partiality, as well as to define these notions more precisely.

Working towards a better integration of local populations in development and governance has increasingly focussed on work with individuals that enjoy special respect and influence. This is based on the hope that such people act as honest and efficient connectors promoting the interests of their communities. The study discusses strengths and challenges of this approach and differentiates trusted personalities who are pastoralists and thus an integral part of the local civil societies of close proximity, i.e. '*internal connectors*', from professionals with formal education who, even if they are from the area, form a socio-culturally and economically clearly distinct group, and in the border regions under discussion a small minority that largely specialises in brokering cooperation and resource flows between local environments and the wider world, i.e. '*external connectors*'. It is crucial to integrate the capacities of both, including CBOS and NGOs, representatives and experts, local networks and home-grown forms of organisation. We suggest generating synergy through cooperation and communication structures that involve far more of the local societies of proximity than well-known "workshop elders", structures that ground innovation in the resilient democratic mechanisms of indigenous institutions.

Although life is quite challenging for a majority of the region's people, what they normally look for in an 'internal' leader is not so much the ability or determination to change things in any fundamental way, but the ability and determination to help find ways of avoiding or reversing negative changes, especially changes that affect their ability to live the life they desire and are well qualified to master. Thus, categories presumed to be synonymous –like 'respected people', 'trusted connectors', 'role models' and 'change makers'– have to be disentangled and differentiated to do justice to local perceptions that associate them with conspicuously different kinds of people. We provide typologies and examples of such personalities, their characteristics and capacities.

This study indicates that, while funding can be important and useful, the at the same time most promising and most neglected resource are the insights and capacities of the region's people, their mental strength, passionate morality and practical ingenuity. Regardless if we look at a Somali businesswoman at the Turkana-Ethiopia border backing local families in situations of crisis, a perspicacious young NGO activist from Karamoja exploring potentials of new media and technologies for illiterate majorities, a pastoralist spokesman from the Loima frontier excelling in generating consensus through the power of public reasoning, a visionary Spanish construction innovator pioneering climate-appropriate construction technologies based on local labour and resources, or a serious Turkana student with a passion for the welfare of his community, we find that many local people are admirably resourceful, independent and self-motivated in their pursuit of equity, a responsible course of action and a chance for everyone. While smart design, perpetual genuine hard checks and flexible adaptiveness are crucial for the success of any intervention, this success will ultimately always depend on the personal qualities, capacities and motivation of those involved.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study explored a type of civil society of high value not only for members but also instructive for others who don't enjoy similarly high levels of participation, pro-activeness, self-reliance and sustainability. To tap its potentials, we suggest community-centred communication and exchange models using modern technology, e.g. cross-border and cross-sector video messaging systems, Nomadic Civil Journalism, inter-community councils, forums integrating pastoralists and development actors, researchers and policy makers to deploy local expertise and complementary capacities for developing appropriate responses to urgent challenges. Working with different types of actors in different contexts on different problems and strategies, an overarching structure is needed to bring them into synergy. More important than quantities are the degree of adaptability of its design to the socio-ecological environment and an adequate coalition of stakeholders across sectors to jointly develop far-sighted answers to the question what kinds of improvement, and in which combination, are most favourable to the social, ecological and thus economic resilience of local societies under increasing stress and help local and regional civil societies to ensure that people have a say in what affects and concerns them.