

Processes of boundary making in the Karamoja Cluster: Changing land tenure, conflict, and governance challenges

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Abstract

Land tenure and resource governance in the drylands of Kenya and Uganda are undergoing rapid change. Pastoralists must negotiate these changes at a time of multiple challenges, including prolonged drought, livestock and crop disease, and various forms of conflict. In this 'frontier' region land reform and the rush for dryland resources by a diversity of private and public actors are provoking different forms of boundary-making along with fragmentation of pastoralist areas. The region's resources are being revalued with the rise of mining, energy extraction, conservation, and infrastructure projects (Mosley and Watson, 2016; Lind et al., 2020). In addition to these often externally driven pressures on land, people from the region are increasingly individualizing and privatizing access to and ownership of land (Greiner, 2016; Elliot, 2016; Drew, 2022). People's decisions to individualize land are situated within a highly dynamic context. For example, drought and crop failure can cause people to sell land to buy food. At the same time, land reforms in Kenya and Uganda are encouraging pastoralists to secure communal land through demarcation and registration (Alden Wiley, 2018; Ashukem, 2019). These various forms of boundary-making are re-drawing the nature of Kenyan and Ugandan drylands in terms of land and resource rights, access, and management.

This article reveals the complex relations between different actors involved in processes of boundary-making and land tenure negotiations. It draws out contestations between and within communities, and between communities and public and private actors. For example, family members and neighbours feud over irregular land sales by individuals, while communities clash over land demarcation associated with communal land registration. The paper also shows how conflicts relating to land intersect in new ways with livestock raiding and other forms of violent conflict at the community-level.

The paper argues and shows how interactions between different actors involved in processes of boundary-making and land tenure negotiations involve the navigation and contestation of different ways of seeing and conceptualising land governance, access, and use. In dryland regions modernist discourses and ideologies relating to commercialisation of resources, privatization, and individualisation of land combine and compete with more communal ways of governing land. Tensions between these different ways of conceptualising and governing land are present at multiple levels and processes, such as within communities, between communities and land speculators, and in the implementation of land reform.

To address these pressing issues, the paper focuses on the following questions:

- How are processes of boundary-making and resource governance institutions contested within and between communities, and between communities and various private and public actors?
- How do modernist visions for the drylands intersect and clash with more communal ideologies in processes of boundary-making and land tenure change?
- To what extent do different types of land demarcation enable or inhibit secure access to land and resources for diverse pastoralist groups and individuals?
- What can be learned from the ongoing, rapid changes in dryland governance and use in terms of the identification of alternative pathways towards 'good' resource governance, food security and reduced conflict?

The paper applies a political ecology of natural resource institutions and resource conflicts (Behnke 2018; Haller 2019; Turner 2017) to theorise processes of 'boundary-making' (Bollig, 2016). It is based on an interdisciplinary research project that comparatively investigates changing land use and tenure in West Pokot and Turkana Counties (Kenya), and Moroto and Napak Districts (Uganda). A range of qualitative and quantitative data from across the four sites are used to understand the changing dynamics of land tenure and resource governance alongside the multiple challenges facing pastoralists of the region. The project's regional approach enables a unique and novel understanding of how boundary-making in one area is interlinked with land tenure and livelihoods in neighbouring areas.

On top of adding to understandings of the complexities surrounding land tenure change, the paper also provides suggestions that could promote equitable resource governance for pastoralist communities across the region. Such equity requires that boundary-making does not lead to exclusion; rather it must enable the most vulnerable members of society to access the resources they require to sustain their livelihoods. The paper forwards ways to promote institutional structures and practices that maintain and improve pastoralists' flexible rights to communal resources.

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