

Contestation, conflict and claims-making around the Lake Turkana Wind Power windfarm, northern Kenya

Jeremy Lind (Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies, Sussex University)
Daniel Salau Rogei (Post-Doctoral Fellow, Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises Research Programme, Carleton University)

Investment in large-scale renewable-energy projects has increased substantially in recent years as governments capitalise on the turn to ‘green’ energy. The prevailing perspective is that renewable energy investments are broadly positive – generating ‘public good’ by expanding national energy production from green sources while contributing to economic growth. Yet, benefits for communities adjacent to project sites are often more ambiguous, with inadequate attention to the impacts on social cohesion or the rights of local peoples. This paper adds to discussions of community perspectives and responses to large land- and resource-based investments that highlight the role of local agency. Taking the example of contestations around the Lake Turkana Wind Power (LTWP) project in northern Kenya, it argues that various community strategies and manoeuvres to seek recognition and associated rights to opportunities and benefits uncover a deeper conflict around governance and authority as it relates to everyday lives and livelihoods. Local agency highlights the shortcomings of efforts that seek to formalise rights within a statutory legal and regulatory framework and the other processes through which community stakeholders assert their inclusion in large-scale investments.

Sprawling over 160 square kilometres to the east of Lake Turkana in Kenya’s far north, the LTWP site – consisting of 365 turbines and a high voltage substation – was connected to the national grid in 2019. Notable as the largest single private investment in Kenya’s history, the US\$800 million LTWP development was constructed in rangelands inhabited by interacting groups of Turkana, Samburu, Rendille and El Molo peoples. Yet, life continues to be deeply insecure for most. Residents of the small settlements near the LTWP windfarm talk about the project in ways that differ, sometimes significantly, from the ways that governments, developers, and advocacy groups do. Framings and meanings given to the wind development do not invoke straightforward notions of resistance or anticipating rewards. Rather, they are a critical commentary on the project’s governance through performative consultation and its elevation of gatekeepers that steer benefits to the exclusion of most.

By examining how residents living near the LTWP project ‘see’ and respond to the development of the windfarm, we address the following question: How do different actors who are ‘assembled’ around particular resource-based investments frame and contest the process of development as well as distribution of project benefits and harms? By centring the views and priorities of residents based in ‘communities of place, identity and interest’ (Banks et al., 2013), we uncover the multiplicity of possible interpretations, influenced by differences such as gender, age, ethnicity, employment, and social status.

The paper is based on an ‘intersecting methodologies’ approach (Shaw and Lind, 2022) encompassing community-based participatory research (CBPR), participatory video, and qualitative and ethnographic methods, carried out in small settlements in the LTWP area between 2017 and 2019. By revealing various local subjectivities and competing vernacular

perspectives, the paper details the wider impacts and forms of contentious politics arising around the LTWP project. These include an overwhelming sense that people had not been told the truth, and that many promises were made that were not going to be kept, or were already broken; an increase in conflict as people felt that jobs and opportunities were given out in ways that were not fair and balanced; and consultation processes that were circumscribed and which quieted the voices of many residents in a way that was reflected in how project benefits were distributed and harms left unattended.

These assorted local perspectives are inseparable from strategies and actions. People sought to be recognised, ranging from protests and blockades to mobilising other local opinion against the development, and electing leaders who challenged the project. These various ways of contesting the political terrain and governance spaces of the wind development further develop the notion of ‘inclusion by subversion’ (Okenwa, 2019), whereby strategies are intended as a means of engagement and way to forge connections with public authorities. The experiences of residents inhabiting the rangelands around the LTWP project show how large-scale projects are redefined through local meanings and practices in ways that challenge developer and state governance of everyday lives at the margins.

References

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