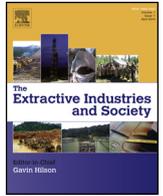




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Original article

# Pastoralism in the time of oil: Youth perspectives on the oil industry and the future of pastoralism in Turkana, Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

The central aim of this paper is to discuss how oil exploration and development is creating disjunctures in the livelihood desires and strategies of youth from pastoralist households in Turkana, northern Kenya. It specifically considers how the newfound presence of oil exploration companies is altering the nature and type of livelihoods that youth desire in Turkana. While pastoralism remains the dominant livelihood strategy in the region – practiced by over 70% of the population – the presence of an emerging oil industry is leading many Turkana youth to imagine futures involving livelihoods other than pastoralism. These futures are characterized by a move away from subsistence livelihoods towards wage-labour and market-driven production. Drawing from key informant interviews, focus group discussions and field observations, our findings contribute to current debates about the interplay between extractive industries and pastoralist livelihoods in Turkana. Ultimately, we argue that while youth in Turkana are trying to take advantage of new opportunities being created by the oil industry, these opportunities could also exacerbate existing inequalities and foster new forms of vulnerability.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2012, Anglo-Irish firm Tullow Oil discovered oil in Turkana, an arid and semi-arid county in northwestern Kenya primarily inhabited by pastoralist communities. According to Tullow, it has made significant social investments in education, health and livelihoods in Turkana since beginning its exploration and development activities in 2012. Notably, the company has invested KSh 125 million (US \$1.2 million at today's exchange rate) in a scholarship scheme for Turkana youth. In 2014 alone, Tullow helped 30 students from Turkana undertake post-graduate studies in oil-related fields in the United Kingdom. In the rather unique context of Turkana – where pastoralism remains the dominant livelihood strategy and education rates remain extraordinarily low – such schemes are indicative of the fact that some youth are likely to experience new opportunities and different life chances as a result of the emergent oil industry.

With this in mind, the primary objective of this paper is to analyze the disjunctures that oil exploration and development appears to be creating in the livelihood desires and strategies of youth in Turkana's pastoralist communities, as well as how such

disjunctures stand to alter livelihoods in the county. Specifically, this paper demonstrates that the new presence of oil exploration companies in Turkana is altering both the nature and type of livelihood activities that Turkana youth desire. While pastoralism is still practiced by over 70% of the population in Turkana (Watson and van Binsbergen, 2008), the mere presence of the oil industry is causing many youth to imagine futures involving livelihoods other than pastoralism alone. These futures are increasingly characterized by a shift away from subsistence livelihoods towards non-livestock based activities and wage labour.

Drawing from interviews, discussions and field observations, we argue that the discovery of oil is creating new opportunities – both real and imagined – for youth in Turkana. Moreover, the emergence of an oil industry is providing youth with the desire and, in some cases, the means for livelihood diversification, as well as new ways to generate income. As a result, some youth in Turkana are being exposed to new life chances, which may ultimately equip them – as well as their households and communities – to respond to the changing realities of life northern Kenya. Importantly though, youth do not see diversification into the oil industry as replacing pastoralist livelihoods altogether. Rather, they see the oil industry as an opportunity to sustain and adapt existing livelihoods. In this sense, our findings support the argument that the long-term success of pastoralism in Turkana is

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due in part to the imaginative, innovative and adaptive capacities of pastoralists and their communities (Catley et al., 2013).

At the same time however, our findings reveal problems with claims about the potential of the oil industry to contribute positively to the future of the county as a whole, which have been circulating in Kenya since oil was first discovered in Turkana. For one, the new (and few) livelihood opportunities that have been created by the oil industry are neither accessible nor readily available to most in Turkana, including youth. In fact, most employment opportunities remain completely out of the reach of youth in Turkana. As such, we suggest that the inequitable distribution of livelihood opportunities in the oil industry has the potential to exacerbate social stratification and generate new forms of inequality in Turkana, as well as to contribute to existing tensions and conflict. Discussions with youth – and their parents – about their increasing desires to diversify into the oil industry brings other important issues to light, including concerns related to migration and precarious labour conditions. Our findings suggest that in addition to any livelihood benefits the oil industry represents for pastoralist communities in Turkana, the current trajectory of oil development may also contribute to new forms of social stratification and inequality.

Our discussion in this paper contributes to ongoing debates about the importance of livelihood diversification for pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the unintended outcomes that can result from diversifying into new income-generating activities. It also offers insights on how different groups in pastoralist communities respond to and are impacted by resource extraction—differentiating the voices, perspectives and experiences of youth. As our opening discussion indicates, youth in Turkana are eager to discuss and understand the possibilities created by oil exploration and development, despite being underrepresented in important decision-making processes shaping Turkana's oil industry. This in turn shapes the methodological approach and analytical lens we use in this paper, as we strive to amplify the voices of youth whose perspective are often neglected in relevant debates. The focus on youth is also meant to promote better-informed, and more inclusive, debates on the promises and pitfalls of the oil industry for the future of pastoralism in Turkana.

This paper begins by reviewing relevant literature on the livelihood implications of extractive industries for pastoralist communities, and clarifies our analytical approach. The next section provides an overview of the study area and relevant contextual information—highlighting interactions between oil exploration companies, the government and communities in Turkana to date. We then describe our methods and further explain our decision to focus on youth. Then, in Section 5, we analyze the livelihood desires and strategies of youth in Turkana in light of ongoing oil exploration and development. We explore the kinds of futures that young pastoralists are navigating towards, as well as the opportunities and constraints that they are encountering in the process. This analysis reveals that the livelihood opportunities created by Turkana's emergent oil industry are not equally accessible to all youth, and discusses other challenges that are arising with efforts to diversify into Turkana's emergent oil industry. We conclude that the current trajectory of oil in Turkana risks excluding youth and undermining their livelihood desires, which could correspond to new forms of socio-economic inequality in the long run.

## 2. Conceptualizing the interplay between pastoralist livelihoods and extractive industries in sub-Saharan Africa

A common depiction of pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa has long been one of people in waiting (see Reidy 2012). This depiction – which is frequently reflected in mainstream news, literature and

policy debates – paints pastoralists as “marginal peoples living in marginalized spaces” (Catley et al., 2013, p. 2). While it is true that many pastoralist communities face unique hardships and development challenges – particularly in arid and semi-arid regions of sub-Saharan Africa – common misrepresentations of pastoralists tend to reinforce misunderstandings about the adaptability and resiliency of their livelihoods. This is not to say that media images portraying poverty, famine and destitution among pastoralist communities are not real, but that such images only convey a narrow part of the story.

A more critical approach to studying pastoralist livelihoods departs from such representations, focusing instead on the ability of pastoralists to transform, adapt and innovate in response to continually changing circumstances. Much of the critical theoretical work that promotes this perspective is rooted in Scott's (1976, 1998, 2009) observations of relationships between peasants and states. In contrast to depicting pastoralists as people perpetually in need, this body of work sees pastoralists as individuals with agency and pastoralist livelihoods as sites of innovation (Catley et al., 2013). Our analysis is based on this approach, emphasizing the imaginative, innovative and adaptive capacities of individuals in pastoralist communities in Turkana. Drawing on an established body of critical literature, including Simons (2005), Scott (2009), McPeak et al. (2011) and Catley et al. (2013), we represent pastoralists as “active agents of change rather than passive recipients” of development (Sen, 2011; xiii).

### 2.1. Pastoralist livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa

Evidence of the adaptive and innovative capacity of pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa can be found in their livelihood activities and strategies.<sup>1</sup> Unlike some parts of the world where governments provide services to people with risky, insufficient or unsustainable livelihoods, pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa tend to inhabit spaces where states repeatedly disengage from doing so.<sup>2</sup> With little to no state-offered safety nets in place, pastoralists have long engaged in a complex portfolio of livelihood strategies – or livelihood diversification – in order to survive. Fluid, flexible and adaptive livelihoods have enabled pastoralists to spread or mitigate risks, while at the same time creating opportunities for economic gain and improved access to different forms of capital (Bebbington, 1999; Pedersen and Benjaminsen, 2009). As such, the types of livelihood activities that pastoralists engage in – in addition to livestock production – are in constant motion, shifting according to the opportunities available in different spaces and times. Livelihood diversification has proven essential to the survival of pastoralists and has ultimately become an important part of the everyday life of individuals and households.

While the agency and adaptive capacity of pastoralists should be emphasized, changes beyond their control – at local and global levels – still challenge and constrain their livelihood strategies. Such changes include, but are not limited to, climate change, insecurity, land grabbing, globalization, commercialization, urbanization and migration. Climate change in particular appears to be having a significant impact on livelihoods in arid and semi-arid regions of sub-Saharan Africa, where many pastoralists reside. As the effects of climate change become more apparent, competition over land and other natural resources also appears to be increasing (Catley et al., 2013). This has challenged the ability of many

<sup>1</sup> We use the term “livelihood” in reference to the complex portfolios of activities that people use to survive and generate income (Scoones 2009; Alinovi et al. 2010; Coulthard et al. 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For greater detail on why pastoralists reside in spaces that are marginalized by the state, see Scott, 1976, 1998, 2009.

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