

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

PARTICIPATORY PLANNING IN EAST AFRICA'S DRYLANDS, TAKE TWO

From chasing an illusory panacea to practical learning

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Motivation

Historically, many drylands in East Africa have suffered from either malign neglect or 'modernisation' imposed from the top down. Both of these scenarios have failed to integrate local knowledge and voices.

Purpose

How and when can participatory planning bring local voices into decision-making? Can this make planning more equitable? Can this build resilience? Can this improve governance?

To what extent does the effectiveness of interventions depend on local context? Beyond formal design, to what extent does success rely on discretion by local implementers?

Approach and methods

We examine Ward Development Planning (WDP), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented in northern Kenya from 2017 to 2022, as an example of participatory planning. Existing literature paints a confusing picture, where there is neither consensus on whether participatory planning works, nor theory to explain uneven impact.

We employ mixed methods, combining an evaluation, survey experiments, and in-depth case studies across five counties in Kenya. This allows us not only to evaluate overall impact of WDP, but also, using case studies and survey experiments, to examine causal mechanisms to explain why WDP had uneven impacts.

Findings

Participatory planning has significant potential to improve governance in drylands. Its capacity to do this should not, however, mean it is taken to be a panacea that solves all problems and challenges.

Participatory planning can lead to many different benefits. But specific interventions can only effectively address a subset of benefits, owing to limited time and resources. Potential benefits need to be prioritised.

Participatory planning interacts with local social dynamics in complex and contingent ways: searching for best practice is to pursue a mirage.

Programme success relies on local actors using their discretion to translate design into effective action. Local agency and creativity during implementation needs to be appreciated and facilitated.

Policy implications

Participatory planning can bring local voices into decision-making in drylands. To realise the benefits, policy-makers and donors need to adjust their perspectives in three ways:

1. Rather than viewing participatory planning as a panacea that solves all problems, donors and policy-makers should focus on a subset of goals, guided by context and constraints.
2. Donors and policy-makers should shift away from asking “What works?” and expecting a universal answer. Instead, they should learn by focusing on context and locally-led adaptation.
3. Programme management must bring to the fore the agency and decision-making of local practitioners, communities and organisations. They must abandon rigid control from the top down.

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