Empowerment of Pastoral Communities in Ngorongoro, Tanzania

When the Ereto Ngorongoro Pastoralist Programme, a donor funded programme in Tanzania, was looking for a strategy that would build long-term collaboration between the programme and local institutions in the area, it became clear that helping set up independent community-based organisations was the most feasible strategy for sustainability and empowerment. Twelve community based organisations were supported, and within one year, these organisations were up and running, defending community interests and organising development activities.

Ngorongoro District in Northern Tanzania is home to some 100 000 largely Maasai pastoralists practicing mobile and open range livestock production. The district is large and remote and with limited access to government services. Poverty is widespread. Local government is elected but generally perceived as non-representative of the local pastoralist communities. Traditional institutions play a strong role in organising many aspects of daily life. Generally, the pastoral production sector in Tanzania is characterised by a low level of government support, understanding and acceptance; and pastoralists – around 1½ million people – are facing increasing difficulties due to loss of land and lack of supportive policies.

Starting with the basics
The empowerment process started with collaboration on tangible development activities. The Ereto Ngorongoro Pastoralist Programme (NPP) was active for 11 years (1998-2009), supporting poverty reduction in the largely pastoral District of Ngorongoro. The support focused on improving water and veterinary services, restocking and building capacity, and empowerment of local institutions. It also promoted pastoralism as a sustainable land practice that works well together with conservation.

The programme, working in an area of much debate (pastoral communities and conservation), was the subject of serious bilateral discussion between Danida (Denmark) and the Government of Tanzania through the Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism. Although the programme focused its support in one district it also implemented activities in support of pastoral policies and national civil society and government institutions. The principal players in this empowerment process were the traditional Maasai ilaigwanak (spokesmen) representing the local communities, the Pastoral Council in the Ngorongoro Conservation Area, and the Ngorongoro District Authorities.

"No one can tell us what to do; this is our own organisation, and we are not accepting orders from the government - we decide on what we do in our organisation and what we want to speak out about. We can go straight to authorities with our demands without asking permission from anyone."

— Maasai customary leader from Playa village, Ngorongoro
Our CBO is going to make our development more effective, we will co-ordinate the various development initiatives in our area, and we will be able to link up with new partners who will collaborate with us in our development efforts

— CBO member in Piaya village, Ngorongoro

Working closely with local user groups improved organisational capacities and paved the way for stronger local organisations. Eredo NPP worked closely with the various user groups, developing mutual trust and collaboration. Many groups dealing with tangible development interventions became increasingly interested in getting together and helping each other.

“Our women’s groups in the ward have a strong desire to work together and to learn from each other — likewise the other user groups can contribute to our common goals of development and accountability.”

—Member of women’s group, Nainokanoka village

Attempts at establishing various forms of community-based organisations had been made earlier. However some initiatives were frustrated by opposing political forces and by conservation authorities. Eventually, the communities, supported by the programme, decided to utilise the various user groups as the basis for forming more inclusive community organisations. By building on existing groups and committees, and by focusing on local development issues, the communities felt it would be possible to act outside the influence of party politics and conservation authorities.

Achieving and sustaining local empowerment

Formation of Community Based Organisations (CBOs) was seen as an important step by communities in their empowerment process. As a response to the aspirations of the communities, the programme supported a process where the user groups, together with other community members, formed CBOs in each of the 12 wards.

“We are using our CBO to demand accountability of the Conservation Authorities, of the Pastoralist Council, and of the local government and other organisations; we are a watchdog to ensure that promises are being kept by the various stakeholders and that our interests are being spoken out.”

—CBO Chairman in Oloirobi village, Ngorongoro

Local traditional institutions played a key role in facilitating and participating in the development of local organisations. The empowerment process was built in close collaboration with traditional local institutions that are often overlooked in government directed development efforts. The programme had been working with Ewoloto (mutual restocking) committees with strong traditional leadership with very high levels of integrity. Using these committees as a cornerstone in the formation of CBOs was a crucial aspect of the empowerment process. Building CBOs from within local society and locally accepted institutions clearly facilitated the process of empowerment. Involvement of widely respected traditional leadership in the CBOs was crucial in ensuring accountability and community support. However, they are also targets for other actors with intentions of controlling rather than empowering people.

“Our CBO is a way of mixing customary and modern leadership that can take up the challenges we face today, and the CBO is for the people – just like we as customary leaders are made to take an oath that we will work for the common good.”

—CBO leaders and members in Olbalbal village, Ngorongoro

Meeting basic rights

The need for joining hands and speaking out on rights contributed to a widespread interest in developing local organisations. Communities stressed that defending their rights is central to improving their lives. Although local development was a focus in the empowerment process, the aspect of rights was seen as part of the process.

“We have several land and wildlife conflicts in our area and we use the CBO to fight for our rights to our land and our lives”

—Maasai villagers in Nainokanoka village in Ngorongoro Conservation Area

Little understanding has been shown by the Conservation Authorities of the fact that the landscape has been managed by these pastoralists for many generations. Tourism brings in money, but the local communities see next to nothing of this, and they are constantly faced with expanding restrictions placed on them by the Conservation Authorities. There has been severe mistrust between the local population and the Conservation Authorities since the mid-1970s,
Having our CBO is like giving us a voice, responding to our real needs for development and rights when the Authorities began to limit the livelihood opportunities of the pastoralists.

In this context of mutual mistrust, the Pastoralist Council (PC) was established in the mid-1990s by the Conservation Area Authority to promote local development. It consists of the various elected village and ward politicians and of some appointed members; but it does not have independence from the conservation authority and is seen by most people as not representing them. Since the district government structures are also not seen by people as being supportive of their rights and needs, organisations to truly represent the people were badly needed.

User groups sustain a range of development initiatives and CBOs further promote sustainability and new initiatives. The groups have implemented development activities in relation to water, livestock restocking, veterinary service, and women in economic activities. These user groups are now part of the CBOs organising the continuation of activities. The CBOs have accessed funding to implement development initiatives and they function as organisers of local development activities. Linking empowerment with tangible livelihood improvements and poverty reduction ensures that empowerment is directly related to people’s lives. Empowerment processes are facilitated by combining the immediate focus of promoting local development with that of promoting rights.

The importance of CBOs

CBOs are stressing the requirements for fighting poverty and incorporate the poor people in the local community. Experience showed that the CBOs, to become focal points for empowerment, have to be local in the sense of covering an area where people have common interests, can meet without travelling long distances and have some locally accepted institutional structures. Membership of CBOs grew when they were seen to be functioning. Even if the leadership of CBOs is drawn from the more influential in the communities, CBOs are understood to be for the benefit of all.

“I decided to join the women’s group and later the CBO to make sure that my family would benefit from the activities but I could not pay the membership fee, however as the CBO leaders know my situation, I became a member for a much smaller fee.” — Woman in Oloirobi village, Ngorongoro

Membership fees - as decided by the CBOs - are relatively high, but since the leadership knows the people in the area, those who cannot afford it pay much lower fees, ensuring participation of even the poorest. Still, in such local organisations it is often the more influential community members who take the lead and therefore function as gatekeepers. Communities are clearly not homogeneous and interests are different. However, the strong sense of mutual assistance associated with the traditional institutions promoted a spirit of inclusiveness and contributed to checking the role of gate-keeping by the leadership. The strong backing of the CBOs, the large numbers of people at the meetings, and the wide ranging membership among the communities testify to the inclusiveness of the CBOs and their relevance to a wide section of local society.

The role of women in CBO leadership was stressed. Women’s groups were supported in all the wards and they were well represented in the CBOs. Women make up a relatively large percentage of members and it had been decided to ensure that women would hold some leadership positions in the CBOs. This was widely accepted and was made possible by the strong focus on gender balance which was promoted by Ereto NPP throughout.

Empowerment of local communities in areas with conflicts is often opposed by authorities. Previous attempts at organising the communities had been frustrated by the conservation authorities and so a focus on local development CBOs was promoted. Such CBOs could then eventually take up rights issues. The whole process of CBO formation was informed by this approach.

“We are happy with the CBOs as they can be used to implement government policies and development. We will monitor and audit the CBOs so that they are working according to government policies and so they are not cheating.” — District Executive Director of Ngorongoro District
“Having our CBO is like giving us a voice, responding to our real needs for development and rights.”
—CBO members Endulen Village, Ngorongoro Conservation Area

The concept of local CBOs is understood differently by local communities, and by government agencies. While members clearly see the CBOs as empowering them and giving them a voice, the government authorities are more likely to see the CBOs as purely working for local development by implementing government policies. Government does not seem to feel that the empowerment aspect of the CBOs is important.

Maintaining this dual aspect and sometimes blurred distinction of organisational roles proved very useful in the process of promoting empowerment. Hence District and Conservation Authorities as well as the Pastoral Council are to some extent recognising and working with the CBOs. The CBOs are simply too difficult to avoid as they are strongly rooted in the communities. Whereas any organisation only focusing on rights and advocacy would have been shut down or isolated by the authorities, it is difficult to do so with CBOs as they play the roles of both development organisations and rights advocacy groups.

**Extending benefits**

**Formation of CBOs, empowerment of communities, and linking to other development partners is being replicated outside the area.**

The relative success of the empowerment process in Ngorongoro through the formation of CBOs has attracted attention among other communities, civil society and development partners. The approach is being replicated in other parts of Northern Tanzania where some civil society organisations have embarked on a process of empowerment through CBO establishment. Some district departments have also embarked on collaboration with the CBOs on specific development projects.

**Linking local empowerment with higher level organisations grew out of local demands.** The CBOs in each of the 12 wards pushed for establishing a Forum for all the CBOs. They collected their own funding to organise the Forum to facilitate sharing of experience, represent the CBOs on issues of common interest, and provide the communities with a common voice. The Forum also represents CBOs to potential partners.

“When we go together with other CBOs in our neighbouring areas we can share experience and unite with others. We will stand much stronger”
—Customary leader Endulen village, Ngorongoro

**The established CBOs and the more empowered communities were soon playing a key role in defending rights.** In the Conservation Area, the CBOs soon faced a major challenge: the government of Tanzania in April 2009 announced the imminent removal of some 30,000 people from the Ngorongoro Conservation Area and the immediate ban on all forms of cultivation including home gardens. The CBOs participated in organising a strong opposition to these plans including a rather unusual area-wide campaign where all local leadership, including politicians, were made to take an oath in front of traditional leaders and laibons (shamans) that they would work for the good of the people. So far the removal and total ban on cultivation has not come into effect and the fact that people are better organised has probably contributed to some restraint on the side of the authorities.

Later in 2009 in other parts of Ngorongoro District some 10-15 000 people were forcibly removed from their homes to allow a major tourist and hunting company to operate freely. The wards where the CBOs had been established were not directly affected, but they have shown strong solidarity with the affected people. One or two of the wards covered by the CBOs are however at risk of being affected and the CBOs have made it clear to the authorities that they would fight any eviction in their area. It however remains to be seen to what extent such local organisations will be able to stand up against strong vested interests with support from the highest levels of government.

But the sense of a common cause is strong and the pastoralists of the Ngorongoro now have the organisational structures for expressing their common interests and exploring their rights.

“This is the first time that we have been able to ensure that all local leaders and politicians are united in working for the people, I know that we are up against strong forces, I know that some local government leaders and local politicians can be persuaded by money, but now we are at least doing all things possible to defend our rights.”
—Chair of the CBO Forum from Endulen Village