

Non-elite Environmentalisms in a Global Context: Olderkesi and Narok, Kenya



Report on Fieldwork and Stakeholder Engagement Workshop, October 2019.

Report compiled by Paul Hurley, Francis Oloo, Sospeter Wekesa, Emma Roe, and Luke Olang', with thanks to all of the participants we met on field work and who contributed to the workshop.

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1. Background and context

We are in a moment of profound environmental change, which presents challenges at local (water and food security), regional (land security) and global scales (climate change). Rural parts of Kenya have undergone substantial changes in recent years. Water resources and communities are under pressure from agriculture, industry and land management challenges like conservation, deforestation and soil degradation. Institution-led development and environmental efforts - whether addressing food security, nutrition, conservation or climate change adaptation - can sometimes compete or run counter to each other.

With funding from the University of Southampton and a partnership with the Technical University of Kenya, an interdisciplinary research team came together to think about these institution-led (elite) development efforts and how they interact with the realities of (non-elite) communities in areas like Olderkesi in Narok County, Kenya. This short project will enable us to scope for a larger proposal next year that will bring together different partners and stakeholders. The team is made up of Dr. Emma Roe, Dr. Luke Olang', Dr. Francis Oloo, Dr. Paul Hurley and Sospeter Wekesa, who bring together experience and knowledge across university and non-university settings.

The team undertook two days of visiting communities and projects in the Olderkesi area, and held a workshop in Narok town with stakeholders from communities, government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). We say 'environmentalisms' in the plural because it isn't one single thing, and we wanted to find out what 'non-elite environmentalisms' might be in this local context. They might be what communities are doing for themselves, from traditional indigenous ways of living or from newer innovations responding to environmental and social change. They might be things that people are doing within their own family or what they are doing as a wider community.

2. Fieldwork in Olderkesi

On 22nd – 23rd October 2019, Francis, Paul and Sospeter visited different projects and communities in Olderkesi to learn more about non-elite environmentalisms in practice. The team was warmly welcomed by individuals and organisations, facilitated by an excellent local guide, Mr. Mark Karbolo, and learnt a great deal about the area and the humans and non-humans that live there. It inspired rich conversations at the workshop in Narok and since.

2.1 Projects visited in Olderkesi area

i) Nkoiswash Community Based Organsiation Bee-Keeping Project.

We met with one of the villagers involved (Mr. Dabash) and learnt that the community has recently invested money in buying 10 bee hives, and hopes to get a total of 100 hives. Bee keeping is not traditional in Maasai communities but is something learned from the Ndorobo community more recently, and this is one of few projects of its kind here. The hives offer an alternative and additional form of income to livestock farming and also function as a deterrent for elephants but the hives have recently suffered destructive attacks from honey badgers. There are around 50 people (families, so maybe c. 300 individuals) involved in the project, of whom around 60-65% are women, and their involvement gives them capital and independence. Honey is believed to have a medicinal value as well as a monetary one, and 4 litres or 3 kg of honey can be exchanged for 1 sheep.



ii) Olderkesi Sidai Youth Group.

We met with three representatives from this group of around 40 people (30% women) under 35 years old, who seek to preserve local culture and support communities through concerted environmental work. Around 65% of the Maasai population are under 35 and the Sidai (“Sidai” means “good”) Youth Group works together through skills and information sharing to learn how to improve the local environment and to encourage other pastoralists to do the same. They value learning from their elders (through storytelling, traditional modes of reading stars and the natural environment to predict weather) as well as formal education, which brings about more mixing and knowledge exchange between different communities. The members we talked to spoke about drought, issues of overstocking, overgrazing (which can suppress grass and encourage invasive species), tree planting and logging, and their own potential to educate, lobby and build capacity. They see an important role for young people in the future of the area and communities.

iii) Olderkesi Development Project / Africa Gospel Church.



We stayed overnight in the accommodation here, and had conversation over dinner with some of the local individuals involved, and with the American missionary (Mr. Andrew Abrams) the next morning. The mission was established in 1992 as part of the World Gospel Mission and has historically been funded by donations but is attempting to be more self-sustaining. One of the biggest impacts it has had is through the drilling of a borehole, which serves local villagers (who pay 300KShs p/m) and the school (1000 primary and 500 secondary pupils). This provides clean water as well as reducing the distance people have to travel for. Both the borehole pump and the buildings of the project use solar power, and the project also has gardens, where they farm cabbage and other vegetables

for the school and for volunteers. The NGO that supports the church is developing a programme dubbed ‘Farming God’s Way’, with has an emphasis on conservation and biblical principles. It encourages mulching rather than tillage to reduce soil degradation and water usage, and crop rotation to discourage pests. This is being practiced in the project garden, and it is hoped will be adopted by local communities. Others note that while the church and school are improving livelihoods in some ways, some educated young people move away from the community, and some of the traditional Maasai culture and beliefs are being lost.

iv) Ortinye Letelegut Wetland Management project.

This project was started as a community initiative 15 years ago, to counteract the drought and degradation of the existing water source by humans and livestock. A wetland area has been created, with a fence to keep out livestock but that still allows community members to enter to collect water and vegetation. Within this fenced area, a range of trees have been planted (with indigenous species proving more effective than exotic ones) which maintain soil moisture and have in places brought up new water sources. Water now flows for several up to 5 kilometres from these sources while initially the flow was limited to a kilometer or two, and the quality of the water is perceived to be better. More pasture and fodder is now available from the wetland for livestock (the fodder as pasture is cut by hand from the “grass bank” and brought to the livestock outside the wetland), increased rainfall-induced infiltration, improved biodiversity and better availability of dry firewood. The project was set up by a grant, and while 5 acres of wetland was originally planned, it has still proved successful.



v) Olderkesi Community Conservancy.



This was one of the bigger projects that we visited, with a core conservancy area covering over 7000 acres, that is mainly funded and managed by Cottars Wildlife Conservation Trust (CWCT) together with other NGOs like African Wildlife Foundation. CWCT leases land from the local Olderkesi community and uses it to conserve wildlife, generate income for the community, and provide ecotourism opportunities for safari visitors (the conservancy sits between the Maasai Mara National Park and the Serengeti, with valuable wildlife corridors). The organisation has been working with a land use map, developed in consultation with stakeholders across Olderkesi, that defines main land uses (conservancy, tourism, pastoralism and cultivation) and designates areas (for agriculture, conservation, grazing and urbanization) in a way that aims to uplift human life as well as conserve wildlife. This involves creating infrastructure like water sources, bridges, clinics and schools, and providing scholarships, training and job opportunities for community members. The conservancy is committed to giving the profits of its ecotourism for the socio-economic good of the local community, and has become a source of employment. On the day that we visited, they had just finished training more rangers, and of 30 trainee rangers, 30% were female. They are also committed to improving the lives of women through a Women Group Programmes that involves formal and hygiene education, microfinance, table banking and family planning. The conservancy shares knowledge through local community organisations as well as nationally with other conservancies.

vi) Small Scale Irrigation Farming.

We saw two small-scale private farms and talked with one farmer (Ms. Nolan Mala). She has two acres that she uses to grow tomatoes and onions for her household and for a commercial buyer in Nairobi. She uses an innovative method that involves digging dams and channels for the water flow (pumped from a shared stream nearby, over which there can be tensions in dry weather) to fill up multiple growing beds on the field. It is a method she learnt from traveling commercial farmers. On the day of the visit, she was working with a labourer, but her family sometimes helps her out. It is hard work and is supplementary to her family's livestock keeping. The costs of input into the land (seed, fertilizer and labour) might range between 200,000-250,000KShs, but give a return of 1m KShs (depending on weather and market prices) twice a year. The hedge meant to protect her field had recently been damaged by wildlife. The farmer is aware of possible damage that fertiliser is doing to the water so doesn't drink it, and knows that it's already polluted from upstream. In the past they would have to drink it but they have a better water source now.



vii) Sand River Dam, Olderkesi.

The Sand River flows through Olderkesi, and only sometimes does water flow on its surface, due to erratic rainfall. But it can be considered a potentially valuable groundwater source, as has been tried in sand excavation, or in this instance in damming. An additional benefit is that the sand naturally filters the water. A dam was built by the community some years ago, where rain water naturally flows, creating an accumulation of sand and water that can be extracted throughout the year. Unfortunately when we visited, the dam appeared not to be well functioning and the availability of water was uncertain, but there is potential scope to develop the use of sand dams in other locations.

2.2. Fieldwork Reflections

We were very inspired by the people we met and the projects that we visited. There is obvious potential in Olderkesi area. The area sits in landscape that has experienced rapid change in recent decades, to which communities have been responding in ways that have been both beneficial and detrimental to the environment. There has been a tension between socio economic pressures (of the local community) and pressures of wildlife conservation (led by external agencies). Traditional ways of coexisting with the land and wildlife have come under threat from increased population and modernization, as the Maasai become more connected to the wider world. This is both in their direct participation in economic systems, and in their experience of global phenomena like climate change that connects drought in Olderkesi with consumerism in the UK, with industrial production in China, and so on.

In spite of the various changes and challenges facing the area, there are some very positive things happening, with people caring for environments in the area in ways that also benefit communities and individuals. The geography of Olderkesi and its communities means that practices and projects like this are not always linked up and knowledges are not always shared. That is one challenge (and is, perhaps, where elitist powers have stepped in), seeing a gap to be filled rather than activities to be joined up.

3. Stakeholder Engagement Workshop in Narok

Central to the project was a stakeholder engagement workshop, bringing together a range of people to share their knowledges and experience with each other as well as with the research team. The workshop was designed using an approach that Paul and Emma have developed on projects in the UK, that puts conversation at the forefront and emphasises having many different (sometimes disagreeing) voices around the table. Participants sat in groups of 5-7 around 4 small tables, each with a host from the research team. This seemed particularly important to the topic of non-elite environmentalisms – that the researchers (from the ‘elite’ setting of the university) were there to listen and to learn from people’s practices and stories, rather than to project our own onto the situation. We were fortunate to have such an array of interesting and generous guests, and to be able to offer some travel expenses to make the workshop more accessible. It felt important to hold the workshop in Narok town, the headquarters of Narok County, where Olderkesi and the Maasai Mara are located.



3.1 Workshop Participants (in alphabetical order)

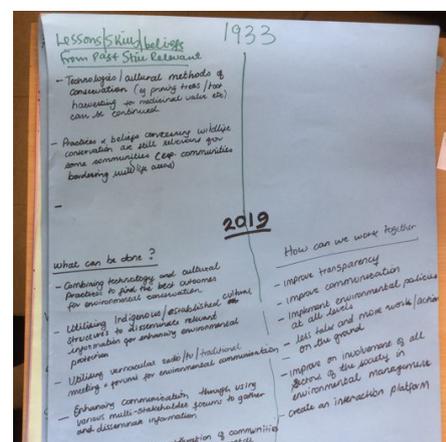
Caroline Jepchumba (Action Africa Help-International), Francis Oloo (Technical University of Kenya), Grace Ntayia (Olderkesi Development Project), James Nkaya (Olderkesi Conservancy), Jane Tina (Nashuku W.C.), John Nyakuni (Olderkesi Africa Gospel Church Project), Jonathan Yenke (Olderkesi Water Resource User Association) Ketter Kenneth (Ministry of Agriculture), Linda Munyao (Environmental Institute of Kenya), Luke Olang’ (Technical University of Kenya), Mark Karbolo (Olderkesi Water Resource User Association), Noontomom Manie (Naikara Area, Narok), Paul Hurley (University of Southampton), Paul Rarieya (Kenya Water Institute), Purity Kiunga (Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries), Raphael Kweyu (Kenyatta University), Sarah Mutune (Technical University of Kenya), Sheki Dayou (Friends of Conservation), Simon Ndarao (UPANDE Ltd), Sospeter Wekesa (Technical University of Kenya).

3.2 Workshop Discussions

The day began with a formal welcome and introductions from all the participants at the workshop, before three in-depth group discussion sessions throughout the day. The questions for these sessions are below, along with some of the points raised in discussions (not all could be captured so any omissions are incidental and not intentional).

1) *What are the effects and impacts of food and water insecurity? What did our ancestors do to get food and water? What do we do differently? What emotions are involved?*

- Participants talked about there being less food and water now, about agriculture being intensified, about pollution and about the shifting dynamic of human-wildlife conflict. They also talked about the increase in economic activity, changes in land tenure, house types and food practices (production and consumption) and the emergence of conservancies as a model for conservation. People talked about emotions of sadness, guilt, frustration and security.



2) *What is environmentalism? What do individuals do? What do stakeholders do? Who benefits or loses out?*

- Stakeholders defined environmentalism as a movement, as an ideology, as a school of thought and as action or activities geared towards positive environmental management. People saw environmentalisms as aspects of conservation, and as things driven by concerns on environmental impacts and actualized by policy. Elitism was defined in terms of power, exposure, attitude and authority, and elites identified as those with the power (political, social and capital, economic, professional) or those who are an authority on a particular subject. We talked about non-elite environmentalisms then, as being based on local knowledge, and on local needs rather than a higher aim, on local context and local realities. It was discussed as being diverse in its manifestation from one community to another, self-driven, bottom-up, non-conventional or non-formal in its methods, and not well well documented – non elite environmentalisms are passed through story-telling, narration and cultural practices.

3) *What lessons have we learnt from the past? What can be done now? How can we communicate our knowledge, experience and feelings, and to who? How can we practically work together?*

- The stakeholders appreciated the important role that the local communities play in conservation, and how local knowledge and practices have developed over time. It was suggested that often, non-elites plant and nurture the seeds and fruits that the elite will later reap, but that the goal of environmentalism should be to bring equal benefits to elites and non-elites. People discussed ways forward through organic farming, knowledge sharing, stakeholder engagement in policy, co-design and co-implementation, and the integration of different environmentalisms to be more sustainable. There was hope for collaboration and improved funding structures, and for ways to address power imbalances around the valuing of different knowledge and around who speaks and who listens. There was discussion about communication – that it be done in a transparent manner, that it be done in local languages, that emotions, arts, beauty could help to communicate the need for environmentalism and its integration in communities.

Bringing experience from personal and professional life, participants helped to really explore these questions and to ask many more. We used big pieces of paper on the tables to plot things on a c. 160-year timeline (spanning the life of the oldest person we knew and they youngest person we knew) and to note down answers to some of

the other questions and to map out thought and conversation journeys. These became documents of the conversations, and functioned both to keep track of some of those discussions as they happened, but also to inform the writing of this report and the writing of the bid for a larger project.

3.3. Workshop Reflections

From our experiences on the day and from participant feedback, the workshop far exceeded our expectations. We were thrilled with the generosity and depth of engagement, and it felt like ‘non-elite environmentalisms’ strikes a chord. It might mean different things to different people, but that seems entirely fitting, if it is to fit the varied and multiple practices of diverse communities and NGOs. Workshop participants seemed inspired to hear about each other’s activities, projects and perspectives in the area. They valued the opportunity to share them and to connect with others working in elite and non-elite environmentalisms, and there was enthusiasm for collaboration and exchange. There were some warnings and some unanswered questions – how do the discussions from the workshop get shared or developed? What can we do to share the *value* that we’ve created today, and the value that we’ve given different knowledges, practices and relationships? And while ideas and discussions are very inspiring, they require real resources to bring them to fruition and good planning to sustain them. The workshop was a very fruitful day, and in many ways felt like just the beginning. There could have been more time to meet more non-elite environmentalists, to undertake some visits like some of the research team did in the preceding days, and some more time given to planning future partnership and collaboration. There were understandable concerns about how we make sure the workshop was worthwhile, in terms of it bringing people future opportunities, resources or enabling practical interventions.

4. Looking forward

The research team feels very positive about the workshop and fieldwork, which have shown a need for work on this topic and opened up opportunities for collaboration with individuals, projects, organisations and institutions. We are planning to submit a funding bid in January 2020 to the UK Global Challenges Research Fund, who are looking for projects on ‘Cultures, Behaviours, and Histories of Agriculture, Food, and Nutrition Partnership Award’. For this we would be building on some of the discussions we’ve had around food and water security, and how cultures of non-elite environmentalism can help to address these things.

We welcome expressions of interest from any of the workshop participants who would like to continue the conversation about this call. We can offer no promises about how or whether everything will fit together, and obviously no guarantee that we will get the grant, but we are positive about the possibilities and feel like we have built a strong foundation to work from, for this call or for others in future.

You can contact Dr Paul Hurley on P.D.Hurley@soton.ac.uk / +44 7803 120556 or Dr Francis Oloo on oloofrank@gmail.com / +254 722 173755.

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