

## **Empowering Pastoral Communities in Kenya to Improve Dryland Conditions**

The pastoralist communities of Kenya's drylands face marginalization due to drought, climate change, and its effect on natural resources. To help these communities escape the cycle of food insecurity and poverty, Colorado State University partnered with the University of Nairobi through Higher Education for Development to establish the Center for Sustainable Dryland Ecosystems and Societies (CSDES). The partnership is funded by the United States Agency for International Development.

Since its inception in 2011, the center's staff has been working to create forums to discuss the role of higher education in international development in Kenya's drylands, and engage community members in the planning of the center's research and curriculum development.

In 2011, the center held "Dryland Community Voices: Setting a Joint Agenda in Higher Education and Development from the Ground Up," a collaborative three-day workshop that gave the pastoralist communities a voice, allowing them to critique and help redesign academic programs, improve their own livelihoods, and uplift their communities. More than 45 representatives of dryland communities from across Kenya attended the workshop.

"Previous development approaches in Kenya's drylands have been accused of doing little to actively engage communities in drylands in problem identification, planning and implementation of programs targeting them," said Jesse Njoka, partnership director at the University of Nairobi and CSDES director. "By directly engaging the communities in designing CSDES higher education program and research, interventions will be more targeted and hence increase impact."

On several instances, participants observed that issues, such as gender biases prevalent in higher education often originate from ingrained attitudes, and problems in primary and secondary education.

Fatuma Amin (left), a master's student at the University of Nairobi presented her personal story of success at the workshop. The fifth born in a family of 12, Fatuma was the first in her family to attain a formal education. Fatuma's story is an example of the integral need for higher education opportunities, particularly for women in pastoralist Kenya, but also demonstrates how cultural biases influence academic priorities.

In her pastoralist community in northern Kenya, most women are offered few opportunities for economic advancement, often expected to marry and run a household. Beginning with primary school, already low female enrollment in her community began to diminish further, said Fatuma. Out of her primary school class of more than 50, only nine were female, and of that nine, only two progressed to high school.

Beating the odds, Fatuma continued her studies past secondary school to complete a bachelor's degree in development studies. Through additional funds leveraged under the HED award, Fatuma was afforded the opportunity to pursue her master's degree in disaster management at the University of Nairobi.

“Inspired by my background, my goal has always been to reduce cultural biases, build resilience and improve livelihoods for community in the drylands, especially women,” Fatuma said. With her coursework complete and only her research project left to accomplish, Fatuma is expected to graduate December 2014.

Prof. Njoka said the workshop sparked stories similar to Fatuma’s and discussions continue to inform education and research priorities at the University of Nairobi. As a result of the positive feedback, more community engagement meetings are set to take place in the next project phase.