

COMMENTARY

Community Wildlife Conservancies and Livelihood Diversification

A Commentary on Household Economics in the Maasai Mara, 2000–2026

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of community wildlife conservancies in the Maasai Mara ecosystem represents a significant shift in land use and governance, with profound implications for pastoralist household economies. While promoted for conservation and development, their long-term impact on income diversification remains contested. This commentary critically analyses the evolving relationship between conservancy membership and household livelihood diversification strategies. It aims to synthesise evidence on economic outcomes and identify persistent structural constraints. The analysis draws on a synthesis of longitudinal research, policy documents, and field observations from the ecosystem. It employs a political economy lens to interpret trends in household economic data and institutional arrangements. Evidence suggests conservancy wages have become a dominant, yet precarious, income source, often crowding out traditional livestock-based diversification and reinforcing dependency. A critical theme is the gendered disparity, with women's access to conservancy-related cash income remaining disproportionately low. Conservancies have reconfigured, rather than fundamentally diversified, local economies, creating new vulnerabilities alongside benefits. Their design often limits broader entrepreneurial activity. Policy must prioritise institutional reforms within conservancies to actively support genuine livelihood diversification, including targeted funds for women-led enterprises and integrated livestock-conservancy business models. community conservancies, livelihood diversification, political ecology, household economics, pastoralism, Kenya This commentary provides a novel synthesis of the political economy mechanisms by which conservancy wages can inadvertently inhibit broader entrepreneurial diversification, offering a critical framework for future policy evaluation.

Keywords: *Community wildlife conservancies, Maasai Mara, livelihood diversification, pastoralist economies, neoliberal conservation, household income, Kenya*

Article Highlights

- Conservancy wages reconfigure, rather than fundamentally diversify, pastoralist economies.
- Gendered disparity persists, with women's access to conservancy cash income remaining low.
- Institutional design often limits broader entrepreneurial activity and creates new vulnerabilities.
- Policy must prioritise reforms to support genuine diversification and women-led enterprises.

Core Argument

A political economy analysis reveals how conservancy membership can inadvertently inhibit broader livelihood diversification, creating precarious wage dependency instead of resilient economic expansion.

This commentary synthesises longitudinal evidence to critique the economic outcomes of neoliberal conservation models.

ABSTRACT-ONLY PUBLICATION

This is an abstract-only publication. The complete research paper with full methodology, results, discussion, and references is available upon request.

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