



## *Herders' Debate, Drama and Games Dominate Co-Production of Knowledge Sessions in Amboseli*



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Herders in Amboseli gathered under the shade of an acacia tree for a parliamentary-style debate on co-production. The interactive sessions created space for discussing local and scientific knowledge within the local context, highlighting areas of overlap and complementarity on equal footing. Knowledge was openly discussed, bringing together community wisdom and scientific inquiry.

Before the sessions started, the community members present elected a “Speaker” for the day who presided over the proceedings with good humour and guided the flow of discussion. On one side stood the proposers and on the other the opposers, each taking turns to sharpen ideas through argument and humour. A Maasai Moran stepped into the role of “Sergeant-at-Arms,” with playful authority, calling for order when laughter erupted or when voices overlapped in excitement.

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The motion, “We alone are the causes of our problems, and we alone can solve them,” carried the weight of everyday life in the rangelands. It spoke to land subdivision and fencing, which continue to reshape ancient migration routes. It reflected concerns over grazing pressure and the growing strain on shared pastures. Participants also discussed livestock diseases that spread silently through herds and wildlife moving closer to human settlements. At the same time, the debate touched on changes in family life and declining land health within a rapidly changing ecosystem.



**Amboseli Conservation Area Chief Park Warden, Joel Ole Nyika, addresses the community gathering ahead of the herders’ debate, encouraging participants to take part more actively in such forums as spaces for shared learning and collaboration.**

Speakers shared experiences from the rangelands. They spoke of cattle paths that have been interrupted by fences. They described elephants still following invisible corridors across increasingly fragmented land. Others recalled droughts marked by dry rivers. They also spoke of the relief that comes with the return of rains.

Laughter often broke through the discussion. This happened when examples reflected shared struggles that were too familiar, such as family planning, sanitation, and polygamy. Despite the humour, the discussion remained clear and focused. It felt as though the ecosystem itself was speaking through the people.

At the end of the spirited session, Madam Speaker ruled that local communities should be open to external support, collaboration, and technologies. She emphasized the need to scale solutions beyond the boundaries of the ecosystem. She also highlighted the importance of strengthening collective responses to shared challenges, including access to livestock markets, vaccines, education, and health services.



**Madam Speaker (left) and other community members could not hold back their laughter as the debate turned to familiar realities, with examples striking close to home on family planning, sanitation, and polygamy. The shared humour reflected the everyday experiences that resonated across the gathering.**

Beyond formal debate, learning unfolded through a series of community-designed games. In a hand-tag exercise, survival depended on alertness, speed, and constant awareness of others. Those who observed carefully and moved strategically were more likely to succeed, mirroring how pastoralists depend on reading weather patterns, pasture conditions, and early signs of disease to protect their livestock and sustain livelihoods.

A second game, designed by the Herders Forum of Kimana and christened “Nyasi”, Swahili for pasture biomass, transformed the Amboseli landscape into a decision-making board. Participating herders were required to make continuous choices about grazing areas, livestock movement, survival priorities, and environmental risks. Each decision carried visible consequences, sometimes immediate and sometimes delayed. Within the game, even small actions rippled through the wider ecosystem, leaving some participants vulnerable when poor decisions were made. Through this process of play, participants learned by doing, and were able to reflect on the logic and consequences of their own real-world pastoral practices.



**Herders play a hand-tag exercise where speed, alertness, and strategic movement determined survival, reflecting how pastoralists rely on reading weather patterns, pasture conditions, and early signs of disease to protect their livestock.**



***The board game, created by the Herders Forum of Kimana and played using locally available materials such as bottle tops and leaves, engaged participants in collective decision-making. Bottle tops represented different numbers of cattle, while leaves symbolized pasture biomass levels available across the landscape during different seasons. Through the game, players explored grazing choices, livestock movement, and environmental risks. The MOSAIC team in East Africa is now working with the herders to develop a digital version of the game that will be made available online.***

Drama sessions further deepened this process of reflection by bringing everyday pastoral challenges into performance. Scenes depicting drought, disease outbreaks, education, early marriages and resource-based conflict were enacted by community members and then collectively analysed. These performances created a shared space where difficult realities could be expressed safely, discussed openly, and reinterpreted collectively, allowing participants to see familiar challenges from new perspectives.

Songs and storytelling provided another layer of knowledge transmission. Morans, elders, and women used rhythm, narrative, and performance to pass on lessons about herding, resilience, family life, and survival in a fragile ecosystem. These oral traditions carried memory across generations, anchoring ecological knowledge in culture and identity. Researchers also participated in this exchange, responding with songs from other Kenyan communities, creating moments of dialogue, connection, and mutual recognition.



***Morans and elders enact a blessing ceremony commissioning morans to care for the landscape, while women cheer in encouragement and celebration. The performance brings together narrative and song to transmit lessons on herding, coexistence, resilience, family life, and survival in a fragile ecosystem.***

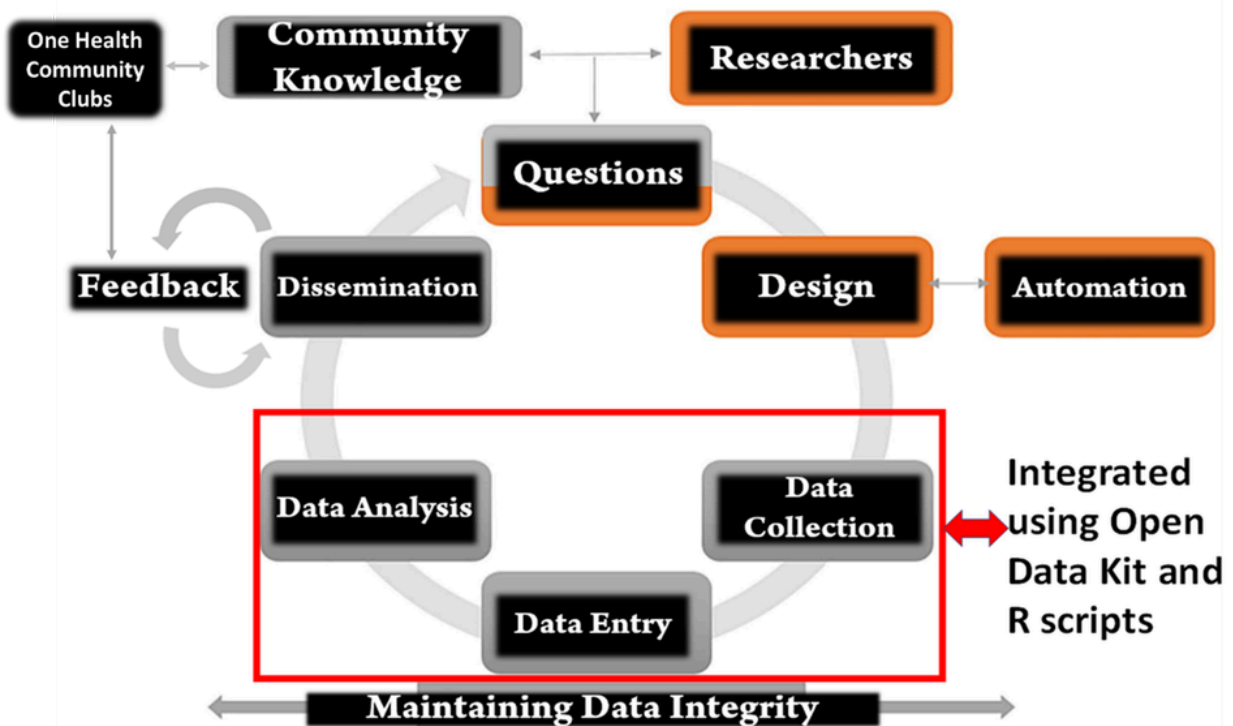
As discussions gradually shifted toward contemporary tools such as artificial intelligence and remote sensing technologies, herders consistently grounded the conversation in their own established systems of environmental interpretation.

Knowledge of rain patterns inferred through livestock intestines was discussed as part of a long-standing pastoral forecasting system. Participants explained that experienced elders traditionally examined the appearance, texture, moisture, colour, and fat deposits around the intestines and internal organs of slaughtered animals to interpret signs of approaching seasonal conditions. Certain patterns were believed to indicate good rains and abundant pasture, while others were associated with drought, scarcity, or increased disease risk.

Changes in Acacia roots indicating moisture shifts, lunar positions used to guide seasonal predictions, and livestock behaviour as early warning signs of drought were also described as part of a long-standing indigenous intelligence system rooted in close observation and experience.

One of the herders said, “We know artificial intelligence can be combined with our intelligence to make useful decisions for the community.”

One Health thinking emerged naturally and without prompting across all engagements. Communities consistently linked human health, livestock wellbeing, and ecosystem change as interconnected realities. Livestock diseases such as Foot and Mouth Disease, Lumpy Skin Disease among others were discussed alongside vaccination practices, drug withdrawal periods, and the consequences of mismanagement. The ecosystem was widely understood as a single interconnected system in which disruption in one component inevitably affects the others.



*Co-production of knowledge and data production framework followed during the sessions in Amboseli, adapted from Mose et al., 2018.*



*Amboseli herders and researchers pose for a group photo after one of the sessions, marking a moment of shared engagement, dialogue, and co-learning in the field.*

Discussions also turned toward broader environmental pressures shaping the landscape. Participants reflected on deforestation driven by increasing demand for firewood, risks associated with pesticide use, and shifting patterns of wildlife movement and behaviour. Elephants were observed to continue following ancient migration routes despite fencing and land subdivision.

Whether through debate, games, drama, song, or reflection, knowledge was actively co-created across all the interactive moments.



*A wrong move in the hand-tag game, and victory slips through the fingers.*