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The physical appearance of Africa's marginal semi-arid lands shows evidence of eroding hillsides, denuded plains, large erosion shelves, and deep sheer-sided gulleys. These features manifest an imbalance between humans and the resources which support them or what some scholars have termed rural population pressure (Anzagi and Bernard, 1977; Steel, 1970). A decade ago, an International Labor Office mission to Kenya (1972: 405, hereafter ILO) noted that surface soil degradation and erosion in marginal semi-arid areas were chronic. Other symptoms of the physical destruction of the land included the drying up of streams, cultivating on river banks leading to silting of streams and dams, unchecked gullying of cultivated slopes, and sheet erosion following bad grazing practices. More recently, the World Bank (1980: 53) noted that increasing population growth in the drier areas of Kenya has led to a pressure exceeding the carrying capacity of the land, which in turn has led to lower income per capita, and even to famine.

In general Kenya's rangelands are densely populated relative to pastoral areas in other African countries (von Kaufmann, 1976: 255). The government itself (Kenya, 1979a: 211) notes the urgency of dealing with social problems related to the rapid population expansion in medium and low potential areas of the country where crop production is feasible but very risky.