

POLICY BRIEF

Managing variability, governing security – How do policies affect livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa drylands ?

In order to support their livelihoods, pastoralists must respond to shocks and stressors that stem from extreme weather, longer term climate change, market fluctuations, and conflicts. The policy domain represents an additional source of uncertainty for many, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, and is becoming increasingly relevant. A paper from PASTRES examines [the changing policy landscape for pastoralists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), focusing on the regions of the Sahel and Horn of Africa.

Pastoral livestock production systems in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are mostly found in the vast dryland belt stretching from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa, where raising small ruminants, cattle, and camels provides one of the main supports of livelihoods. In 2010, the African Union estimated pastoralists in Africa at 268 million – generally living in isolated and remote areas, often close to borders and frontiers. Their culture, products, and services are key features of African drylands. However, despite the large populations it supports, its contribution to regional economics, and the sector's socio-cultural importance, governments in the region generally overlook the relevance of pastoralism.

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In spite of significant diversity in socio-cultural and production systems, great levels of similarities in challenges and potentials link herding communities in these regions. Most pastoralists are faced with great difficulties to fit within the national institutional architectures that arose under post-colonial statehood, where the establishment of centralized governments, delineation of border frontiers, and prioritization of other land uses turned them from regional majorities to national minorities.

Modernisation

Policies and investments in most SSA countries have poorly served herding economies, and have failed to harness their potential. Instead, despite important contrasts and divergences in post-colonial ideological perspectives, political economy, and development trajectories, the dismantling of pastoral governance systems and resource management has usually been purported as a prerequisite for modernisation.

Most policy frames and development interventions in pastoral settings aimed to maximise and stabilise the productivity of drylands through financial investments and technological advances. These addressed mainly veterinary services, genetic improvement, water development, and forms of controlled grazing such as ranching schemes and enclosures, as all often part of wider practices aimed at encouraging livestock commercialisation. The modernization perspective implied ending pastoral mobility, settling pastoralists around permanent water points, feeding animals through crops and promoting exotic, 'improved' breeds with the aim to support intensified, more sedentary livestock production. These visions clashed with those of traditional pastoral practices, which, through adaptive husbandry practices and unique social relations around labor and land, instead aim to optimally benefit from variability in pasture and water availability and to sustain reliable production.

The marginalisation of pastoralists in national politics and mainstream society is evident in most countries where indicators of poverty, food and physical insecurity, emigration rates and land encroachment are at highest in drylands, while the levels of public expenditure, primary service coverage and investment provisions are at lowest.

Desertification

It took many decades for the International Community to reassess its understanding of pastoralism and to acknowledge the capacity of local communities to effectively manage 'marginal' drylands. The evolution of the United Nations' vision of development with regard to pastoralists and rangelands represents a clear example with this respect. The 1977 UN International Conference on Desertification identified pastoral land use as a main cause of environmental degradation that posed a global threat to sustainability. This position was reiterated in the UNEP 1984 Governing Council. These narratives helped to legitimise the idea of moving pastoralism towards more 'rational and sedentary' systems, by blaming vegetational dynamics that were perceived as ecological degradation on pastoral practices. Donor agencies and international policy agendas allied in pushing the conversion of pastoral territories and livelihoods. This process was particularly intense in eastern Africa, through villagisation schemes in Ethiopia, individualisation of land rights in Kenya, and land gazettement and forced mobility reduction in Uganda.

It was only during the 1990s that the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) legitimised the relevance of local communities' knowledge, rights and capacities towards what had been defined as 'sustainable development'. Agenda 21 strongly advocated a combination of government decentralisation, devolution and community participation for communally managed natural resources. In 1994 the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) placed a major emphasis on improving the livelihoods of drylands inhabitants as a main measure to achieve its goal, but the provisions of the Convention remained weak as to matters concerning access to land.

In complement to this, a set of institutional agencies have been established over time at different levels with the mandate to specifically address crises in drylands, particularly droughts. Other, more innovative efforts to reduce pastoralists' exposure to livelihood shocks and related food security problems in the Sahel and Horn regions have included the establishment of strategic food and feed reserves, extending animal health service coverage, and testing livestock insurance schemes. These interventions often evolve from paradigmatic lens that

embraces stability, equilibrium, and certainty rather than providing opportunities to harness variability management. This approach is also visible in more recent programmes, such as the so-called ‘Great Green Wall’, which originated under the colonial narrative of desertification.

Great Green Wall

With origins in colonial administrators’ assumptions about pastoralism, this endeavour original intent was to ‘prevent the expansion of the Sahara’ by planting a vast wall of trees across 11 African countries, stretching from Senegal to Djibouti. Major criticisms of the plan address the limited sensitivity for both ecological and socio-economic considerations. The key issue is again one of a sedentist vision that hinges on tree plantings to stabilise an ecosystem that is by nature variable, whereas a perspective focused on variability would support practices able to make use of this variability, including through livestock. More recent recognition that the Saharan extension overwhelmingly depends on macro climatic factors, rather than on local practices, implies that policy should adapt, and accept as its challenge not building barriers against deserts and fixing boundaries and tenures, but rather supporting communities as they respond to increasing variability. There are signs of change in the policy process, with an increased emphasis on local communities, their livelihoods and land use practices, but the risk remains that the Great Green Wall will be dominated by its original vision of a large investment scheme imagined as a top-down, technical intervention to create stability by donors and governments. Indeed, a fundamental emphasis on creating stability in an inherently dynamic system could further alienate and undermine the very communities who have achieved most of the successful localised, contextually-appropriate afforestation and agro-forestry schemes.

If the legacy of the narrative of desertification is not questioned, the project stands to operate as a largely top-down, technical intervention that lacks sensitivity to local realities, and that stands to primarily benefit the donors and governments who have designed it.

Neo-liberal policy priorities and regional integration

Sub-Saharan Africa drylands, already stressed by the impact of dramatic climatic events, also suffered under the neo-liberal policy agenda that was prioritized in the 1990s. Vast and remote territories with limited and scattered populations implied too high investment costs for a presumed limited political return. Structural adjustment programmes led to a scaling down of public investment in remote drylands areas and a drastic reduction of many essential services that were provided for pastoralists by the central state, including, in most countries, the privatisation of animal health and veterinary care.

However, since the turn of the millennium, national democratisation, devolution of central state power, and forms of decentralisation of governance have provided some room for re-configuring power relationships and the social contract between different communities and central states. The scaling up of regional integration and evolving transnational networks have reconnected territories, providing for new opportunities and exchanges, and the emergence of new interests and relationships.

Regional coordination and integration are critical in supporting grazing, migration, and trading, necessary for the survival of both sedentary and nomadic populations across SSA. This has proven especially important for transnational networks and connections between northern and western Africa, and between the Arabian peninsula and countries of the Horn which are vital for national economies and regional integration. Sub-regional policies and structures have also evolved. Several policies and legislative texts regulate cross-border relationships and related movements of livestock, people, and goods in a transnational, regional perspective. In West Africa, ECOWAS countries issued in 2000 a livestock passport to allow animals to cross borders and facilitate related transactions, though many herders complain its implementation is hardly visible. In the Horn of Africa, the degree of regional integration and coordination amongst countries is less advanced, especially on matters related to rangeland management, pastoral development, and cross-border movements, though some bilateral agreements are in place. In 2020, a Protocol on Transhumance was endorsed to facilitate cross-border mobility of livestock and herders in East Africa, but its full impacts are yet to be seen.



Evolving infrastructure in SSA drylands. PASTRES, 2020

A changing political economy

Economic transitions and environmental changes are also reconfiguring relationships between herding and farming communities and territories. For example, in the Sahel, the land used to grow crops has doubled over the past four decades, at the expense of natural shortgrass savannas. Policy and interventions over decades have encouraged farmers to expand their livelihoods by acquiring their own herds and herders to settle and turn to crop farming. The crop-residues and water facilities that herders traditionally acquired in exchange for manure and milk are now paid for with cash rather than by barter, as customary collaborative mechanisms to share land and livestock product have been replaced by those centred on markets and money. Large-scale farming and development corridors have also been established: here, investments in physical and commercial infrastructure aim to ‘unlock the potential’ of inner rangelands and to enhance their contribution to the national economy and regional integration.

Together with intense land use reconfiguration, livelihoods in SSA drylands are intensely reshaped by population growth, climatic and environmental changes, and the expanding commercialization of the livestock sector. Trade of animal products has grown significantly across and beyond regions, and milk markets are now widespread in most countries, often managed

by skilful pastoral womens’ networks. The penetration of the market economy and the incorporation of rangelands into the wider political and commercial arena significantly impinge on the livelihoods of herding communities; the resulting patterns of growing inequalities and dispossession are a main driver behind the frustration and political radicalisation among some groups. As pastoral regions have become the foci of new and competing economic interests and socio-political agendas, these tensions and the related grievances can be easily manipulated.

The levels of insecurity and violence in significant portions of these drylands further impinge on pastoralists, who in turn pay the highest price in terms of rights and livelihoods. Altogether these processes contribute to shift the rules of the game, and to reconfigure the playing ground in pastoral rangelands. On the one hand, this opens the way for external, non-pastoral interests and agendas, from climate change financing, to transnational corporations to global jihad, so to contribute significantly to the reconfiguration of new socio-political landscapes. On the other hand, the ongoing dynamics are contributing to the recognition that pastoral communities are strategic allies in the pursuit of sustainable governance and political stability in the region. The key policy question is how to disentangle and redress these dynamics, translating the wider rec-

ognition of the rights and interests of pastoralists into their integration in local, national, and regional institutional and economic structures, aimed at ending their sense of structural exclusion and socio-political marginalisation. A flourishing pastoral economy is essential to regional integration and political stability.

All the above result in intense encroachment on pastoral territories, involving the displacement of grazing communities, privatisation of range resources, rapid growth of small towns into commercial centers, development of mining and energy industries, and major rearticulation of territories and reconfiguration of power and influence in drylands – further fuelling competition amongst different land users. The conversion of large rangeland chunks into other land uses not only undermines the relations around sharing land that govern the entire territory, but practically excludes herders from critical hotspots for dry season grazing and during drought events, often relegating poor strata and minority groups into the least productive lands. Access to land is a major critical domain in most SSA countries, and state policy rarely supports pastoralist practices as a land use priority, and most countries indeed sponsor policies to settle them and to convert rangelands to crop farms, ranches, wildlife conservancies, or extractive use.

Policy progresses and frustrations

Research since the 1970s has found that pastoral mobility is a strategic way to harness environmental variability in space and time. More recent efforts have shown the consistency of pastoral practices in ensuring reliable food and income supply out of unpredictable resource settings. But conventional policy and investment frameworks have continued to pursue goals of stabilising, controlling, and re-organising the ways that pastoralists produce, live, and market their produce.

The pastoral sector has experienced the greatest concentration of failed development projects in the world: in many cases, they failed to improve income or productivity in rangelands, often, ironically contributing to their degradation. The longstanding inconsistencies in dominant policy frameworks have not been free from implications, as recent decades have witnessed a dramatic erosion of pastoral livelihoods, with growing demographics, changing

LAPSSET corridor through the northern Kenyan rangelands

The LAPSSET corridor connecting inner drylands with the Indian Ocean is planned to pass through Isiolo, with the town earmarked for major investments. While the LAPSSET corridor is evolving incrementally, with important infrastructure developments such as the highway to Moyale and the reopening of Isiolo airport, speculative interests are now growing at a higher rate than the surrounding region. As the northern 'frontier' is opened by infrastructure and development as well as wildlife conservancy efforts, many see opportunities for speculation and investment, while pastoralists increasingly feel dispossessed of their own lands. This policy attention to the northern dryland areas has resulted in improvement of roads and communications connections, and led to dramatically improved marketing prospects. The county is now criss-crossed by motorbikes carrying camel milk, live animals, and other products to urban areas and consumer goods back again, with mobile phones instrumental in checking supply, demand, and prices. No doubt the implications for local communities' livelihoods will be far-reaching, yet still largely unknown, especially if large investments in commercialization of the livestock sector are made. However, it is likely that these developments will escalate the number of inequalities and conflict over land in the coming years as these opportunities arise, and communities organise accordingly amidst land grabbing, external pressures, and growing uncertainties in general.

climate, and shrinking areas of accessible rangelands. Despite the growing calls for change, inclusion, and investment, the situation in most Sub-Saharan Africa drylands has worsened, and development perspectives have given way to humanitarian and security agendas.

The degradation of livelihood and security conditions in most SSA drylands has been exacerbated by misinformed policies and poorly conceived investments, and contributed to the sense of marginalisation and political and economic grievance amongst herding communities that has grown due to years of exclusion from the policy arena. The current crisis affecting large parts of SSA drylands is primarily a reflection of the crisis in the governance system.



Marketing milk along the road in Yabello, Ethiopia. PASTRES 2020

At the continental level, a main turning point has been the adoption in 2011 of the [African Union Policy Framework for Pastoralism in Africa](#). The AU policy framework is articulated through two main complementary and intertwined axes: on the one hand it aims to protect and secure the lives, livelihoods, and rights of African pastoralists in order to strengthen their contribution to national, regional, and continental economies. Regional integration and movement are an important aspect. On the other hand, it emphasises the need to fully engage pastoralists in national and regional governance, and to redefine development processes and approaches, in order to avoid the shortcomings of past policies and interventions.

Another significant policy step has been made in 2013, when the governments of Chad and Mauritania with the Declarations of Ndjamena and Nouakchott recognized the strategic role of pastoral communities as allies in managing and securing the vast SSA drylands.

Despite good intentions, many pastoral-friendly proclamations and related institutional arrangements fail to materialise into more supportive legislation, directives, and guidelines because of dwindling political commitment, cumbersome bureaucracies, and weak enforcement mecha-

nisms. Implementation has consequently often lagged as well, and a persistent bias towards crop farming and sedentarised livestock-keeping heavily influences development narratives and related policy and investments frameworks.

Involving pastoralists in the future

The paradigm of pastoralism as a backward, inefficient, and unsustainable practice remains quite pervasive, even in new generations of public officers, authorities, and policymakers throughout the African continent. This makes formal institutions and development agencies poorly suited and ill-equipped to deal with the complexity of pastoral systems, and undermines their capacity and legitimacy among local communities.

The lack of adequate consideration of pastoralists' capacities, interests and needs in societal development and policy dialogue is a central shortcoming, and feasible solutions undoubtedly depend on providing pastoral communities with full political and legitimate representation. This is most conspicuous in the near ubiquitous lack of security for pastoralists' fundamental livelihood assets, including their land, their livestock, and their mobility. A new social contract is needed, and redressing the political economy in Sub-Sa-

haran African drylands by protecting the rights and needs of pastoralists from prevailing political and economic interests is the key to redressing current governance failures. The ecological and political challenges of SSA drylands can only be tackled together with pastoral communities, not in opposition to them.

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Watering herds in Isiolo, Kenya. PASTRES, 2020

PASTRES

[PASTRES \(Pastoralism, Uncertainty and Resilience: Global Lessons from the Margins\)](#) is a research programme that aims to learn from pastoralists about responding to uncertainty and resilience, with lessons for global challenges. PASTRES is funded by an [ERC \(European Research Council\) Advanced Grant](#) starting in 2018, and running for five years. The project is hosted by the [ESRC STEPS Centre](#) at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex and the [European University Institute](#) in Florence. It is led by Prof Ian Scoones (STEPS/IDS) and Dr Michele Nori (EUI), with supervision support from Dr Jeremy Lind (IDS).

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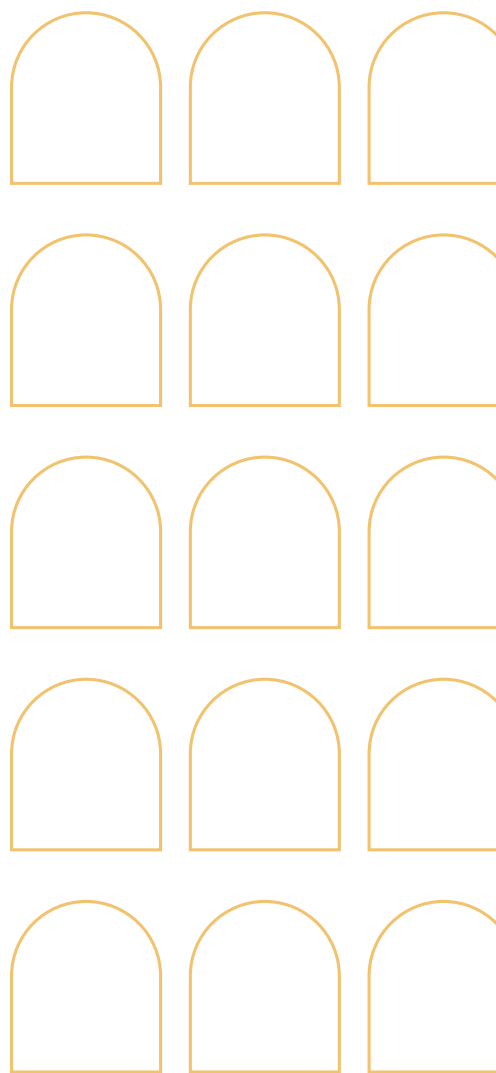
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