

# Dryland Myths: Policies that Hurt Pastoralists

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This policy briefing paper describes how pastoralism in Africa is surrounded by myths. The paper explores three important myths and explains how they influenced inappropriate policies for pastoral communities. The paper accompanies policy briefing paper no. 8, *Towards Pro-Pastoralist Policies in Africa*.

### **Myth 1: Primitive Pastoralists**

It is widely believed that pastoralists are primitive and inefficient users of natural resources. Similarly, over-grazing by livestock is often seen as the main cause of land degradation and desertification. However, recent analyses show that land degradation in dryland Africa has been overestimated. Long term satellite monitoring of biomass shows a cycle of contraction and expansion of the northern vegetation limits of the Sahel, and little change since 1970<sup>1</sup>. Where degradation occurred it was usually due to long term climatic trends and not to livestock.

Early attempts to define the outputs of pastoral systems focused on measures such as meat production per animal. More recent studies also consider indicators such as meat per hectare, milk and blood produced, life time production and long term sustainability. These studies clearly show how pastoralism is often more productive than African, Australian or American commercial ranches under the same climatic and environmental conditions. Furthermore, pastoralism uses far fewer expensive, non-renewable energy sources.

- In Mozambique traditional systems have higher returns per hectare than commercial beef ranches.
- Sahelian transhumant pastoralists produced 8 times more than 'modern' Australian and American ranches, without using any fossil fuel inputs.
- In Botswana traditional systems up to 95% more productive than ranching.

As well as being more productive, pastoralism provides greater benefits to society and is more equitable than commercial ranching. Lending, borrowing and gifting of livestock, sharing of meat and milk, and herd migration ensure that products of pastoralist systems are widely distributed<sup>2</sup>.

**Policy Consequence:** *Pastoralists must settle down and be modernised*

The belief that pastoralists cause desertification has driven policies aimed at settling pastoralists. Typically, these policies have prevented pastoralists from moving with their animals, damaged the environment, lowered production and allowed alienation of pastoralist land by outsiders and government.

The belief that pastoralism is inefficient led to the widespread introduction of western ranching technology involving fencing, water development, exotic breeds and range improvement. Most ranches showed negative rates of return and provided few benefits to rural populations. Instead they 'fostered range wars and a mad rush for privatization and expropriation of rangelands'. The effect on women was negative because they were not allowed to become members of group ranches and became unpaid workers, taking care of their husbands' livestock. With the increasing exodus of men, women could not exert control over land use and ownership, or decision-making and governance within the group ranches<sup>3</sup>.

### **Myth 2: Tragedy of the Commons**

Commons are open access land which everyone can graze. As there is no benefit to an individual from reducing their stock everyone will keep as many livestock as possible. Therefore, commons will always be over-exploited and less productive compared with privately owned land. Does such a pessimistic hypothesis really hold true for African pastures?

- African pastures are not commons. They are 'controlled access', managed through customary institutions.
- Where uncertainty is high and returns low this is more efficient than individual private rights. African pastures are at least as (and often more) productive than individual- or state-owned land.
- Many African pastures remain 'tragedy free'. They show no evidence of overgrazing.
- Pastoralists plan for long term sustainability as well as short-term production. When pastures change rapidly and unpredictably, it makes sense to stock at high levels in order to make use of good times and see out bad times. High livestock numbers represent a rational stocking strategy not over-exploitation.

**Policy Consequences:** *land alienation, conflict, privatisation*

The tragedy of the commons hypothesis had two unpleasant outcomes. First, as the commons belonged to no-one, everyone was entitled to use them. Although unsuited for crop production, farmers encroached into pastoralist areas and rapidly degraded them. Privatisation led to alienation of land from traditional users, concentration of land in the hands of the rich, and a rapid increase in absentee landlords with few links to local communities and little interest in sustainable land use. More than 50% of the livestock in the Sahel is now owned by absentee owners.<sup>6</sup>

### **Myth 3: Aid is the answer!**

Pastoralist areas have become increasingly dependent on food aid and humanitarian relief. This attracts large numbers of people to distribution points resulting in over exploitation of resources, and the inevitable need for even more food aid and relief.

### **Policy Consequences: *Never ending and self-perpetuating crisis***

Handouts and subsidies will not solve the problems facing pastoral areas because they reward dependency and hence become self-perpetuating. Relief inputs are often inequitable and encourage corruption, with richer, more powerful people benefiting the most. Inappropriate aid also undermines local production and self-reliance. Local producers cannot compete with free foods; local service providers go out of business when free veterinary drugs are given free of charge or subsidised. Aid can also propagate short-term thinking and remove incentives for dealing with underlying problems.

### **References**

<sup>1</sup> Tucker C, Dregne H And Newcomb W 1991, Expansion And Contraction Of The Sahara Desert From 1980 -1990, Science 253-299

<sup>2</sup> See Scoones For A Much More Detailed Comparison Of Pastoral And Commercial Systems. The Examples Are Mainly Taken From Here Also De Ridder, N And KT Wagenaar. "A Comparison Between The Productivity Of Traditional Livestock Systems And Ranching In Eastern Botswana." ILCA 1984

<sup>3</sup> Sandford 1995 Oxby 1985; Galaty 1988 For gender impact see Talle 1988; Kipuri 1989; Kipuri 1991

<sup>4</sup> Vink And Kaisser Vink, N And WE Kaisser. "The 'Tragedy Of The Commons' And Livestock Farming In Southern Africa." The South African Journal Of Economics, 55:2, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Scoones, I Living With Uncertainty, New Directions In Pastoral Development In Africa

<sup>6</sup> Fafchamps M., C.Udry, And Czukas, K., (1998), "Drought And Saving In West-Africa: Are Livestock A Buffer Stock", Journal Of Development Economics.

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The Organization for African Unity/Interafrican Bureau for Animal Resources (OAU/IBAR) is a specialist technical agency of the OAU mandated by member states to promote livestock development in Africa. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, OAU/IBAR implements major livestock development programmes including the Pan African Programme for the Control of Epizootics (PACE) and Farming in Tsetse Controlled Areas of Africa (FITCA).

### The objectives of OAU/IBAR are to:

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- Collect, collate and disseminate information in all aspects of Animal Health and Production
- Initiate, develop and execute projects in the field of Animal Health and Production
- Liase with appropriate authorities of member states, regional groups, inter-governmental and international organisations.

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