



Priority Areas for Action and Research on Pastoralism and Rangelands in Eastern Africa

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Abstract

There is an element of irony around pastoralism and research in Eastern Africa. While it is one of the most researched production and livelihood systems, pastoralism is also the least understood by policymakers and development actors, with discussions about its importance characterized by significant gaps in knowledge. What is more, policy actors have difficulties accessing empirical data specific to pastoralism and rangelands in a form that allows well-founded decision-making on policy and action. Most available data tend to be out of date and not disaggregated with reference to pastoralism and rangelands. As a result, much of the discourse around pastoralism and rangelands is based on generalities and stereotypes that date back to the late 19th century, when colonialists first came into contact with pastoralists in Eastern Africa. These generalities and stereotypes are partly to blame for the persistence of inappropriate policy approaches to the development of pastoral areas in the region.

Empirical and up-to-date data are critical for making the case for targeted investment by governments and other development actors to support pastoralism and sustainable rangeland management in Eastern Africa, where rangelands constitute nearly 75% of the landscape and are home to up to 90% of the livestock population. Such data should demonstrate the contribution of pastoralism and rangelands to livelihoods, food and nutrition security, alleviation of poverty and adaptation to climate change.

This presentation identifies key priority areas for action and research to fill the knowledge gap on pastoralism and rangelands in Eastern Africa. It highlights interventions that should be prioritized to address the challenges that pastoralists face in governance, land and natural resource management and development planning, and to create an enabling environment for sustainable pastoralism and rangelands management and development.

Introduction

This paper identifies the main priority areas for research and action to inform the creation of an enabling environment for pastoralism and rangelands in Eastern Africa. Based on a review of key literature and policy documents, the paper is premised on recognition of two related facts. Firstly, notwithstanding significant progress in recent years, the policy, legal and institutional context in Eastern Africa continues to be largely unaccommodating for pastoralism and rangelands. Secondly, despite the fact that pastoralism is one of the most researched production and livelihood systems, government policies and programmes on governance, rural development and management of land, environment and natural resources display a huge knowledge gap on its logic, rationale and importance. In these circumstances, the need for research to strengthen the evidence base for policymaking cannot be overemphasized.

‘Eastern Africa’ is used in this paper to refer to the region covered by countries that comprise the East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD¹). The region is characterized by expansive drylands, which occupy nearly 75% of the landmass. The proportion of drylands in countries of the region ranges from 20% in South Sudan to 99% in Eritrea. Pastoralism is the predominant land use, livelihood and production system in these drylands, and pastoralists and agropastoralists constitute significant proportions of national populations. They produce 90% of the livestock in the region, contributing on average 57% of the agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in IGAD Member Countries.

¹ The specific countries of relevance here are Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.

Yet the importance of pastoralism and rangelands to livelihoods and economies is not reflected in government policies across the region. Countries do not have in place policies that enable and facilitate the practice of pastoralism and sustainable management of rangelands. Where policies are adopted, they tend to focus on production, paying little attention to processing and marketing (Mkama and Sulle, n.d.). Moreover, sector policies that have a bearing on pastoralism and rangeland management tend to contain adverse provisions that frustrate this livelihood and production system.

Critical policy-related challenges to pastoralism and rangeland management

Policy-related challenges to pastoralism and rangelands are many and diverse. The detailed manifestation of the challenges varies from country to country depending on a variety of factors, among them the national historical, ecological, demographic and political context. However, broadly speaking, the challenges derive from policies adopted by governments in three major areas, namely: political governance; economic development planning; and land, environment and natural resource management. In all the three areas, the interests of pastoralism and rangelands are routinely overlooked and undermined by policy imperatives that aim to address concerns of majority populations in countries of the region. National policies in the region tend to contain prescriptions that are underpinned by either overt hostility or benign neglect of pastoralism and rangelands (Johnsen et al. 2019).

Political governance: history of marginalization

Although national contexts vary, in general, pastoralists as a group have tended to be victims of policies on political governance in Eastern Africa since the emergence of modern state systems during the period of colonial occupation, experienced by all the countries in the region, other than Ethiopia. Throughout the region, the preferential treatment of settled communities was dictated by the logic of a colonial state apparatus using limited personnel and resources to impose authority over large populations in vast territories. It was with settled communities that colonial administrators made agreements and eventually entered into partnerships that morphed into post-colonial states.

Centres of power and commerce were established along the coastline, on the banks of the Nile River and the shores of Lake Victoria, and in highland areas where climatic conditions were more tolerable for colonial administrators and settlers. These areas were far from the rangelands where pastoralists lived and grazed their livestock. The patterns of white settlement would ultimately dictate the distribution of urban centres as well as political and economic development, laying the foundations for the marginalization of pastoralists from political and economic development that would last well into independence. In Kenya, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda, the interactions between government and pastoralists during colonialism up to the end of the 20th century was defined by imperatives of containment rather than engagement (Odhiambo 2014).

The policy attitude to pastoralists and rangelands with regards to governance meant that traditional institutions remained central to governance processes within these communities. However, with containment rather than positive engagement as the basis of interactions, ultimately the authority of traditional institutions was undermined by lack of legal recognition, as their functions and powers were usurped by state institutions. But this was more in form than in substance, as the actual presence of the state institutions on the ground was never adequate for purpose, and they lacked legitimacy among local communities.

Economic development planning: inappropriate or no investments in traditional livestock sector

The political marginalization alluded to above translated into the exclusion of pastoralists and rangelands from investments for economic development, as the drylands were perceived to be lacking in economic opportunities, and pastoralists seen to be averse to entrepreneurship. The case of Kenya is instructive in this regard, as the national development policy blueprint, *African socialism and its application to planning in Kenya*², designated the rangelands occupied by pastoralists as low-potential areas and made the choice that development money would be invested in “areas having abundant natural resources, good land and rainfall, transport and power facilities and, people receptive to and active in development”, where it would yield the largest returns (Republic of Kenya 1965:46). This and similar policy biases condemned the pastoral areas to economic marginalization, as they were denied investments in infrastructure and social services that would spur economic development.

The perception that rangelands were lacking in economic opportunities was reflected in the neglect of the traditional livestock sector. Policies and institutional frameworks for livestock development focused on

² Popularly known as Sessional Paper No. 10 of 1965

commercial ranching, notwithstanding the fact that it was (and still is) the traditional livestock sector that supplies up to 90% of the meat consumed in the region (Nyariki and Amwata 2019). Governments across the region have long neglected to support the development of physical infrastructure such as roads, markets and abattoirs or veterinary services needed to facilitate livestock production and productivity.

Yet countries of the region are not only self-sufficient in meat and meat products, but are also active participants in the export market, with Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya making substantial exports of livestock to the Middle East, all thanks to the traditional livestock sector underwritten by pastoralists in the rangelands. The growth of the livestock sector has happened in spite of rather than because of government policy, as evidenced by the fact that, even when it had no functional State, Somalia was still a lead exporter of livestock (Leeson 2007).

Land, environment and natural resource management: tenure insecurity

Secure access to rangelands for grazing is central to the identity and sustainability of pastoralism as a system. Over time, pastoralists have developed institutions, systems and practices that enable them to make optimal and productive use of the unique ecosystem in the drylands of Eastern Africa. These include communal land ownership, seasonal mobility across landscapes that in some cases traverse national borders, and traditional institutions and systems for governance of natural resources. Government policies have had serious challenges in accommodating these institutions, systems and practices, particularly mobility and communal land tenure.

The practice of mobility has defined policy perspectives on pastoralism as a system. It remains the most critical sticking point in the way government policies and other production systems interface with pastoralism and rangelands, not least because it offends the policy preference by African governments for settlement, whether through cultivation or urbanization (Little 1992; Horowitz and Little 1987; Galaty et al. 1981).

Mobility feeds the perception among policymakers and among other land users that pastoral land use causes degradation, and that the rangelands are 'empty', 'unused' or 'underutilized', and therefore available for appropriation and conversion to other uses, including settlement, large-scale commercial agriculture, infrastructure development, location of refugee camps and installations for military training and exercises. As populations have grown and land uses incompatible with pastoralism have increased in the rangelands, the potential for conflicts between pastoralists and other land users during pastoral mobility has equally increased. This leads to mobility being projected in policy circles as the cause of conflict and insecurity in the rangelands, resulting in development of policy responses that undermine pastoralism and sustainable rangeland management.

Government policies in the region have also had challenges in accommodating communal land tenure, given the tendency to privatization of land rights. Moreover, communal land tenure contradicts imperatives of state control of land and natural resources. The challenges have been exacerbated in recent years with the renewed focus on African land for large-scale commercial agriculture and other land-related investments, which has seen states in the region appropriate large portions of former rangelands and convert them to non-pastoral uses.

Looking ahead: towards enabling policy environments

A major challenge to policymaking with reference to pastoralism and rangelands is the fact that it is generally not informed by evidence. Despite the fact that pastoralism is one of the most researched production and livelihood systems in the region, there are still national policies that are not informed by research. Perceptions about pastoralism among key policymakers and development actors, and the general discourse about pastoralism and the rangelands – particularly within the popular media – continue to be based on generalities and stereotypes.

The negative perceptions and stereotypes are a major driver for the persistence of inappropriate policy approaches to the development of pastoralism and rangelands in the region. They result in little effort being made to generate empirical data specific to pastoralism and rangelands in development planning, which then feeds the narrative that pastoralism and rangelands make little or no contribution to national economies and justifies failure to allocate resources and direct investment to the drylands. Where data do exist, they are often out of date and thus not useful for informed decision-making on policy and action.

The need for empirical and up-to-date data on pastoralism and rangelands to form the basis for making the case for effective investment by governments and other development actors in pastoralism and rangelands cannot be overstated. Data are needed that demonstrate the contribution of pastoralism and rangelands to livelihoods, economic development, food and nutrition security, environmental sustainability and adaptation to climate change in the region. Some of the key areas for research and action to provide a better basis for strong advocacy and sound policymaking in Eastern Africa are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Key areas for research and action on pastoralism and rangelands in Eastern Africa

Priority areas for research	Priority areas for advocacy and policy action
1. The logic of pastoralism and their rangelands management practices (<i>why pastoralists do what they do</i>)	1. Capacity building for pastoralist civil society to engage with relevant national, regional and global policy processes
2. The value of pastoralism and rangelands for national, regional and global economies	2. Capacity building for governments and development actors to understand pastoralism and rangelands, their roles and potential
3. The contribution of pastoralism and rangelands to food security, regional peace and integration	3. Strengthening devolution of governance and natural resource management
4. The value of pastoralism and transhumance for productivity and health of rangeland ecosystems	4. Reinforcing capacity of governments and civil society for improved data collection, analysis and dissemination
5. The role/potential contribution of pastoralism and pastoralists' indigenous knowledge to adaptation to climate change	5. Strengthening the interface between research, policy and practice with respect to pastoralism and rangelands

Going forward, this agenda for research and advocacy should be linked to regional processes at the African Union (AU) and IGAD levels, where frameworks already exist for improved understanding and action in support of pastoralism and rangelands. The AU Policy Framework for Pastoralism (AU 2010) and the IGAD transhumance protocol (IGAD 2020) provide strong foundations for engaging governments collectively and individually for improved policy and programming in support of pastoralism and rangelands. Advantage should also be taken of good practice examples at national level, particularly in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania on some of these priorities.

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