



# POLICIES AND STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE VULNERABILITY OF PASTORALISTS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Pastoralism, the extensive, mobile grazing livestock on communal rangelands, is the key production system practiced in the world's drylands. Recent estimates indicate that there are about 120 million pastoralists / agropastoralists worldwide, of which 50 million reside in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Worldwide, pastoralists constitute one of the poorest population sub-groups. Among African pastoralists, for example, the incidence of extreme poverty ranges from 25 to 55 percent.

In SSA, therefore, any attempt to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty needs to include pastoral people. The crucial policy question is whether it is preferable to invest in pastoral development, or whether it would be more appropriate to design exit-strategies for pastoralists allowing them to abandon livestock keeping.

There are good economic reasons for investing in pastoral development. First, pastoralism is the best, if not the only, means to make productive and sustainable use of natural resources in arid and semi-arid areas that would otherwise remain unexploited. Second, in SSA pastoral people produce a large share of the meat supply, being as efficient per unit of land as 'modern' ranchers.

At the same time, however, increasing human and livestock pressure in the drylands needs to be addressed by strategies that support adoption of alternative income generation activities by some pastoral/agro-pastoral people.

## ● The Vulnerability of Pastoral People

The dryland areas of SSA where pastoral people make a living are characterized by soils with low organic matter and low nutrient content, subjected to extreme year-to-year variability in rainfall, which regularly takes the form of droughts.

In the course of centuries pastoralists have developed effective mechanisms to survive in this erratic and risky environment. Traditional risk-management strategies

include livestock accumulation, regular and opportunistic herd movements depending on rainfall patterns, breed and species diversification, and herd dispersion between community members.

For a number of reasons these traditional risk management strategies have become increasingly ineffective over the past decades and poverty levels among pastoral populations have risen. First, increased human populations and the associated growing animal stock coupled to land degradation are reducing the relative abundance of natural resources. Second, the expansion of agriculture from semi-arid into arid areas (the 'greening' of the Sahel) and the common tendency to establish private property rights over land have reduced the mobility of pastoral people. Third, as the preferences of pastoral people have changed, their integration into markets has strengthened, and their exposure to market risks and to competition from large and often capital intensive production units has grown.

Pastoralists are therefore ever more vulnerable to a number of risks, which are beyond the direct control of individuals, households and communities. The prime challenge for policy makers thus is to create an economic and institutional environment, which reduces the vulnerability of pastoral people to risks. This environment should reduce conflicts over resource access and enable pastoralists to effectively cope with weather and market risks, escape out of poverty and contribute to economic development.

## ● The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) provides a framework for assessing how risks, shocks and long-term trends affect the livelihoods of pastoralists.

The SLA first identifies the main assets of people, which encompass natural, physical, human, financial and social capital. The crucial assets for pastoralists are their livestock, access to land and water, and their social network. On the other hand, pastoralists are often poorly educated and



have limited financial assets, which are typically constituted only by their livestock.

The SLA then examines how pastoral people, given the broader economic and institutional environment, combine their assets for survival and production purposes.

Within this framework, risks can affect pastoralists at two levels. First, some of the assets are *per se* subject to risks: for instance, a drought or an epidemic may significantly reduce herd size; ethnic conflicts may reduce social capital within the community. Second, the transformation of assets into welfare/income benefits is subject to risks: for example, encroachment of land by settled farmers may deprive pastoral people of access to water points; declining terms of trade for livestock might make their sale unprofitable.

## • Towards Policies and Strategies that Reduce Vulnerability

Policy-makers face a challenging task when designing policies and strategies aimed at reducing the vulnerability of pastoralists. In fact, many aspects of vulnerability and its reduction are still not fully understood and require applied research.

A first important distinction policy makers should make is between *idiosyncratic risks*, which affect single households (e.g. the death of the main income earner), and *covariant risks*, which affect larger regions and even countries (e.g. a drought or an epidemic).

Policies designed to reduce idiosyncratic risks are embedded in the standard poverty reduction strategies formulated by most countries in SSA. They include, for example, schooling, public health programs and the establishment of micro-finance institutions. These measures aim at enhancing peoples' capacity to cope with specific individual or household risks, largely irrespective of their initial (livestock) assets.

On the other hand, specific policies and strategies are required to address the vulnerability of pastoral people to covariant risks, which impact on pastoralists as a group. These policies vary according to the risks they attempt to address, but should be based on some common principles. In particular, they should combine strategies for risk reduction, risk mitigation and risk coping. The most desirable outcome would be to

reduce the probability of any risk to zero. As this is unachievable, it is necessary to concomitantly develop strategies that reduce the impact of shocks on the livelihoods of pastoral people, as well as strategies for their rehabilitation and/or diversification after a shock has occurred.

A review of policies in countries of SSA suggests that major efforts have so far focused on dealing with the risk of droughts, epidemics, market exclusion, and social conflicts. There are no blueprint solutions, but some interesting and innovative strategies are emerging. Kenya provides an example of the design and implementation of effective drought management policies. Burkina Faso has developed successful approaches of managing conflicts between pastoral people and farmers in arid and semi-arid areas. A number of West and East African countries have been offering public off-farm employment to pastoral people in order to promote diversification of their income sources and reduce their vulnerability. At the same time, of course, there are several instances of policies that have been ineffective and failed.

Three main lessons have emerged so far. First, since policies targeted at pastoral people cannot follow those applied to settled areas, there is a need to explore new and innovative ways to serve the interest of pastoralists. Second, policy makers often refrain from investing in risk-reducing interventions, because it is virtually impossible to document 'shocks prevented' and to attribute their non-occurrence to any previous intervention. Third, policies and strategies aimed at reducing vulnerability need to be embedded in a broader development process, whose ultimate objective goes beyond helping pastoralists overcome single exogenous shocks, but to make them resilient to the plethora of environmental, health and economic shocks, which is an increasingly common characteristic of the globalizing economy.

### Policy Brief based on:

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