

The crisis of pastoralism?

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As part of discussions on the future of pastoral production systems in East Africa there have been a number of recent interventions arguing that something urgently needs to be done to deal with a Malthusian style crisis in pastoral areas. In short, the argument goes, there are too many people which, combined with a declining (or not increasing) productivity of the natural resource base, means that not enough livestock can be kept to sustain a viable pastoral system. This argument has been most eloquently and effectively argued by Stephen Sandford in “Too many people, too few livestock: the crisis affecting pastoralists in the Greater Horn of Africa”. This is a response to this piece, aimed at sparking a wider discussion.

Such a discussion is urgently needed. For at the same time as the pessimistic prognoses about pastoralist futures in the Greater Horn of Africa, there has been, for the first time in several decades, a revival of interest in pastoralism and livestock production. This takes two forms – one a celebration of the ‘pastoral way of life’ and the importance of indigenous systems of production and management¹ and another focusing on the market potentials of a ‘livestock revolution’². What should we make of these positions? What should the practical and policy responses be?

Pastoral pessimism?

The arguments of Sandford (and others) put the more up-beat assessments in doubt. What are some of the major elements of the pastoral pessimists’ argument?

1. That people:livestock ratios have declined in pastoralist households to a level below 3 TLUs/person, deemed to be a ‘viable’ amount for sustainable livestock production, due to a combination of human population growth and declining rainfall.
2. That primary and secondary productivity (through range management, veterinary and other interventions) are not sufficient to make up the gap, and are unlikely to be so in the future.
3. That real prices of livestock products have not increased (and are unlikely to do so, despite growing demand) to compensate for lower numbers per household.
4. That, with small and decreasing herd/flock sizes, sales remain focused on immediate cash needs rather than ‘commercial’ offtake.
5. That pastoral economies remain poor, associated with limited circulation of cash, and so have little opportunity for growth through linkages to other income earning activities.
6. That land for grazing and livestock production continues to be removed for cropping, and that this, particularly if supported by irrigation, is probably a better bet for many pastoralists anyway.
7. That for many the best option is exit, but in a way that does not involve destitution and displacement.

¹ See, for example, WISP website: <http://www.iucn.org/wisp/>; and Turmi gathering report: <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/news/Pastoralists.html>

² See Delgado et al (1999) <http://www.ifpri.org/2020/dp/dp28.pdf>; Perry et al (2005) <http://www.fao.org/AG/againfo/projects/en/pplpi/docarc/wp23.pdf>

There is much truth in this argument – backed up by recent empirical studies. For example a recent examination of pastoral livelihoods in Somali region in Ethiopia³ showed that:

1. The recent series of droughts in Somali Region have caused widespread and seemingly irreversible losses of livestock in thousands of pastoralist households.
2. Many of these households have been forced out of livestock-based livelihoods and into urban areas or IDP camps as a consequence, possibly permanently.
3. Pessimism about the future viability of livestock-based livelihoods is high, especially among women and young people in parts of the region.

Notes of caution

However, we would like to add a note of caution to some interpretations of the more pessimistic .

First, we should be wary of using figures for the ‘viable’ people:livestock ratio derived from settings and times which bear little relation to today’s situation. While it may be true in some ‘pure’ pastoral systems based simply on consumption/sale there may be some ideal minimum herd/flock size, this forgets that what is viable is dependent on the wider economic and livelihood system, as well as patterns of mobility. These classic earlier studies⁴ were based on relatively closed pastoral systems, where the opportunities for trade, exchange and adding value to livestock production were limited. They did not account for increasingly important close interactions with cropping, including the adaptive behaviour of pastoralists who engage increasingly in opportunistic farming or agro-pastoralism as a risk-spreading strategy.

Contemporary livelihoods in pastoral areas are also more diversified and more integrated with the cash economy than ever before, with most households having access to one or more sources of income that are not derived from livestock production and marketing. An important source of counter-cyclical income, for instance, is remittances from relatives living abroad, which supplements household income, sustains families through periods of crisis, and finances both livelihood diversification and the rebuilding of herds and flocks (through purchase rather than natural growth) after a drought or disease outbreak. In short, there are very few ‘pure’ pastoral settings today, and given the need to sustain more people on less land with fewer animals per capita, this is probably a good thing. Simple notions of ‘viability’ or ‘carrying capacity’ therefore are inappropriate.

Complex livelihood responses

That said, this is not to deny a serious problem. But, as Sandford points out, this is highly differentiated. Thus in southern Ethiopia, for example, several different

³ See Devereux (2006) Somali region report:
<http://www.ntd.co.uk/idsbookshop/details.asp?id=894>

⁴ See for example: Leslie Brown (1977) “The ecology of man and domestic livestock”, pp. 35 – 40, in: Pratt D.J. & M.D. Gwynn, *Rangeland Management and Ecology in East Africa*, Hodder and Stoughton, Dahl, G and Hjort, A (1976) ‘*Having herds: pastoral herd growth and household economy*’. Dept. of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm

livelihood pathways can be identified⁵. In addition to pathways simply of ‘*hanging in*’ to systems of largely subsistence pastoral production, these include:

Stepping up: towards a more commercial production system, where high value premiums (including from export opportunities) can be gained. This option requires capital, labour and inputs (notably veterinary care). This will only be available for a few. It can only be achieved by significant support, especially if meeting SPS export requirements is a goal. Many current policies and interventions restrict this option – limits on mobility, for example, reduce productivity; taxation and market regulation restrict entrepreneurial opportunity; cross-border barriers limit trade to ‘official’ (and often expensive) routes.

Stepping out: this is the majority pattern for most in any case, with cycles of accumulation and loss of herds and flocks, with incomes compensated by a variety of activities, including farming and off-farm activities. Diversification can happen over time (according to cycles), over space (with different enterprises in different areas) and between actors (within families and across communities). Strategies for diversification require both push (perhaps avoiding certain forms of relief) and pull (encouraging social protection measures that allow for building diverse livelihood portfolios; investing in infrastructure etc, and small urban areas). Governments and donor agencies have been poor at dealing with this sort of dynamic, especially linking support to inevitable drought cycles. However, there is much research and some action which suggests things are moving in the right direction⁶. The livelihoods so created may not be ‘viable pastoralists’ in the old-fashioned sense, but they will be viable alternative to destitution for many, and will definitely involve livestock as key productive assets. For example in the Somali region study 54 distinct livelihood activities were recorded, many of these related to livestock rearing and marketing of livestock or livestock by-products (pastoralism, agro-pastoralism, livestock trading), but many others being entirely independent of the livestock sector (selling clothes or charcoal, running a tea-stall, making mats, Koranic teachers). Households with more diversified income portfolios can be viable with less than 3 TLUs/person. With diverse and diversified livelihoods of this sort many more people can make a living in the drier areas, and the simplistic estimates of people:livestock carrying capacities can be revised significantly upwards.

Moving away: In the pessimist narrative this is seen as the main solution for most. Pastoralists of course have in the past been highly mobile and patterns of movement in and out of more or less pastoral modes of production have typified ‘opportunistic’ responses to high variability. The issue today, as correctly pointed out by Sandford and others, is that this mobility is less easy. Once livestock are lost, restocking is nigh on impossible, and destitution – including in extremis movement to IDP camps - is a far more likely outcome. This is of course unacceptable, and other mechanisms beyond recurrent (permanent?) provision of relief need to be devised. The Somali region study found large numbers of displaced pastoralists surviving in formal and informal IDP camps, with no policies or programmes to assist them back into (or out of) livestock-based livelihoods. In some respects the ‘moving out’ option (if we reject wholesale translocation and resettlement) is highly compatible with the diversification and ratcheting up options. It is critically reliant on the growth of urban sites of

⁵ See http://www.future-agricultures.org/pdf%20files/Briefing_SP_1.pdf

⁶ See PARIMA project: http://aem.cornell.edu/special_programs/afsnrm/parima/; and recent conference overview: [http://www.ilri.org/Link/Publications/Publications/Theme%201/Pastoral%20conference/Papers/Peter%20Little_Multiple%20dimensions%20of%20poverty%20in%20pastoral%20areas\(1\).pdf](http://www.ilri.org/Link/Publications/Publications/Theme%201/Pastoral%20conference/Papers/Peter%20Little_Multiple%20dimensions%20of%20poverty%20in%20pastoral%20areas(1).pdf)

consumption and demand and the development of growth linkages through the setting up of (agro)processing enterprises, trading and service provision.

Policy options and trade-offs

Overall, it seems to us that the challenge is to provide mechanisms to kick start pastoral economies and allow them to flourish, accepting differentiation as a motor of growth. This will require supporting new forms of commercial production, but only as linked to local growth opportunities in processing, trade and so on. With more money flowing through the economy, other opportunities will arise which in turn will be helped by investment in basic physical and social infrastructure (with roads and education being the top priorities).

In thinking about future scenarios for pastoral economies we must be aware of some of the trade-offs. Not everything is a win-win. This must take account of some of the political dynamics of pastoral transition too. Take one oft repeated example – the proposal to settle pastoralists along riverine areas to take up irrigated agriculture⁷.. This sounds like a good idea at face value – providing pastoralists who can not make a living in the pastoral economy with a high value, more reliable alternative. But there are downsides. The removal of ‘key resource’ grazing along river banks from the wider use by livestock may undermine the whole system, encouraging even greater collapse. These key resource areas are what sustains existing carrying capacities. Removing them may pull the plug on the whole system, making the dry upland areas unusable and fuelling conflicts between transhumant pastoralists and settled ex-pastoralists. Of course given the politics of land in many areas, opening up fertile irrigable land does not always (or even often) benefit the poor and marginalised former pastoralist. Those with political clout (usually not of pastoral origin) tend to get the better land and the situation remains as bad if not worse than before.

So to move ahead, we would argue (against the Sandford position) that a focus on the viability of “traditional self renewing pastoral systems” and people:livestock ratios is not appropriate, but (with Sandford) that a more sophisticated approach to pastoral development thinking that recognises major resource constraints and significant challenges to pastoral livelihoods. There is a need to move beyond old-fashioned thinking about pastoral systems to recognise three key policy imperatives:

- New market dynamics - and the importance of linking market opportunity to local growth
- Diversification – expanding livelihood portfolios in ways that encourage local growth linkages.
- Moving out – establishing new livelihoods outside pastoralism/livestock keeping which avoid destitution.

The problem today is that policy thinking often opposes these solutions. Investments in livestock marketing tend to focus on the export trade with high cost infrastructure, great market and price uncertainty and high entry barriers. Such trade may have less multiplier effects on the wider (local) pastoral economy than informal, often illegal trade which sees little support and facilitation (and much hindrance) from the state and external agencies. Livelihood diversification is often part of development projects, but often without concrete thought about transitions and the way expanding

⁷ This has long been the policy of the Ethiopian government, and is apparently supported by Sandford.

livelihood portfolios can enhance local economic activity. A focus on small towns as part of a rural development strategy, for example, is seen as contradictory rather than part and parcel of a regional/territorial approach. And exit strategies are rarely thought about until it is too late, and the relief agencies are left to deal with the problem in camps of displaced people.

The politics of policy

There is also an important political risk associated with predictions of Malthusian crises in pastoralist communities: namely that this plays directly into the hands of those who would impose radical 'solutions' on these communities, such as coercive sedentarisation. Governments are traditionally suspicious of nomadic societies, which in East Africa as elsewhere are mostly located around politically sensitive borderlands. Any evidence suggesting that pastoralism is unsustainable can and will be used to support efforts by such governments to settle pastoralists, in order to pacify and control them. Yet there are few examples, if any, of successful pastoralist sedentarisation programmes.

Instead of declaring pastoral livelihoods unviable, and implicitly endorsing policies that undermine pastoralism and turn doubtful assertions into inevitable facts, observers and policy-makers need to recognise the responses that pastoralists are themselves adopting to the stresses and shocks that their livelihood system has always faced.

The Somali Region study found that many pastoralists have already chosen or been forced to leave livestock-based livelihoods, while others are rapidly diversifying their livelihoods, and others (the majority) are continuing to pursue pastoralism through an array of adaptations. Rather than imposing a single model on all pastoralist families (from 'do nothing' through to 'mass sedentarisation'), policy-makers should provide appropriate support to whichever pathway particular groups, families and individuals choose to follow. Two key principles are to expand people's options and to maximise their physical, economic and social mobility. For example, providing education, especially to girls and women, enhances access to non-agricultural livelihood activities, while lifting constraints to movement and trade across borders expands the area within which pastoralists pursue their livelihoods and alleviates the carrying capacity constraint.

The interventions by Sandford and others are timely and helpful. They point to the need for rethinking and re-evaluation (and much more empirical data on livelihood change on the ground). However, the talk of crisis should urge action not despair. Encouraging the clearly necessary transition in pastoral areas is a major challenge for the future, but one with more rays of hope and optimism than the more pessimistic narratives.