



Pastoralism, Land Utilization and Rights in Ethiopia

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email: fss@ethionet.et
website: www.fssethiopia.org

Background

Pastoralism is the dominant form of livelihood in the arid- and semi-arid lowlands of Ethiopia, particularly in the southern and eastern peripheries of the country. To make an efficient utilization of the erratic as well as geographically and temporally variable resources, pastoralists engage in strategic mobility. As such, sparse population density is a defining feature of the production system, while emphasis on size of herd and breeds which are hardship resistant is the norm.

Pastoralism in Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, pastoralists make up about 15 % of the population, while they inhabit more than half of the national territory. Most of Ethiopia’s pastoralist communities are found at the geographic peripheries near international borders. The greatest majority of livestock found in Ethiopia are found in the pastoral production system: about a third of cattle and sheep, some 70 percent of goats and all camels. Some 90% of Ethiopian livestock exports, which make up a fifth of the national exports, originate from pastoral territories. Moreover, pastoralists contribute some four fifth of the annual milk supply in the country. The association of the lowlands with the frequent drought incidences and food insecurity however conceal this productive quality of the pastoral lifestyle.

Pastoralism and Land: ‘Seeing Like a State’

The most important factors determining successive government’s view and interventions relating to pastoral land are: (1) mismatch of the pastoral production system to the state culture and associated ill-views towards pastoralism; (2) nature of resource endowments, and (3) intention to put the land into ‘rational’ use and under capitalism production system.

Firstly, as the Ethiopian state culture is centered on the highlands and ox-plough farming, the pastoral mode of production, particularly the inherent mobility, is viewed as a sign of its ‘backwardness.’ It is not uncommon for mainstream society and government to see pastoralism as an unproductive production system, which wastes large swaths of land area. As such, pastoralism is generally viewed as a ‘dead end’, as a ‘livelihood system’ in need of replacement, and the population in need of saving and development. The ‘irrationality’ argument is also extended to viewing pastoralists as ‘hostile’ and ‘warmongers.’ A serious examination of the needs and aspirations of pastoralists undergirding their conflictual relations with the state, investors and each other is left unexplored and unattended, and as a result a

genuine conflict resolution process has not been attempted. Rather additional factors, such as exclusive framings due to the ethno-linguistic federal arrangement, contraband cross-border trade and human trafficking networks, further complicate the conflict dynamics in pastoral areas.

Second, the nature of resource endowments of the lowlands, i.e., large flat lands amenable for mechanized farming, low population density and the gently flowing through the lowlands, make them ideal targets for irrigated commercial farming. This is unlike the highlands, where the rivers flow in deep gorges (thus not amenable for irrigation) and high population density necessitates displacement of large number of farmers. The largest sections of the pastoral lowlands are generally dry and not-amenable for irrigated farming. Thus, the state targets the same key dry-season pasture lands and recession farming lands pastoralists covet, and turn these into commercial farms. In doing this, the pastoral lifestyle is seriously impacted.

This process has been hastened in the past decade and half, due to the ‘dam boom’ Ethiopia

experienced. The dams regulated the water flow, thereby simultaneously disabling the flooding of riverbanks in the pastoral lowlands (which were used as retreat farming lands and as dry season pasture) and enabling irrigated farming. This was first tried in the Awash Valley since the 1960s, and more aggressively in the Omo Valley in 2010s. In effect, the key resources for pastoralists are being withdrawn and put under a different land use system.

Third, as the pastoral system—compared to the value it creates and the wealth stored in it—is subsistence-oriented, and does not significantly benefit the state. In addition to the promotion of commercial farming, successive governments therefore consistently favour sedenterisation of pastoralist households and commercialization of the livestock keeping system. Both sedenterisation and marketization/commercialization of the production system lead to fragmentation of the rangelands. Such fragmentation and fragmentation of rangelands benefits wealthier households, at the expense of the poor.



Climate Change and Invasive Species

A decline in productivity of rangelands will have serious implications on the production system. On top of the conversion of rangelands into private ranches and/or commercial farms, the proliferation of invasive species is eating into the remaining rangelands for pastoralists. The concentration of the pastoral herd on declining range expanse and quality will in due course reduce the productivity of the rangeland. On top of this, climate change will further impose additional pressures on the pastoral production system.

The production system could not indefinitely survive under conditions of constricted fodder availability. As such, there will be a limit beyond which the resilience of the pastoral system will be broken. It appears that with the increasing pace of commercial farming, sedenterisation and privatization of rangelands the lowlands are edging ever closer to such a point.

Urbanization and the Modern Economy

It is unlikely that the declining resources at their disposal will sustain the increasing pastoral population. This might essentially push pastoralists into integrating into the modern economy, among others facilitated by the increasing infrastructural (primarily road) integration and growing of urban centres. While the negative consequences of such interventions might outweigh over the shorter term, if capacitated to take advantage of the same—by an adapted education and health system—the modern economy could provide opportunities which could offset the challenges coming with increasing dropouts from the system and by diversifying risk management approaches to those within the system.

Policy Recommendations

This chapter illustrated the fundamental environmental and policy related challenges pastoralists are experiencing. Decades of ill-advised policies and development interventions are chipping into the sustainability of pastoralism as a viable production system which effectively exploits the available erratic natural resources in the lowlands. It will be rather foolish to continue with more doses of the same prescription

and expect a new outcome. Therefore, we recommend the following key policy ideas:

1) Devise participatory policy making for development in pastoral areas: Hitherto development thinking and practice in pastoral areas is elite driven, and primarily centred on the conviction that pastoralism is spiralling to a dead end. There are culturally rooted biases in such analysis, which also get reflected in the measures enforced, for example in the form of sedenterisation and commercial farming. The first action should thus be to invite pastoralist communities and their genuine representatives to the table, and include them in the policy formulation. Such measures will help policy making with, not for, pastoralists.

2) Rangeland productivity and expansiveness: A range of factors—from proliferation of invasive species to climate change to regulation of river flows to privatization of rangelands to commercial farming—are conspiring towards reducing the productivity of rangelands and increasing rangeland fragmentation. Given the central importance of rangelands to a pastoral production system, if such deterioration in quality and expanse of rangelands is left undeterred it will severely affect the production system. As such, the government and NGOs should consider rangeland improvement schemes, better regulate privatization and commercial farming schemes. Mechanisms to control invasive species should also be considered.

3) Better conflict management: Most pastoral frontiers remain outside the effective control of the government. As such, the government is unable to impose order in the majority of rangelands. Therefore, it will be highly advised for the government to collaborate with customary leaders to prevent and resolve pastoral conflicts.

4) Greater access of appropriate social services: pastoral areas remain poorly serviced by modern amenities, including schooling and health facilities. This cuts the chances of the youth joining the modern sector, and thereby reducing the direct pressure on the pastoral system. Thus, it is important to devise ways for greater access to social services to ensure longer term sustainability of the production system.



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Acknowledgment and Disclaimer

This Policy Brief has been published with the financial support of Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA) The contents of the Policy Brief are the sole responsibilities of the author and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the OSIEA or the FSS.

Forum for Social Studies (FSS)

P.o.Box:- 25864 code 1000 Addis Ababa: Ethiopia

Tel:- 0111545605/06 Fax:- 0111545607

Email:- fss@ethionet.et