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Unleashing the power of the pastoral sector: new perspectives

Pastoralism is a critical part of Africa's food system. Yet it is overlooked and urgently requires more support, according to speakers at a recent conference.

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Pastoralist leaders have called on African governments to provide greater support to their way of life, during a recent event organised by the University of Florida's Global Food Systems Institute.

The conference, which focused on 'Inclusive Investment Opportunities for Unleashing the Power of the Pastoral Sector', was held in Nairobi at the end of January, and included investors, social entrepreneurs, policymakers, and representatives of pastoralist communities from across Africa.

Speaking in some of the sessions, Sarli Sardou Nana, Chairman of Fulbe Development and Cultural Organization ([FUDECO](#)), a Nigeria-based Non Governmental Organisation and SPARC partner, said: 'Despite all the challenges faced by pastoralists in Nigeria including marginalisation, killings, extortion and land dispossessions, grazing bans, blocking of cattle routes, illegal confiscation of grazing reserves, and lack of investments in the sector pastoralists feed the country when it comes to meat and milk, they provide jobs and income to a huge livestock value chain, and [they contribute 17% to Nigerian's GDP](#).'

A way of life under threat

Mr. Nana's views were echoed by other pastoralist leaders at the conference. They highlighted the issues facing their communities, including land grabs and dispossessions, mass killings, marginalisation, extortionist schemes and multi-taxation systems. One example cited was the [recent air bombardment of pastoralists](#) in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, by the Nigerian air force in collaboration with the local governor, who has banned grazing in the state. Speakers also cited mass killings in Sarduana local government area, Numan, Jos and Kaduna among others. According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Genocide, [these are not isolated instances](#). In Mali, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic and more, [pastoralists are being killed](#) by insurgents, private armies and official state forces, and cattle are frequently rustled.

Despite the difficulties, pastoralists are frequently marginalised in policies and initiatives to do with peacebuilding, as well as livestock and land management. In fact, according to FUDECO research, in eight states of Nigeria there was no evidence of any genuine engagement with pastoralists in Nigeria's National Livestock Development Plan or any other initiatives.

Important contributions

Engaging with pastoralists is all the more critical given their vital contribution to African food systems and diets. In Nigeria alone, Nana says, “Of the 10,000 and 6,000 cows which are slaughtered in Lagos and Abuja daily, over 90% come from pastoralists through underdeveloped traditional markets. Nigerians cannot afford imported meat or meat from commercial ranches.”

The value of these indigenous systems should not be underestimated, Nana adds. “While Western-educated petro-chemical engineers and economists fail to ensure Nigerians have a steady supply of fuel, water and electricity, pastoralists [who are] considered to practice “outdated” traditional cattle rearing methods, provide a steady supply of meat and milk to the entire country – there is no scarcity of meat. Feeding African countries is proof that pastoralism is a viable and sustainable system.” While pastoralists welcome innovations and investments, leaders at the event said that these should integrate their indigenous knowledge and practices.

Pastoralist issues are African issues

While pastoralism has been described as “a barely visible, often forgotten, herding culture”, it comprises a large section of the population. It is estimated that over 20 million pastoralists live in Nigeria and are responsible for millions of cattle. In Africa, this figure is much larger: in 2010, the African Union estimated that there were 268 million pastoralists on the continent - a quarter of the total population.

Solving pastoralist issues, then, is critical to more sustainable development in Africa as a whole. The University of Florida’s [Market Analysis for Pastoralists](#) (MAP) project has identified that the incidence of extreme poverty ranges between 25% and 55% among African pastoralists. These pastoralists live in a large percentage of the territory and form an important pillar of the economy in many countries. In Ethiopia, for instance, 15 million pastoralists live across approximately 60% of the country and contribute around 35% to the agricultural Gross Domestic Product. According to some statistics, they [could contribute even more in future](#). But according to MAP: “Pastoralists face increasing challenges, including recurrent droughts, rangeland degradation, conflicts, and pastoral-unfriendly policies. In addition, limited market literacy and access are important factors that constrain pastoralists’ ability to improve their livestock’s productivity and livelihoods.”

Participatory research: building the capacity of pastoralists

There have been several initiatives, and much research, targeting the pastoral sector in Africa. However, very little has actually changed the livelihoods of pastoralists. Dr. Adegbola Adesoga, Professor of Ruminant Nutrition and Vice President at the University of Florida, warned that pastoralists are often marginalised, and that many livestock projects fail because they don’t genuinely engage pastoralists in the planning and execution.

FUDECO is trying something new. The NGO has taken a “Participatory Action Research Approach”: building the capacity of communities, and empowering pastoralists to identify their issues and to work with researchers to take action to find solutions. As a result of the conference, FUDECO also hopes to establish a Pastoralists Participatory Action network in Nigeria, to support this work.

FUDECO is a partner of SPARC, and is currently carrying out two projects in northern Nigeria supported by the programme. A [policy briefing](#) has already been published, which details the livelihoods, resilience and farmer-herder conflicts among pastoralist groups, as well as issues relating to gender equality, social inclusion and the empowerment of pastoralist women. –

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