

SUMMARY

FACED WITH FLOODS

Shifting livelihood strategies among South Sudan's pastoralists

Alex Humphrey and Elizabeth Stites, with Thudan Gai and Nyachar Lony

Motivation

Conflict and climate shocks are driving rapid change within the pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihood systems that many South Sudanese households have relied on historically for food and income. Recent among these shocks is prolonged and widespread flooding, which has caused extensive crop and livestock loss and a reorientation of the livelihood strategies upon which communities are most reliant. However, there is a dearth of evidence showing how pastoralists and agro-pastoralists have adjusted their livelihood strategies in light of these shocks, and similarly the extent to which these shocks – and communities' responses to them – are likely to spell permanent versus temporary changes to the broader pastoral livelihood system. Some donors and implementers in South Sudan are asking: What is the future of pastoral livelihood systems amidst such volatility?

This report begins to address this question by examining shifts in livelihood portfolios in South Sudan's Unity State. We draw on qualitative participatory rural appraisal methods to examine the changing balance of food and income sources at the community level as a proxy for livelihood strategies, and consider potential implications for the future of pastoral livelihoods.

Purpose

This report is part of an ongoing SPARC research initiative that seeks to understand livelihood trajectories in the drylands of East Africa, examining the ways in which pastoral livelihood systems are changing in response to climate change and conflict. This and other reports in the series will inform donors and implementers on the evolving profile of pastoralism and highlight opportunities for investments that support resilience within highly adaptive pastoral and agro-pastoral systems.

Approach and methods

The report draws on the findings from semi-structured one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted during March and April 2023 with 80 men and women engaged in pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihood activities in South Sudan's Rubkona County. The study participants reside in towns and rural villages, as well as in the Bentiu internally displaced persons camp. Participants were recruited to ensure diversity in terms of socioeconomic status, age and gender. FGDs employed participatory rural appraisal approaches, including a proportional piling activity in which participants used a consensus-based approach to indicate the dynamics related to the relative importance of different food and income sources to their broader community. Interviews allowed researchers to obtain a deeper understanding of key topics discussed in the FGDs, with a more targeted focus on household-level dynamics.

Findings

- Compounded shocks over the past decade in the study locations have included conflict, displacement and climate shocks – and most recently, protracted flooding. These have precipitated a steep decline in livestock holdings, and accelerated livelihood diversification and fragmentation. Communities have become dependent on low-return activities, mostly around natural resource exploitation.
- Livelihood changes have contributed to shifts in gender and social norms within pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihood systems. Many women now engage in labour-intensive tasks and increasingly provide for their households through diversified economic activities. While this may contribute to a sense of autonomy and control over resources for some women, it also contributes to an already heavy female time burden.
- Despite communities now being less reliant on livestock production for food and income, and the perception of increased risk of owning livestock since the floods, many study participants highlighted the continued importance of cattle to their cultural, economic and social systems. Many remain hopeful that the flood waters will recede and they will be able to return to mixed agro-pastoralism.
- Animal production currently plays a reduced role in household food and income generation, but this does not necessarily mean that pastoralism is in decline or that current livelihood adaptations are permanent. Pastoral systems are resilient, having evolved to function in variable environments. If policy and climate conditions allow, pastoral populations in Unity State could resume their reliance on livestock production. However, whether they choose to do so will depend on resources, preferences and experiences in the interim years.

Policy implications

Whether and when livestock-based production systems will return to being a primary source of food and income for most households in Rubkona County depends largely on three important questions:

Will conditions conducive to pastoralism return? At the time of writing, flooding had receded somewhat in Rubkona County. A resurgence of pastoral livelihoods will depend, however, on a further reduction in flood levels to allow access to grazing areas and transhumant routes. For the pastoral system to be able to rebound fully, stakeholders will need to invest in sustained peace and to adopt and promote pro-pastoral policies. Such policies must ensure pastoral mobility and access to resources despite trends of privatisation, commercialisation and population growth.

If conditions return to normal, to what extent will people resume pastoral production? Peoples' future aspirations and current priorities will continue to change with shifting patterns of risk and opportunity in the drylands. Many interviewees expressed concerns over the long-term sustainability of pastoralism. Some – especially young people – have taken up urban livelihoods or opportunities outside livestock husbandry. Others expressed a desire to shift to alternate livelihoods. For some, these shifts in activities and new perspectives may be a temporary reaction to shocks, rather than a permanent change. Others are unlikely to resume the difficult lifestyle of pastoralism, although some respondents did describe an intention to return to livestock keeping as soon as conditions allow.

How successful will recovery be, and how long will it take? Recovery in a post-shock period will vary with household resources and capabilities. Those households or communities who lost the largest proportions of livestock will have greater difficulties replenishing their herds, and these are often already vulnerable. Growing inequity of animal ownership coupled with increased privatisation of resources makes it even more difficult for the poor to get a foot back into livestock production or to grow existing herds to sustainable levels. The combined effects of impoverishment, conflict and displacement have undermined customary social safety mechanisms, including loans of animals to help rebuild herds. These factors create an environment in which recovery will likely be uneven and non-linear. Herders with advanced access to financial resources and pasture will be in a relatively better position when the flood waters first recede, as they will be able to purchase animals at depressed prices in areas where recovery is lagging. Those without capital will continue to feel pressure to sell at depressed prices.

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