

Mercy Corps and Pastoralism

Helping Pastoralist Populations in Their Livelihood Choices



In Mongolia, Mercy Corps and its partners establish early warning systems to monitor forage conditions. Photo: Thatcher Cook for Mercy Corps.

More than 25% of the earth's resources in over 100 countries are managed by a large yet significantly ignored economic group – called pastoralists.¹ More than 200 million pastoralist people live in arid, remote areas characterized by extreme temperatures and unpredictable rainfall.² While these conditions limit opportunities for sedentary and arable farming, with mobility and careful management of resources pastoralists and their livestock can transform scant water and vegetation into nutritional and economic value.

Why Target Pastoralist Populations?

Pastoralist livelihood systems, when managed efficiently within an enabling environment, are one of the most viable and sustainable means of effectively and efficiently utilizing marginally productive dry lands and adapting to climate change. Mobility and flexibility are important characteristics of adaptation.

With livestock being the main source of livelihood across the Greater Horn of Africa and the Sahara desert, pastoralist herds provide most of the meat, milk, and animal products for the region. Not only do pastoralists feed their own families, but they sell cattle, camels, goats and sheep to growing towns

and cities and export them to the coastal cities of the Gulf of Guinea and the Middle East.

Aside from its direct economic and nutritional value, livestock also has important indirect values, such as financial services (serving as a means of investment, insurance and credit) and ecosystems services (biodiversity, carbon sequestration and nutrient cycling)³. Overall, in many countries, pastoralism contributes significantly to agricultural GDP.⁴

Yet the resilience potential of pastoralism has not been fully recognized, and pastoralists are increasingly under threat from legal, economic, social and political disincentives. A diminishing natural resource base caused by climate change, population growth, and shifting land use is restricting mobility, which in turns leads to conflict and reduces livestock productivity.

What is Pastoralism?

Pastoral production systems are those “in which at least 50% of the gross incomes from households come from pastoralism or its related activities, or else, where more than 15% of households’ food energy consumption involves the milk or dairy products they produce” (Swift’s 1988). For others, pastoralism is defined as a livestock system where rangelands account for more than 50% of animal feeding time (Benlekhal, 2004).

The pastoralism lifestyle is built on four inter-related principles:

Mobility: As a response to climate variations, pastoralists and their herds move over long distances to maximize and manage their use of grazing, and access medicinal minerals, plants, and water.

Herd management: Herds are diversified in sex, age and species to spread risks.

Access to markets and services: Trade in livestock generates resources for fulfilling other family needs (food, education, health care). Small ruminants (goats and sheep) are considered “petty cash”, cattle are “capital”, and camels “assets”.

Communal support: By taking care of each others, pastoralists can recover quickly from disaster.

¹ Blench, R (2001) Pastoralism in the New Millennium FAO

² Communities of practice for pro-poor livestock and fisheries/aquaculture development, 12-13 Jan. 2009, Rome, IFAD Headquarters, <http://www.ifad.org/lrkm/events/cops/papers/pastoralists.pdf>

³ WISP (2007) Squandered Wealth: A global economic review

⁴ Source - World Bank 2005, UNDP 2003, the World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism (WISP) 2006

Pastoralism – A Strong Economic Potential

Hides and skins are easier to export than fresh meat or milk. Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya have 60 tanneries which generate a combined income of more than \$135million.

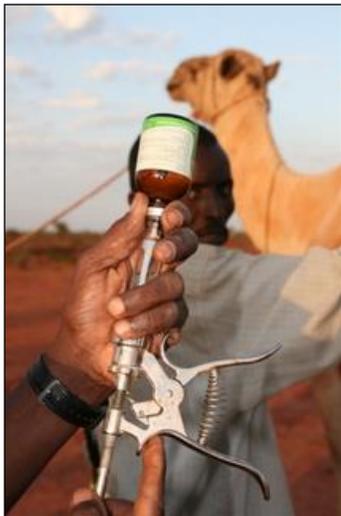
Intra-regional trade in livestock in the Horn and East Africa is estimated to exceed US\$ 60 million a year.

“Even in terms of direct products alone, pastoralism has been shown to be 2 to 10 times more productive than commercial ranching under the same conditions” (WISP, 2006).

In Mongolia, pastoral livestock are responsible for one third of GDP and are the second largest source of export earnings (UNDP, 2003). Ethiopia’s pastoral dominated livestock sector contributes more than 20% of Ethiopia’s total GDP, and almost 8.5% of the GDP in Uganda (WISP 2006).

Simultaneously, local governments often consider pastoralism as a primitive lifestyle and, thus, push for a change to a sedentary lifestyle, which leads to policy gaps in terms of mobile social services and regulation of seasonal migration. Finally, pastoralists have limited education and can be difficult to reach, so they’re often excluded from major economic opportunities stemming from livestock or tourism.

Because pastoralists are constantly on the move, they do not fit within the traditional framework of modern societies and it is easy to ignore them. Pastoralists are among the most economically, politically and socially marginalized people on Earth, and their way of life runs the risk of disappearing -- with disastrous consequences to livestock production and the natural regeneration of drylands.



In Ethiopia, Mercy Corps developed the **veterinarian input supply chain** by boosting supply outreach through the reinforcement of community animal health workers’ network. To ensure sustainability, these workers were linked to and remunerated by private pharmacies. Photo: Emma Proud for Mercy Corps.

Building Economic Resilience

To build the economic resilience of pastoralist populations, Mercy Corps focuses on their most vital asset – livestock. We work with pastoralists, governments, private-sector actors and trade/professional associations to jointly research, map and document bottlenecks inhibiting the

competitiveness and expansion of the livestock industry.

Based on program results, and using a market-based approach, Mercy Corps projects boost both the supply and demand for animal health and nutrition goods and services by developing new business models with, and forging linkages between, wholesalers, agro-veterinarians, and animal health workers. Down the livestock value chain, Mercy Corps fosters the establishment of viable commercial relationships between herders and traders.

Strengthening these vertical linkages, while improving key infrastructures, reduces transaction costs and spoilage and increases market integration. Simultaneously, we build the advocacy skills of private-sector actors and trade associations to enable livestock stakeholders to effectively voice their needs and concerns and create dialogue and collaboration platforms.

Mercy Corps’ **commercial destocking programming in Ethiopia** led to an increase in revenues for livestock traders, limited the loss of productive livestock among herders, and helped decrease the pressure on an already stressed environment.

Building Social Resilience

Pastoralist people often live in areas characterized by violent conflict – either between herders and farmers when transhumance corridors and land tenure systems are not well defined and natural resources are scarce; or stemming from the presence of heavy banditry and terrorist groups where local governments are failing. These conflicts and insecurity reinforce pastoralists’ vulnerability by reducing their mobility and depleting their economic and human assets.

Mercy Corps' expertise in peacebuilding – honed through the implementation of more than 100 peacebuilding programs across 30 countries – has allowed us to develop an approach for pastoralist communities that directly addresses conflict-related constraints to food security, resilience to drought and economic growth.

Our interventions focus on enhancing local capacity to resolve disputes, cooperatively managing shared resources, and addressing economic conflict drivers. Reinforcing local governance structures leads to a more efficient management of rangelands and trees, thus contributing to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The skills and relationships built through these programs enable both communities and local government to adapt to external shocks – both political and climatic – and more effectively manage competing demands on increasingly scarce resources without resorting to violence.

Uganda Our Building Bridges to Peace program sought to **build trust and economic interaction** between ethnic groups with a history of violence. Joint economic projects were undertaken including a small dam that increased access to water for multiple communities, and agriculture projects that encouraged joint farming and market rehabilitation. These were complemented with peace building activities. Our final evaluation found that communities where the program was implemented gained better access to natural resources, more livelihoods opportunities, better perceptions of security, greater trust and stronger inter-communal ties (such as intermarriage) compared with communities where the program was not implemented.

Building Environmental Resilience

In dryland ecosystems, pastoralists actually play an important positive role – they both use the ecosystem's resources, such as grassland and water, and contribute to the production and stability of these ecosystems. For example, livestock grazing, if properly managed, enhances the fertility, distribution and diversity of plants, which in turn capture carbon dioxide, reduce erosion and facilitate water-holding capacity. Nevertheless, pastoralists are often accused of exacerbating natural resource depletion through over grazing.

To build environmental resilience, Mercy Corps employs a broad range of strategies designed to improve resource-use rights (grazing/farming delineation), protect and enhance existing resources (soil bio-reclamation techniques), and promote improved management strategies for existing resources (commercial destocking).

In all cases, Mercy Corps builds the capacity of community groups and traditional and government institutions to evaluate current and past trends and conditions, identify internal and external drivers of change and build a shared vision for the future of their ecosystem.

In **Niger**, Mercy Corps employed over 10,000 pastoralist households through a cash-for-work program. This program improved fodder production and rehabilitated rangeland through **proven land bio-reclamation techniques** such as half moons and zai holes.

A Strategy Adapted to the Various Groups

Pastoralist populations include both transhumant pastoralists, as well as more sedentary agro-pastoralists, and each of these groups has different strengths and needs. Mercy Corps programs analyze the context, including the environmental and economic constraints, and assist them in their choice to either “move up,” i.e., to fully harness the potential their lifestyle offers, or “move out” of their way of life by helping them “sedentarize”.⁵



In **Uganda**, Mercy Corps reinforces the capacities of pastoralist communities to achieve sustainable food security. Photo: Jenny Vaughn for Mercy Corps.

⁵ Mercy Corps is aware that pastoralists can take different paths depending on the environment – in line with Andy Catley's “The Futures of Pastoralism in Africa”, Tufts University

Pastoral women are especially marginalized - they experience the discrimination of pastoralist populations while also living in remote, under-serviced areas with limited to no education or health infrastructure. Their main source of livelihood comes from animal by-products (milk and skins) rather than the livestock itself, and their efforts are usually overseen by their husbands.

In **Somaliland**, Mercy Corps increased women pastoralists' social and financial capital through the provision of revolving loans, which fostered collaboration between men, clan elders, and women to manage these loans in an efficient and transparent manner and provided women new business and social opportunities.

Women's control over household economic resources is complex and depends on the origins and status of the individual animal and the woman's degree of 'informal power' over her husband.⁶ However, with recurring droughts, pastoral households migrate and/or families split. When men leave with the herd, women lose their access to livestock products, endangering their income source. And when men leave the herds behind, women are left with the extra burden of managing the stock. In both cases, women are constantly under the threat of violence.

It is in this context that Mercy Corps works with pastoral women and their male counterparts to help women boost their income or choose livelihood alternatives so that they are able to increase their decision-making within their households and their communities.

Mercy Corps' Experience

Mercy Corps is implementing programs addressing pastoralist issues in Africa (Niger, the Horn of Africa, Uganda and South Sudan) and Asia (Mongolia and Afghanistan). Valued currently at over \$134 million, our programs have contributed to improving the resilience of more than one million pastoralists.

⁶ Informal influence usually depends upon the woman's age, her husband's social standing, the number and age of her sons, and in some societies her ability to speak well and exhibit wisdom. "Gender Issues and Pastoral Economic Growth and Development in Ethiopia", Cathy Watson, January 2010

Mercy Corps programs combine emergency response with recovery and longer-term development activities that are designed to protect, stimulate and increase economic, social and environmental resilience.

Working along the transhumance corridors to reach extremely mobile pastoralists or within agro-pastoral communities, Mercy Corps implements programs focused on improving animal health service delivery; strengthening the capacity of herders in animal nutrition and care, including herd management; fostering livestock markets and trade; boosting service delivery adapted to mobile populations; and strengthening input supply chains.



In **Niger** and **Mali**, Mercy Corps works along the transhumance corridors to establish one-stop service centers for migrating herders, including water points, fodder shops, and animal vaccination facilities. Photo: Thatcher Cook for Mercy Corps.

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