COPACSO Issues Paper

Uganda's Loss of Pastoral Land and Indigenous Food, Animal and Grass Varieties: Experiences from the Pastoral Complex of Karamoja Region

COPACSO
COALITION OF PASTORALIST CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

Introduction

Pastoralism, understood as a complex and finely-tuned symbiotic relationship between the environment, livestock, and people, has been practiced for millennia in Uganda's semi-arid regions, particularly in the *Cattle Corridor*. This system thrives on ecological balance, ensuring the sustainable use of water, pasture, livestock, and people in highly variable climatic conditions. Communities have historically developed coping mechanisms, such as periodical strategic mobility and communally organized resource sharing, to manage the spatial and temporal availability of water and pasture. Despite these traditional systems, colonial and postcolonial governments in Uganda have progressively undermined the authority of local institutions, leading to the erosion of communal land tenure. This system was only reinstated in the 1995 Constitution as one of four recognized legal land tenures in the country.

The Coalition of Pastoral Civil Society Organizations (COPACSO) has for years been engaged with the pastoral question across Uganda's cattle corridor. From such engagement, it has been realized that the survival of pastoralism, just like settled crop farming, is threatened by a complex process that is leading to the loss of pastoral lands, loss of their productivity and the loss of indigenous seeds, animals and grass varieties in the pastoral complex. Many pastoralist areas of Uganda, particularly in Karamoja, are increasingly at the risk of losing access to, control, and use of land, which has been under control of clan and family systems (customary tenure). The threat is conditioned by the market logic which has compounded the competition for land, driven by population explosion, expansion of large-scale crop farming, government projects, mining concessions, and conservation initiatives that occupy approximately 54% of Karamoja's land. These pressures are worsened by the weakening of and usurpation of the role and authority of traditional leadership. These have fueled intra-clan, inter-clan conflicts and conflicts between pastoral communities and other land users. The problem extends beyond just land access—it includes the erosion of traditional knowledge systems, such as the management of indigenous seeds, pastures, and animal genetics, which have sustained and regenerated pastoralist communities for generations. This in turn does not only strain the remaining traditional grazing grounds, water and pasture resources but also affect the availability of indigenous seeds/grasses/animals and the sustainability, resilience, and survival of pastoral communities.

From its history of working with such communities, COPACSO has joined The Land and Equity Movement in Uganda (LEMU) and other partner organizations to launch a national campaign dubbed ***Keep Your Land, Keep Your Seed*** whose major purpose is to advocate for the retention of land and indigenous seed/food varieties by the rural farming communities so as to bolster their resilience against famine, food and animal shortage, extreme poverty and other climate induced forms of socioeconomic crisis, which are exacerbated by the dominance of commercial approaches to land access (land sales) and the dominance of 'improved' seed/grass varieties and commercial crops/grasses. In the build-up to the campaign, LEMU, COPACSO and other partner organizations[1] undertook several pre-launch activities that would lead up to the actual campaign launch. These included the development of the national campaign strategy, the formation and operationalization of a campaign planning committee, and background studies in different parts of Uganda to inform a national level issues paper on land and seed/food/grass loss. As part of the pre-launch activities, COPACSO undertook a pre-launch study in the pastoral region of Karamoja. This issues paper focuses on the experiences from the pastoral complex of Karamoja focusing on issues of loss of land, loss of land productivity and loss of indigenous seed/grass varieties in the region.

Key emerging issues

Pastoralist communities depend heavily on natural pastures to sustain their livestock and natural pastures are diverse and adapted to the variable climates of these regions, with factors such as rainfall, temperature, and soil type influencing their composition. Different types of grasslands, such as Moist Hyparrhenia, Dry Hyparrhenia, Themeda triandra, and Setaria-Chrysopogon exist across the country while the latter is dominant in the Karamoja Region. Specifically, the prevalent issues affecting pastoralist communities are:

[1] Other partner Civil S ceociety Organizations include Oxfam, LANDnet, PELUM, SEATINI Uganda, Uganda Agribusiness Alliance, UCOBAC, and Food Rights Alliance.

❖ **Seed dependency due to loss of indigenous seeds, grasses and tree varieties**

Pastoralist communities in Uganda are suffering rapid decline of indigenous grasses. Such loss is driven by various factors including conversion of rangelands for agriculture, private ranches, and other uses which in turn reduce grazing areas, especially those crucial for dry-season survival. Additionally, land individualization policies and practices fragment rangelands, restricting traditional pastoralist mobility and hindering effective pasture management. Moreover, bush encroachment, often due to insecurity or exclusion from traditional grazing areas and charcoal burning, tends to lead to a reduction in grazing land. As a result, pastoralist communities risk relying on external seeds due to the lack of indigenous seed production. It should also be noted that commercializing seed varieties has eroded indigenous seeds, undermined agricultural biodiversity and weakened the resilience of local pastoralist systems. This raises costs and diminishes control over seed quality and availability hence poor agricultural proceeds and harvests. Matters are not helped by the inadequate knowledge and appreciation of the preservation of indigenous seeds, hence perpetuating seed dependence and hampering the sustainability of traditional agricultural practices.

❖ **Erosion of Indigenous animal genetic sovereignty**

The introduction of high-yield exotic breeds dilutes indigenous livestock genetics, leading to the loss of traits like disease resistance and environmental resilience. The shifting climate patterns such as droughts and unpredictable rainfall, strain indigenous breeds that might struggle to adapt as their natural ecosystems change. The individualization of land arising from privatization and land grabbing restrict pastoralists' movement with their herds thereby undermining selective breeding practices essential for maintaining genetic diversity. Moreover, market pressures emanating from the global focus on high-yield commercial livestock devalues indigenous breeds, diminishing the cultural and ecological importance of traditional livestock to pastoralist communities.

❖ **Structural constraints**

There are some constraints, such as insufficient documenting and failure to recognize indigenous animal breeds and breeding programmes in national policies, which endanger indigenous breeds. There is also a prevalent policy level bias towards prioritizing productivity, and by extension, sidelining indigenous breeds and failing to protect their genetic sovereignty in favor of commercial livestock. Worse still, pastoralist communities often lack access to veterinary care, financial support, and markets, all of which hinder their ability to preserve and sustainably manage their indigenous livestock genetics. There are also structural constraints that emerge from the dominant notions of land ownership and use, which tend to favor the individual as opposed to community, that have no resonance in pastoral contexts.

❖ **Land grabbing due to infrastructural development projects and mining**

Investors, mining companies, and even the government are increasingly appropriating land from pastoralist communities. Indeed, several development and business projects are pushing pastoralists into small and more stressed territories, yet pastoralism requires extensive lands. There is also a challenge of weak institutional and legal frameworks, for instance, local governments and traditional institutions tend to have limited finances and legal vagueness which undermines their capacity to enforce communal land rights effectively. One can also observe rising conflicts due to the increasing strain on resources, driven by climate change and population explosion. For instance, nowadays, there are ceaseless conflicts between pastoralists and cultivator communities as well as between Ugandan pastoralists and those from neighboring countries, hence socio-politico-economic instability in the region.

Conclusions: Shifting Perspectives and Supporting Sustainable Pastoralism

Addressing the challenges to pastoralism and promoting sustainable development in Karamoja requires a shift in perspective, recognizing the valuable contributions of pastoralist communities. Ensuring land, indigenous seed, and animal genetics sovereignty is crucial for sustaining local livelihoods, food security, and the survival of indigenous animal breeds. Legal recognition of land tenure and conflict resolution are key to addressing land issues, while education, conservation, and local production of indigenous seeds and breeds can enhance community resilience. Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) offer complementary strategies by helping communities restore ecosystems, secure land rights, and preserve agricultural biodiversity. By supporting these approaches and the ***Keep Our Land, Keep Our Seed*** campaign, Uganda can promote sustainable pastoralism, protect its natural resources, and ensure the long-term viability of pastoral livelihoods.

Recommendations

Several strategies to address the challenges and ensure sustainable land management for pastoralist communities include:

A. Policy and Institutional Reforms:

- **Recognize and secure pastoral land rights:** Formalizing customary land tenure and enacting policies that protect grazing areas are crucial. This includes finalizing the draft Rangelands Management and Pastoralism Policy.

- **Support pastoral institutions:** Integrating customary institutions into formal governance structures strengthens resource management and conservation.
- **Invest in research and extension:** Targeted research and extension services can help pastoralists adapt to changing conditions and adopt improved management practices.
- **Promotion of Sustainable Land Management:** Policies should encourage practices like controlled burning and rotational grazing, which are adapted to the specific conditions of pastoral areas.

B. Community Empowerment and Sustainable Practices:

- **Strengthen Communal/Clan Land Associations (CLAs):** Provide CLAs with legal recognition, capacity building, and resources to effectively manage communal lands.
- **Promote sustainable pastoralism:** Encourage practices like rotational grazing, water harvesting, and reforestation to improve rangeland health and productivity.
- **Recognize and support traditional knowledge and practices:** Pastoralist communities have a deep understanding of their environment and have developed sustainable resource management methods. Policy interventions should acknowledge and build upon these traditional systems.
- **Promote community participation:** Ensure the active involvement of pastoralist communities in decision-making processes related to land-use planning and management.

C. Addressing Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss:

- **Implement climate-resilient agriculture and water resource management techniques:** These can mitigate the effects of droughts and erratic rainfall.
- **Preserve indigenous knowledge and biological diversity:** Protecting indigenous seed varieties and animal breeds through community seed banks, breeding programs, and documentation efforts is crucial.
- **Enhance seed sovereignty:** Promoting local seed production, preserving indigenous varieties, and providing education on seed management are essential.

D. Enhancing Indigenous Seed and Trees Sovereignty

- **Promoting Local Seed Production**: Support local seed production through training, establishing seed banks, and promoting community seed exchanges to preserve indigenous varieties and boost resilience.
- **Preserving Indigenous Seed Varieties**: Develop programs for conserving indigenous seeds through community seed banks and engage farmers in collection and preservation efforts to maintain biodiversity.
- **Education and Capacity Building**: Provide training on seed saving, management, and sustainable agricultural practices to strengthen local farmers' resilience and improve food security.
- **Customary Tenure Systems:** These systems govern access to essential resources like water and pastures, ensuring equitable use and preventing overgrazing.

  Negotiated Access and Authority: Access to strategic grazing areas, particularly during dry seasons, is often negotiated and regulated through traditional rules and institutions. This helps maintain a balance between livestock numbers and available resources.

  Reciprocity and Sharing: Pastoralist communities practice principles of reciprocity and resource sharing, fostering cooperation and resilience in managing their environment.

E. Addressing Indigenous Animal Genetic Sovereignty Challenges

- **Community-Based Breeding Programs (CBBPs)**: Support CBBPs that allow pastoralists to manage breeding based on traditional knowledge, enhancing indigenous livestock sustainability and productivity, while at the same time sustaining such knowledge systems.
- **Policy Advocacy for Indigenous Breed Protection**: Advocate for policies that recognize the value of indigenous breeds in biodiversity and cultural heritage, supported by civil society organizations like COPACSO.
- **Participatory Resource Mapping and Land Rights Protection**: Involve pastoralists in mapping traditional grazing lands to secure land rights and protect areas vital for indigenous breeds.
- **Climate Adaptation Strategies**: Promote climate-resilient pastoral practices like water harvesting and drought-tolerant fodder crops to sustain indigenous livestock in changing climates.
- **Improved Access to Veterinary and Extension Services**: Ensure affordable access to veterinary services to maintain the health of indigenous herds and improve survival rates in challenging conditions.
- **Documentation and Registration of Indigenous Breeds**: Create databases and registries for indigenous breeds to ensure their preservation, international recognition, and access to genetic resource benefits. These databases should also be locally (or at least nationally) managed and controlled.
- **Inclusive Market Systems for Indigenous Livestock**: Develop markets that value the unique traits of indigenous livestock to increase

their economic value and promote genetic diversity.

F. Addressing Climate Change Challenges

- **Climate-Resilient Agriculture**: Introduce drought-resistant crops and diversify agriculture to enhance resilience to erratic rainfall and ensure food stability.
- **Water Resource Management**: Promote efficient water management techniques like rainwater harvesting and drip irrigation to mitigate drought impacts and ensure reliable water access.
- **Reforestation and Agroforestry**: Encourage reforestation and agroforestry to restore soil fertility, reduce land degradation, and improve agricultural productivity.

G. Nature-Based Solutions (NbS) and Techniques

- **Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR)**: FMNR enhances soil fertility and restores degraded lands by promoting natural tree regrowth from existing roots.
- **Assisted Natural Regeneration**: Removing barriers to natural regrowth accelerates ecosystem recovery and boosts soil health and biodiversity.
- **Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM)**: Involving communities in resource management promotes sustainable land use and equitable resource access.
- **Rangeland Management**: Rotational grazing and pasture improvement restore rangeland health, benefiting both pastoral and agricultural systems.
- **Water Resource Management**: Sustainable practices like rainwater harvesting and efficient irrigation increase agricultural productivity and mitigate drought impacts.

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