

Policy brief:

Securing Land Right for Pastoralists

This paper calls on governments to legally protect the land rights of pastoralists, including the need for mobility and the customary rights to access and manage pastoral resources

Introduction

For pastoralists to operate productively and sustainably, land-tenure rights are needed to support mobility, flexible access, and non-exclusive use of land. Tenure systems enable people to use land effectively for their livelihoods. For those whose livelihoods rely on pastoralism, an appropriate tenure system must, above all, secure their ability to use the land for pastoralism.

Rangelands and pastoralism must be understood as a single system. Rangelands emerged through a mutually beneficial interplay between plants and herbivores. Pastoralists use livestock to complement and continue these ecological functions.

Mobility allows pastoralists to make the most of resources that are both dispersed and ephemeral. The distribution of grazing opportunities on rangelands can be highly variable, shifting in both location and timing from year to year due to climate variability, especially rainfall. Pastoralists specialize in taking advantage of these successions of short-lived and often unpredictable outbursts of nutrient-rich pasture over the rangelands.

Pastoralists' mobility is key to both the sustainable use of rangelands and the economic productivity of pastoralism. Mobility enables livestock to feed on best-quality pasture for longer than would be possible if they stayed in one place. By tracking best forage on rangelands where nutrients are unevenly distributed, pastoralists maximize herd productivity while favouring pasture regeneration and avoiding overgrazing. Mobility also reduces pastoralists' exposure to drought.

Challenges

Formal land-tenure systems have largely failed to recognize the rights of pastoralists, particularly those that support flexible, multifunctional, and temporary land use.

Securing these rights is essential for efficiently and sustainably accessing resources in highly variable environments. In the absence of a formal recognition of these rights, rangelands have been represented as unused and unclaimed land the state is free to allocate at will.

Across the world, pastoralists are losing access to grazing areas. Rangelands are being repurposed or privatized, and fenced off for industry, infrastructure or agricultural expansion in the name of economic development, conservation, and climate change mitigation. As a result, rangelands are becoming fragmented and inaccessible. These pressures make it ever more difficult to practice pastoralism, putting both pastoralists' livelihoods and rangelands at risk.

Because the economic and ecological value from pastoralism is poorly captured in official data, pastoralists are often disadvantaged in policy making and planning processes. Mechanisms to evaluate and recognize the economic and ecological benefits that pastoralism brings, particularly concerning land use, are often missing or inadequate.

Shifting the perspective

Pastoralism is a sophisticated, adaptive system that works—its challenges arise when it's obstructed. Pastoralists regenerate rangelands by tracking shifting patterns of quality pasture, using livestock to mimic the role of wild herbivores. Their mobility allows vegetation to recover and ecosystems to remain resilient. When allowed to operate by its own logic, pastoralism adds value—ecologically, socially, and economically.

Ecological sustainability shouldn't be a compromise—in pastoralism, sustainability is what drives productivity. Pastoralism is a productive, ecologically grounded way of life that thrives by working with nature, not against it. Rather than relying on fossil fuels or fixed infrastructure to impose artificially stable conditions, pastoralists use mobility, deep ecological knowledge, and selective grazing to manage variability and sustain both herds and landscapes

Pastoralism supports the wider food system and delivers critical ecosystem services. By fostering soil fertility, water regulation, biodiversity conservation, and nutrient cycling, pastoralism contributes to both environmental health and food production. Manure from livestock sustains crop farming, and mobile herding systems support food security, safety, and nutrition.

Land use does not have to be exclusive—land use for pastoralism is temporary, unobtrusive, and compatible with other activities. From daily grazing routes to long-distance movements, pastoralism requires secure access rights that allow people and

animals to move as needed. This use of land—shared, seasonal, and non-exclusive—can and does coexist with other livelihoods and land users, as it has for generations.

Customary institutions are not obstacles to progress—they are foundations for sustainable land governance. Developed to help people live together, they uphold the duty of inclusion over the right of exclusion and have long enabled flexible, negotiated access—something fixed legal categories often fail to do. Their strength lies in adaptability—not only to ecological variability, but to changing social expectations. Resilience grows when they also include women, youth, and minority groups in decisions about land use. Supporting this evolution is not a break from tradition, but part of it.

Calls to action

1. Guarantee in the law pastoralists' right to access land for their livelihoods. To make a living from the often unpredictable spatial and temporal variability of pastoral resources, and manage them sustainably, pastoralists need land rights that allow for correspondingly variable access to land. Guaranteeing pastoralists access to grazing opportunities and water for their animals within and across national borders is necessary for the resilience of rangeland-pastoralism systems: rangelands' health, people's livelihoods, and the wider economy.

2. Protect mobility as a right fundamental to the livelihood of pastoralists. Flexible access to key pastoral resources where and when they become available is essential for sustainable pastoralism. Pastoral mobility should be acknowledged as a fundamental right attached to the way pastoralists use the land and inseparable from their right to livelihood. This should include facilitating the development of infrastructure and institutions that support mobility, and of agreements with public authority and other users, allowing pastoralists to move across land and water, as well as borders.

3. Expand legal frameworks to represent the full spectrum of pastoralists' land rights. Move beyond viewing land solely as an object of appropriation and trade, and legally recognize it as a space for livelihood, drawing on customary traditions and collective land governance. Land ownership alone is insufficient to enable pastoralism, as the distribution of grazing resources on the rangelands can change unpredictably. A legal framework that supports pastoralist livelihoods does not reduce customary land rights to community ownership of land. It acknowledges the legitimacy of shared, multifunctional, non-exclusive, and temporary land use by different communities at different times of the year—thereby also legally protecting pastoral mobility.

Specifically, an expanded legal framework should move beyond individual or corporate ownership and recognize land rights revolving around diffuse, unincorporated

communities. In addition to community ownership, the expanded framework should include the legal recognition of shared and customary use and management of land now owned by private persons, other communities, or the state. Such a framework should ensure that these collective rights can be secured and registered with the same level of protection as ownership, particularly against eviction or competing claims from other rights-holders.

4. Identify, acknowledge, and register pastoralists' customary land rights that have been overlooked in the formalization of land tenure. The shift toward market-driven land-tenure systems has largely excluded pastoralists' customary rights and self-governed land-based commons in general. Whether this process was imposed by foreign powers against indigenous peoples or implemented by independent states, the dismissal of pastoralist land rights is a historical land injustice that needs to be addressed. Today, legal systems need to recognize these land rights: identify, acknowledge, and register them through the expanded legal framework described above.

5. Recognize pastoralism as a form of land development. The vital role pastoralism plays in adding value to the land is rarely acknowledged in law or planning. In most countries, legal and policy frameworks define agricultural land development solely in terms of crop farming—an oversight that must be corrected. The value pastoralists add to the land in terms of landscape functionality, ecosystem services, and economic productivity should be formally integrated into national economic planning. Legislation should recognize pastoralism as a form of land development, equal in status to crop farming.

6. Stop the conversion of pastoralist land to other uses that exclude pastoralism. Pass legislation to protect pastoral rangelands against conversion to uses that are incompatible with pastoralism, whether by public bodies, private owners, or communities. Introduce regulations to ensure that conversion of pastoral rangelands for public utility purposes preserves pastoralists' access for grazing, water, and passage as much as possible. Ensure that pastoralist communities whose livelihood depends on accessing or using the land are informed of land-use conversion plans and can successfully challenge and prevent conversion to uses that are incompatible with their livelihoods.

7. Involve pastoralist communities in all processes in which they are stakeholders. Integrate pastoralists' participation in planning at all relevant levels – local, regional, national and international. Take their expert knowledge into account—to identify how and when the land needs to be used, and to secure the existence of rangeland-pastoralism systems that can be both economically successful and ecologically sustainable.

This brief has been prepared by the Working Group on Land Rights in the Global Alliance for the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) (May 15, 2025). Written by Mark Moritz, Flora Vern and Saverio Krätli, with support from Jonathan Davies, Fiona Flintan, Ann Waters-Bayer, Jarso Mokku, Anita Sharma, and facilitated by Natasha Maru/International Land Coalition. It has also received feedback from a wider group of experts and civil society representatives.