

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM D'A 26:

No pastoralism without mobility: challenges and proposals

"Mitigate, adapt to and manage the effects of drought in order to strengthen the resilience of vulnerable populations and ecosystems": this is the third strategic objective defined in the 2018-2030 strategic framework of the UNCCD¹, United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. In arid areas, this resilience relies largely on rangelands and pastures, which dominate the landscape, and pastoralism makes use of these areas that agriculture is unable to manage. In total, these ecosystems constitute 54% of the world's land area and support nearly 500 million people worldwide². Arid regions alone are home to some 200 million pastoralists³. This is enormous, yet the issues related to these areas are poorly addressed in public policy.

By designating 2026 as the Year of Pastoralism and Pastures, the United Nations has decided to highlight this activity, which offers a way to reconcile the preservation of fragile ecosystems, economic development and social cohesion in arid and semi-arid areas. This spotlight is necessary because today, threats to the mobility of herders and their herds are dangerously undermining pastoralism, calling into question the sustainable management of rangelands and ecosystems, which was established as a priority at the 16th Conference of the Parties to the UNCCD (COP16) held in Riyadh⁴, in 2025. In practice, mobility is central to the resilience of pastoral systems and their ability to cope with major crises such as droughts. Controlled movement of animals helps to preserve soils, regulate water resources and maintain biodiversity, while reducing conflicts over land use.

But today, the movement of people and animals is becoming increasingly difficult. This is due to growing insecurity in these areas, increased regulation at inter-state borders, and the advance of agricultural production, which is gaining ground and reducing the space available for grazing.

Understanding pastoralism

A way of life and a mode of production. This way of life is based on the ownership, exploitation and organised mobility of herds. The aim is to guarantee the supply of fodder, and this takes different forms in terms of time and space. During the rainy season, mobility is said to be daily and of low amplitude. It consists of dispersing the animals across the pasture. During transhumance in the dry season, it is both larger in scale and longer in duration: herders leave their home region to reach host territories that may be several hundred kilometres away. Some nomadic communities practise itinerant mobility: with no fixed abode, they move throughout the year, with a peak during the dry season. Others, who are semi-nomadic, may have seasonal residences.

Sharing common resources. In these areas where water and food are scarce, sharing is essential. Access to pastures, water points, rangelands and forests is negotiated collectively. The use of these "living territories"⁵ is based on a self-management system that includes social and customary agreements as well

¹ [Decision 7 of COP.13](#)

² Source: UNCCD

³ Source: FAO (See [pastoralist-knowledge-hub/en](#)) (accessed in May 2025). See also FAO, 2018.

⁴ [Decision 29 of COP 16](#)

⁵ Concept of APAC, Indigenous and Community Heritage Areas and Territories

as institutions responsible for managing them, all with the aim of preserving the nature of the territory, cultural values and the well-being of the community.

A wide variety of ecosystems. Pastoralism is practised in areas with low agricultural potential that are unsuitable for other types of development. These may be cold, mountainous or flat areas, such as the South American Altiplano, the Tibetan plateau or the steppes and tundras, but also arid or semi-arid areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa and central and southern Asia.

1 | Why is it essential to preserve pastoralism?

A tool for protecting and even regenerating natural resources in particularly fragile soil and climate contexts: In many regions, pastoralism is the only form of sustainable use of natural resources. Thanks to the mobility of livestock, this mode of production makes it possible to adjust the number of animals and the availability of water and food. This reduces the risk of vegetation and soil degradation associated with grazing and preserves the biodiversity of pastures. This ability to sustainably manage the exploitation of limited natural resources requires real technical knowledge of both the climate and the environment. The pastoralists of Iran's indigenous communities, who raise sheep and camels and whose migration routes cross mountains 3,000 metres high, are able to understand past rainfall and future weather conditions by looking at a bush or dunes. This is an important social and cultural asset.

A guarantee of economic and food security in areas that are extremely vulnerable to desertification:

Pastoral systems contribute to food security in some of the harshest environments on the planet. The animals themselves, but also through the milk and meat they produce, provide communities with food and products that can be exchanged in commercial networks. They transport people and materials, and are capable of pulling tools. The considerable contribution of pastoralists to local economies benefits a wide range of actors, including food suppliers, processors, livestock buyers and local people who buy their supplies at markets.

A tool for preserving social ties, which are essential for coping with crises and uncertainties:

Pastoralists interact with sedentary populations at local, national and international levels. These interactions are also non-commercial and constitute an essential factor in social integration and cohesion. By moving around, pastoralists enable the exchange of information and connections between communities in sparsely populated areas. In these difficult contexts, their technical expertise, the preservation of their culture and the social ties they develop constitute valuable social capital. These social networks and community solidarity contribute to their resilience.

2 | Why is mobility vital to pastoralism?

A controlled territorial strategy based on detailed knowledge of ecosystems, seasonal cycles and social balances between communities, pastoral mobility is an ancestral adaptive response to resource variability. It offers a means of preserving pastures, avoiding overgrazing and ensuring the survival of herds. Because it connects territories, compensates for ecological imbalances and ensures the continuity of practices and social solidarity, it is at the heart of pastoral resilience. In other words, it gives herding communities the ability to anticipate, absorb and adapt to climatic, economic or social shocks while maintaining their livelihoods.

In practice, what does this mean?

Thanks to mobility, pastoralists can adapt to climatic or geopolitical crises. In western India, sheep and goat herders from the Rabari community do not perceive droughts as obstacles because they move to less affected areas. In West Africa, where different herding communities share a territory of 6 million km², there is high insecurity linked to terrorism, which leads to cattle theft and kidnapping. By migrating to coastal countries, pastoralists ensure their survival, even if this means living alongside farmers, which is not always easy.

Thanks to mobility, pastoralism provides ecosystem services such as improving soil fertility, maintaining open landscapes (notably through fire regulation and carbon storage), **and restoring fragile areas.** In Tajikistan, a return to nomadic practices has restored fertility to land degraded by overgrazing. Unable to reduce herd sizes without compromising the economic survival of livestock farms, the return to mobility has reduced the pressure exerted by animals on grasslands while increasing milk and meat production. In Iran, the mobility of goat herds helps to regenerate mountain pastures and rangelands: shepherds attach a small bag containing seeds to the goats' necks. As they move around, the goats drop the seeds and push them into the ground with their hooves.

Thanks to mobility, new economic and social links can be created between communities. While relations between herders and farmers are sometimes difficult, there are also cases where synergies are created. In Western India, for example, the expansion of agricultural areas has encroached on what were once pastoral areas, leading to alliances between herders from the Rabari community and farmers. Grazing cleans and fertilises the farmers' plots, which in turn provide land for the pastoralists.

Thanks to their mobility, pastoralists maintain their knowledge and culture. The identity of communities is closely linked to their movements. The cultural importance of certain grazing routes and seasonal migrations can therefore dictate how and when pastoralists move.

3 | What constraints do pastoralists face today in their movements?

The lack of land policy frameworks:

Often regulated by control of water points, access to grazing land is generally characterised by non-exclusive priority rights for resident groups and rights for third parties based on solidarity and reciprocity. However, many formal legal systems do not recognise or guarantee these customary rights. They may therefore compete with national policies or private initiatives, leading to tensions and conflicts. The coexistence of several types of land rights (customary, Islamic, administrative) also contributes to limiting pastoralists' access to traditional grazing areas. Furthermore, private ownership of land (or wells) has emerged in pastoral areas usually governed by collective usage rights. However, the owners are not necessarily livestock farmers. This has resulted in a reduction and fragmentation of collective resources. Although the governments of Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Senegal have made considerable efforts since the 1980s to recognise pastoral land rights, their implementation remains complicated. With the exception of Niger, these countries do not have institutions responsible for implementation.

Increased pressure on land:

In the absence of measures to secure access to pastureland, strong population growth and the need to derive greater economic value from the land are reducing the space available for pastoralism. Agriculture, gold mining and the creation of nature reserves and parks have sparked interest in pastoral regions. In Guinea, for example, some transhumance routes traditionally used by herders are being encroached upon

by fields. Elsewhere, the areas around wells, which are rich in organic matter, are also tending to be cultivated. Once at the centre of a complementary system of agriculture and livestock farming, pastoralists are being pushed towards less productive areas of degraded land, which is exacerbating tensions over access to water resources and pastureland. On a larger scale, foreign companies and states are being granted agricultural exploitation rights over large areas. This legal and organised land grabbing reduces the amount of land available to pastoralists and can even create areas that are impassable for livestock farmers, limiting their mobility.

All these activities often take place on the best-irrigated land, denying livestock farmers access to the pastures and water sources on which they depend during the dry season.

Administrative restrictions:

Although dating back to colonial times, the establishment of artificial borders continues to pose difficulties. Drawn in sparsely populated pastoral regions, a number of borders cut across traditional grazing lands or migration routes. For several years, increasing restrictions on cross-border movements, linked in part to the rise in violence and terrorism, have forced herders to change their seasonal routes. These are becoming more unpredictable and irregular. Added to this are changes in agricultural policy in some coastal countries: to reduce dependence on imports from the Sahel, for example, governments are implementing protectionist policies that also hinder the freedom of movement of pastoralists. In the same coastal area, the growing stigmatisation of pastoralists as "potential jihadists" may also lead to policies of border closures or severe restrictions.

Growing insecurity:

Violence by armed groups, banditry and inter-community conflicts are leading to the establishment of border barriers, but also to the closure of livestock markets and an increase in livestock theft. These measures specifically hinder the movement of pastoralists, particularly in rural areas of the Sahel and West Africa. As a result, pastoralist communities are being forced to take increasing risks when travelling. In the northern Sahel, for example, Islamist terrorism is turning grazing areas into zones of lawlessness and underdevelopment. This rampant insecurity, which is a symptom of a global governance crisis, is leading armed groups to recruit pastoralists, promising them that they will redress the injustices they suffer.

And also

In addition to these structural difficulties, pastoralists face rising travel costs while essential services (water, animal health, markets) remain inadequate. They lack access to reliable information on climate and geopolitical developments, which prevents them from anticipating crises individually, given that institutional coordination on this issue is also lacking. The lack of veterinary services undermines animal health and, as a result, herd mobility, leading to additional costs. Finally, prejudice and stigmatisation weaken institutional recognition of pastoralism.

4 | Ways to support pastoralists that have already been identified...

How can we ensure that pastoralism remains mobile? A number of international texts and decisions point the way forward. This is the case with the Nouakchott+10 High-Level Forum Declaration on Livestock Development and Securing Pastoral Systems in West Africa and the Sahel. Established in 2024, it assesses ten years of commitments and calls in particular for the restoration of historical solidarity between farmers and herders; the negotiation of local agreements to reduce tensions; the securing of areas where agriculture is expanding at the expense of grazing land; and the integration of territorial governance into adaptation strategies.

Similarly, the medium-term scenarios proposed by IRAM for West Africa show that the current situation is unsustainable. Breaking with the current system, abandoning transhumance does not seem feasible either. This would lead to even greater saturation of space, exacerbate conflicts between farmers and herders, and increase competition for land due to the need to produce fodder for livestock. Ultimately, pastoralists would lose their resilience. The reasonable scenario is therefore to maintain mobility and rethink the relationship between farmers and herders through the prism of complementarity.

Initiatives are already underway in the field to achieve this. Since 2013, ECOWAS has been investing in information and early warning systems and multi-stakeholder dialogue. It is also working to develop infrastructure adapted to pastoralism and to strengthen the international transhumance certificate. Finally, it is considering a spatial reorganisation of the value chain, with the Sahel focusing on production and coastal countries on fattening and finishing. In Guinea, the most recent programmes focus on securing grazing land and water points through participatory mapping, the creation of pastoral ponds and agro-sylvo-pastoral developments.

These initiatives are supported by local authorities and pastoral groups through the development of local planning and joint management agreements. In Kenya, decentralised governance has paved the way for community resource management and rangeland restoration projects, particularly in Laikipia and Samburu counties. Community water projects – sand dams, gabions and boreholes – have helped mitigate the effects of drought and reduce tensions between communities. Recent legislation, notably the Rangeland Management Bill, demonstrates a political will to recognise mobility as a lever for adaptation, even if its application remains limited. In France, local initiatives to reclaim wasteland for grazing, implement watering schemes and support winter transhumance projects illustrate a renewed interest in pastoral mobility.

5 | ... But we must go further

The roadmap is therefore clear. It must now be put into action. To do so, five measures appear essential.

Collect data on pastoralism in order to understand and act accordingly.

On the one hand, this involves measuring and demonstrating the positive impacts of pastoralism by communicating research results. Recent studies have shown, for example, that biomass removal on well-managed rangelands does not exceed 30%, which allows plants to regenerate. On the other hand, it is a question of measuring the sustainability of pastoral systems and adapting public policies. To this end, indicators developed by the International Land Coalition exist to measure land security for pastoralists. This decision-making tool must now be used.

Adapt public policies, in particular by taking into account and respecting pastoralists' self-governance schemes.

Established by pastoral communities themselves, these schemes support the sustainability of their lifestyles and the natural resources on which they depend. These traditional self-governance schemes must be respected and supported by public policies.

Establish effective land governance bodies.

This involves recognising the importance of the plots and grazing areas used by pastoralists and giving them flexible access to these areas in line with their migration patterns. One of the aims is to facilitate the essential coexistence between livestock farmers and crop farmers.

Adapt cross-border movement arrangements.

Without this mobility, pastoralists are deprived of part of their resilience.

Improve knowledge sharing and information dissemination.

Observatories, early warning systems, and accessible climate and pastoral data are all tools that can facilitate mobility and, therefore, crisis anticipation and adaptation.

Excerpts from the bibliography used:

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This document was produced as part of the Désertif'actions initiative, which seeks to better understand how to improve the resilience of territories to drought. It is based on a specific bibliographic analysis as well as on country workshops and webinars held in the run-up to this event, which will take place from 25 to 28 March 2026 in Djerba.

Intended for Désertif'actions participants and contributors, this note aims to shed light on the facilitation of pastoral mobility, which is essential for preserving and even improving resilience in arid and semi-arid areas. It should help to strengthen the arguments that civil society representatives will be able to put forward at COP17 of the UNCCD.

List of countries that contributed to this note through their preparatory workshops: France, Guinea, Kenya.

Find the reports from the preparatory workshops and webinars on the website desertif-actions.org

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