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**Abstract:** This article presents the author's views on how to save Africa's nomadic herders from drought. The drought is big news in Africa, affecting huge areas of the Sahel, east Africa and the Horn. There are 20 million nomadic animal-herders in this area, and they are fast becoming some of the poorest people in the continent. The governments and aid agencies are trying to turn them into commercial ranchers or agriculturalists. However, the best way to save them is to support their traditional lifestyle. Now, funders and policy-makers have been starting to get the message. One example is intervention by governments to ensure that herders get fair prices for their cattle when they sell them in times of drought.

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### Unsettled existence

**Forcing Africa's nomadic herders to become ranchers will not save them from drought. Far better to support their traditional ways, says Curtis Abraham**

ON NEW Year's Day, 50,000 inmates in Kenyan jails went without lunch. This was not some mass hunger strike to highlight poor living conditions. It was an extraordinary humanitarian gesture: the money that would have been spent on their lunches went to the charity Food Aid to help feed an estimated 3.5 million Kenyans who, because of a severe drought, are threatened with starvation.

The drought is big news in Africa, affecting huge areas of the Sahel, east Africa and the Horn. If you are reading this in the west, however, you may not be aware of it — the media is not interested in old stories. Even if you do know about the drought, you may not be aware that it is devastating one group of people disproportionately: the pastoralists. There are 20 million nomadic or semi-nomadic animal-herders in this region, and they are fast becoming some of the poorest people in the continent. Their plight encapsulates Africa's perennial problem with drought and famine.

How so? It comes down to the reluctance of governments, aid agencies and foreign lenders to support the herders' traditional way of life. Instead they have tended to try to turn them into commercial ranchers or agriculturalists, even though it has been demonstrated time and again that pastoralists are well adapted to their harsh environments, and that moving livestock according to the seasons or climatic changes makes their methods far more viable than agriculture in sub-Saharan drylands.

Furthermore, African pastoralist systems are often more productive, in terms of protein and cash per hectare, than Australian, American and other African ranches in similar climatic conditions. They make a substantial contribution to their countries' national economies. In Kenya, for example, the turnover of the pastoralist sector is worth \$800 million per year. In countries such as Burkina Faso, Eritrea and Ethiopia, hides from pastoralists' herds make up over 10 per cent of export earnings.

Despite this productivity, pastoralists still starve and their animals perish when drought hits. One reason is that only a trickle of the profits goes to the herders themselves; the lion's share is pocketed by traders. This is partly because the herders only sell much of their stock during times of drought and famine, when they need the cash to buy food, and the terms of trade in this situation never work in their favour. Another reason is the lack of investment in herding areas.

Funding bodies such as the World Bank and USAID tried to address some of the problems in the 1960s, investing millions of dollars in commercial beef and dairy production. It didn't work. Firstly, no one bothered to consult the pastoralists about what they wanted. Secondly, rearing livestock took precedence over human progress. The policies and strategies of international development agencies more or less mirrored the thinking of their colonial predecessors. They were based on two false assumptions: that pastoralism is primitive and inefficient, which led to numerous failed schemes aimed at converting herders to modern ranching models; and that Africa's drylands can support commercial ranching. They cannot. Most of Africa's herders live in areas with unpredictable weather systems — they are prone to droughts — that are totally unsuited to commercial ranching.

What the pastoralists need is support for their traditional lifestyle. Over the past few years, funders and policy-makers have been starting to get the message. One example is intervention by governments to ensure that pastoralists get fair prices for their cattle when they sell them in times of drought, so that they can afford to buy fodder for their remaining livestock and cereals to keep themselves and their families alive (the problem in African famines is not so much a lack of food as a lack of money to buy it). Another example is a drought early-warning system run by the Kenyan government and the World Bank that has helped avert livestock deaths.

This is all promising, but more needs to be done. Some African governments still favour forcing pastoralists to settle. They should heed the latest scientific research demonstrating the productivity of traditional cattle-herding. Ultimately, sustainable rural development in pastoralist areas will depend on increasing trade, so one thing going for them is the growing demand for livestock products: there will likely be an additional 2 billion consumers worldwide by 2020, the vast majority in developing countries. To ensure that pastoralists benefit, it will be crucial to give them a greater say in local policies. Other key tasks include giving a greater say to women, who play critical roles in livestock production.

The rich world should pay proper attention to the plight of the pastoralists. Leaving them dependent on foreign food aid is unsustainable and will lead to more resentment, conflict, environmental degradation and malnutrition. It is in the rich world's interests to help out.

"The policies of aid agencies mirrored the thinking of their colonial predecessors"

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