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# PASTORALISTS as family farmers



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*In the definition of family farmers for the International Year of Family Farmers (IYFF) in 2014 and now for the United Nations Decade of Family Farming 2019–28, pastoralists are mentioned as a group requiring specific attention. Despite this recognition, most statements, papers and information about family farmers refer primarily to small-scale crop farmers. As a group of organisations supporting, working with or representing pastoralists, we want to draw attention to the importance of including pastoralists within discussions and interventions in family farming, including within the Decade.*

## Pastoralist families

Pastoralists are people who raise livestock or (semi-)wild animals on rangelands or natural grasslands in production systems that depend on some degree of herd mobility. They manage diverse species of grazing and browsing animals such as sheep, goats, camels, cattle, yaks, llamas, reindeer, horses and donkeys. Like small-scale crop farmers, the production unit – in this case, the herd of livestock – is managed by a family and relies mainly on family labour. Different family members are responsible for different components of the farming system. In pastoralism, as in family-based crop farming, the men, women, elders, youth and children all play important economic, social and cultural roles that are closely intertwined. The pastoralist community and herds evolve together and combine also environmental and reproductive functions. Like other family farmers, pastoralists make intensive use of indigenous, traditional and local knowledge that links to ecological and social

systems. They combine subsistence and market orientations and, in most cases, the local and national markets are more important for them than the global ones. These features of pastoralism fully reflect the definition and spirit of family farming used by the World Coordinating Committee for the IYFF and for the Decade of Family Farming.

## Their use of rangelands

The specific agroecological conditions of the areas where pastoralists live – the rangelands (grasslands, savannas, dry forests, tundra, steppes, deserts, mountain pastures and similar ecosystems) – define the type of family farming that can be practised sustainably. Pastoralism is a form of land use in which grazing and browsing livestock make productive use of natural vegetation in marginal areas that are too dry, too high, too cold, too steep and/or too infertile for sustainable crop production. Vegetation growth in the rangelands depends primarily on water and nutrient availability and temperature, and varies greatly over space and time. Water sources for livestock also vary considerably, and are often shared by large numbers and many types of animals, including wildlife. Pastoralists make the best possible use of these heterogeneous and dispersed rangeland resources using rotational grazing, complex access and governance arrangements, and mobility – bringing their herds to the most nutritious pastures with lower risk of animal disease at a given point in time. Pastoralists are adept risk managers, able to cope with and adapt to the often unpredictable and variable physical environments in which they live.





Getting views of women and men - woman in Tibetan herder family mapping  
Photo: Yan Zhaoli

## Links between cropping and mobile pastoralism

Among family farmers, there is a spectrum of farming types between solely animal farming at one end to solely crop farming (field, tree or garden crops) at the other. At the animal-farming end of the spectrum can be found highly mobile to more sedentary systems that also include some cropping, either opportunistically or on a regular basis (agropastoralism). Such integration is increasing among pastoralists seeking to diversify their livelihoods and spread risk in the face of new challenges such as climate change. Also many crop farmers diversify into livestock keeping. The pastoralists who do some cropping and the crop farmers who keep some livestock may sometimes appear to have similar farming systems, but the difference is that the former's main concern is for their animals while the latter give priority to their crops.

In many countries, pastoralists' livestock provide important inputs for crop farming, such as manure to fertilise the soil and animal traction for ploughing either in the pastoralists' fields (if the family is engaged in cropping) or in the fields of other farmers, in addition to transporting crops and other goods and providing financial security and insurance. Many crop farmers invest their savings in livestock, often bought from pastoralists, and also buy live animals from pastoralists for local festivals and ceremonies. In many countries,

pastoralists' herds graze the stubble on harvested cropland and thus speed up the process of decomposing the plant biomass into manure, while producing food at the same time. Such mutual benefits of livestock keeping and crop farming by two different groups of specialists using the same land areas at different times of the year with low levels of external inputs are often underestimated.

## Some specificities of pastoral farming systems

The **mobility** of the pastoral production unit – the herd – is the most significant characteristic that distinguishes it from other forms of farming. In dry or mountainous areas, where climatic risks are higher and the environmental conditions less predictable than in better-watered areas, pastoralists move animals within the rangelands to make best use of ephemeral resources instead of staying in one place to grow crops or to raise stall-fed animals.

Pastoralism is based primarily on **natural vegetation** with little or no supplementary feeding and is a more ecologically friendly and sustainable farming system than high-external-input irrigated cultivation of annual crops or intensive animal production. It is the most ecological way of using land to produce food in dry or mountainous areas.

The high level of uncertainty involved in producing food in such areas is also a reason why most

Moving cattle to nutritious high altitude pastures in French-Swiss Alps,  
Photo: Veronique Magnin



pastoralists depend on a land-use system involving **common property resources** and make counter-seasonal use of arable land (grazing in seasons when crops do not grow) rather than using a relatively small area of land owned and used exclusively by a single family. Mobility and common property regimes are ideal for making sustainable use of the natural resources and for dealing with climatic risks and shocks.

Another pastoralist strategy to deal with uncertainty and risk is **collective action** with other families, often sharing resources and labour, e.g. grouping the livestock of several families for long-distance migration. One form of “pastoralist insurance” consists of supporting other families in times of need in reciprocal relations that build on strong social capital.

### Pastoralists in the Decade of Family Farming

We hope that the Decade for Family Farming will give pastoralists a chance to make their

voices heard in platforms for policy dialogue, particularly the National Committees for Family Farming, in which pastoralist organisations should be represented and active. In the national and regional initiatives during the Decade, we would like to see pastoralists included among the family farmers who are influencing agricultural (including pastoral), environmental and social policies and identifying gaps and opportunities to promote more equal and balanced development.

Not only under the theme of “Pastoralists” but also under many other themes being addressed during the Decade, pastoralist voices need to be heard, e.g. Agroecology, Indigenous Peoples, Mountain Farming and Rural Women. Pastoralists can join forces with small-scale crop farmers to oppose large-scale industrial and non-sustainable agriculture and to call for policy formulation and implementation that creates more enabling conditions for all family farmers.

*A brief by CELEP (Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism), International Land Coalition Rangelands Initiative and International Support Group for the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). These groups are advocating for designation of an IYRP by the United Nations. A longer joint paper on pastoralists as family farmers, including details on i) the importance of pastoralists for the wellbeing of nations, people and the environment; ii) challenges and opportunities for pastoralists, and iii) suggestions for incorporating pastoralists' issues into policy advocacy activities during the Decade of Family Farming, can be obtained from Ann Waters-Bayer (waters-bayer@web.de).*

