

A call to the EU for an adapted response to the COVID-19 pandemic in pastoral areas in Eastern Africa



The Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism (CELEP) welcomes the chosen lens of the EU to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, focusing on addressing “the humanitarian, health, social and economic consequences of the crisis”. The European Union (EU) considers a “Team Europe” approach to curtail COVID outbreak in order to ensure global health, to support countries fighting against the virus and to enhance resilience. CELEP welcomes this approach, especially considering that 300,000 to 3.3 million Africans could lose their lives as a direct result of the pandemic and many more are at the brink of losing their livelihoods from the pandemic and the related emergency measures. In order to flatten the contagion curve, African governments are taking actions which can often be summarised as lockdowns: bringing a general halt to public life, disrupting supply chains and closing markets and businesses. Entire cities – from Nairobi to Dakar – are under curfew, often resulting in situations of violence and fatalities. The aim of the government measures? To prevent generally fragile public healthcare systems from being completely overwhelmed by huge flows of sick people who need immediate care. Though these measures may work to slow down the spreading of the virus and though they might, to a certain extent, be suitable for European and North American contexts, this is not the case in many African countries. For people like pastoralists who depend on mobility to access production resources and markets, these measures have a huge impact on their livelihoods and, in many cases, threaten their food security. CELEP therefore asks the EU: (i) to take pastoralists – in Eastern Africa in particular – into consideration when developing adapted responses to the ongoing COVID-19 crisis; and (ii) to use the current crisis as an opportunity to reconfigure development aid to make sure it puts local food producers, such as pastoralists, at the forefront of its strategies.

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Pastoralism in Africa

“Pastoralism” refers to a wide family of livestock-based livelihood/food-production systems that are highly diverse but all share the specialisation to make a living from the variability of the natural environment. This consists in improving the animals’ diet and welfare by managing their grazing itineraries at a variety of scales in time and space. Pastoralism is practised in most parts of Africa. The exact number of African livestock keepers practising pastoralism is unknown but, according to the African Union (AU) Policy Framework on Pastoralism, the pastoralist population in Africa is estimated at 268 million. In Eastern Africa, pastoralism provides employment as well as subsistence and livelihood values for up to 20 million people. In addition,



pastoralists provide milk and meat for local, regional and international markets and contribute significantly to macro-economic development. In Kenya, for instance, the pastoralist sector has an overall estimated value of €750 million and an annual marketed value of €50–80 million. In Uganda, the livestock sector contributes 7.5% to the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 17% to agricultural GDP. In addition, crop farming is a key beneficiary of pastoralism, which helps raise crop productivity by providing manure, animals for draught and transport. Though the importance of pastoralism in (Eastern) Africa is obvious in terms of demographics, economic contribution as well as contribution to food security and nutrition, this importance has not been and still is not fully recognised by policymakers. Eastern African pastoralists therefore bear the consequences of decades of political marginalisation. A lack of investment in infrastructure and basic services (education, healthcare, etc.) has, in many cases, led to higher illiteracy levels, higher poverty rates and

poorer health services compared to national averages. Furthermore, pastoralists increasingly have to compete with other types of land use to access their “traditional” grazing grounds and water points. To make matters worse, a recent desert locust outbreak in Eastern Africa has resulted in the destruction of crops and pasture. According to the [Regional Desert Locust Alliance](#), “The combined impacts of COVID-19 and the desert locust invasion will worsen the already dire food security situation in the Greater Horn of Africa”. The desert locust infestation was preceded by a series of shock and stresses, such as droughts, floods and conflicts, which negatively affected the shared use of natural resources and undermined pastoralists’ resilience. All of this compounds the effects of the government measures now applied to curtail COVID-19.

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COVID-19 impacting African pastoralists

It is within this context that African pastoralists now have to deal with the COVID-19 crisis. In many cases, this is exacerbating an already problematic situation in which pastoralists – just like many others – often have to choose between poverty and starvation, as described in [this article by Alex de Waal and Paul Richards](#). The article rightfully puts forward three major consequences as to how lockdowns and curfews – which seem to be the predominant way in which African governments are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic – affect local communities. Firstly, they make it difficult or impossible to access markets so as to sell and buy food, which is also becoming increasingly expensive because of the lockdowns. Secondly, they have a severe impact on social networks, which are vital in contributing to food security for vulnerable people in particular. Finally, lockdowns affect the supply chains of essential drugs and thus cause tremendous healthcare problems. For example,



in Guinea, one of the countries at the epicentre of the 2014–15 Ebola epidemic, reduced healthcare services as a consequence of the Ebola response measures led to a 53% decrease in the diagnosis of tuberculosis (TB) and a doubling of the mortality rate from this disease.

For pastoralists in Eastern Africa, the severe impact on livelihoods and food security of the COVID-19 pandemic and of the responses formulated by their governments has become very apparent. Firstly, it has become very difficult for pastoralists to access markets. In Eastern Africa, 90% of the consumed meat comes from pastoral systems. Trading animals and animal products and buying other food has become increasingly difficult, and consumers – both rural and urban – will now have reduced access to meat and milk. In some areas, this could threaten food security. Additionally, because of the pandemic, herd mobility is increasingly compromised. Mobility is inherent to pastoralism; if herders are confined to certain areas, their ability to access water and grazing areas for the herds is reduced, menacing their entire production strategy. In some parts of Eastern Africa, the lockdown could impede herd mobility at the time of the year (the wet season) when mobility gives the highest returns; this would jeopardise herd survival in the next dry season. Reduced production will definitely have a long-lasting negative impact, in particular on the nutritional status of poorer people, vulnerable women, the differently abled and the elderly. In addition to limited access to markets and agricultural inputs, pastoralists may find it more difficult to access services, in particular human and animal health services, leading to serious consequences for both pastoralists' lives and their livelihoods.

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Short-term actions – what can be done now?

The Communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19 mentions particular measures under *Urgent, short-term emergency response to the health crisis and the resulting humanitarian needs as well as under addressing the economic and social consequences*. In this regard, CELEP makes the following recommendations:

1. First, it would be very important that measures developed by the authorities to slow down the spread of the virus are adapted to local contexts. In order to do so, the authorities need to **consult the communities** to find out what the local people deem possible to protect their health, whilst safeguarding their livelihoods and food security. In pastoral areas in Eastern Africa, this means discussing with traditional leaders, community elders, women's groups, youth groups, village administrators, etc. Where legally registered groups exist (e.g. group ranches, livestock marketing cooperatives), consultation should be accompanied by transfer of resources to enable these institutions to respond in a timely manner to local priorities in the face of the pandemic. As the article by Alex de Waal and Paul Richards rightfully puts it: "*ordinary people are not the problem, rather they are the solution*". In addition, awareness-raising efforts on hygiene, social distancing, etc. will work only if the communities understand and are convinced about them. To play their role in COVID-19 control/management, pastoralist communities need to be fully informed about the disease. This means that relevant information should be made available to pastoralists in their own languages.



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2. Second, as the current government response to COVID-19 in Eastern Africa is menacing food security and livelihoods in pastoral areas, the EU should encourage government efforts to design – together with the pastoralists – effective systems that allow the pastoralists the mobility needed to access essential resources for their livestock so that the herds continue to be productive and pastoralist livelihoods can be maintained. In addition, the EU should work together with local authorities, local communities and local private-sector actors to provide (i) direct cash and food aid and (ii) access to markets and trade. **Cash transfers and food aid** should be considered in particular for vulnerable people such as female- and child-headed households. In addition, as pastoralists derive a livelihood from their animals and their access to production inputs and services may be limited by the current crisis, food aid could include **feed aid** for their livestock. In addition, emergency aid could also focus on providing **access to animal health services through a One-Health approach**, as mentioned above. Regarding access to markets and trade, programmes could focus increasingly on **mobile technology** to continue trade without physical markets and for monetary transactions. Kenya, for instance, is one of the world's market leaders in mobile money applications; also the pastoralists in Kenya use M-Pesa. This is a clear asset also for providing cash aid. In addition, programmes and projects should give attention to various types of **livelihood diversification** suitable for pastoralists so that they are not obliged to go into making charcoal and thus causing environmental degradation.

3. Third, actions should focus on reinforce African health systems to be able to cope with the ongoing pandemic. One way to reinforce African health systems adapted to pastoralists would be to set-up **Community One-Health Teams (COHTs)**. These teams are able to carry out interventions in pastoral areas to protect the health of humans, animals and the environment. This would help to preserve pastoralist livelihoods in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such joint interventions of community human, animal and environmental health professionals and experts would improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the provided services and would make pastoralists more resilient. Furthermore, in the current COVID-19 crisis, COHTs could play a vital role in undertaking surveillance and contact tracing activities in high transmission-risk areas, such as markets in pastoral zones.

Long-term impact

The COVID-19 pandemic is a world crisis as has seldom been seen before and will have a profound impact on our day-to-day lives for many years to come. The speed and the intensity with which the virus spread from China over Europe to the USA, Africa and Latin America is unprecedented and is a result of our global interconnectedness. People, goods and services travel long distances in a globalised world. Food is no exception to this and is traded globally, often over long distances. Though trade is important to provide access to "exotic" food products for consumers and to provide an income to food producers, trade should complement, not replace, local food production. The current crisis should therefore be regarded as an opportunity to put local food systems, such as pastoralism, at the forefront

of national food policies – not only because it gives the most benefits for local food producers and food security in general, but also because local food systems generally have a positive impact on food safety AND dealing with climate change. Climate change is another ongoing crisis, and promoting local food systems such as pastoralism is expected to have a positive impact on climate change mitigation.

The EU has recognised the importance of pastoralism and other types of smallholder farming in the EU Consensus for Development. The past SHARE (Supporting Horn of Africa Resilience) and AGIR (Global Alliances for Resilience) programmes as well as the report of the Taskforce Rural Africa recognise the importance of pastoralism for resilient livelihoods in the drylands. It would therefore be important to maintain this focus. Future programming and financing should be coherent with these previous engagements, and efforts to deal with the spread of the current coronavirus should be developed with this in mind.



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About CELEP

The Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism (CELEP) is an informal advocacy coalition of European organisations, groups and experts working in partnership with their counterparts in Eastern Africa. They collaborate to encourage their governments in Europe and Africa and the EU to explicitly recognise and support pastoralism and pastoralists in the drylands of Eastern Africa. For more information, contact the CELEP focal point Koen Van Troos at k.vantroos@vsf-belgium.org or the regional focal point Ken Otieno at kenotieno@reconcile-ea.org or visit our website www.celep.info

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