

**Development for Pastoralists
As The Rich World Turns Away From Meat¹
by Professor John Morton²**

Talk

Concern about the livestock sector's contribution, and that of meat consumption in particular, to greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) has been growing in recent years. A 2013 FAO study estimated that 14-15% of human-induced GHGs came from livestock (this excluded the effects of livestock-related deforestation), with cattle accounting for around two-thirds, of which 41% was attributed to beef and 20% to milk. Overall, about 45% was accounted for by feed production and 39% by ruminant digestion.

Calls for action to do something about this emphasise the need for people to switch to a predominantly plant-based diet (thought to be more healthy anyway), which would also reduce the competition for agricultural land, of which 70% is for livestock production, including the 40% devoted to growing feed crops and some that was only suitable for grazing. In the UK, health and climate change concerns (especially the latter among younger people) are indeed driving reduced meat and milk consumption, with 12% stating they are vegetarian or vegan and 27% reportedly "considering reducing the amount of meat they eat". At the same time, there is growing and well-articulated advocacy for 'sustainable livestock farming' in the UK, with perceived benefits for soil fertility, livelihoods in hill areas and food waste reduction (by feeding it to pigs).

¹ This presentation was based on Professor Morton's 2022 Ralph Melville Memorial Lecture

² The Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich.

Worldwide, the human population supported by the livestock sector is estimated to be 1.3 billion people, including 430-680 million of the rural poor. Pastoralists alone numbered around 180 million, predominantly but not solely in Africa. Not all are poor but the great majority are vulnerable. So the central issue for development professionals is whether, and if so, how, to support livestock production by the poor and vulnerable in developing countries. Put bluntly, do developing-country livestock producers give us “good value for methane”? (see Grazed and Confused, Food Climate Research Network, 2017)

Unfortunately, the way the protagonists in this debate address the public at large is too broad-brushed, not to say simplistic. The discussion cries out for nuance and specificity, not least in terms of (i) distinguishing between different farming systems, and (ii) the small amount of animal origin protein in developing country, particularly Sub-Saharan African diets, well below the so-called ‘healthy reference diet’, the affordability of this reference diet for many and its incompatibility with many regional/cultural preferences. Animal sourced foods (ASFs) are energy-dense and good sources of protein and micronutrients, such high nutrient density foods being particular good for feeding small children.

Identifying livestock product value chains that benefit the poor as producers and as consumers is not simple; for example, milk value chains have clearer benefits for poor consumers than meat value chains. To take two major types of farming system by way of illustration, that of small-scale sedentary livestock production (whether animal products only or combined with cropping) and that of pastoralism, the case for helping the former seems more straightforward than for the latter.

The ‘best’ candidate for support would be milk and egg production by backyard or landless producers. However, well-targeted interventions into small-scale, sedentary, land-using livestock production can improve animal health and food safety, empower small farmers within value chains, and secure more sustainable livelihoods through the use of fodder crops and better animal breeding. The increase in GHG emissions would be low (“good value for methane”). In contrast, support for pastoralism is harder to defend. While pastoral production may be by the poor (or at least the vulnerable), it is not for the poor. Pastoralists are not subsistence farmers because they generally trade livestock products for carbohydrates through markets and indeed some sell live animals or meat into international value chains supplying wealthy consumers (e.g.,

Horn of Africa -> Arab Gulf States, Sahel -> urban coastal West Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Eswatini -> Europe).

While the old criticism of pastoralism, “the Tragedy of the Commons” and inevitable overgrazing, has been largely discounted, arguing in support of pastoralism in the context of the GHGE issue can look like special pleading. So what are the justifications for providing development assistance to pastoralists and other extensive livestock producers? There are a range of arguments that can be summarised as follows:

- The opportunity cost of much pastoral/range land is low in terms of viable alternative uses for cropping*
- Without livestock grazing, the environmental consequences of letting these lands revert to a wild state could be neutral or negative (GHG emissions from wild ruminants, termites due to excess vegetation)*
- History shows that the socio-cultural costs and even the economic cost of pushing traditional pastoralist communities into sedentary farming can be high, bordering on the abusive in some cases*
- With global warming, large areas of Africa are expected to become too dry for cropping; pastoralism, which doesn’t just live with uncertainty, but lives off uncertainty, may represent unrealised potential to turn increasing environmental instability into an asset for food production.*

Furthermore, the best ways of supporting pastoralism are becoming clearer. They include: (i) research-led animal health improvement based on the delivery of community-based animal health services; (ii) recognition of, and support for, rights and institutions concerning communal land tenure and customary resource management; and (iii) developing the marketing of livestock products.

Professor Morton concluded his talk by putting forward what could be considered a radical proposal, namely that the ability of pastoralists and other rangeland users to produce food on dry lands that are not available for cropping should be actively harnessed and celebrated. For example, can we rethink veterinary regulations to make it easier for pastoral/rangeland livestock producers to export meat to wealthier countries and can we think of labels/standards/brands to explicitly promote such meat (the marketing of Namibian meat in Denmark as “Nature’s Reserve” begins to approach this).

Discussion

A member of the audience said that the general aim should be to have meat produced by the poor going to the rich, so that value would be transferred from the latter to the former. This was challenged by another member of the audience who asserted that we need to start with production by the poor for the poor. This led to an inconclusive debate about ‘food sovereignty’ as an essential development objective in order to counteract the significant control that corporations have over the existing food system and its market institutions.

Rapporteur: Martin Evans