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Climate change policy processes and pastoralism in the Horn of Africa: Old wine in new bottles?

By Tom Campbell, Maynooth University

There is a growing body of knowledge on the effects of climatic and other forms of dynamic change on pastoralism in the Horn of Africa. But less is known about what influences how policy-makers respond to these changes. Policies are shaped by a certain set of discourses and narratives, as well as by political interests. To understand how this works, we can use an [environmental policy narrative approach](#). This seeks to identify and unpack how particular discourses are 'framed' within policy, what forms of knowledge count, and whose understandings and interests are legitimate.

In the Horn of Africa, pastoral dryland areas (and pastoralism) have long been equated with narratives of poverty, low productivity, environmental degradation and conflict, despite a growing acceptance of pastoralism as a legitimate land-use system. More recently, 'new' policy narratives have emerged, built largely around 'climate resilience', 'green economic growth' and the need for 'climate-smart agriculture'. These are being invoked by the state, donors and other actors as they endeavour to generate consensus and mobilise resources – including new climate finance – in the face of climate change, food security and development imperatives. In turn, the policy prescriptions and investments that flow from such narratives and funding streams have far-reaching implications for the livelihoods of pastoralists.

Old myths about pastoralism persist

The findings of [a doctoral research project](#) on climate change policy narratives and pastoralism in Ethiopia and Kenya – undertaken by the author between 2016 and 2020 – reveal that while concerns around climate change and calls for strengthening resilience of dryland communities may have given a fresh impetus to pastoral development, there are myths that persist. 'Old' narratives that depict pastoral systems and pastoral areas as 'unproductive', and 'in need of modernisation', remain deeply embedded in policymaking.

Combined with [resource scarcity](#) and climate-change arguments, these narratives open up spaces for the state and other actors – private investors,

local elites, conservation organisations – to extend their control over natural resources previously managed under customary institutions. Climate-policy ‘solutions’ and pastoral area investments are, in turn, leading to new patterns of social differentiation and vulnerability among pastoralists, as well as accentuating existing ones.

What discourses and narratives are dominant?

In my research, I’ve analysed the content and the discourses of various relevant Ethiopian and Kenyan policies. This reveals that, despite growing recognition of the value of mobile pastoralism, a ‘transforming pastoralism’ discourse remains dominant in both cases, if slightly less so in Kenya.

Taking Ethiopia’s recent *National Adaptation Plan* (NAP-ETH) as just one example, we see that ‘short-term coping mechanisms’ in the predominantly pastoral regions of Afar, Somali and Oromo are deemed no longer viable in the face of climate change. The plan instead states the need for ‘building resilience and adaptive capacity for vulnerable communities’.

Unlike in several earlier Regional State Adaptation Plans, there is no reference to drivers of vulnerability that aren’t related to climate change; or to pastoralists’ own agency and innovation. Just as they are predominant in earlier national Climate Resilient and Green Economy strategies, technical solutions are privileged in NAP-ETH over resource rights and governance issues. These technical solutions include things like ‘improved (livestock) breeding and feeding systems and improved pasture/grazing management’, ‘improving the resilience of value chains and marketing systems for livestock’, ‘improved early warning systems’ and ‘strengthening crop and livestock insurance’, along with adaptation options that include ‘livelihood diversification and voluntary resettlement’.

In both cases, it is apparent that the desire to ‘transform’, ‘commercialise’ and ‘integrate’ dryland resources and production – including the pastoralist economy – within a broader framework of national development, is being driven by an ideology of market-based economic growth and modernisation, although still with a strong mediation role for the central state (especially in Ethiopia). The imperative of climate change, meanwhile, has provided a new language to policymakers to reframe growth as an opportunity to build a ‘green economy.’

Nonetheless, analysis reveals a higher level of interdiscursivity within the Kenyan policy documents reviewed. This perhaps reflects the more open and participatory nature of Kenyan policymaking in general, but also the fact that a conducive policy space for pastoralists to engage in Kenyan politics opened up through processes of political devolution underway since 2012.

What do policy actors think?

Interviews with a range of policy actors in both countries provided similar insight. Referring to the new (2018) *Ethiopian Pastoral Area Development Policy*

and Strategy, a senior civil servant asserted that: “The whole idea of the policy framework and strategic thinking is to create resilient pastoralism... resilience in terms of diversified livelihoods.”

The view that settlement in one place means formerly marginalised pastoralists can avail of better services and avoid the worst affects of climate-induced drought suggests that ‘transforming pastoralists into agro-pastoralists’ retains a strong hold in certain policy circles. While the argument for sedentarisation predates concerns about climate change, the language of ‘climate resilience’ has been absorbed into the transforming discourse.

Donors also have a say. The research also shows that donors (and to a lesser extent – a select group of INGOs and national dryland researchers) have greater influence on shaping policy than was the case in the past. In Kenya, I found that the discourses of different groups of actors had more in common with each other than was the case in Ethiopia. Kenyan government officials have clearly absorbed narratives and metaphors associated with the ‘[modern and mobile](#)’ standpoint more closely associated with civil society and pastoralist organisations – supporting the argument that narratives shift to suit the needs of actors as new opportunities and contexts arise. The process of devolution and the accelerated economic development of northern Kenya’s arid and semi-arid (ASAL) counties are a case in point.

Policy outcomes

Data from interviews support what has been argued elsewhere: that the kinds of policy prescriptions and planning that flow from dominant narratives surrounding climate change, the ‘green economy’ and the development of pastoral areas more generally, primarily serve the interests of those who have most to gain from greater commercialisation, changes in land use and the privatisation of formerly communally managed resources.

In Ethiopia, this includes the state itself – in terms of higher economic growth – but also private investors and a growing commercial and politically well-connected class within pastoralism. [Control-orientated measures](#) – programmes of sedentarisation, fixed water-points and conversion of dry-season pastoral reserves to crop cultivation – continue to be prioritised by the state, despite a long history of similarly ill-fated interventions.

In Kenya, narratives of ‘green growth’, ‘food security’ and ‘climate resilience’ are being evoked by the state and its development partners as a means of legitimising new infrastructure projects and private investments in Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL) counties. Some people will benefit from infrastructure development corridors (e.g. [LAPSSET](#)), the rapid growth in towns, investments in extractives, green-energy projects such as [Lake Turkana Wind Power](#), irrigated cropping and even wildlife conservancies. But others are undoubtedly ‘losing out’ as a consequence.

One domain where the prescriptions that flow from climate policy narratives have implications for pastoralist livelihoods is ‘climate smart agriculture’ (CSA).

The Government of Kenya has recently developed a *CSA Strategy 2017-2026*, with substantive funding from the World Bank. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is little attention given to livestock. As with 'climate resilience' and 'green growth', CSA proves an attractive fit for the Kenyan government's ambitions to tackle the twin challenge of climate change and food security without constraining economic growth.

Meanwhile sizable new land banks, as a means to ensure future food security, are being proposed in Northern counties, where land is still considered plentiful. One such development is the (one million acre) [Galana-Kulalu](#) irrigation and food security scheme in Tana River County, which has dispossessed local agro-pastoralists from lands they had used, and which – according to national media reports – [has largely proved an expensive failure](#).

Making policy with pastoralists in mind

Policies and interventions in the name of climate change adaptation and pastoralist development need to be considered within the context of political interests and governance in pastoral areas. 'Resilience-building' types of policies and programming on their own, whether well-intentioned or designed with other interests in mind, are clearly insufficient to address broader challenges faced by pastoralists.

'Governance' opens up a broader political agenda that addresses the political processes and relationships through which state and non-state actors interact. This would allow policymaking in the Horn of Africa to move beyond the kinds of depoliticised 'environmental-crises' narratives that are a feature of the predominant 'transforming pastoralism' discourse.

At the heart of such governance is the need to facilitate, rather than impede, mobility – pastoralists' primary means of managing variability. Strategic resources must also be safeguarded from inappropriate forms of capital accumulation – investments frequently driven by the very policies that purport to transform pastoral areas in the name of 'green growth' or 'climate resilience'.

About the author

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