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Cooling Up the Drylands: Disentangling the pastoralism- security nexus

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Executive Summary

This policy brief explores the dynamics, trends and challenges that characterise portions of the pastoral belt, spanning from Afghanistan to Somalia to Mauritania. Cases from ongoing trends in North-Eastern Somalia and Northern Mali provide interesting insights into the current structural crisis affecting a large part of the pastoral world.

Pastoralism – mobile livestock rearing – is both a cultural identity and an economic activity. Moreover, herding represents the best way to safely occupy and secure vast, remote territories, where the costs of any other form of controlling, monitoring and patrolling would be largely higher. Although elements of heterogeneity exist, pastoral territories share similar geographical, economic as well as political configurations in the different regions of the world.

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Sub-Saharan African drylands host around 50 million people who rely on pastoralism for their livelihood, as this provides employment and income in these harsh territories, and greatly contributes to ensuring food security, rangelands management, and to national GDPs. In Africa and beyond, the intertwines of geo-political, economic and climatic factors contribute to the reshaping of pastoral spaces, economies and societies; the complex interplay between global trends, regional arrangements and local transformations poses relevant challenges to the livelihoods of pastoral communities (Nori et al, 2008).

In several pastoral regions, the vulnerability of livelihoods is further exacerbated by conflict and insecurity. Changing border regimes and the absence of the classic and factual repositories of statehood have exposed pastoral spaces to the penetration of different destabilising forces. In particular, transnational trafficking and radical Islamism are reshaping economic functions, generational cleavages and political allegiances among portions of pastoral communities.

Accordingly, pastoral communities are developing new strategies that aim to cope with and adapt to an altered context that affect both local and transnational equilibria. Three dominant patterns of behaviour can be detected: 1) enhancing the market integration of pastoral economies (Market); 2) emigrating and/or shifting out of pastoralism (Migration); 3) participating in illicit activities or joining/supporting insurgent/terrorist groups (Militia) (Nori & Baldaro, 2017).

Policy-makers should be aware of these dynamics and the underpinning factors, as well as of the strategic responses of pastoral communities, in order to develop innovative policy solutions fostering resilience and peaceful conflict resolution among these marginalised populations. A new socio-political contract is to be forged with pastoral communities: the recognition of their role as the most effective

and powerful allies to maintain rangelands safe and productive is a necessary prerequisite to enhance peace, security and development in these regions.

The Crisis in the Pastoral Belt

The so-called pastoral belt is formed of the regions spanning from Afghanistan through central Asia and Yemen, to the Horn of Africa and the Atlantic coasts of the Sahel. This space tends to overlap with the area that Eyal Weizman (2015) calls the “Conflict Shoreline” (See Map 1). Using the ‘aridity line’³ and drone strikes⁴ as proxies, Weizman identifies different places where specific ecological conditions interact with economic, social and political marginalisation, fostering grievance among local populations and furthering violent conflicts.

Map 1. Superimposing the pastoral belt and the conflict shoreline



Source: elaborated from WISP, 2008 and Weizman, 2015

3. Areas where the average rainfall is at best 200 millimeters a year, considered as the minimum for growing cereal crops on a large scale without irrigation.
4. According to Weizman, drones are used in those areas where international actors consider their security is at stake because of local instable and conflict-prone socio-political conditions. At the same time, they are seen as areas of peripheral interests, where international security providers refuse to send troops.



The main elements determining a 'structural crisis' along the conflict shoreline and the pastoral belt are:

1. **Intense environmental change:** This results from both climate variability and the political and institutional mismanagement of natural resources and commons, which leads to encroachment, dispossession and changes in how rangelands are accessed and used. These factors are usually exacerbated by climate change dynamics as well as by the strong demographic growth characterising pastoral regions in recent decades (Catley et al., 2013).
2. **Socio-political and economic marginalisation:** Since the late seventies economic crises and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) have led to the break of the 'post-colonial contract' that supported socio-economic equilibria within most of African countries (McMichael, 1997; Konadu-Agyemang, 2000). The partial retreat of the state from peripheral areas also resulted from the new global setting that followed the end of the Cold War. Consequently, rangeland areas mainly inhabited by pastoral populations have suffered a decreasing economic and infrastructural state engagement. Nowadays populations living in pastoral regions rank amongst the poorest and most destitute agricultural peoples in the world, and the most excluded from basic socio-economic services and infrastructure (WHO/UNICEF, 2005; Haughton and Khander 2009; African Union, 2010). On the other hand, these areas are now usually ruled by different forms of 'hybrid' governance arrangements implemented by state, non-state and transnational actors together (Risse, 2013).
3. **The War on Terror:** 9/11 events in 2001 have further contributed to the overall restructuring of the international setting, as the global periphery has been reconfigured as a space of insecurity (Smith, 2009: 22). In the aftermath of 9/11, marginal areas along the pastoral belt were reframed as 'ungoverned spaces', out of state control and open to the penetration of transnational terrorist and criminal groups (Keister, 2014). Consequently, many of the regions inhabited by herding communities are perceived as "black holes" of the international system (Korteweg & Ehrhardt, 2006), and they have been turned into theatres of the 'long war' against terrorism. As a matter of fact, in these regions security concerns have superseded food security/humanitarian concerns.

Pastoral Strategies of Adaptation and Change

Somalia and Mali represent two cases located in African drylands, where communities are exposed to the above-mentioned factors of crisis. Herding groups are actively participating in the redefinition of norms, practices and power relations within their inhabiting spaces, as a way to cope with and reshape their own environment. Even if they cannot always be considered as a homogeneous group, pastoral communities can be seen as rational agents, aiming to defend and improve their livelihoods and the very existence of their group (Catley et al., 2013). Starting from the observation of these two crucial cases, we identified and tested three main strategic behaviours, applied by pastoralists in order to pursue their physical, political and economic security in a changing and challenging context. We labelled these strategies – at times intertwined and complementary – Market, Migration and Militia (Nori & Baldaro, 2017).

- **Market:** Enhancing the market integration of pastoral economies through more intense engagement with urban settings and regional and global markets, pushed by the growing demand for livestock commodities. Clear examples illustrating this strategy are the intensification of livestock trade as well as the commercial exploitation of camel milk in Somalia and the integration within a common (informal) economic system of trans-border urban markets along the Mali-Burkina Faso frontier.
- **Migration:** Emigrating and/or shifting out of pastoralism as a possibility to diversify the livelihood base and to rely on extended social networks by spreading community members, and through the establishment of an international diaspora. For example, over the last 40 years, the Somali diaspora has spread throughout the globe, while Touareg communities have settled in the main urban centres of North Africa and the Sahel, creating new employment opportunities and developing close links with local ruling elites.
- **Militia:** Participating in illicit activities such as trafficking, smuggling, or hosting/joining insurgent groups and militias, so as to capitalise on the repositioning of national peripheries inside regional networks and global pathways. Different pastoral populations – Somalis, Touareg, Fulani, Hausa, Toubou



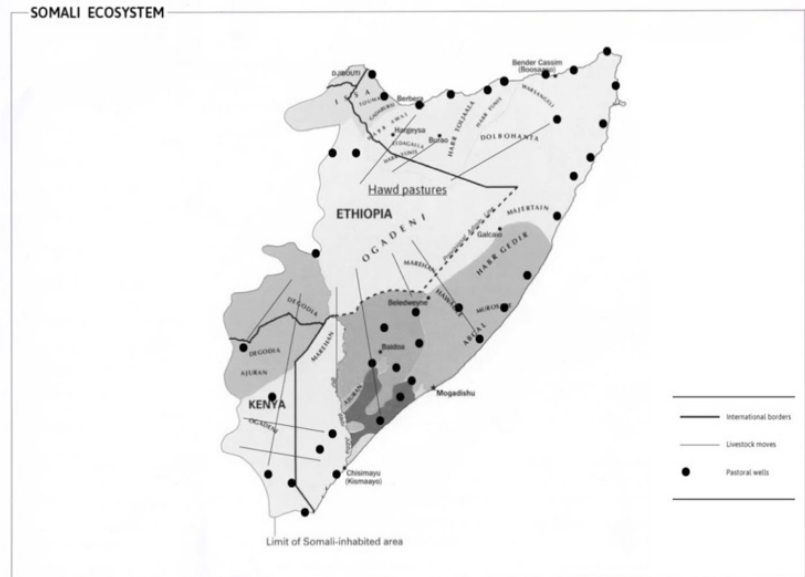
and others – have developed transnational networks and “security forces” built on ethnic ties, in order to participate to highly profitable illicit economic exchanges, including the trafficking of drugs and humans. Moreover, both the Malian and Somalian cases have shown that radicalisation and joining terrorist/jihadist groups can become strategies to express grievance and adapt to a hostile context (Nori et al, 2008). Insurgent movements exploit the sense of disillusionment and resentment that marginalised populations feel towards central governments, state structures and international institutions.

The adaptive strategies of the 3Ms contribute in turn to reconfiguring the institutions, relationships and norms that govern these societies, affecting their strategies and behaviours and altering internal group cohesion and power relations, including the social, gender and generational dimensions.

North-Eastern Somalia: Improving Beyond and Despite the (absent) State

Since the fall of Siad Barre’s regime in 1991, the breakdown of the centralised institutional structure, and the altogether fading away of the idea of a Somali state, pastoralists in the Horn of Africa have witnessed an interesting reconfiguration of their territories, where trans-border production, exchange and commercial patterns are making an important contribution to supporting the development of livelihoods (Nori, 2010). The Somali ecosystem spanning from and connecting Somali regions in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya is inhabited by communities sharing the same ecological conditions, cultural features and livelihood patterns. This ecosystem is crossed by trans-border networks and extensive links that facilitate the regional movement of livestock, information and commodities. Such regional movements are managed through corridors, territorial patterns that interlink the seemingly isolated inner drylands with coastal areas and – through the ports - the international arena. By allowing continuous exchanges between pastoral products, imported goods and the interrelated flows, these corridors serve the different needs and activities of groups living under different environmental settings (Nori and Majid, 2002).

Map 2. The Somali ecosystem (with indications of main clans, trade routes and wells)



Global networks and regional corridors are the main infrastructure behind the booming livestock export trade that characterises the Somali economy. In 2015, after years of steady growth, Somalia exported a record of around 5.5 million heads. Especially in the northernmost regions with a relatively more secure environment, this trade has triggered important infrastructural investment and developments from private as well as public funding, including international cooperation (Nori, 2010). In such setting, marketing of camel milk shifted from being tabooed to, today, representing a main pillar of the Somali pastoral economy (Herren, 1993; Nori, 2010). Every day, thousands of litres of camel milk are produced and traded through vast rangelands to satisfy the demand of urban consumers, and in turn serving the needs of pastoral producers and trading women along the chain. It is Somali women in fact that manage and govern camel milk marketing, relying on sophisticated information and credit systems, which enable them to overcome the constraints of large distances, scattered productivity and even drought spells (ibidem).

Since the collapse of the central state, security is at stake in portions of southern Somalia, where the activities of insurgent groups and militias, such as Al Shabab, pose critical challenges to local livelihoods. Somali pastoralists in northernmost regions have instead strengthened



their resilience, through risk-taking entrepreneurial attitudes and social innovations. While civil unrest still rules in parts of southern Somalia, effective systems of local resource management and institutional governance have been established in northernmost regions, and forms of market integration and economic diversification contribute to enhancing pastoral performance and welfare. When the state rolls back, more informal polities roll in (Fairhead and Leach, 2005).

Northern Mali: Defying the State

In northern Mali the current situation suggests that pastoral communities – mainly formed by Touareg and Fulani peoples – are indirectly defying a weak, but repressive and predatory state, and challenging regional border regimes. In particular, inhabiting a landlocked and semi-arid territory that central governments have historically considered as the Mali inutile, Touareg have partly defined their very identity in opposition to the Malian state (Lecocq, 2010). The management and the improvement of the trans-Saharan trade has been one of their most important sources of income and power, along with pastoralism (Scheele, 2012). The struggle for political and economic autonomy fed conflict with the Malian state,⁵ driving different rebellions (1962-1964; 1991-1996; 2006-2009; 2012-2013) that have been managed through repression, marginalisation and a limited co-optation by central-ruling elites (Harmon, 2014). At the same time, every conflict produced internal skirmishes and caused social and generational divisions within the Touareg population. On the other hand, Touareg created important diasporas within the whole Sahara-Sahel, as a way to ‘escape’ from the poorest and most marginalised area of the country, and became essential actors for developing all kinds of – licit and illicit – exchanges in the area.

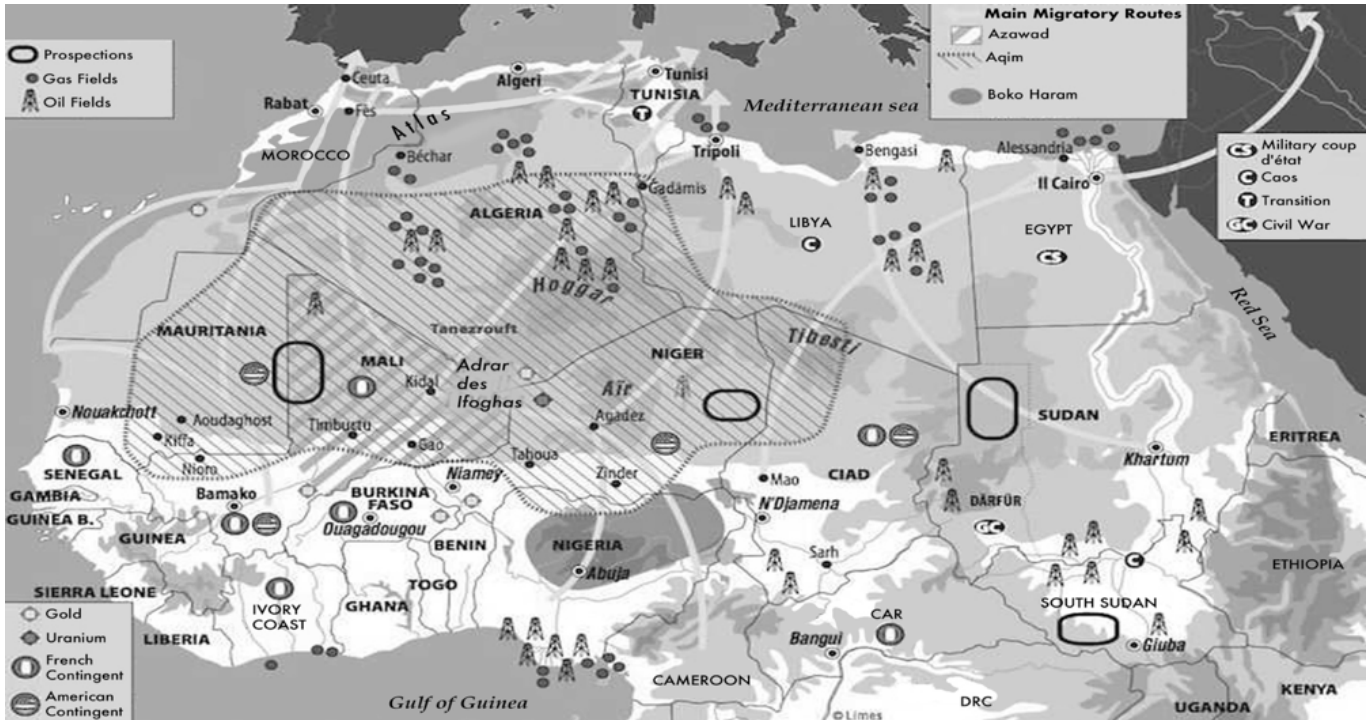
The specific role and expertise of the Touareg within the trans-Saharan economy has allowed them to create contacts and build mutually-beneficial business with drug traffickers and jihadist groups, which are transnational actors who made their appearance in the region at the beginning of the 2000s (Harmon, 2014; Solomon, 2015). This complex association of local grievance, state weakness and repression, and transnational interests has brought about two main consequences: on the one hand, it has changed local settings, redefining both the political

geography and power relations within the region (see Map 4); on the other hand, it has driven the partial collapse of the Malian state, whose control over national territory and borders has been challenged, and thus threatening its very existence (OCSE & CSAO, 2014). Nowadays, the diffusion of contentious violent practices that is also taking place among the Fulani people is showing that new generational, social and political cleavages seem to divide pastoral communities as never before, threatening their survival and the fragile equilibria in the Sahara-Sahel.

5. A similar pattern has also been followed in Niger.



Map 3. Pastoral Routes in the Sahara-Sahel



Source: elaborated from Canali, 2012

Conclusions

In Africa as elsewhere, herding is the most effective way to safely occupy and secure rangelands, vast and remote territories covering around a fourth of the global land area. Pastoral communities represent the most relevant and powerful allies to manage and govern these agro-ecologically marginal regions, where other forms of livelihood prove unfeasible, and where the costs of any other form of producing as well as of controlling, monitoring and patrolling, would be largely higher.

Pastoral regions are currently agitated by extreme environmental as well as socio-political dynamics, which undermine the basis of local populations' livelihoods and identity. The current crisis in the pastoral world is due to multiple and interlinked factors that include, but are not limited to, environmental change, socio-political exclusion, economic marginalisation and a shifted international agenda.

Conflict and insecurity constitute the main threats to pastoral livelihood systems. The increasing power of insecurity and insurgent groups in certain pastoral areas within

a vicious pastoral-security nexus is a further challenge for herding groups. It is likely that insurgent movements have found their way through pastoral territories as they have capitalized to an extent on the sense of disillusionment, resentment and abandonment that local populations feel towards central governments, state structures and international institutions.

Crisis in the pastoral world must be tackled through an integrated and multidimensional approach, taking into consideration its ecological, economic, political and transnational dimensions. It is necessary to put an end to the marginalisation of pastoral communities. Their integration in the management and governance patterns of regional territories is the way to ensure a sustainable, peaceful and inclusive development. With a view to supporting livelihoods and to enhance security in these regions, a new socio-political contract is to be forged through the recognition of consistent trans-frontiers networks, routes and exchanges for production and trade purposes, and enhancing the active involvement of local communities in the socio-political and institutional dimensions.



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