Is Pastoralism Still Viable in the Horn of Africa?

New Perspectives from Ethiopia

"The ability of the Somali Region economy to generate wealth is not in doubt. It is the variability of income generation and asset ownership, and the consequent vulnerability of groups of people within the region, that must be addressed." This is one of the primary conclusions of a forthcoming report into the causes and consequences of livelihood vulnerability in the Somali region of Ethiopia, a two-year study led by the UK Institute of Development studies (IDS) and commissioned by the UNOCHA Pastoralist Communication Initiative (UNOCHA-PCI). Its conclusions, which imply that with the right support, the pastoral economy can thrive and contribute extensively to the national economy, are applicable across the arid and semi-arid areas of the Horn of Africa. But pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, farmers and traders have suffered from a series of livelihood shocks, some natural (droughts, livestock diseases), others political (crackdowns on informal trade, bans by Gulf states on livestock imports, banditry and conflict). As a result, and because rainfall in the Horn has been low in recent years, questions are being asked about the sustainability of pastoralism as a livelihood system. Thousands of people, whose voices have been collected in this rigorous study, argue that the system is dynamic and sustainable, but needs support and diversification to reduce livelihood vulnerability.

Sources of Vulnerability

"Drought triggers livelihood crises, but the underlying causes of vulnerability in the Somali region of Ethiopia are social and political, not natural." The impact of drought on rural livelihoods is multi-dimensional. Pastoralists lose livestock, while farmers and agro-pastoralists lose their harvest. Other livelihoods that depend on pastoralist and agricultural incomes, such as traders and service providers, also report facing declining incomes in drought years due to falling demand for their goods and services. On the other hand, droughts are part of the natural cycle in semi-arid areas, and local livelihoods are sensitively adapted to the certainty that drought will come and can be overcome.

Many people believe that droughts are more frequent than in the past, but analysis of long term rainfall data for Somali Region does not support this perception. A marginal decline in rainfall is observed in the northern part of the region since the 1950s, but in the much drier central zones average rainfall has actually increased since the 1970s. The defining characteristic of rainfall in arid and semi-arid areas is its variability from year to year, and there is no evidence that the recent sequence of localised droughts represents a permanent decline in average rainfall. If vulnerability to drought is increasing, the reasons have to do with inadequate support to economic, social and political coping mechanisms, rather than increasingly frequent or abnormally severe drought events.

After drought, conflict is another major source of vulnerability. An indirect effect of conflict is expressed by the Somali word aabsi (‘fear of conflict’), which results in migration routes being disrupted, services not being delivered and large tracts of contested arable or grazing land lying unutilised for years.

The report gives voice to the people of Somali Region themselves, and presents this evidence to policy makers. The approach included a questionnaire survey of 1,100 households in nine rural districts and two urban centres across the region, ethnographic methods, market monitoring and interviews with local leaders, members of government, traders and internally displaced persons.
The opinions expressed in this paper do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations.