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# Understanding the Horn of Africa

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An online curriculum project of the Center for African Studies  
University of California, Berkeley

## “East African Pastoralists.”

by J. Michael Halderman

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Part of the online curriculum, “Pastoralism - Classic issues in contemporary times,” contributing to the *Environmental Pressures*, *Conflict Management* and *Youth* modules in the Understanding the Horn of Africa web portal

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## Introduction

This reading is part of a larger curriculum on Pastoralism in the Horn of Africa (HOA). Other material in the curriculum piece includes:

- “Classic” Issues That Have Confronted Pastoralism in the Horn
  - Introduction
  - Key Points Covered in the Readings on “Classic” Issues
- The “Classic” Issues Continue to Confront Pastoralism in the 21st Century
- Student Activities & Questions to Answer Related to the “Classic” Issues
- The Emergence of New Issues Relating to Pastoralism in Recent Years
- The Potential of Pastoralism to Cope with Climate Change
- Student Activities & Questions to Answer Related to the New Issues and to Climate Change
- Relevant Websites and You Tube Videos
- Photos in the HOA Web Portal
- Relevant Maps in the HOA Web Portal
- Key References

All of this is available on the [HOA web portal](#).

## This Reading

This excerpt is one of four pieces written by J. Michael Halderman that introduce and describe through overviews and case studies the “classic” issues that confronted pastoralists and pastoralism in the Horn of Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the following readings. It is best to read them in the following order:

1. ***“East African Pastoralists.”*** In Cultural Survival Quarterly, volume 8, number 1 (Spring 1984: Special issue on pastoral societies in a changing world) pp. 39-45.
2. ***“Problems of Pastoral Development in Eastern Africa.”*** In Agricultural Administration, volume 18, number 4 (1985) pp. 199-216.  
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0309586X85900913>
3. ***“Which Route to Follow?”*** In Development and Famine Risk in Kenya Maasai Land. Doctoral dissertation, department of political science, University of California, Berkeley (1987) pp. 39-59.
4. ***“The Future of Pastoralism in Turkana District, Kenya.”*** Response to a request for information from students at Wageningen University in the Netherlands (June 2005) pp. 1-2.

Except for #2, these are available through the UnderstandingtheHorn.org site as well as through the Center for African Studies Horn of Africa Working Paper Series site:

[http://www.escholarship.org/uc/cas\\_horn](http://www.escholarship.org/uc/cas_horn)





# Cultural Survival QUARTERLY

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Volume 8

Spring 1984

Number 1

## NOMADS Stopped In their Tracks?



Some of the articles from this issue are online here:

<http://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/81-spring-1984-nomads-stopped-their-tracks>

# East African Pastoralists

*Michael Halderman*

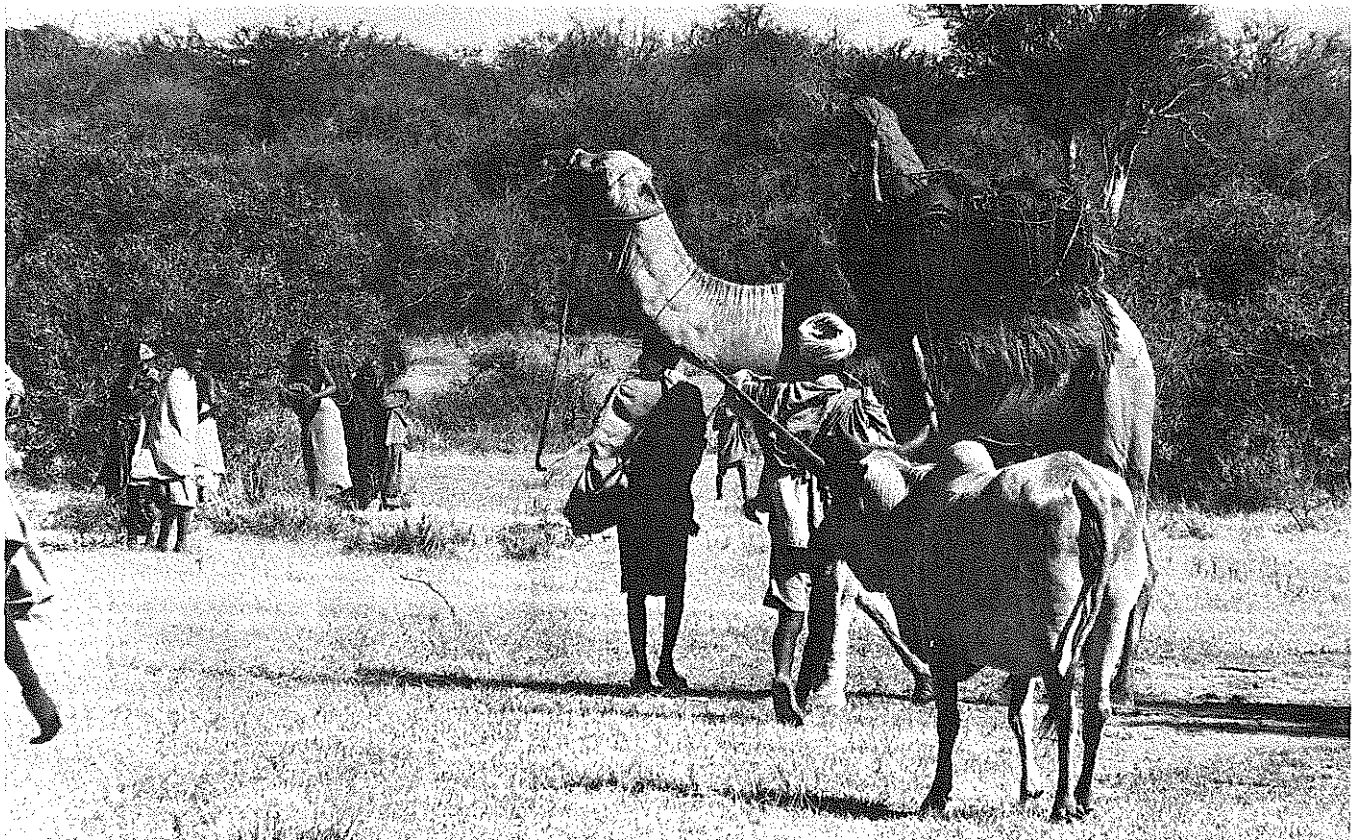
During the past fifteen years eastern African pastoralists have shown once again that they are vulnerable to food shortage and famine. Solving these problems will not be easy. Modernization has disrupted already inadequate traditional food systems and continues to threaten pastoralists. "Pastoral development" is proposed as a means of achieving long-term food security by increasing pastoralists' involvement in national food and economic systems. For pastoral development to become reality, however, daunting obstacles must be overcome. If solutions are not found and implemented there could be heavy costs to the region's pastoralists and governments.

## **Pastoral Areas and Populations**

Approximately five million pastoralists inhabit eastern Africa [Sandford], roughly 8% of the total population of 62 million [UNRISD 1976b]. Primarily semi-nomadic, they occupy an enormous amount of the region's territory (particularly in proportion to their numbers) and possess vast herds and flocks of livestock on which their economies and subsistence systems are heavily based. While many pastoralists also cultivate crops, this article does not deal with settled, primarily agricultural societies, even though some own large numbers of livestock.

Somalia (1.7 million), Ethiopia (1.6 million), and Kenya (1.5 million) have the largest pastoral populations in the region [Sandford]. Although the number of pastoralists in each of the three countries is reported to be nearly the same, they make up approximately 70% of Somalia's total population, 12% of Kenya's and 4% of Ethiopia's. It is likely that pastoralists make up 1-2% of the population of Tanzania and Uganda. Sandford estimates the total number of pastoralists in Africa at 17.3 million. The Sudan, with 3.9 million, has the largest number of pastoralists of any single country. The total for the Sahelian countries was estimated at 6¾ million, with Chad, Mali and Mauritania having pastoral populations similar in size to Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya.

Most of Somalia, about two-thirds of Kenya, and well over a third of Ethiopia are inhabited by pastoralists. In Tanzania and Uganda, where pastoral populations are small in relation to national totals, sizable amounts of land are occupied by herders. Eastern Africa contains a large percentage of Africa's livestock, much of it owned by pastoralists. According to FAO statistics, Ethiopia's approximately 26 million cattle represent nearly one-fifth the continental total, while one-quarter of Africa's camels are found in Somalia. [FAO Production Yearbook].



Boran at river well (Ethiopia).

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Maasai woman and children (Kenya).

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### Limitations of Traditional Pastoral Food Systems

Those involved in attempting to achieve food security for pastoralists face an uphill battle. Part of the problem is that most pastoralists inhabit semi-arid and arid areas where development benefitting local populations has proven particularly difficult. Over the centuries pastoralists made remarkable adaptation to such harsh environments, where cropping provided only a tenuous existence and where hunting/gathering supported small numbers of people. But traditional systems did not provide food security that would adequately meet today's international standards. Pastoralists' oral history contains countless stories of pre-colonial famine attributed primarily to drought, livestock disease, and locusts.

Pastoralists have followed a number of traditional strategies attempting to cope with natural shocks to food systems. One basic feature of these strategies was heavy reliance on livestock. In addition, a wide range of social relationships among members of pastoral groups provided traditional social security systems. Livestock were dispersed among relatives and friends, both to minimize risk and to invest in the security network. Sometimes marriages were arranged in which girls went to live with families in other (preferably better) ecological areas, even with different tribes, so that in time of need the family could appeal to their "in-laws." Severe problems could induce large groups to migrate long distances, where they might fight with other

groups for territory or water. At times, small groups and even individuals scattered in search of food. When fortunate, they found food, and perhaps began a new social unit, or were assimilated by other groups. A great deal of ethnic mixing has taken place in eastern Africa as a result of past food shortage and famine.

In times of famine pastoralists sometimes left the plains to live with agriculturalists in highland (or other) areas where food systems had not been as seriously affected. After the drought or livestock disease epidemic, herders would return to the plains to re-establish their pastoral economy. Stock raiding, an integral component of these societies, served to replenish herds after disaster. Pastoralism appears to have been remarkably resilient as cycles of disaster and rebuilding are said to have occurred innumerable times.

### Disruption of Pastoral Food Systems

In the past hundred years, modernization, brought about by colonialism, produced enormous social, economic and political changes in eastern Africa. Many have benefitted, particularly inhabitants of urban areas and localities that were among the earliest to develop economically. Pastoralists have not been so fortunate. While there have been both positive and negative aspects of the changes, pastoral food systems have been severely disrupted. In addition, pastoralists now occupy peripheral economic, social, and political positions in the

independent countries of the region. These factors seriously hamper the achievement of pastoral development and food security.

Colonial powers introduced a modern state form of government around the turn of the twentieth century. The reaction of pastoralists was frequently violent, and pastoral areas were the last to be "pacified." Since then, pastoralists have been particularly alarmed by administrative attempts to control their movement and to reduce or limit the number of their livestock. These efforts were viewed by pastoralists as direct threats to their food and socioeconomic systems and were therefore resisted. The most frequent problems resulted from policies to restrict the movement of people and livestock to specific districts, provinces and countries. When the imposed boundaries ignored traditional pastoral systems, pastoralists in turn ignored or opposed these boundaries, especially during droughts. Nevertheless, colonial governments quite effectively reduced the large-scale migrations of pastoral and other peoples. In many areas large-scale stock raids gave way to small-scale stock theft. The degree of control over pastoral areas and groups varied widely, however; some remote areas were very lightly administered.

The processes propelled by colonialism, especially the commercialization of rural areas, greatly increased competition for good land in pastoral areas. The Maasai, for example, lost large areas of land to European settlers as a result of treaties with the British government in the decade before the First World War. When the Europeans left after independence, the land was taken over by non-Maasai. Game parks, commercial farms and ranches, towns, modern cities, and airports now occupy land held by pastoralists less than one hundred years ago. In recent years many other actors have entered the stage. Governments eager to increase the off-take of meat from pastoral areas have established various types of activities including stock-fattening schemes, company and state ranches. They have also granted land for other uses, at times leading to disastrous consequences for pastoralists who traditionally occupied the areas. The establishment of irrigated estate agriculture by multinational corporations in the Awash valley of northeastern Ethiopia during Haile Selassie's reign, for example, is reported to have deprived Afar pastoralists of vital dry season grazing and water sources [Bondestam]. I have been told by several relief experts that the Afar had the highest rate of human mortality of any ethnic group during Ethiopia's subsequent food crises of the 1970s.

Poor agriculturalists also compete with pastoralists for land. Many of these farmers have themselves been displaced by the processes of modernization: population pressure, new land tenure systems, competition for good land with other groups and individuals as a result of the increased profitability of agriculture, and lack of opportunities in and/or training for the modern sector. These agriculturalists have often "spilled over" from ecologically favorable highland zones into areas traditionally utilized by pastoralists. Their attempts to subsist in these semi-arid areas have often led to serious problems and even disaster; they were identified as a category particularly vulnerable to food shortage and famine in the 1970s [Halderman 1976]. When agriculturalists spill over, not only do they put themselves at risk, but they also reduce the viability of pastoral food systems and economies by taking over vital land and water sources.

Competition for land also exists between pastoralists who want to use it for commercial purposes and others who require it for subsistence. Some pastoralists have acquired legal title to individual ranches in Kenya, depriving other herders of land they once used or had access to.

Colonial rule, the commercialization of rural areas, and the emergence of independent states have severely disrupted pastoral food and resource utilization systems. Certain natural controls on human and livestock population growth have been removed while, simultaneously, pastoralists have lost large amounts of good land. More people and livestock are thereby crowded into less — and less favorable — land. Many pastoralists are in a precarious position because the groups who have taken land in the past threaten to take even more in the future. While the traditional systems have been crippled, pastoralists (and their supporters) are in a very weak position to obtain more favorable development policies and programs because of their lack of political influence.

### **The Potential Role of Development**

If development is to help bring about food security for pastoralists, emphasis needs to be put on improving the living standards of the people concerned, not simply on the economic development of areas. Herders will resist efforts by governments and aid agencies to maximize economic productivity and return on investment if these goals threaten their food production and socioeconomic systems. Pastoralists are not inherently anti-development, but they do — quite rationally — give their own subsistence top priority. It should not be forgotten that the fundamental purpose of subsistence systems is the survival of the society.

But pastoralists will lose out if they remain at a subsistence level. To improve living standards economic development is required at national and local levels because eastern African countries are too poor to subsidize herders' welfare and food needs. Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda have been classified by the United Nations as among the world's 31 least developed countries, and each of the countries in the region has faced severe economic problems in recent years.

What is needed is a particular kind of development — defined here as "pastoral development" — suited to the needs and problems of pastoralists. To be successful, this approach should be based on a policy framework that encompasses several diverse elements: (i) subsistence needs of pastoralists, (ii) economic development goals of governments, (iii) protection of the environment and (iv) opportunities for herders outside pastoralism. Effective solutions will involve the incorporation of pastoralists into the evolving social, economic and political systems of the various countries on terms that benefit the majority of herders. The future of pastoralists is tied to the future directions and performance of national food and economic systems.

Previous development efforts in pastoral areas have encountered serious problems because restrictions on movement and attempts to sedentarize were seen by most pastoralists as challenges to their economic and food production systems. Efforts to enforce stock quotas and to increase the off-take of animals from pastoral herds were often viewed with alarm, particularly by poorer families whose survival or long term economic

viability was at risk. Pastoralists' reluctance to participate in development programs and the problems of food shortage could both be overcome if — and it is a big "if" — development policies could be formulated that would improve food security for herders. If pastoralists perceive development efforts as in their best interests, they will be far more inclined to accept the proposals. If such an approach is not taken, however, the legacy of failure may well continue.

The potential of pastoral systems to damage the environment should not be ignored, particularly if populations increase. To deal with this possible problem and to improve food security, modifications or alternatives to pastoral food and economic systems should be developed and encouraged. Two strategies may be part of the solution. The first is to find alternatives to pastoralists' focus on producing livestock primarily for subsistence. Efforts should be made to capitalize on pastoralists' extraordinary ability to raise livestock in harsh areas, without threatening their complex survival systems or the future productivity of the land. The cycle of selling livestock during dry periods and building

up herds when the rains are good seems essential to pastoral systems of resource utilization, and may well be the most effective method available given environmental conditions. Rather than attempting to confront this system, it may be possible to devise policies based on the system. Moreover, perhaps new technologies that fit within pastoral systems could be developed to allow increased commercialization of livestock products. It may, for example, be possible to use solar energy to preserve milk for sale, especially during wet seasons when milk is plentiful. Prices might be useful tools to encourage pastoralists to increase both the sale of their products and the purchase of other foods. With innovative approaches, pastoralists might become more integrated into district and national food systems.

The second strategy is to encourage herders to leave pastoralism. The obstacles to pastoral development and food security are so daunting, especially if population increases, that removing large numbers of people from this occupation and from these areas should make solutions easier to achieve. This approach could be related to the first strategy by promoting efforts to develop and



Maasai mother feeding child.





Maasai girl.

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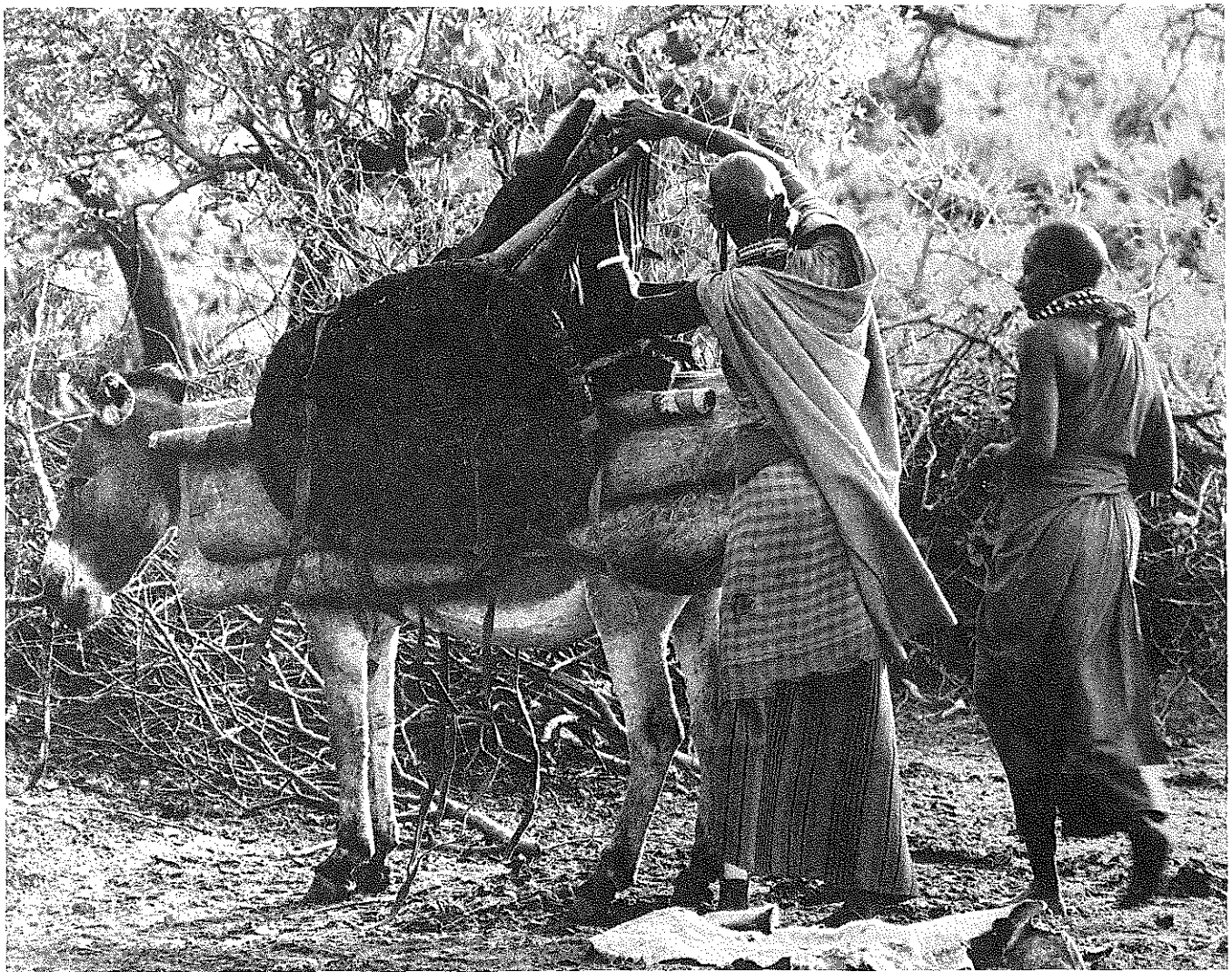
expand industries based on livestock such as leather goods. Pastoralists could play a major role in discovering alternative livelihoods, assisted by those (especially NGOs) with experience in small-scale development projects around the world. Another alternative is to encourage pastoralists to move to other areas and/or to enter the modern sector.

### **Is Incorporation Possible?**

Although pastoral development and food security require increased incorporation of herders into national food and economic systems, there are a number of serious obstacles to overcome to reach the intended goal. Many younger pastoralists undeniably desire to enter the modern sector, some hoping to leave pastoralism by moving to urban areas. But opportunities in this sector are extremely limited, and governments are already concerned about excessive population movement to urban areas. Pastoralists, moreover, are very poorly prepared to compete with those who have had better access to education and other opportunities, many of whom are themselves unemployed or underemployed. In regard to another alternative, if pastoralists are encouraged to leave their homelands for other rural areas, where would they go? There is very little good land (with adequate rainfall and water, and

free of tsetse) in eastern Africa that is not already controlled or owned by other ethnic groups, governments, companies or individuals. This is one reason why many poor agriculturalists have spilled over into semi-arid areas where cropping is risky at best. In addition, while incorporation in national economic and food systems should reduce pastoralists' vulnerability to natural shocks, it increases their exposure to economic and political shocks such as collapsing markets or prices for their products, or increased prices (or unavailability) of food or necessary production items.

Recent events in Africa raise another set of disturbing questions regarding the incorporation approach and its underlying assumptions. Is it possible for governments to integrate pastoralists into national economies that do not grow, and into food systems that cannot produce and distribute adequate quantities of food? If these discouraging trends continue, should pastoralists resist incorporation into such ineffective economies and food systems? Are pastoralists therefore doomed to a subsistence existence and to a future of recurrent food shortage and famine? What other long-term risks will pastoralists face if they remain aloof from — or cannot be incorporated into — the evolving socioeconomic and political systems of the various independent countries of the region?



Maasai women leading donkey before moving kraal camp.

©Halderman

Sub-Saharan Africa has been identified as the Third World region with the most disappointing development record during the 1970s. Rates of growth of GNP per capita were the lowest in the world, and rates for 1980-85 were projected even lower [World Bank 1980 and 1981]. Food production has been abysmal. Africa is the only continent where per capita availability of food actually declined during the 1970s [Thomas]. Each of the eastern African countries has had food shortage problems in recent years, and the long-term outlook is bleak. For many years Kenya had the most effective agricultural sector and food production system in the region, but even Kenya has imported large amounts of food in the past few years. Projections of food needs, population growth, and food production are not encouraging for any country in eastern Africa [see, for example, Republic of Kenya, 1981].

Adding to the difficulties is the position of some officials in development assistance organizations. In spite of the need, but perhaps because of the obstacles, these officials seem to have written off pastoralists. After considerable interest sparked by the food crises of the 1970s, they now argue that scarce resources are better utilized where they can produce the greatest and surest returns.

The costs of such government incapacity and donor

unwillingness could be very high for pastoralists and for the eastern African societies and governments concerned. If pastoralists do not become involved in the social, economic and political systems of the independent nations of which they are citizens, they may well lose out in the long run. They will compete for resources, including land, with individuals, classes and ethnic groups that have modernized and are therefore far better prepared for the new forms of competition.

Failure to achieve pastoral development, or a policy of government neglect toward pastoral areas, will probably increase the socioeconomic and political inequalities between districts and provinces that were established or exacerbated by colonialism. Since districts and localities tend to have an ethnic base in eastern Africa, such failure may also increase ethnic disparities and possibly lead to conflict. A likely result is that those ethnic groups that have already achieved economic and political power will increase their advantages over other groups. Pastoralists will then fall even further behind, relative to many other groups in the various countries. Attempts to promote national integration and ethnic harmony will probably suffer severe setbacks. Within pastoral societies, inter-group and emerging class relations may also be affected. Those pastoral groups and individuals who have already established firm links to

national economic and political systems will be in a far stronger relative position if other groups and individuals have little opportunity to catch up.

Concentrating resources in the already most productive areas could theoretically provide adequate national supplies of food. Whether this food will then reach those most in need is a separate issue. Once it becomes a commodity, food tends to gravitate toward those areas and groups with the strongest economic and political demand. Urban and upper income groups can expect to do well, while pastoralists and other groups with little clout can expect to do badly.

### Conclusions

Perhaps pastoralism is an anachronism, a pre-capitalist form of production unable to withstand the onslaught of capitalistic or state-directed commercialization of rural areas. Most traditional societies have not fared well against this type of competition over the past couple of centuries. If this diagnosis is correct, efforts should focus on moving pastoralists out of their present systems with as little disruption as possible.

But the answer may not be so simple. There are about five million pastoralists in eastern Africa, and another ten million plus in the Sudan and Sahelian countries. They occupy vast areas and possess enormous herds of livestock. From a policy-maker's perspective, they appear to utilize semi-arid and arid areas better than existing major alternatives. Agriculturalists in such areas are more vulnerable to food shortage and famine, and probably produce greater environmental destruction. State-run ranches have been notoriously unsuccessful. Pastoralism keeps large numbers of people alive and committed, and the productivity is so high that since the early years of colonialism alarmed officials have called it "over-stocking." Pastoralists' highly decentralized and flexible management systems, moreover, tap the extraordinary knowledge and skill of local populations.

Successful pastoral development and the achievement of long-term food security will require a policy framework that utilizes rather than frustrates the abilities of herders. Alternatives must be found to systems that concentrate on producing livestock primarily for subsistence. But pastoralists cannot wait for long-term solutions if their families' survival is threatened. Another essential step is to protect herders' territory. Continued attrition of choice bits of land for beef fattening schemes, irrigation projects and subsistence cropping by agriculturalists will further reduce the effectiveness of pastoral economic and food systems. If pastoralists are pushed into drier areas they will become severe liabilities for the governments concerned. Their potential contribution to national development will be jeopardized, and they will be in more frequent need of food aid.

It will not be easy to overcome pastoralists' long-term food security problems, but the costs of inaction or failure are very high. The most promising way to find solutions is to enlist the assistance of those directly concerned. Pastoral cultures produce analytical, articulate individuals who could assist in the difficult process of solving development problems (not only their own). Socioeconomic classes are emerging and there are conflicting interests within pastoral societies, but widespread involvement of herders in the formulation and im-

plementation of policies is essential. Long ago pastoralists developed remarkable adaptations to harsh natural environments. They should now focus on the challenge of adapting to new socioeconomic and political environments. □

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