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The Future of Pastoralism in Turkana District, Kenya

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Understanding the Horn of Africa

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The Future of Pastoralism in Turkana District, Kenya by J. Michael Halderman

Response to a request for information from students at
Wageningen University in the Netherlands
(June 2005) pp. 1-2.

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 short reflection 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 19th century and throughout the 20th 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.
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. (This chapter is a short story based on real events that is intended to provide the reader with a deeper and closer sense of the people and issues involved.)
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 number 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. The second article is available online [here](#)



FUTURE OF PASTORALISM IN TURKANA DISTRICT

Michael Halderman

June 15, 2005

Background. This was my response, with a new title, to the request from Hanna Gooren and a group of other students at [Wageningen University](#), the Netherlands, to provide my view and opinion regarding an “ethical issue” they had been asked to research and to prepare a joint paper. The research question was: **“Should pastoral nomads in Turkana District be supported or has their livelihood become too hopeless?”**

RESPONSE

Pastoralism in Turkana district should be supported for both practical and ethical reasons. At the same time, it is necessary to also support alternatives to pastoralism.

Over the centuries pastoralists in Eastern Africa evolved finely tuned production systems that allowed relatively large numbers of people to live in arid and semi-arid areas. No other known production system has been able to support such large numbers of *self-provisioning* people in such areas. In recent decades, however, the effectiveness of these production systems has been significantly reduced and eroded, leaving pastoralists vulnerable to food shortage and famine. The severe conflict that has plagued Turkana district is both a consequence and cause of the problems.

The combination of (1) this downward trend for pastoralism and (2) well-intentioned (although in many cases misguided) relief and development efforts has led to a situation in which a very large proportion of the residents of Turkana District face a bleak future. But the *solution is definitely not* for governments, development organizations, NGOs and others *to stop supporting pastoralism*. By many standards, the residents of Turkana District who are able to practice pastoralism are far more capable of providing food for themselves, and earning income if there are markets, than are the many who have dropped out of pastoralism. Some of the drop-outs try to survive by growing crops in areas where crop production is very risky. The worst off are the drop-outs who have become destitute and are usually supported by food aid. They have few resources from which to make a livelihood.

It would be Euro-centric to argue that pastoralism should not be supported while more “modern” production systems should be supported. Many westerners believe that pastoralism is a primitive lifestyle and that settled farming is more advanced, and that the modern way of life is even “better.” Settled farming is possible in only a few parts of Turkana District. Large-scale *irrigation schemes* established in the 1970s along the Tana River in northeastern Kenya quickly became very expensive environmental and economic disasters. Small-scale irrigation schemes are much more appropriate and sometimes relatively successful. There are some [small-scale irrigation schemes in Turkana District](#), but I do not know how they have performed in recent years.

When the development of Turkana District as a whole is considered, it makes good sense to promote some small-scale irrigation schemes and some settled agriculture. But it is extremely important to recognize that when such approaches are promoted they can lead to serious problems because the areas used are dry season and reserve grazing areas and water sources. Pastoralism cannot function effectively without adequate dry season (and reserve) grazing areas and sources of water. The ***biggest problem*** that has affected pastoralists throughout all of Eastern Africa over the last 100+ years has been loss of dry season and reserve grazing areas and water sources.

Governments, donors, NGOs and others should promote the rights of pastoralists to maintain their access to the dry season and reserve grazing areas and water sources that they still have access to – which means helping pastoralists get and maintain ***secure land rights***.

In regard to ***drought management***, those involved must not lose sight of the fact that drought has played a major role in limiting the populations of people, livestock and wildlife in semi-arid and arid areas. Overzealous and/or short-sighted efforts at drought management have real potential for long term harm. Only interventions that will be environmentally sound in both the short and long term should be promoted, funded and implemented.

While pastoralism should be supported, it is also very important to promote ***alternatives to pastoralism***. There is obviously a need to promote alternatives for the many families and individuals who have ***“fallen out” of pastoralism***, especially the many destitute. In Turkana District, families are often split as those who are able to practice pastoralism are far away with the herds and flocks while other members of the extended family live a more settled lifestyle near towns, mission stations or feeding centers. Supporting various income-generating activities can be very useful for such people. Many of these more settled semi-pastoralists or former pastoralists want to return to pastoralism because it enables them to be self-provisioning, not dependent on food aid or whatever.

It is also important to promote alternatives to pastoralism for those pastoralists, especially the ***young, who desire a different lifestyle***. Achieving this will require: (a) providing appropriate organizational, technical and practical skills to groups of women and youth to enable them to earn a livelihood outside pastoralism; (b) providing scholarships to capable students (girls and boys) who would otherwise not be able to complete their education.

The following are the ***policy recommendations*** I would make for Turkana District. Promote:

- advocacy at the national and local level that promotes the interest of pastoralists
- the continuation of pastoralism to enable large numbers of people to be self-provisioning
- livestock marketing
- alternatives to pastoralism
- effective methods of conflict resolution
- effective drought management
- environmental protection
- better opportunities for women and youth
- better donor coordination.