Balancing efforts to address climate change, poverty, risk and uncertainty

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Climate Change

While working in Latin America this summer it struck me that many environmental management/ regulation advances that these countries had been making a decade ago had fallen to the wayside.

In separate conversations with the Minister of Environment of both Honduras and Nicaragua, it was interesting to note that both said the primary source of external funds for their Ministries revolves around various climate change initiatives and so that is what a significant portion of their effort focuses on.

My point is that while climate change is indeed a serious long-term concern, I am increasingly appalled that issues that could be addressed in a substantive way right now, are by default or disingenuous intention being pushed to the side. While writing this, I remembered and pulled out a quote from Phil Stott, Emeritus Professor from the University of London from 4 years ago, which sums up my concerns even more today: “Each day, 20,000 people in the world die of waterborne diseases. Half a billion people go hungry. A child is orphaned by AIDS every seven seconds. This does not have to happen. We allow it while fretting about ‘saving the planet.’ What is wrong with us that we downplay this human misery before our eyes and focus on events that will probably not happen even a hundred years hence? We know that the greatest cause of environmental degradation is poverty; on this we can and must act.”

In this context, ILRI has a lot of things that could make a substantive difference in the 1-5 year time period. ILRI should also of course contribute to some of these longer-term global issues. This may warrant a discussion within ILRI as to the institutional tradeoffs involved with how much to focus on climate change issues relative to other things that could be accomplished in the next couple of years? It would not hurt to periodically review/discuss the balance of what is at the heart of such institutional tradeoff decisions.

Livestock-Water, Pastoralism-Vulnerability

One of the issues that I would encourage both the livestock-water and the pastoralism-vulnerability discussions to explicitly explore is the individual and government policy challenges to dealing with uncertainty.
This was especially highlighted last year when by-in-large the FEWS-net warnings of the current drought in parts of East Africa were not taken to heart until it was too late. Unrealistic expectation and hopeful inaction are still dominant components that limit progress on both livestock-water and pastoralism-vulnerability issues.

WHY? and what can be done to change this? If these issues are not substantively tackled in a manner that has resonance with both individual producers and policy makers there is little hope for long-term progress on either livestock-water and pastoralism-vulnerability.

More information is not the limiting factor, but perhaps how the information is main-lined into decision making is. Bottom-line: what is the personal enterprise and policy environment that is needed to allow success? This raises some very thorny issues, but without addressing them is there any real chance of resource management success? Maybe a pulse of especially concentrated effort in this vein by ILRI could nudge resource management down a more sustainable effort.

Several U.S. agencies are continuing to build momentum toward incorporating risk assessment into policy in a way that will make it harder to engage in moral hazard behavior relative to crop and livestock. This means that, for example, sophisticated risk assessment maps are being developed for the U.S. that show, given soil and long-term climate records, what the odds are of different degrees of failure for different types of grain crops and forage production for different planning time periods.

I think this is heading down a path where at a certain level of risk there would be a line drawn by policy makers to identify that such behavior is not responsible/sustainable and is therefore consigned to different category of regulation or insurability (e.g., this is what many countries already do relative to development in 100-year flood plains).

So, given the soils and climate in, for example, northern Samburu, what is a reasonable confidence limit for stocking rate to make sure there is not failure in a 10 year period, a 20 year period, etc? How would this reasonable stocking rate change (increase vulnerability) if X % of the dry season pasture in the region was converted to grain crops?

This analysis is hard to do well, but possible – one of the reasons why it hasn’t happened in the U.S. or other places of the world is that operating at a given level of “acceptable” risk would likely not yield the products that are currently expected (hoped for) to maintain a certain number of people or a given lifestyle over time.

ILRI is perfectly positioned to tackle these issues. Long-term research showing variability of income amount/stability relative to stocking rate, or destocking strategy, has not been well developed for much of the world that is susceptible to erratic climate.

There is a real need to consider how pragmatic types of planning/policy tools could be developed to better address uncertainty and the pain and degradation that miscalculation of uncertainty can cause.

Contributed by Tom Thurow, Professor of Watershed Management at the University of Wyoming.

On 9 and 10 November 2011, the ILRI Board of Trustees hosted a 2-day ‘liveSTOCK Exchange’ to discuss and reflect on livestock research for development.