

# Why investing in Africa's livestock sector offers best returns for climate resilience

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*Asking Africa to reduce numbers of livestock to meet global climate goals, as one European negotiator suggested earlier this year, is not a solution to the climate change crisis, writes George Wamukoya. [Laika ac/Flickr]*

Asking Africa to reduce numbers of livestock to meet global climate goals, as one European negotiator suggested earlier this year, is not a solution to the climate change crisis, writes George Wamukoya.

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Africa's cattle, sheep and goats appear to contribute disproportionately high levels of greenhouse gas emissions relative to output largely because the continent's livestock production systems remain under-resourced and under-developed, and therefore inefficient.

Increasingly, these systems are also facing additional pressures of rising temperatures, and water and forage scarcities.

In spite of these constraints, livestock on average account for about 40% of agricultural GDP in Africa, ranging from 30 to 80% in individual countries, but rarely does the sector get more than five to 10% of agricultural investment and is often left out of climate finance commitments entirely.

The latest figures show that the livestock sector in Africa received a fraction of overseas development aid, or around \$33 million, compared to financial support for renewable energy of almost \$760 million, despite the availability of homegrown solutions.

Kenya alone requires an estimated \$62 billion by 2030 to achieve its target of reducing emissions by a third, the best opportunity for which comes through improvements in the livestock sector.

Just as there are ways Africa can electrify the continent without relying on fossil fuels, there are ways Africa can produce livestock, meat and milk without compromising the environment or accelerating climate change.

As negotiators head to the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), it is crucial we recognise that the environmental impacts and sustainability of livestock are not fixed in stone. And while the sector may contribute 14.5% of emissions globally, these estimates are largely based on data from the Global North.

With greater levels of financial support, Africa has the chance to both increase and improve livestock production, unlocking more of livestock's benefits for people and prosperity while minimising impact on the planet.

Moreover, as one of the regions hardest hit by the impact of climate change, Africa can develop ways to adapt its livestock sector to cope with increasingly extreme and unpredictable conditions through solutions that foster greater resilience such as those mapped by Livestock Data for Decisions.

For example, one major contributor to livestock emissions as a result of low levels of productivity is insufficient feed, particularly during droughts and in drylands, which make up just over 40% of the planet's land surface, much of which supports livestock.

Yet cattle and goats can easily adapt from eating grasses to eating cacti, a shift that has been promoted in Madagascar, which this year suffered a prolonged drought and the world's first climate-induced famine.

Using cactus in livestock feed has also been shown to improve the production of meat and milk for cash earnings, while also helping to reduce the amount of groundwater used, because of the high water use efficiency of cactus.

Another growing area of opportunity lies in harnessing the genetic advantages of African sheep and goats to breed livestock with higher heat tolerance.

Researchers hope to be able to tap into the genes of animals, which have developed over time and through natural selection far higher heat tolerance in perennially hot and dry regions of Ethiopia than breeds found in other areas of the country.

Not only does greater heat tolerance mean livestock need less water and shade, but it also means greater potential to produce meat and milk despite extreme conditions.

And with more consistent production through droughts, livestock farmers and pastoralists can also benefit from new technological tools that provide them with access to markets and market information to maintain their incomes.

Tools like KAZNET, a crowdsourced platform that provides real-time information via SMS and mobile applications, are becoming increasingly popular as a way to help traders and producers navigate the volatility of the market as a result of climate change.

While many countries, companies and farmers elsewhere are retrofitting climate adaptation and mitigation practices to their livestock systems, Africa has a unique opportunity to build on local knowledge to grow an already critical sector in a way that offers greater long-term resilience to the threat of climate change.

A sustainable livestock sector in Africa offers benefits not just for people and economies but for tackling climate change and contributing to the achievement of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

But we cannot achieve this alone, and to date, insufficient climate finance has been channelled towards the livestock sector.

As we look beyond COP26 to the next milestones for global climate action, it is clear that African countries need more investment in livestock if we are to have any chance of meeting our – and the world's – climate targets.

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