Not by pastoralists alone...

Pastoralists do not live in isolation. Responses to pastoralists' shocks should not be viewed in isolation either.

The developed world has long been fascinated by the lifestyles of pastoralist communities in the Horn of Africa. In contrast, governments and non-pastoralist society within the region often regard them as a nuisance - backward and even embarrassing. Geographical remoteness and poor access to infrastructure and services add to their political and social marginalisation.

In a cruel twist of fate, these overly romantic and overtly discriminatory views have combined to ensure that both national governments and external agencies alike treat so-called ‘emergencies’ affecting pastoralists, such as droughts and disease outbreaks, in isolation. In the one case to sustain at all costs an apparently ‘idyllic’ way of life; in the other to maintain control over a peripatetic, ethnically diverse segment of the population. Whilst this ‘special case’ approach may, on occasion, have had short-term merit by averting humanitarian disasters, more generally it has failed to recognise that these societies are part of national and regional livestock value chains and are of considerable importance to the stability and development of rural and national economies. Moreover, numerous ‘emergency’ interventions have often unwittingly - perhaps sometimes deliberately - destroyed the intricate network of links and relations integral to the functioning of such systems.

You never walk alone

A study of recent drought and disease ‘episodes’ in the Horn of Africa has revealed that continuing to treat these recurrent events - which have become the new norm - as ‘emergencies’ is no longer helpful or appropriate.

An integral part of the way in which the ‘emergency’ industry has thus far approached these issues has been to concentrate their relief efforts on one actor group only - pastoralists. Few would argue that pastoralists are indeed the key sector actors affected. But the assumption that their problems can be solved by focussing on them in isolation, rather than as an integral part of a broader system, is flawed. This narrow approach has closed the door on the creative use of ideas, technology and information from different sources, which in turn can generate new services and production arrangements in response to change.

From small acacia seeds

Fortunately, there are a few exceptions to this rule. Some projects have looked beyond pastoralists’ immediate humanitarian needs during a drought or disease outbreak and have adopted a broader, livelihoods approach. In practical terms this has involved experimentation with interventions related to livestock nutrition, health or marketing with limited geographical cover and temporal spread. Such interventions have thus far engaged limited parts of the system only and, whilst results in some cases may have been encouraging, there are important questions as to how these types of interventions contribute to building the necessary capacity. For example, they are generally not embedded within existing systems and the short-term ‘project’ approaches used tend to fill institutional gaps rather than build institutional capacity.

In addition, as highlighted in another brief in this series, the general conclusion being drawn from these experiences is that interventions deemed ‘successful’ should be up-scaled. This goes against the now commonly accepted observation that the simple dissemination of technological interventions does little to build the required capacity. Dissemination of the approaches and processes that were instrumental in the system’s innovation, however, will.
Nevertheless, this type of experimentation is a step in the right direction. It is in the interaction between policy and practical lessons where real progress will be made. Thus far, however, these institutional experiments are hardly registering on the emergency industries’ radar. Building the necessary networks and institutional capacities to predict, prevent and rationally respond to challenges, such as the trend towards drier conditions punctuated by more frequent extreme weather events, will require significant revision of the paradigms that have, thus far, dominated sector thinking. Recognition that pastoralists are an integral part of national and regional economies and increasingly entwined in livestock value chains and linked to distant export markets is a good start. This, by definition, means it is no longer sensible to consider pastoralism in isolation, but rather as part of the broader livestock sector. Promoting such policy and institutional change will depend on the underlying capacities for change, and this capacity is largely a function of the patterns of linkages and the quality of the associated relationships among actors in the sector.

This capacity strengthening perspective on policy and institutional change implies that projects geared towards the solution of one specific problem need to be broadened to strengthen institutional and policy learning: the incremental, iterative process by which policy and institutional changes are tried and evaluated, and through which different stakeholder perspectives are brought to bear on the direction of change. For this process to be pro-poor it must include actors who can advocate in an informed manner on behalf of the poor.

In practice

Policies and institutional arrangements are essential in mediating how the livestock sector develops, how current and former livestock keepers fare, and how well the needs of consumers - rich and poor, rural and urban - are served. In areas with limited economic growth, policies and institutional arrangements are needed that reduce vulnerability and that help to maintain livestock production as a pillar of livelihoods and a safety net for poor households. At the same time these arrangements need to minimize risks from diseases that can be transmitted from animals to people and through animal-source foods, as well as environmental hazards to the livestock keepers themselves and the wider community.

Instead of regarding pastoralists as ‘special cases’ and treating the stresses they encounter as humanitarian disasters, policy makers and practitioners need to start recognising that these recurrent problems can only be solved through the acknowledgement that pastoralist societies are an integral part of the wider economy. Building the locally specific capacity that can respond to change is particularly important. This requires a mix of policy and institutional change, technology and investment that recognises that the problems pastoralists face can no longer be treated as emergencies, but that these have now become the main rural development problem.