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Changing perceptions of rangelands and pastoralists through multistakeholder action before and during the IYRP

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Key words: concerted action; International Year; pastoralism; rangelands; transdisciplinary research

Abstract

The International Year of Rangelands & Pastoralists (IYRP) should draw attention to rangelands and pastoralists and their economic, social, cultural and environmental contributions to global wellbeing. The “gap analysis” by UN Environment revealed much ignorance and misperceptions about rangelands and pastoralism among national governments, international institutions and the general public.

The IYRP campaign seeks to foster better understanding of how rangelands are used in an ecologically sound and resource-efficient way, e.g. through mobile pastoralism. It seeks to raise awareness of the importance of rangelands and pastoralists among policymakers. It seeks to encourage investment in the rangelands and related policy support, referring especially to the initiatives of pastoralist men, women and groups and of other local people toward decent livelihoods. It seeks to convince conservationists of pastoralists’ contribution to biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource management. It seeks to raise the awareness of pastoralists themselves about the value of their production system and provide them with good arguments for defending its integrity. To make this possible, scientists need to work already now – years before the IYRP begins – to generate better evidence. The gaps in data about rangelands and pastoralists need to be filled so that well-founded information is available to draw the world’s attention to the importance of pastoralists and rangelands during the IYRP and beyond.

This presentation sets the stage for country/regional papers that bring examples of concrete actions needed at those levels to generate information and awareness. Much of the work involves transdisciplinary and multisectoral research, as well as widespread sharing and discussion of the knowledge generated for the benefit of all stakeholders. The path toward the IYRP is as important as the Year itself. This session should encourage joint planning and implementation of multistakeholder endeavours before and during the IYRP to generate and analyse data and deepen global understanding of rangelands and pastoralism.

Introduction

The campaign for an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) was initiated in order to draw attention to the economic, social, cultural and environmental contributions of rangelands and pastoralists to global wellbeing. The “gap analysis” brought out by the United Nations Environment Programme (Johnsen *et al* 2019) revealed many misperceptions about rangelands and pastoralism among national governments, international bodies and the general public. One of the biggest misperceptions has been – especially in Africa – that the rangelands are “empty wastelands” and not being used productively (“*mise en valeur*”, as the French express it).

Until recently, the rangelands were regarded as being on the margins of the “developed” world and were largely ignored by national governments and development planners. This perception of rangelands as wastelands is leading to a new crisis that is looming for pastoralists. As the recent book about *Land, Investment and Politics* edited by Jeremy Lind *et al* (2020) reveals, the pastoral drylands of Africa are now seen as the new frontier with abundant and cheap uninhabited land that can be exploited for economic development and national wealth. These include activities such as irrigated farming; extraction of minerals, oil and gas; conservation and tourism; and large-scale projects to generate renewable energy. Claims of traditional land users such as pastoralists are either ignored, or local elites help negotiate deals with investors that benefit only the elites rather than the traditional user groups. The pressure of such investments on pastoralist communities will become much stronger in the coming years.

This makes it all the more urgent that – through the IYRP campaign – we foster a better understanding among policymakers, research and rural development practitioners about how rangelands are being used productively in an ecologically sound and resource-efficient way through mobile pastoralism. Above all, the pastoralist communities themselves need to have arguments and evidence for negotiating with governments and private-sector investors to ensure that the inevitable investments that will be made by outsiders in the

rangelands will not push the pastoralists out but will rather support their efforts and initiatives to live and thrive in the rangelands.

Multifunctional and complementary uses of the rangelands that include pastoralism are possible, but development planners and policymakers and investors need to understand how this could work. The IYRP campaign needs to convince national policymakers about the economic value of pastoral production and also to convince conservationists and environmental advocates of pastoralists' contribution to biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. Also the general public in all parts of the world – and especially those in urban areas – have little understanding of the value of rangelands and pastoralism.

Thus, on several fronts, the IYRP campaign needs to change the conventional perceptions of rangelands and pastoralism held by many stakeholders in development, including the general public. Scientists, such as many of the people attending this Congress, can play a hugely important role in bringing about this change. This will require that scientists deliberately build upon their research findings to provide well-analysed and well-presented information not only for other scientists in other disciplines but also for policymakers and the general public, so that policy and public support for the rangelands and pastoralists can be gained.

Multistakeholder research and action

To achieve this, all people wanting to promote rangelands and pastoralists – and especially those who have come together in the initiative for the IYRP – need to collaborate closely already in the years before the IYRP begins in 2026. They need to generate better evidence for policymaking and planning – and they need to do this together with pastoralists and other local rangeland users. The path we take toward the IYRP is as important as the Year itself.

In the two sessions on the IYRP during this Congress, we seek: i) to raise awareness and debate on critical knowledge gaps and research priorities related to rangelands and pastoralism; and ii) to build a stronger coalition for IYRP approval by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) this year and for planning actions up to and including 2026. We will look at the situation and trends in rangelands and pastoralism in different parts of the world as identified by the eleven current Regional IYRP Support Groups (RISGs) – in the Arctic, Australasia, Central Asia & Mongolia, East Asia, Eastern & Southern Africa, Europe, Middle East & North Africa, North America, South American & Caribbean, South Asia and West & Central Africa.. We will then discuss how to generate and analyse and disseminate information needed to deepen understanding of the value of rangelands and pastoralism and their role in global wellbeing.

This will require multisectoral cooperation and transdisciplinary research, with widespread sharing and discussion of the knowledge generated for the benefit of all stakeholders. But this should be especially for the benefit of those stakeholders who currently have the weakest position in negotiating development: the pastoralists and other local land users. A participatory and inclusive approach in designing and conducting research to fill the information gaps will help raise the awareness of pastoralists about the value of their production system and provide them with good arguments and evidence for defending its integrity and thus their own livelihoods.

The eleven RISGs comprise multiple stakeholders: pastoralists, researchers, rural advisors, NGOs and academics from the biophysical, social, economic and environmental sciences – in some cases, also people from the private sector. This is an ideal composition for bringing in different perspectives on the rangelands and also reaching out to multiple sectors, disciplines and social groups.

The effort in the past months has been focused on generating government and organisational support for the Mongolian Government's proposal for an IYRP. After the UNGA, the focus can shift to preparing for the Year: filling in the information gaps, raising the profile on rangelands and pastoralists, changing the many misperceptions about them, and joining forces to influence policy at national, regional and global level to create favourable conditions for sustainable human ecosystems.

Addressing coming challenges

Several challenges and research needs will be raised by the speakers in this session. I want to highlight here that it is extremely important to examine not only what we have studied in the past years but also to recognise which challenges are coming and growing – and indeed could grow exponentially and lead to extreme changes in rangeland use and severely affect pastoralist livelihoods.

One such challenge is climate change. When we talk about climate change and pastoralism, some of us refer to the inherent capacity of pastoral systems to deal with stronger climatic variability – primarily by virtue of livestock mobility and the pastoralists' capacity to work with uncertainty. But, at the same time, the growing global awareness of the need to mitigate climate change and to find sources of renewable energy with lower emissions of CO₂ than conventional energy sources is leading to an increasing focus on a vast area where renewable energy can be generated – namely, in the sparsely populated rangelands.

Already now, there are several renewable energy projects – solar, wind and geothermal (e.g. Drew 2020, Renkins 2019, Rignall 2016, Stock & Birkenholtz 2019) – in both temperate and tropical rangelands, and the number is growing – very often in ways that exclude the local land users. At the same time as pastoralists are in need of space for herd mobility to deal with climatic variability, large tracts of rangelands are being taken over by government and private investors for large-scale projects. These areas are being fenced off, thus diminishing pastoralists' access to land, causing fragmentation of grazing areas and blocking movement between grazing areas. In other words, the expropriation of rangelands for large-scale projects is reducing pastoralists' inherent ability to be resilient to climate change. The interventions are also weakening social structures and traditional safety nets among pastoralist groups.

There are examples in Kenya. The Lake Turkana Wind Energy Project, Africa's largest wind farm, has led to complicated contestations involving issues of identity, ethnicity, local politics, patronage networks and perceptions of rights to benefit from the wind-power investment (Drew 2020). Also the Olkaria Geothermal Power Station has pushed pastoralists out of their grazing areas. The companies as well as the international financial institutions that helped finance these projects reportedly failed to obtain the free, prior and informed consent of the local communities (Renkens 2019).

It is to face this type of challenge that participatory, community-based research and action are urgently needed so as to ensure that pastoralist groups are fully aware of what is happening and can protect their interests and perhaps even negotiate win-win situations. There are indeed cases in other parts of the world where complementarity between livestock grazing and renewable energy production has been achieved. In many countries in Europe, for example, livestock graze under wind turbines and solar panels. Australians even report on synergies of wind farms with grazing¹ (Hall *et al.* 2012). Such cases need to be made known to other pastoralists and to policymakers, as well as to private-sector investors, to show them the possibilities of arranging different access rights rather than fuelling conflict and impoverishing local people.

It is not just a matter of multidisciplinary research by rangeland management specialists, ecologists, animal scientists and energy experts to find technologies that create a win-win situation for producing energy and livestock. It is also a matter of research together with social scientists and land-tenure specialists and pastoralist communities to increase understanding of the issues around rights to common land and to help avoid elite capture among pastoralists – those elites who negotiate directly with investors allegedly on behalf of the pastoralist community but actually for their own benefit.

It is also a matter of good communication of multipurpose alternatives to exclusive use of land for generating energy, so that pastoralists can access and use this information for their own negotiations to retain access rights to their traditional pastures. It is also a matter of good communication with policymakers so that they are aware of the research evidence that pastoralism and renewable energy projects can be complementary and that mutually beneficial arrangements can be made for the energy investors and for the local people.

In these and many other cases on the new frontier of governments and investors trying to extract value from rangelands – not only cases related to renewable energy – we need innovation. This refers to innovation not in the conventional understanding as the introduction of new technologies, but rather innovation in institutional arrangements regarding multistakeholder access rights to the land as well as local people's equitable access to the benefits being generated by the external investments.

Implications for IYRP action planning

Future rangeland research and development to address issues such as those raised by generating renewable energy in the rangelands has to go beyond research into plant and animal production. It also needs to look into multipurpose and complementary uses of the rangeland and all the environmental, social, economic,

¹ "Grazing livestock appear unaffected by wind turbines, since they graze beneath the turbines, and use the posts for rubbing and for shade" (Hall *et al.* 2012).

cultural, judicial and governance issues that these entail. But the research cannot stop there. It needs to enlighten policies for sustainable rangeland use and management and instil greater appreciation of the practices and rights of pastoralists and other local land users. Last but not least, it requires bringing this knowledge and integrating this approach to research into institutions of higher education so that future generations of scientists can work in an interdisciplinary way with land users in trying to address their most pressing concerns.

The future of the rangelands will become still more complex with the growing global demands for using rangeland resources in new ways in the face of climate change. Those of us attending this Congress – and many more who are engaged in similar work – form a core of concerned people who can plan joint actions in research, education and outreach to better inform national policymakers and the world about the multiple values of rangelands and pastoralism. This will hopefully include joint lobbying for enlightened policies for sustainable rangeland use and co-management and a greater appreciation of the rights of the local land users.

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