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Developing a glossary of people-focused terms related to rangelands and grasslands

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Abstract

Excellent glossaries on rangelands and grasslands have been developed by the Society for Range Management (SRM), the International Grassland Congress (IGC) and the International Rangeland Congress (IRC). However, these are largely confined to biophysical and technical terminology and contain very few concepts referring to social, institutional and policy aspects of using rangelands and grasslands. After the 10th IRC in Saskatoon, Canada, in 2016, an informal group started to develop a glossary of such “people-focused” terms. The short and non-academic definitions are meant to improve communication and understanding by users/practitioners in rangeland and grassland management, policymakers, teachers, students, journalists and the general public.

The glossary focuses on terms in common international use in rangeland management and includes terminology referring to rangelands/grasslands users (e.g. pastoralists, agropastoralists, hunters and gatherers) and to how they organise the use and management of rangeland resources (e.g. common property rights, resource access rights, herding contracts, transhumance and other forms of mobility). More general terms in social sciences are not included, as the debates about their meanings are well covered in the conventional social science literature. Thus far, the glossary is in English only. It is hoped that people working on rangelands and pastoralism in other countries will translate it into other languages and adapt it with area- and language-specific terminology.

The definitions in the glossary are intended to fill an existing gap relatively quickly. Previous experience of the SRM, IRC and IGC showed that developing a comprehensive glossary takes several years. The current version of the glossary will doubtless be revised when a more systematic effort is made to define socio-institutional terms related to rangelands and grasslands. In any case, further revisions will be made as concepts evolve and new ones arise, as was the case with the technical glossaries of the SRM, IGC and IRC.

Introduction

Almost a decade ago, the Forage and Grazing Terminology Committee made up of members of the Society for Range Management (SRM), the International Grassland Congress (IGC) and the International Rangeland Congress (IRC) brought out an “International terminology on grazing lands and grazing animals” (Allen *et al* 2011). Members of the same committee later set up a web-based SRM glossary (<https://globalrangelands.org/glossary/P?term=>), which is updated periodically.

These two glossaries are quite technical and based on concepts of “Western” range science. The terms refer primarily to vegetation, animals, physical aspects of the land, and techniques for managing livestock and land. The glossaries give little or no attention to the people and institutions managing and governing the use of the land and animals. Practitioners and policymakers who want to comprehend processes of range management need to have a clear understanding of the concepts that refer to the people who undertake these processes, i.e. the social and institutional terminology.

In 2008, in the lead-up to the joint IGC and IRC in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, Irene Bain from the Ford Foundation initiated the preparation of a bilingual (English and Chinese) booklet *People and policy in rangeland management: a glossary of key concepts*, which was distributed to all congress participants. This booklet provided a starting point for a glossary on people-focused terms, but the print-run was small and the booklet is no longer available in print or on the Web. Only 25 concepts were explained, each in considerable detail in a chapter of several pages.

At the IRC 2016 in Saskatoon, Canada, a committee was set up to campaign for an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). Some members of the committee – now called the IYRP International Support Group (ISG) – formed a small group to develop a new glossary of a much larger number of people-focused terms than found in the Ford Foundation booklet. However, the definitions were to be much shorter – in the style of the glossary by Allen *et al* (2011) and the SRM glossary – with a few more complicated concepts explained in somewhat greater length in boxes.

In 2017–19, some initial attempts to explore the diversity of terminology about rangelands and pastoralism were made during the study mandated by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) into gaps in data and information about pastoralism and rangelands (Johnsen *et al* 2019). This revealed an immense variety of definitions and usages of English terminology across regions of the world and also quite some ambiguity and inconsistency in the use of certain terms, including “pastoralist”. The UNEP study called for a global assessment of rangelands and pastoralism that would include clarification of terminology and definitions, in order to make future data collection more efficient and comparable.

Already in 2017, such a glossary was started by a small informal group, which includes some of the authors of the UNEP study. This group calls itself the “Social Terminology Core Team” (“Core Team” for short in this paper). Under the coordination of the President of the IRC, the glossary is meant to fill the gap until a formal assessment process can be set up, which could take several years.

Aim and intended users

The aim of this glossary is to collect and define terms referring to social, economic, institutional and policy aspects of pastoralism and rangeland use and management so as to shed light on how these terms are generally used.

The definitions are intended primarily to clarify the terms for practitioners – including pastoralists – and policymakers in governmental and development organisations working in rangelands, contributors to and editors of journals related to agriculture and ecology, and teachers and students of biophysical and ecological sciences in institutions of higher learning. The glossary could also be useful for journalists and interested members of the general public.

English is the most common language used in international meetings and publications about rangelands and pastoralism, although most participants/authors working in rangeland science and practice are not native speakers of English. Thus, the glossary is meant to be a tool to improve communication and understanding in these settings. It could also be useful for people from English-speaking countries that are “divided by a common language”, such as Australia and the USA, which have quite different words for similar concepts. Clear definitions of socio-institutional terms would also facilitate the work in international and interdisciplinary research projects and programmes.

Therefore, in compiling this glossary, the Core Team considered terms in the English language only, but including English terms that refer to people, institutions and policies related to rangelands in several parts of the world, ranging from the poles to the tropics. The Core Team hopes that people working on rangelands and pastoralism in other countries will translate this English glossary into other languages and adapt it to the concepts in their respective regions and cultures, adding appropriate country-specific terms.

Methodology

The Core Team of five persons from Australia, Germany, Kenya, Mongolia and Norway works directly on formulating the definitions in the glossary. A wider group of advisors from Australia, Canada, France, Italy, UK and USA suggested and helped select the terms to be included in the glossary. These advisors are peer reviewing the definitions.

The Core Team defined the scope of the glossary to encompass social, economic, institutional and policy-related terms that refer specifically to pastoralism and rangeland management and are in common international use. It agreed to include terms referring to rangeland users (e.g. pastoralists, agropastoralists, hunters and gatherers) and to how they organise the use and management of rangeland resources (e.g. common property rights, land tenure and resource access rights, herding contracts, governance institutions, transhumance and other forms of mobility).

Not included are terms referring to techniques of land and livestock management/husbandry, as these are already covered in the existing SRM glossaries. More general terms from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, ethnography etc are also not included, as the debates about their meanings are well covered in the conventional social science literature. If the Core Team does include and define a more general term from these disciplines, then it specifies the term's relevance with regard to pastoralism and rangelands. The team agreed to try to formulate the definitions so that they could be understood by people not specialised in the social sciences.

After agreeing on the criteria for selecting terms to be included in the glossary of social terminology, the Core Team clustered the terms into themes and, within each theme, clustered related terms under subheadings, similar to the hierarchy of terms in the glossary by Allen *et al* (2011). The Core Team members then divided up responsibility for finding or formulating the preliminary definitions of terms under each theme. They identified and reviewed numerous publications that defined or explained the selected terms. Where an existing definition was used in its original form or was only slightly edited by the Core Team, the source is cited. Where no citation is given for a term, this means that the term was defined by one or more members of the Core Team, including formulations and edits offered by the advisory group as well as ideas drawn from several sources in the literature. All sources consulted are listed in the bibliography at the end of the glossary.

During the process of defining the selected terms, some other terms were recognised as important and were included in the list; some terms were combined and some were dropped because they were too country-specific or seldom used today. The team also came across some terms that did not contribute to clear communication or even led to miscommunication; it lists these “contentious terms” in an appendix with an explanation as to why their use should be handled with care.

Most term descriptors are 40–80 words long. In the case of terms that are particularly complex and vary in their interpretation in different countries, a longer discussion of the term is given in a box. The Core Team decided not to attempt to specify only one term that should be used for a particular concept worldwide. Instead, it wants to help people living and working in the rangelands to understand the diversity of terms used, and also understand how people in the rangelands see and name themselves. The objective of this exercise is to clarify meanings of terms so as to harmonise rather than standardise, thus allowing for contextual complexity. This can sometimes mean that a term (such as “pastoralist”) is given a basic definition that could be applied universally, and cultural differentiations are mentioned in a box.

The members of the Core Team shared their definitions and discussed them in several virtual meetings until they reached agreement on the definitions. These were sent to members of the advisory group; in most cases, a particular subset of terms, e.g. on land tenure, was reviewed by a member of the advisory team specialised in that field.

Status of the glossary

At the time of writing this paper (nine months before the Joint IGC/IRC in Kenya in October 2021), the Core Team has defined over 60 terms as described above, about 45 of which have been reviewed by one or more members of the advisory team. About 20–30 terms are still being defined. Longer boxes have been drafted for such terms as “pastoralist”, “pastoralist institution”, “indigenous peoples” (whereby it is recognised that some pastoralists do not identify as indigenous peoples) and the multifaceted concept of agroecology (science, movement and practice) as related to pastoralism.

The group hopes to publish the glossary of social terminology shortly after the Joint IGC/IRC in late 2021. It will also seek to integrate the social terms with the technical terms in the above-mentioned web-based SRM glossary. As already mentioned, the intention is to fill relatively quickly an existing gap in definitions of people-focused terms about pastoralism and rangelands. Previous experience of the SRM, IRC and IGC has shown that developing a comprehensive glossary takes several years. The current version of the glossary will doubtless be revised if a global assessment of rangelands and pastoralism is indeed launched, in which case a more systematic effort will be made to define socio-institutional terms. In any case, still further revisions will need to be made as concepts evolve and new ones arise, as was the case with the technical glossaries of the SRM, IGC and IRC.

In the years building up to the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists in 2026, the IYRP International Support Group hopes that the glossary will help improve communication and outreach

about rangelands and pastoralists worldwide. Some of the regional support groups being formed to support the IYRP campaign and to plan and implement activities in their respective regions (e.g. the one in Latin America) have already started to develop translations of the English terms and will be able to enrich the glossary in their own languages.

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