

Policy Brief

Vol 1 – 3 | Jan. 2026

Land-use, Livelihoods and Livestock Production in South Omo Zone of Ethiopia

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Illustration on cover page by Bethel Kebede

Summary

The South Omo zone in Southern Ethiopia is populated by diverse tribes practicing agro-pastoralism. Livestock is the mainstay of economy while small-scale farming supports livelihoods. The area has abundant natural resources (water, livestock, land) and social capital (youth labor force, traditional institutions). However, the people of South Omo suffer from climate-change induced drought and flooding, coupled with land shrinkage resulting from commercial farming taking prime agricultural land with little or no compensation. The FDRE Government has developed a new Land Administration and Use proclamation (1324/2024) recognizing communal land and customary institutions. This policy briefing underlines the vital importance of relying on local researchers and community members to produce knowledge, to embed consultation with communities for policy-development and service delivery, and to allow them to devise and manage solutions. It is vital that agro-pastoralist groups in South Omo zone should take priority in development projects and hold a share in local investments that impact their lives and livelihoods.

Background

In Ethiopia, pastoralists constitute more than 12 million people residing in six national regional states[1] and Dire Dawa City Administration. (MoP, 2020).[2] Pastoralists inhabit the entire lowlands of the country, which constitutes about 60% of the country's total landmass). The pastoral population is heterogeneous in its ethnic composition and social structure, with 90% of them belonging to the Afar, Oromo, and Somali ethnic groups. Most of these groups are found in the peripheries of the country and share lineages with pastoralist peoples in the border areas of neighbouring countries.

The majority of the population of South Omo zone in the Southern Region of Ethiopia Regional State belong to agro-pastoralist groups. Hammer, Dasenech and Nyangatom Woredas have a total population of 252,109 (male 131,288 (52%) and female 120,821 (48%)). These three woredas have a combined landmass of 10,449.19 km^2, covering a significant portion of the South Omo zone which are administratively divided into 93 rural and 5 urban kebeles.[3] The community suffers from lack of rural road access, lack of potable water supply, resource related conflict, drought, lack of water for animal, human disease outbreak, shortage of human health services, soil erosion shortage of forage and pasture, rangeland degradation, livestock diseases, land-slide and flooding, expansion of invasive species, lack of irrigation scheme, lack of nursery sites, lack of fodder bank (feed store), lack of Pastoralist Training Center (PTC), absence of bridges, lack of schools (1-8), lack of livestock market and lack of human health post.

This policy brief draws on learnings from two linked projects – Agro-Pastoralists Educate Others and the Mursi Encountering the Other4 – and focussed discussion between local researchers representing different pastoralist groups from South Omo Zone in Dimeka on 23 and 24 July 2025.

1 The Southern Nations and Nationalities Region (SNNP) has recently split into four national regional states.

2 Ministry of Peace, 2020.National Pastoral Policy and strategy, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

3 Lowland Resilience Project (LLRP). 2025. Participatory Rangeland Management Plan. Hamer Cluster, South Ethiopia Region Rangeland Management Plan for Hamer Cluster (2025-2029). Ministry of Irrigation and Lowlands. Addis Ababa Ethiopia

4 A coalition of Addis Ababa University's Institute of Peace and Security Studies, SOAS University of London and the South Omo Theatre Company with funding from the U.K. Arts and Humanities Research Council 2023-2026.

Analysis of Critical Issues

Land use and rangeland management

Agro-pastoralists in South Omo Zone exhibit diverse land uses that support their livelihoods. Grazing land is crucial for the seasonal movements of livestock, with specific areas designated for wet and dry season grazing. Shrub lands and woodlands also contribute to the availability of forage and firewood, essential for household energy needs. Forest areas provide not only timber and medicinal plants but also play a role in maintaining biodiversity.

Flood retreat agriculture is a means for communities to practice opportunistic farming when river floods recede. This land use is particularly valuable for producing crops like maize, sorghum, and millet, which supplement livestock-based livelihoods. However, farming is limited due to technological factors (lack of improved seed, farming tools etc), the arid climate, Prosopies juliflora infestation and the impacts of dam-building schemes which have disrupted the seasonal flood. Additionally, the expansion of large-scale commercial farming has shrunk the land available for customary agriculture.

Whenever there are problems related with rangeland management, security, animal and human disease, and pandemics the agro-pastoralist communities of South Omo seek advice from their respective leaders. These leaders mediate, bless, curse or permit based on appeal to them. The top decision-maker of customary institution, for instance, in Nyangatom it is the 'Elephant' group, functions at the top of hierarchy. Cases which were not resolved by lower groups ultimately come to this group for decision. Despite their fascinating hierarchical structure and assumed complex function, these customary institutions are being weakened due to various reasons including a decline in level of acceptance and lack of capacity (human and physical) to address the diverse issues that emerge in the community. Interventions on revitalizing these institutions as well as establishing community platforms should be prioritised.

The significance of the newly enacted FDRE Rural Land Administration and Use Proclamation No. 1324/2024 should be understood for its recognition of communal land and customary institutions. The proclamation has provisions that pastoral regions should adapt this proclamation according to the local situations. Now, the concern raised is about popularization and implementation of the new proclamation No 1324/2024, and supporting its adaptation to respective reality of each region. The Afar region is being updating its land law with the Proclamation No. 1324/2024. The Gambella region has got a comprehensive land use and development plan developed in 2019. The Somali region in Ethiopia is developing its own land policy in local language (Somali language). Before it dissociated into four regions, the Southern Nation and Nationalities Regional State (SNNPR) had developed the Rural Land Administration and Utilization Proclamation for the region (Proclamation No.110/2007).

Livelihood

The main livelihood sources are livestock production, farming, beekeeping, trading and informal employment. Agro/pastoralists in South Omo zone face increased vulnerability to climate change due to economic and political marginalization and poor infrastructure so that employ traditional coping mechanisms like migration and herd diversification to

survive.[5] The Ethiopian government's interventions often overlook the effectiveness of indigenous adaptation strategies used by pastoralists.

The overflow of the Omo River causes significant flooding during the rainy season, particularly in the Dasenech and Nyangatom districts, which is detrimental to livestock (Shetahun, 2023).[6] In 2020, the South Omo Zone Pastoral Affairs Department reported that approximately 860,627 cattle, 206,674 sheep, and 122,808 goats starved due to insufficient pasture following flooding along the Omo River (South Omo Zone, 2020; cf LLRP, 2025). Additionally, landslides are a recurrent risk in Hamer, primarily due to the region's topography and intense rainfall during the wet season. Pastoralists in South Omo also suffer from the unpredictable desert locust invasions, which have recently intensified, posing a serious threat to both food and fodder production, especially in areas where crops and pastures are in critical growth stages (World Bank, 2020).

The most important intervention should be looking for off-farm and non-farm livelihood sources with technical support for training, and coaching and accompaniment. Interventions for alternative livelihood can be a developing catalogue of viable options including opportunities with potential for long-term sustainability. It is also necessary to shift the dominant paradigm which suggests that looking for alternative livelihood options is a sign of poverty, rather clever means of livelihood diversification and building resilience.[7] Adopting alternative livelihoods does not necessarily mean abandoning pastoralism to take up full-fledged settled farming. In any case, the alternative livelihood options should be supported by further research with proven options carefully selected, tested and scaled up.

Livestock Production

Livestock plays a central role in the livelihoods of the pastoralists in South Omo zone. These communities rely on various livestock species, including cattle, camels, goats, sheep, equines, poultry, and bee colonies. Livestock – particularly cattle - is not only a key economic resource but also a cultural symbol and an essential element of social status for many families. Sustainable livestock production contributes significantly to ecosystem balance, and livestock can even help improve degraded lands through natural grazing practices.

The pastoralists in this region manage their herds in ways that optimize productivity while maintaining environmental integrity. Additionally, livestock production in the cluster is a vital source of food, income, and trade. As such, cattle, camels, and goats are highly valued, especially in the context of the semi-arid conditions that make agricultural practices challenging. However, challenges such as climate variability, overgrazing, and resource competition pose threats to livestock production. Recent studies suggest that climate change exacerbates these challenges, affecting herd health and productivity, which in turn impacts the overall well-being of the communities (Kefala, 2012).

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5 Kefala, Asnake. (2012). Traditional coping mechanisms for climate change of pastoralists in South Omo, Ethiopia.

6 Shetahun, Asmare (2023) "Cross-Border Conflict Peacebuilding Practices of Dasenech, Nyangatom and Hammer Community of Ethiopia and Turkana of Kenya," Journal of African Conflicts and Peace Studies: Vol. 5: Iss. 2. Available at: https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/jacaps/vol5/iss2/12

7 CST, 2024. Bridging the Gap between Climate Impact and future Borana Livelihood Roadmap. Generic Report. Cafod, Siafs and Trocaire, UK.

Recommendations

Local agro-pastoralist researchers in South Omo, in coalition with IPSS, SOAS and Pastoralist Forum Ethiopia, identified key priorities to respond to current challenges in the region. To ensure that design and implementation are locally sensitive, and that land-use, livelihood change and livestock services promote equitable development, careful consultation across South Omo has to be embedded in any initiatives.

- The FDRE Land Administration and Land Use plan (Proc. 1324/2024) as a nationwide legal document is an important instrument to address land issues in Ethiopia. Regional governments' adoption of the proclamation should be supported and monitored. Non-state actors (including CSOs) have better positions in supporting preparation of regulations and guidelines, and their implementations. Recognition and involvement of the customary institutions in the process of adoption of the proclamation and supporting their capacity is crucial. The presence of non-state actors including customary institution make easy the adoption and implementation of the proclamation. The Gambella region land-use and development plan can also be revised and taken as one model for other regions. This needs advocacy and programs to support the process.
- Foster a landscape approach to land-use planning and ensuring harmonization: cognizant of the inherent feature of mobility in pastoralism, land use planning should move beyond static, and localized approaches. A landscape-level perspective that considers seasonal movements, grazing corridors, and access to key resources is essential to minimize conflict and ensure the sustainability of rangelands. The current landscape of interventions in pastoral areas is fragmented. Greater coordination and harmonization among government ministries, CSOs, research institutions, and donors are crucial to avoid duplication, maximize impact, and ensure interventions are aligned with the priorities and needs of pastoral communities.
- Strengthen and empower customary institutions: customary institutions are the de facto governors of pastoral resources and possess invaluable traditional knowledge. Legal and institutional frameworks should actively recognize and empower these institutions in land administration, resource management, and conflict resolution, ensuring their integration into formal governance structures where appropriate. We need to foster dialogue and collaboration between statutory and customary systems. One option can be facilitation of dialogue and collaboration to identify areas of synergy and address potential conflicts between statutory laws and customary practices, ensuring that traditional knowledge and institutions are not marginalized.
- Carefully assess and regulate large-scale land concessions: any new investments, particularly large-scale land concessions in pastoral areas, must undergo rigorous, transparent, and participatory environmental and social impact assessments (ESIA). The long-term consequences for pastoral livelihoods, land tenure security, and the environment must be the primary consideration, with the free, prior, and informed consent of affected communities being paramount.
- The most important approach for livestock development in the areas are specialized development interventions. There are flagship programs like LLRP and many NGOs have livestock related interventions. The option can be if a cluster of CSOs work on water p, then others can specialize and coordinate market interventions, and still others work on animal health matters (veterinary medicine supply, strengthen health posts, etc.) while still other groups work on feed production. No institution can perform best in all areas of interventions. Agri-food system (processing milk, meat, etc.) can be medium term option, but needs further research on production and priority for investment.

The policy briefs are developed by two linked projects – Mursi Encountering the Other funded by AHRC UKRI, and Agro-Pastoralists Educate Others. The projects were developed by a coalition of Addis Ababa University's Institute of Peace and Security Studies (IPSS), SOAS University of London, the South Omo Theatre Company, and agro-pastoralist researchers from South Omo Zone. Most of the recommendations are drawn from discussions that took place between local researchers representing different pastoralist groups from South Omo Zone in Dimeka, South Omo, on 23 and 24 July 2025.

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