

Integrating Indigenous Pastoralist Knowledge

into Uganda's Climate-Resilient Food Systems



KEY MESSAGE

Uganda can strengthen climate resilience and sustainable food production by formally recognising and integrating indigenous pastoralist knowledge into agricultural, climate, land and natural-resource policies.

The Policy Issue

Pastoral and agro-pastoral communities have accumulated generations of knowledge for managing livestock and natural resources under highly variable climatic conditions. Pastoralism depends upon understanding seasonal rainfall, pasture conditions, livestock behaviour, water availability and the movement of herds across landscapes.

Yet development and land-use policies frequently favour sedentary production systems and can fragment rangelands, restrict mobility and weaken customary institutions governing shared resources. This creates a contradiction: Uganda seeks climate-resilient food systems while some policies and investments can undermine practices that have enabled pastoral communities to manage climatic variability for generations.

Indigenous Knowledge and Agroecology

Pastoralism and agroecology share important principles. Both emphasise biodiversity, animal health, reduced external inputs, efficient use of natural resources, knowledge sharing, cultural values, local governance and resilience. Pastoral knowledge includes understanding land-use patterns, seasonal migration and animal husbandry, while communal resource-management systems emphasise shared access, reciprocity and local decision-making.

Pastoral mobility is especially important. Rainfall and pasture in East African drylands are unevenly distributed across both time and space; consequently, mobility allows livestock to reach temporarily available pasture and water.

Policy position: Rather than treating mobility as evidence of backwardness or poor land management, policy should recognise it as an adaptive production strategy.

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Priority Policy Actions

1. Recognise indigenous pastoralist knowledge in national policy by integrating it into climate adaptation, agriculture, livestock, land-use and food-systems planning.
2. Protect pastoral mobility and communal rangelands, including livestock corridors, seasonal grazing areas and access to water.
3. Strengthen customary institutions that govern negotiated access to pasture, water and other shared resources.

Policy Opportunity

Uganda already has an opportunity to connect pastoralist knowledge with national climate adaptation, agricultural transformation and food-security objectives. ESAPN's advocacy framework specifically identifies national reforms concerning land tenure, climate adaptation, livestock and natural-resource management, alongside domestication of the IGAD Transhumance Protocol and participatory rangeland governance.

Why This Matters for Climate Policy

Climate change is increasing pressure on Uganda's dryland and pastoral areas. Pastoral communities already possess knowledge for responding to rainfall variability, drought and changing availability of water and pasture.

International climate and development frameworks increasingly recognise the importance of traditional knowledge. The Eastern and Southern Africa Pastoralist Network (ESAPN) Advocacy Training Manual notes that climate action under SDG 13 provides space for integrating traditional knowledge and that pastoralism, where supported by secure tenure and mobility, represents an important climate-adaptation strategy.

Uganda should therefore regard pastoralists not simply as vulnerable beneficiaries of climate programmes, but as knowledge-bearers, food producers and partners in climate adaptation.

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4. Ratify and domesticate the IGAD Protocol on Transhumance, thereby strengthening safe and orderly livestock mobility and regional cooperation.
5. Create mechanisms for co-production of knowledge, bringing pastoralists, researchers, extension workers and policymakers together to combine indigenous and scientific knowledge.
6. Direct climate finance towards pastoralist-led adaptation, including water development, rangeland restoration, animal health, early-warning systems and mobility-supporting infrastructure.
7. Ensure meaningful participation of pastoral women and youth, recognising their roles in livestock management, household food security, natural-resource governance and transmission of indigenous knowledge.
8. Document and protect indigenous knowledge, while ensuring that communities retain recognition and control over their

Policy Message

Pastoralist indigenous knowledge should move from the margins of policy to become a recognised component of Uganda's climate-resilient and agroecological food system.