



AFGHANISTAN'S PASTORAL CRISIS: A BLIND SPOT IN HUMANITARIAN, DEVELOPMENT AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS

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About the Author



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Dr. Muhammad Khurshid is a Research and Development Consultant from Pakistan with over a decade of professional experience supporting evidence-based policy research and development initiatives across academia, NGOs and private sector entities. He holds a PhD in Environmental Sciences from the University of Peshawar, Pakistan. His research interest broadly covers the field of natural resource management while specifically he has focused on pastoral resources (pastoralism, livestock, rangelands, water and agriculture), and climate change adaptation by pastoralists in dryland ecosystems. Prior to his current role, he served as a full-time Assistant Professor at the University of Haripur, Pakistan and as a Research Fellow at Ankara University Turkey. He has recently been awarded a project on Afghan Pastoralists in Pakistan.

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Executive summary

Afghanistan's pastoral system supports an estimated two to three million people and makes a significant contribution to subsistence economies, national food security and production. It is one of the most resilient socio-ecological systems in the country, enabling pastoral households to adapt to climate variability and economic shocks. However, this system is facing a complex crisis driven by the intersection of protracted conflict, climate change, forced displacement and long-standing policy neglect.

Pastoral vulnerability in Afghanistan is not inevitable. It is largely produced by policy choices that fail to recognize pastoralism as a viable and adaptive livelihood system. Within humanitarian response mechanisms, development planning, and land governance frameworks, pastoralists remain systematically excluded due to their mobile and nomadic lifestyle. This pastoral marginalization undermines food security and regional socio-economic cohesion, deepens rural poverty, fuels land related conflict and erodes traditional ecological knowledge.

Integrating pastoralists into humanitarian, development, climate, and land governance frameworks is essential for resilience building and socio-economic stability in Afghanistan. It calls on Afghan de facto authorities, UN agencies, donors, neighbouring countries, and civil society actors to adopt pastoralist-responsive approaches that recognize pastoralism as a legitimate livelihood system and a critical component of Afghanistan's rural economy and ecological sustainability.

1. Afghanistan's pastoral crisis: Context and realities

Afghanistan faces one of the world's most complex and protracted humanitarian crisis, shaped by decades of conflict, climate shocks, institutional erosion, and economic collapse. This crisis has been further exacerbated by the ongoing deportation of undocumented Afghan refugees from Pakistan and Iran. An estimated 21.9 million people—nearly half of the population—will require humanitarian assistance in 2026.^[1]

International actors recalibrate their engagements with the de facto Afghan authorities to mobilize flexible financing for humanitarian assistance, development programming, climate change adaptation and returnees' reintegration planning. Yet Afghan Kuchi^[2] pastoralists—who make up approximately 10 per cent of the population and manage more than 70 per cent of the national livestock herd^[3]—remain systematically excluded from humanitarian, development and national policy frameworks.

This policy brief argues that the continued exclusion of Afghan pastoralists represents a critical policy failure with regional consequences extending to Pakistan, Iran, and Central Asia. Drawing on socio-political and ecological evidence, the brief demonstrates that pastoralist's marginalization undermines pastoral economy, food security, fuels intercommunal conflict and exposes them to greater risks across border. It calls for the structured integration of pastoralist-responsive approaches that promote pastoralism as a viable and resilient livelihood system in Afghanistan.

[1] Afghanistan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan

<https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2025-december-2024>

[2] *Kuchi* is a generic term used for all migratory pastoralists in Afghanistan.

[3] Muhammad, K. 2025. Accounting for pastoralists in Afghanistan. League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development, Ober-Ramstadt, Germany. <https://www.pastoralpeoples.org/documents/accounting-for-pastoralists-in-afghanistan/>

Key messages

- The Afghan pastoral system is crucial for national food security and the rural economy, managing over 70 percent of the country's livestock herd and supporting two to three million people.
- Climate change, conflict and forced displacement have severely collapsed pastoral livelihoods in Afghanistan, while existing humanitarian and development systems fail to reach mobile pastoral populations.
- Policy and funding priorities are misaligned with the pastoral system, despite its significant contributions to GDP, rural employment and resilience to climate variability.
- Land tenure insecurity and weak recognition of customary grazing rights are major drivers of intercommunal conflict, disputes and forced displacement.
- Pastoralist-responsive approaches, including effective mobile service delivery, inclusive sectoral policies, and meaningful participation of pastoralists, especially women, are essential for resilience, peacebuilding, and SDG progress in Afghanistan.

2. The Afghan's pastoral economy and policy misalignment

Pastoral production remains central to Afghanistan's economy, and is estimated to be worth USD 7 million. [4] Approximately 68 per cent of the rural population is engaged in livestock raising, either directly or indirectly. Livestock production contributes about 15 per cent or [US\$680 million annually] to Afghanistan's agricultural GDP.[5] These figures highlight the structural importance of the pastoral sector in Afghanistan's agrarian economy.

Despite this significance, Afghanistan's national development framework and donor-funded agricultural programs allocate less than 5 percent of resources to pastoralist-specific interventions. This misalignment has persisted through successive political transitions and has intensified since Taliban takeover in 2021. The majority of the humanitarian and development programming has prioritized service delivery to settled farmers through biometric registration and location-based targeting mechanisms that are poorly suited to mobile pastoralists.

This persistent policy misalignment reflects a structural gap rather than a temporary oversight. Treating pastoralism as marginal or unproductive weakens rural economy, pastoral livelihoods and national foods production and security. Rebalancing this attention toward pastoral systems is therefore a prerequisite for sustainable rural development in Afghanistan.

[4] FAO. 2023. *Afghanistan: Cold wave assessment on livestock – Data in Emergencies Impact Report*, July 2023. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc7193en>

[5] Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Agricultural Sector Review Revitalizing Agriculture for Economic Growth, Job Creation and Food Security <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/245541467973233146/pdf/AUS9779-REVISED-WP-PUBLIC-Box391431B-Final-Afghanistan-ASR-web-October-31-2014.pdf>

3. Interlinked drivers of pastoral vulnerability

3.1 CONFLICT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Armed conflict, socio-political instability, and climatic shocks have placed immense pressure on Afghanistan's pastoral systems. Escalating conflict has turned traditional grazing corridors and seasonal pastures into contested and insecure spaces, where pastoralists are exposed to greater risks of violence, forced displacement and involuntary sedentarization. Existing governance and security frameworks for contested landscapes overlook pastoral land use, grazing rights and seasonal mobility.

Recurrent droughts and desertification have reduced forage availability, water, and increased livestock mortality, pushing many pastoral households beyond coping threshold. The most severe drought to date occurred in 2023 in Nimruz province, causing 80–90 per cent livestock mortality and displacing thousands of pastoral households. [6] This situation illustrates that pastoralists are routinely excluded from timely alerts, drought preparedness measures, and post-shock assistance, leaving them without the social safety nets necessary to prevent total livelihood collapse.

3.2 FORCED DISPLACEMENT

Pastoral mobility historically allowed herders to cope with climate variability and manage resource uncertainty. Recently, this adaptive strategy has increasingly transformed into forced displacement among pastoral households. There are over 3.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan. [7] Of these, an estimated 70 per cent are pastoral households that have been displaced either internally or forcibly returned from Pakistan. [8] In displacement settings, pastoralists face severe constraints in accessing grazing lands, water, veterinary services, and markets.

It is imperative to include pastoralists in early warning systems, drought preparedness strategies, and humanitarian response plans, with targeted support for livelihoods, social protection, and access to social services. Without these measures, pastoralists will remain marginalized, placing their livelihoods and the region's food security at continued risk.

3.3 TRANSBoundary PASTORAL MOBILITY

There are tens of thousands of pastoral households who have been long settled in Pakistan as refugee pastoralists. Pakistan's recent deportation policy has forced them to return to Afghanistan in prevailing crises conditions. Across the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, these pastoralists face strict and often inconsistent cross-border regulations that hinder their mobility.

As a result, refugee pastoralists move through informal pastoral corridors or ancient mobility routes that are no longer institutionally recognized and protected. In these routes, pastoralists face significant livestock losses due to raids, informal taxation, and distress sales of livestock at reduced prices.

These dynamics highlight a significant policy vacuum at regional level. Addressing these challenges requires flexible cross-border arrangements for pastoralists, pastoral focused reintegration programs, and regional dialogue to safeguard pastoral systems across the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

[6] Hasht – e- Subh Daily (2023, August 16). Dire Water Scarcity threatens Nimruz provinces: 80% of livestock perished in two districts. Retrieved from <https://8am.media/eng/dire-water-scarcity-threatens-nimruz-province-80-of-livestock-perished-in-two-districts/>

[7] Displaced people in Afghanistan's cities need support <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/policy-brief-displaced-people-afghanistans-cities-need-support-january-2024>

[8] Schloeder, Catherine A., Michael J. Jacobs, M. Dawood Sherzad, Zohal Maqsoodi, and Hadia Banwal. "Women as partners in pastoral production in Afghanistan." *Rangelands* 35, no. 6 (2013): 58-62.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190052813500046>

4. The social service gap: A barrier to resilience and SDGs progress

Afghan pastoralists face severe multidimensional deprivation across education, health, and water access. Literacy among Afghan pastoralists is critically low at just 5.8 per cent, compared to 29.6 per cent in rural and 53.7 per cent in urban areas of Afghanistan. This disparity is evident in school's enrolment: of an estimated 600,000 school-age pastoralist children, only 7 per cent attend primary school and roughly 2 per cent attend secondary school. [9]

The situation of health service delivery is equally dire for pastoralists. Access to basic healthcare is largely constrained by limited infrastructure, poverty, and the mobile lifestyle of pastoralists. This exposes pastoralists, especially women and children, to high risks of maternal mortality, malnutrition, and other chronic health conditions. Access to water further compounds pastoral vulnerability, as only 35.8 per cent of pastoralists having improved access to water, compared to over 90 per cent in urban areas.

These disparities reflect the structural exclusion of pastoralists from sectoral policies and services delivery models designed primarily for settled populations. Policy reforms must prioritize pastoralist-responsive service such as mobile schools, distance learning mechanisms, and healthcare units to strengthen resilience and Afghanistan's progress toward SDGs.

5. Gender inequalities in pastoral contexts: Implications for the WPS agenda

Pastoral women play a central role in livestock production, domestic activities, and natural resources management. Yet they face layered marginalization due to restrictive social norms, limited asset ownership, exclusion from decision-making, and reduced access to services.

Climate change and conflict have intensified gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities. Evidence indicates that climate-induced resource scarcity disproportionately burdens pastoral women—forcing them to travel longer distances to collect water, fuelwood, and wild foods under insecure conditions. In addition, conflict-driven migration further exposes pastoral women to abduction, harassment and sexual exploitation, while limited access to key social services deepens gender inequalities, health risks, and food insecurity.

The Women Peace and Security agenda gained prominence in Afghanistan's policy discourse. Yet the WPS agenda and Afghanistan's National Adaption Plan (NAP) largely overlooked the pastoral women. Their exclusion from peacebuilding, land governance, and decision-making undermines both gender equality and pastoral resilience.

Integrating pastoral women's voices, knowledge, and representation into WPS, governance, and climate frameworks is essential for policy effectiveness and legitimacy. WPS agenda that fails to account for pastoral realities will remain incomplete, reinforcing existing exclusions rather than contributing to inclusive peacebuilding, resilience, and food system stability.

[9] Afghanistan's Citizens' Charter and Inclusive Development: Afghanistan's Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Kuchi Population in the Citizens' Charter <https://effectivestates.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ise-dpn-nomads.pdf>

6. Land tenure insecurity as a driver of conflict and displacement: The case for legal recognition

Land tenure insecurity is a significant and most persistent structural driver of conflict and displacement in Afghanistan. This insecurity arises primarily from the coexistence of overlapping statutory and customary land tenure systems. Rangelands are formally classified as state-owned, while access to and use of these rangelands are governed through customary systems that lack legal recognition.^[1]

The land insecurity fuels disputes between pastoralists and settled farmers, often escalating into politicized inter-ethnic conflict and displacement. It also enables elites to grab communal pastoral lands for agriculture, private investments, and settlement expansion. The loss of grazing lands heightens competition for the remaining rangelands, which in turn increases the risk of rangelands degradation and discourages investment in sustainable rangelands management, as land rights remain uncertain.

Tenure insecurity is not merely a legal issue—it is a conflict driver and barrier to climate adaptation investment. Formalizing customary grazing rights within Afghanistan's land administration framework would reduce intercommunal violence, encourage sustainable rangeland management, and enable pastoralists to access climate finance and development support.

7. Recommendations

- The Afghan de facto administration must take immediate action to prevent further collapse of pastoral livelihood. An urgent moratorium on land seizures and reallocations in traditional pastoral areas is necessary. In the short term, it is essential to integrate pastoralist-specific measures into national climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction plans. These measures should include drought preparedness, early warning systems, and mobile service delivery models. In the medium term, piloting the formal recognition of customary grazing rights within Afghanistan's land administration framework is crucial. These interventions have the potential to enhance sustainable rangeland management, reduce intercommunal conflict, and enable pastoralists to access development and climate financing.
- UN agencies and international humanitarian actors should prioritize the immediate adaptation of humanitarian aid, and the establishment of effective service delivery systems. This should focus on mobile veterinary services, emergency fodder distribution, nutrition outreach and mobile health units in areas with dense pastoralist populations. UNDP, UNEP and FAO must ensure that mobile pastoral livelihoods are explicitly included in the revision of the National Adaptation Plan and climate finance proposals, with dedicated budget lines for pastoralist-targeted interventions. In the medium term, it is essential to meaningfully include pastoralist representatives, especially pastoral women in climate governance processes, rangeland restoration initiatives, and community-based natural resource management programs supported by multilateral climate and development funds.
- In the immediate term, UNHCR and IOM should develop pastoralist-specific protection and reintegration protocols that distinguish pastoral mobility from forced displacement and irregular migration. These protocols should facilitate cross-border coordination with Pakistan and Iran. In the short term, these agencies should provide climate-informed reintegration assistance for returning pastoral households which includes access to grazing lands, livestock restocking, and veterinary services.

[10] Rangeland Administration in (Post) Conflict Conditions: The Case of Afghanistan Afghanistan's Citizens' Charter and Inclusive Development: Afghanistan's Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Kuchi Population in the Citizens' Charter
<https://effectivestates.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ise-dpn-nomads.pdf>

- Pakistan and Iran should promptly suspend the deportation of Afghan pastoralists during critical cold seasons and drought periods to prevent humanitarian crises and large-scale livestock losses. In the short term, they should implement temporary legal measures such as time-bound grazing permits and secured mobility corridors for pastoralists crossing borders. In the medium term, Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan should negotiate trilateral agreements on transboundary pastoral mobility. This initiative should be supported by the FAO and IOM to formalize long-standing migration routes as part of regional climate adaptation and stability efforts.
- In the short term, bilateral donors and international finance institutions such as World Bank and IFAD should allocate adequate humanitarian and early recovery funding programs as support for pastoralists in Afghanistan. Additionally, donors should facilitate regional dialogue on transboundary pastoralism through effective platforms like the Regional Economic Conference on Afghanistan. In the medium term, sustainable investments should be directed toward rangeland restoration, water infrastructure, and community-based natural resource management in the country.
- Civil society organizations and research institutions should immediately document traditional transhumance routes, customary land tenure systems, and the impacts of climate change on pastoral mobility to guide policy and program development. In the short term, support should be directed toward establishing pastoralist-led representative bodies and cooperatives that can engage directly with humanitarian agencies, donors, and authorities. Over the medium term, these groups should initiate and expand mobility-responsive service delivery models for education, healthcare, veterinary services, and financial inclusion.

8. Conclusion

The crises faced by Afghan pastoralists is the result of persistent policy neglect, institutional misalignment and a lack of support tailored to their specific needs. Continued marginalization of pastoral systems undermines food security, accelerates rural poverty, fuels land-related conflict and weakens climate resilience at both national and regional levels.

A shift in approach is urgently required—one that recognizes pastoral mobility as an adaptive strategy, securing customary grazing rights and delivering services through flexible systems. Equally critical is the effective participation of pastoralists in community decision-making and peacebuilding initiatives in Afghanistan. These interventions can strengthen pastoral resilience, stabilize food systems, and contribute to strategic peace and regional cooperation across South and Central Asia.



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