COMMENT 1

PASTORAL LOCALIZATION OF HUMANITARIAN AID: THE NEED TO RE-QUALIFY THE *PASTORAL* CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT While over the last twenty-thirty years the scientific understanding of pastoralism has undergone a U-turn, the world of development and humanitarian intervention is still catching up with this transformation. Therefore, when discussing the localization of aid into the pastoral context it is crucial to first of all come to terms with the fact that a sound and coherent understanding of such a context cannot be taken for granted. This commentary starts by briefly recalling the salient elements of the transformation: the paradigm shift in Ecology in the 1970s, hinged on the way of understanding variability and leading to resilience theory; the way adaptive pastoralism works with environmental variability, rather than against it, by interfacing it with variability in the production system; and the importance, when working with pastoralism, of using a relational approach and focussing on processes, rather than focussing on 'states' and linearity of causes and effects. Two implications that seem particularly relevant to the challenge of localization are then discussed: the need to engage critically with the methodological legacy, and the need to recognize the web of forces criss-crossing the arena of pastoral development, and therefore affecting humanitarian aid with pastoralists: the legacy of narratives and mindsets, not only in the policy environment but also amongst scholars, technicians, practitioners and the donor community.

Key Words: Localization; Humanitarian aid; Variability; Pastoralism; Methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Offering a comprehensive commentary on such a rich and various set of contributions, with little time to prepare, is quite beyond my strengths! Instead, I will focus on a particular angle and look at the use of the notion of 'localization' of aid as adaptation to the specificity of the pastoral context.

I think that localization is extremely important and long due. At the same time, it strikes me that, in practice, any effort to 'localize' aid into the pastoral context would first of all hit upon a fundamental challenge: over the last twenty-thirty years, the scientific understanding of the pastoral context has undergone a U-turn and the world of development and humanitarian intervention is still catching up with this transformation. Thus, when discussing the 'localization' of aid in the pastoral context, a sound and coherent understanding of such a context cannot be taken for granted. Let me take a step back, and briefly recall the main elements in the transformation I am referring to.

For about a century, classical ecology represented nature in terms of relatively closed systems tending to a steady state. This approach crumbled only in the

1970s, when a fast-growing number of ecologists reconsidered the universality of the classical 'equilibrium' model, finding it rather a particular province in a world dominated by variability. Resilience-thinking, now so popular in development, was born from that theoretical reflection. Scholars working within this perspective have emphasized the need for a science capable of capturing the importance of variability as the norm rather than the exception.

The paradigm shift in ecology, especially the new attention to variability and complex dynamics, provided a more favourable environment for the analysis of phenomena that had been observed by scholars of pastoralism and drylands for some time. In 1981, resilience-thinking scholars noticed that 'comparison of the dynamics of various savanna and other natural systems leads to a conclusion that the resilience of the systems decreases as their stability (usually induced) increases' (Walker et al., 1981: 473). By the end of the 1980s, this observation had been extended to pastoral development: writing about Turkana, Ellis and Swift warned that 'interventions aimed at achieving stability in non-equilibrial systems are likely to be irrelevant at best or disruptive and destructive at worst' (1988: 451). By the mid 1990s, the empirical evidence gathered along this new line on thinking had been organized into a formal challenge to the old pastoral development paradigm (Behnke et al., 1993).

The theoretical shift hinged on the understanding of variability: from seeing it as a disturbance, synonymous with risk, to seeing it as a constitutive part on the ecosystem. More generally, this led to a fundamental re-qualification of problems and solutions in pastoral development. In several cases, what had been framed as a 'problem' was now seen as a 'solution'—for example mobility, now understood as key to both ecological sustainability and economic performance.

I want to draw your attention to the idea that in systems characterized by structural variability—such as pastoral systems in the African drylands—attempts to control variability and introduce stability may *increase vulnerability* rather than decrease it.

A similar point has been made recently by Emery Roe, of the Center for Catastrophic Risk Management at the University of California-Berkeley who, following an interest in pastoralism as a 'high-reliability' system (Roe et al., 1998), studied structurally variable decision-making contexts for over twenty years. Roe now calls these contexts 'mess' systems, because they escape our common-sense idea of order as associated with stability and symmetry. He talks of a 'mess paradox': the more mess there is, the more control decision makers want, but the more control is introduced, the more turbulence is created, and therefore the desire for additional control (Roe, 2013). Thus, the 'command and control' approach is not working in these contexts, and planning should be light-touch, leaving plenty of room to the necessary real-time management. This paradox has important implications for humanitarian work in pastoral contexts where variability—or 'disorder'—is structural and woven into people's livelihood strategies, rather than being simply disruptive and associated with a state of emergency.

Now, what do we mean by structurally variable environment? Nutrients in grass and other fodder plants are not uniformly distributed but triggered by precipitations that are both spatially and temporally patchy. A 'good year' and a 'drought

year' could be just a few kilometres apart. Rainfall variability combines with diversity in soil, terrain, plant species, and even diversity within the same species, as well as the changes in the distribution of nutrients throughout the life cycle of a plant. The latter, means that feeding on the same plant a few days earlier or later can result in a substantially different nutrient intake for the grazer. In contexts where there is no resting point, no 'plugging off' option, like pastoral systems, small differences can build up into big differences, affecting the thin line between prosperity and disaster.

While concentrations of nutrients in the drylands are key to animal nutrition, it is difficult to know in advance where and when exactly they are going to happen, or for how long they are going to last. Yet, this variability is precisely what pastoral systems specialize to exploit. As the nutrient-peaking window in grass is usually only a week or two long, if all the grass matured at once it would be impossible for the livestock to consume it all at the time when nutrients peak. A great deal of nutrients would be lost, used by the plants to develop, before the livestock could feed on them.

Patchy plant development in space and time on the other hand, gives mobile pastoralists the chance to keep their herds within the nutrient-peaking window for much longer than the length of such a period in any location they use. Talking about the Peul Wodaabe in Niger, Nikolaus Schareika refers to this skill as 'stretching the rainy season' (Schareika, 2003). In this light, it is clear that whether drylands variability is a problem or an asset for livestock keeping, ultimately depends on the strategy of production.

Within the classical model, that identified variability with risk and disturbance, virtually all pastoralist practices were interpreted as strategies to *minimize* variability or *cope* with it: mobility, diversification, herd-splitting, etc. Yet, when looked at closer range, these 'coping strategies' actually add variability to the system rather than reducing it.

So, how to explain this? Pastoralists embed variability in their production system to interface the variability in the environment. This can lead to *relative* stability, as in the case of two dynamic processes *moving at the same pace*, both dynamic in absolute terms but also 'stable' relatively to one another. This is more than simply overcoming an obstacle: there is added value. Something different, and extra, is done in this way: stretching the rainy season. This could not be done by stabilizing the environment in absolute terms, even if it was an economically viable option—which, by the way, almost a century of pastoral development interventions have not managed to show at any significant scale.

How does all this relate to the issue of localization? Particularly under two respects, as I am going to show.

LOCALIZATION NEEDS TO ENGAGE CRITICALLY WITH THE METHODOLOGICAL LEGACY

The papers presented during our workshop engage with issues of standardization and categorization. Several of them talk about drought. The definition of

drought is a good example of how standardization combines with the methodological legacy in pastoral development, making the project of localization a conceptually delicate process (Krätli, 2016).

Despite all the claims that pastoralism is particularly vulnerable to droughts, to date there is no definition of drought specific to their context. We have 'hydrological drought', 'agricultural drought' (referring to crop-farming), 'geographical drought', even 'socioeconomic drought', but not 'pastoral' drought. All the current definitions are from a 'substantive' perspective in that they refer to a *state of things*: scarcity of water.

Anthropologists have collected pastoralists' understanding of drought at least since the 1950s. Gulliver (1955: 22 note 1) reports a conversation with one of his Turkana staff about an area on the Kenyan highlands (Kitale): '[he] told me that it was the wet season up there all the year round. I explained that there was a dry season of at least about three months. He replied, "It is not a matter of rain, it is the grass. Plenty of grass makes a wet season. There is no dry season at Kitale"'. From a pastoralist's perspective, it is the accessibility of grass, not the level of precipitations, that defines the dry season and, by extension, drought. A similar example, from the other side of the world, concerns the *zud*, the cold-weather pastoral disaster in Mongolia. The Mongolian meteorological service defines it with reference to snow cover beyond a certain threshold. Pastoralists however talk also of a snowless type of *zud* or 'black *zud*', when surface water is made inaccessible by freezing. In both examples, pastoralists' understanding of the phenomenon refers to a *relationship* (accessibility of pasture and water) rather than a state of things (amount of precipitations, be it rain of snow). Said in a way that perhaps is more familiar to the context of humanitarian aid, pastoralists' perspective on drought or *zud* in terms of accessibility of pasture, reminds me of Amartya Sen's perspective on famine in terms of *entitlement* to food, rather than a state of things associated with scarcity of supply. They are both relational, both alternative to a substantive approach.

A 'pastoral' drought, as distinct from the concept of 'agricultural drought' currently used in development and humanitarian work, would relate not to the amount of precipitations (or to 'failed harvest' as it is sometimes the case), but to 'accessibility' of pasture and water. While drought-as-scarcity-of-rains is a state of things outside human control (hence politically neutral), drought-as-inaccessibility-of-pasture can be affected by management and context: low precipitations triggering agricultural drought do not necessarily trigger *pastoral* drought, as long as the herders can access pasture elsewhere. Conversely, even without major differences in precipitations, pastoral drought can become more frequent as a consequence of reduced mobility. Think of the way the experience 'availability of petrol stations' changes if you drive a vehicle that has 10 km autonomy with a full tank, or one that has 1,000 km.

The difference in perspective, from substantive to relational, is pivotal. The notion of pasture quality, and especially of 'palatability', is a useful way to exemplify this difference. A 'substantive' perspective treats palatability as an *inherent attribute* of the plant: 'a palatable plant'. Alternatively, palatability is understood as a relationship rather than an attribute: the relationship between certain plants

and the particular animals that feed on them. If the animals feed on the plants, there is palatability; if the animals refuse to feed on them, palatability is not there. Palatability is not *in the plant* but *in the relationship*. Pastoralists judge the quality of pasture by looking at their animals: are they feeding and putting on weight? In this way, the whole experience of grazing in a certain area at a certain time is considered at once, and this can include the presence of disturbances to feeding such as noise or bad smell, and elements that can favour it, such as the presence of particular plants the combination of which when feeding can boost the animals' appetite.

As in the case of pastoral drought, a relational perspective is much more effective in capturing agency, for example the role of management. Palatability understood as a relationship is not a given state but something that can be manipulated: for example by training animals to feed on the plant. The extension service of the School of Range Management of the Utah State University, set up by Frederick Provenza and his colleagues, successfully trains flocks to feed (and fatten) on plants that had previously been considered unpalatable (for example sage bush).

The substantive perspective—with its assumptions of linear causality and stability, and its focus on states rather than processes—is fundamentally at odd with the pastoral context where variability is the rule. If left undetected, its legacy can pre-empty the best efforts of localization.

LOCALIZATION WOULD NEED TO RECOGNIZE AND ENGAGE WITH THE EXISTING 'FORCE-FIELD'

I have talked about the problems with the methodological legacy, but I also want to mention the need to consider the web of forces criss-crossing the arena of pastoral development, and therefore affecting humanitarian aid with pastoralists. I am talking about the legacy of narratives and mindsets, not only in the policy environment but also amongst scholars, technicians, practitioners and the donor community.

The meaning of the language we use and the examples we choose, no matter how well intended, are inevitably affected by entering this force-field. The language of *vulnerability* for example, when referred to pastoralists resonates with the narratives of poor-productivity, unsustainability, backwardness that have populated pastoral development for decades—where 'coming out of vulnerability' (or simply development) has been equated with coming out of pastoralism. I am not saying that one should avoid mentioning how things are. Sometimes, it is absolutely correct talking of vulnerability, but finding ways of doing it without playing into this legacy seems one of the challenges of localization.

It is the same when talking of 'displacement'. Displacement is a problem for everybody, but for the pastoralists in particular, as it means staying away from land on which their only right is often in the regularity of use—say, returning every year—and the interruption of use even only for a year or two might result in the permanent loss of right. The unwanted displacement of pastoralists may also go unrecog-

nised against a background of mobility. On the other hand, accepting the framing of displacement as necessarily a problem has undesirable implications when working with mobile peoples whose livelihoods depends on the possibility for 'displacement'.

I want to conclude with an example about how we can localize 'displacement' in light of what I have said so far. For someone whose livelihood is tied to a fixed location, displacement has to do with being forced to leave that location. Here the idea of being cut off from one's livelihood resources conflates with being removed from one's place. This is of course a sedentary perspective on livelihood. For someone whose livelihood depends on the possibility of reaching distant areas in variable ways, this meaning of displacement falls short of telling the full story. For pastoralists, being cut off from their livelihood resources does not necessarily involve being *removed* from a place. Think of the pastoralists whose annual migration has been stopped by the new border between Sudan and South Sudan: they are cut off from their livelihoods resources as effectively as farmers forced to abandon their fields. Yet, they may appear to their governments as having finally settled where they 'belong'; the opposite of displacement! Separating the *functional* meaning of displacement (being cut off from one's livelihood) from its geographical *proxy* (being forced to abandon a place), might be one of the challenges of localizing humanitarian aid for pastoral contexts.

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