

Policy Recommendations on Pastoral Commonsⁱ

Introduction

Pastoral commons are systems through which pastoralist communities actively maintain their relationships with nature and each other while governing, managing, sustainably using, and conserving the ecological and cultural landscapes that are foundational to their livelihoods. Pastoral commons encompass lived territories; socio-ecological relationships of care, responsibility, and identity; governance through collective agreement on rules and their implementation; relational cultural and spiritual processes that link people and places; and emergent social networks that coordinate the custodianship of pastoral territories. Pastoral societies shape, sustain, and renew the ecosystems and territories of pastoral commons using decentralized, culturally embedded, and ever-evolving knowledge and institutions. Using these, they choose routes, times, and periods of migration; they select, exchange, pool, and share their livestock, pastures, and labor; and they exchange knowledge within and between generations to meet novel circumstances each season and year.

Pastoral commons are recognized in scientific and political fields for their contributions to global sustainability as well as for their dynamism and capacity to adapt to social, ecological, and climatic change (see [UNEP-WCMC's ICCA registry](#), [FAO's IYRP](#), [UNESCO's recognition of transhumance as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity](#), and [IUCN](#)). When these complex pastoral systems are undermined through violence, land appropriation, removal of customary rights, adverse legal frameworks, fragmentation, land alienation and conversion, forced dependency, social disruption, or erosion of traditional knowledge, cultural practices, social institutions, and cosmovisions, there are significant resulting losses to ecological security, landscape productivity, livelihoods, habitat conservation for key species, biodiversity conservation, breed conservation, and globally valuable ecosystem services such as soil quality, water availability, and carbon sequestration, along with unique cultural heritage, enormous agro-economic potential, and legal and political formulas that have proved sustainable over millennia.

Safeguarding pastoral commons and the benefits they create requires enforceable, rights-based, communal governance-centered legislation that protects local livelihoods, flexible and mobile customary practices, collective rights to occupy, use, and exclude others from the territory, collective decision-making authority, rights of access to public infrastructure, and cultural expression in a wide variety of ecological and socio-cultural contexts. Creating explicit ways to protect pastoral commons, pastoral lives and ways of living, and the rights, identities, socio-cultural practices, and local knowledge of pastoral communities is key to supporting a viable future for [productive, sustainable, and resilient pastoral systems](#). These systems sustain livelihoods, [generate critical ecosystem services](#), [achieve biodiversity conservation goals](#), [improve human well-being](#), and [demonstrate resilience](#) across [immense land areas](#) worldwide. In this context, we propose the following calls to action, which are addressed to governmental and intergovernmental bodies, international organizations with programs for conservation, human development, or social and political rights, and research institutions, donors, civil society allies, and private actors whose policies and investments affect pastoral commons, pastoral [territories of life](#), or their custodian pastoral communities.

Calls to Action

1. Recognize, appropriately, the full range of customary rights of pastoral commons as defined by their custodian communities, including non-written or otherwise diverse forms of customary governance systems and institutions.

Mechanisms of customary governance are characteristic of custodian pastoral communities that use their commons to sustain their ways of life through generations. Appropriate recognition of the full range of rights defined by pastoral communities must involve legal recognition of their self-determined rights and self-governance systems (for an example, see Italian Law No. 168/2017 on the protection of common lands, which recognizes the decision-making authority of local commons over that of the State.) This call to action must be enacted with great caution, since, depending on how commons are defined in national and regional laws and regulations (if they are defined), their legal recognition and formalization can either strengthen pastoral systems or, conversely, weaken them, for example by narrowly describing or arbitrarily favoring subsets of their members or partial scopes of their economic pursuits, needs for infrastructure, land use arrangements, labor sharing arrangements, social ambitions, local ecological knowledge, geographic extents, market access points, cultural activities, or rights and interests. The interdependent ways in which commons are governed, managed, used, and conserved are unique to each custodian pastoralist community and its dynamic and mobile context. Therefore, states should not implement any one-size-fits-all approach by imposing or generalizing definitions of “communal” land. Biodiversity conservation policies, especially, should be highly informed of the particularities of context-specific cases on the ground and must not deprive pastoral communities of their use, governance, and ownership/custodianship rights over and within their commons or communal territories. All rights to steward and use natural resources must be held within pastoral commons, including their land use rights, mobility rights, grazing rights, hunting rights, and decision-making rights, to ensure balance in the commons system. Restricting mobility within pastoral commons, removing hunting, grazing, or other land use rights, offering loans for which livestock are collateral, or restricting livestock sales, for example, can change the balance of pastoral commons systems, with negative consequences to ecosystems, livelihoods, and benefits to the public. Commons are not simple open-access regimes. In commons, community-defined rules, responsibilities, and authority (even when defined only orally) systemically regulate resource use, strengthen stewardship, and transform conflict. The viability of pastoral commons depends on a balanced articulation between local pastoral groups, public authorities, and legal frameworks: the state must act as a supportive facilitator of commons-based self-governance, not as a substitute that undermines it.

2. Secure legal, political, and economic protection for pastoral commoners.

2.1. Create dedicated access to legal services for pastoralists, with particular attention to creating them for pastoralist women, each including legal advice, live translators, education and outreach, fee waivers, and legal representation.

2.2. Support pastoralist groups in collective mapping and self-documentation of their communal territories and customary and legal rights to use and steward natural resources, with appropriate community-led and consent-based safeguards to prevent exposing sensitive knowledge. These maps can include territories, lands, mobility corridors, water, mineral-rich soils important for livestock health, and seasonal resources used over time by pastoral commoners, including ceremonial gathering sites that are shared between groups, as well as critical reserves of resources for periods of stress, which are particularly important in the context of increasing exposure to natural hazards and environmental risks.

2.3. If, after being presented with the option to give or withhold [free, prior and informed consent](#), pastoralist groups and their members, including elders, women, and youth, choose to give and not withhold their consent to it, then: while avoiding implicitly or explicitly restricting pastoral mobility and practices to operating within fixed containing boundaries, use the community-created maps and documentation from Call to Action 2.2 to secure legal and political protection of pastoral commons. Ensure that Spatial/Development/Economic plans recognise and include these mapped pastoral commons/[territories of life](#), including both pastoral communal territories and mobility corridors connecting them, such as drove roads and livestock routes for both transhumant and nomadic societies. Additionally, support the contribution of these cartography and data into platforms such as the [Global ICCA Registry](#) supported by the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre, [LandMark](#), national registries, and other relevant platforms through which the conservation contributions of pastoral communities may be included in reporting mechanisms under international conventions such as the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#).

2.4. Protect market access for pastoral products, including those produced and marketed by women, small-scale producers, occasional producers, from home, and collectively. Mitigate production and sales policy barriers to market entry of pastoral commoners' products. For example, for traceability and environmental certification programs, remove or waive requirements for fixed farm boundaries, permanent inhabitation of a single geography for auditing purposes, bureaucratic hurdles that only make sense for large-scale operations, and regular uploads to the Internet concerning pastoralists' products. Create bureaucratic pathways for bringing collective pastoral commons products to market in addition to products from single producers. Do not impose extra costs and travel requirements on pastoralists bringing products to market.

3. Prevent common land and resource grabbing, including nationalization or privatization of any part of pastoral commons for agricultural conversion, extractive industries, unsustainable development initiatives, green washing or exclusionary conservation, and restrict any transactions (e.g., sales, leases, purchases, and exchanges), subsidies, loans, and taxation measures that undermine customary collective tenure and territorial rights.

3.1. Strengthen conflict redressal mechanisms for pastoralist communities who experience rights violations or destruction of their customary territories and custodial processes, including on mobility corridors and in ceremonial or sacred spaces, whether those be internal or external to the contiguous territory and even if they customarily have been used only at specific times.

3.2. Support pastoralist communities in designing and implementing collective safeguards and enforcement mechanisms ensuring that all transactions, subsidies, loans, and taxation measures regarding pastoral commons (1) support and depend on ongoing pastoral commoning, (2) do not undermine ongoing collective tenure, mobility, governance authority, cultural integrity, and ecological responsibilities, (3) have clear collective [free, prior and informed consent](#) from all affected pastoralist communities and their members, including elders, women, and youth, (4) generate fair, enforceable, long-term benefits, periodically adjusted to maintain their real value, for affected custodian pastoralist groups and their members, and (5) ensure that any involved losses of land, territorial access, or custodial processes by pastoral communities are temporary, reversible, and can occur only if and when the most affected and least compensated have given and not withheld their [free, prior and informed consent](#) to them. When programs that do not both support and depend on ongoing pastoral commoning offer development initiatives, subsidies, or loans, it creates an interest in pastoral commons assets and operations among parties who are not members of the pastoral commons and has the potential thereby to undermine future collective tenure, mobility, governance authority, cultural integrity, and ecological responsibilities for the pastoral commons if proper safeguards are not enacted.

3.3. When implementing this call to action, pastoralist communities and their members must have access to legal advice, translation, and representation in their native spoken languages and be presented with the option to withhold their consent as clearly as their option to give consent. Ensure that any transactions, subsidies, loans, and taxation measures are not enacted for which consent is being withheld by any affected pastoralist communities.

4. Support pastoralists' intergenerational transfers of knowledge and skill within pastoral commons.

Pastoralists fulfill their custodial responsibilities for their territories by exercising their rights to maintain and adapt complex systems of rules and norms that regulate access, use, sharing, conservation, economics, and governance within their pastoral commons. These complex systems are grounded in collective pastoral experiences across generations, and they continuously respond and adapt to ecological variability and social change. Supporting community-led generation and innovation of knowledge and skill in the management of complex pastoral territories, together with the use and transfer of that knowledge and skill within and across generations, requires the following subactions:

4.1. Encourage continuity in local language use, including through formal and informal institutions of education. Local languages have highly specific references to and relationships with pastoralists' custodial responsibilities for their pastoral commons/[territories of life](#). These languages are thus a key conduit transmitting custodial knowledge and socio-ecological wisdom across generations.

4.2. Support the local value chains of products whose production and distribution is led by pastoralists, for these processes of production and distribution reinforce local knowledge and skills. And, in this context, a special focus should be put on pastoralist women, as they particularly host many of the most important traditional pastoral skills and knowledge, including but not limited to regarding animal rearing and the production and distribution of dairy products. Women-led production, further, develops women-led solidarity networks, which have large downstream benefits for regional connectivity, community resilience, and pastoralist communities' continuing custodial knowledge and stewardship of heritage livestock breeds and territories of life.

4.3. Invest in self-directed collective pastoral production processes. Commit to purchasing products derived from pastoral commons, reducing imports of competing products not produced through commoning (especially those competing imports that are produced to lesser quality standards), and increasing public demand for diverse pastoral goods that represent valued regional heritages of pastoral commoning. Support the incorporation of pastoral commons products into public and private product traceability, certification, marketing, and promotional programs to increase market access and product value. These commitments and this support strengthen collaborative production and therefore the generation, innovation, and sharing of knowledge and skills within pastoral commons.

4.4. Commit to the collective self-management and self-governance of spaces where pastoralists convene at specific times in large numbers, such as their collective ceremonial gathering sites, fairs, barter market spaces, and key resources, especially during the dry seasons. Collaborative planning of and high attendance of ceremonies, fairs, and barter market spaces, as well as self-governed negotiations over group access to key rangelands and other key dry season resources, broaden and strengthen pastoralist communities' social networks and social capital, resulting also in their improved economic performance, sustainable development of ecosystem health and food security, and broader representation in regional culture.

5. Facilitate the maintenance or emergence of solidarity networks within and between pastoral and transhumant groups and their community-designated representatives.

5.1. Support pastoralists in establishing assemblies, conferences, and other self-organized spaces for dialogue at local, regional, national, and global levels to collectively identify resource management priorities, organize resource monitoring, and coordinate the implementation and adaptation of complex land access and use rights over time. These should be designed with and for the meaningful participation of women, youth, elders, and other often marginalized groups.

5.2. Provide resources to support pastoralists in designing and establishing local, regional, national, and global platforms for learning, sharing knowledge and experiences, facilitating conflict resolution and collective problem solving, working on collective strategies at national and global levels, and other regular dialogues. This is especially important within and among groups of pastoralists threatened by large transformations such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and productivity loss, groups facing land privatisation or enclosure, extractive industries, and/or competing land uses, and groups addressing inner social inequalities concerning differentiated access to rangeland based on characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and household income.

5.3. Provide resources for pastoral and transhumant solidarity networks to offer recognition, certifications, training, review board services, legal support and awards to and within successful and innovative pastoral commons, including for solutions to widespread problems such as land encroachment, nationalization, privatization, conflict, illegal occupation, lack of options for pastoralist mobility, lack of diverse products with market access; socio-ecological imbalance and its attendant loss of ecosystem services. and extractive research practices. The internal use and development of certifications, standards, training, and review by pastoralist and transhumant solidarity networks can help to harmonize pastoral commons processes with market trends, community priorities, and conservation interests.

6. Ensure that pastoralist groups' community-designated representatives are able to participate in the decision-making processes of governing and managing agencies at local, regional, national, and transboundary levels, including decision-making processes concerning infrastructure planning and development.

6.1. Understanding that pastoralist groups regularly regroup and redistribute themselves in different ways within pastoral commons, ensure that resources are widely allocated and live translation services are available to facilitate meaningful participation by various sizes and scales of pastoralist groups in local, regional, national, and global policy and dialogue spaces, including at events showcasing their [territories of life](#).

6.2. On an ongoing basis, ensure that decision-making processes are guided by the evolving perspectives, knowledge, stated priorities, and aspirations that different pastoralist groups choose to share; for example, regarding their mobility, production, socio-cultural practices, needs, and local conditions within their territories and ecosystems.

6.3. In decision-making processes, fully preserve pastoralists' continuing self-governance and authority over their pastoral commons, their rights to use and steward the resources within their [territories of life](#), and their customary institutions.

6.4. Helpful public infrastructure such as cellular connectivity, health care services, educational opportunities, roads, and communal livestock handling facilities should be developed in accordance with this full Call to Action. They must also be designed and operated to be available, affordable, and accessible to pastoralists in the languages they use; be neither compulsory nor likely to create new debts among pastoralists (because such debts could undermine customary collective governance and destabilize socio-ecological commons processes, leading to the loss of ecosystem services); avoid introducing third-party interests into pastoral commons such as state

dominated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) used by governments to exclude pastoralists; and support pastoral commons systems in the long term (consistent with Call to Action 3).

7. Develop transboundary cooperation mechanisms for pastoral commons that span across different states.

Maintain or create pathways for community-driven design and adoption of joint agreements for transboundary rangeland communal practices and sharing of knowledge in ways that favor transboundary commons' coherence and therefore of landscape and sustainable species migration. Apply such cross-border cooperation mechanisms for pastoral commons in support of bilateral and multilateral confidence building, pastoralist-led dialogue, conflict transformation, and rights protection, as it is frequent to find historically integrated pastoral commons that have been pierced by nation-state boundaries but which are still de facto working across the different borders, or which can be revived. This is achievable by facilitating, or encouraging the continuation of, solidarity networks within and across pastoralist groups (see Calls to Action 4 and 5).

8. Affirm that pastoral commons protect valued ecosystems, that managed grazing is a maintenance process that preserves rangelands, that pastoral commons are not available to be repurposed, and that pastoralists' lives, livelihoods, and [territories of life](#) must be protected.

Encourage continuing maintenance of pastoral commons through managed grazing by custodian pastoralist communities. Grasslands in pastoral commons store most of their carbon underground such that little of it can be released into the atmosphere by wildfires, unlike shrublands and forests. Rangelands also provide habitats for wildlife species that would not survive in closed forests or shrublands. The regular grazing patterns by which herds and flocks, managed by custodian pastoralist communities, maintain pastoral commons as rangelands cannot be well-substituted by the migration patterns of unmanaged and wildly fluctuating populations of wild ungulates (similarly to how the effects of regular fire application by land stewards cannot be alternatively achieved by spontaneous wildfires). Pastoral commons coevolved with human management; due to that management, they continue to provide ecosystem services to custodian pastoralist communities and the larger public, and no portion of them is, by default, available to be used for other purposes. Violence against pastoralists and the destruction, dispossession, or degradation of their livelihoods and [territories of life](#) are in violation of internationally recognized [human rights](#).

9. Promote the co-creation of knowledge through collaborations between custodian pastoralist communities and knowledge holders and local, regional, national, and non-governmental research and education institutions.

Such research must follow community protocols, be conducted only if [free, prior and informed consent](#) has been given, be benefit-sharing, respect Indigenous and local knowledge systems, and be conducted and disseminated in local languages. Methodologies must be coherent with local pastoral traditional knowledge systems, cultures, practices, and cosmologies. Research questions must be important to pastoral communities' continuing stewardship of the well-being of their [territories of life](#). Knowledge co-creation should uphold pastoral commoners' leadership, ownership, and control over study design, local curriculum design, and educational narrative, involve mutual cooperation and engagement among different stakeholders, and increase opportunities, including leadership opportunities, for pastoral commoners. Potential topics should be identified in consultation with pastoralist custodians and could include, amongst others, the role of local governance and management processes within pastoralist culture, identity, and sustainable custodianship, local and traditional monitoring methods and indicators, herding and pasture health, biodiversity conservation (including native herbivores and

carnivores), disease management, food and other products' provision and marketing, emerging technologies increasingly useful for pastoralists, history of local pastoral commons, natural hazard and disaster management related to the impacts of climate change on the territory and the people, evidence generation for the high value of pastoral ways of being for conserving biodiversity, grantwriting, eco-/ethno-tourism opportunities, and obtaining payment and recognition for ecosystem services.

10. Encourage temporary, revocable use by pastoralists of public, abandoned, and tenure-uncertain lands as commons-in-practice, thereby enabling pastoralists to perform natural and valuable public services such as land maintenance and conservation work while also creating ecological corridors and connecting [working landscapes](#).

Prevent irreversible and undesirable land transitions – such as from grasslands to shrublands and forests due to diminutions in grazing pressure (see Call to Action 8) – by prioritizing the access of herds and flocks to temporarily or permanently unmaintained lands as commons-in-practice. Pastoral activities within pastoral commons and commons-in-practice are natural ecosystem maintenance processes that have been occurring between pastoralist custodians and their [territories of life](#) for centuries to millennia, and the customary boundaries of those territories of life have always shifted through time in response to ecological and social influence. This call to action should be implemented in particular in fast-transforming urban and peri-urban areas, since pastoral mobility corridors often pass through areas such as these that are becoming bustling urban centres with no plans yet made for ongoing use by mobile pastoralists.

11. Recognize that real-time micronegotiations underpin the mobility practices and livestock development practices of pastoralist communities.

11.1. Members of pastoral commons are generally dependent on continually relocating their herds and flocks based on their assessments of ecological conditions and social context. Protect the rights of pastoralists to [create, moderate, and co-lead these negotiations over mobility](#). Change restrictive public policies that encourage settlement and hamper mobility to, from, and within pastoral commons.

11.2. Protect pastoralists' rights to sell, buy, give, trade, raise, and slaughter livestock according to their needs, knowledge, and preferences in pastoral commons. Members of pastoral commons build up their herds and flocks to meet their households' real-time assessments of which livestock traits are desirable for matching localized environmental conditions, economic opportunities, and personal preferences. Genetic diversity within herds and flocks is an asset to making full use of available resources in varying and unpredictable environments. Therefore, reform restrictive public policies that constrain or encumber which kinds and types of livestock pastoralists may breed, register, and sell.

11.3. Do not apply the terms “overgrazed,” “overgrazing,” and “degraded” to pastoral commons; rather, restore rights, decision-making authority, and market access to custodian pastoralist communities' customary collective governance systems. Where custodian pastoralist communities have collective decision-making authority over livestock mobility and livestock development practices within pastoral commons, they have the degrees of freedom necessary for restoring ecological and socio-ecological balance to pastoral commons systems. Imbalances within pastoral commons systems are usually traceable to external constraints – for example, due to policies, debts, or third-party interests – placed on mobility, livestock development, mechanisms for coping with forage scarcity, or market access for diverse products.

12. Enhance the public image of pastoral commons among decision-makers and society at large.

Increase public appreciation for the conservation outcomes, ecosystem services, and social benefits that pastoral commons and pastoralists provide, including biodiversity conservation, wildfire prevention, carbon sequestration, and the public's broader enjoyment of pastoral products and [landscapes](#). Emphasize that regular presence and large-scale communal stewardship by pastoralists, including their usage of customary mobility routes and negotiation processes for livestock access to rangelands, are both important for conserving rangeland ecosystems and the landscape continuity and wildlife corridors intrinsic to them.

13. Prioritize community self-strengthening and bottom-up approaches when responding to each of the foregoing calls to action.

Safeguard community and collective decision-making authority and protect the rights of pastoralists to develop and adapt their own localized processes of negotiation for collective custodianship of the resources which they hold in common, including but not limited to mobility, biodiversity, self-governance, livestock genetics, land connectivity, water, seasonal forage reserves ("banks"), patterns of fire application, and social ceremonies. Ensure that the planning and development of public infrastructure is accountable to the stated preferences of the various groups in pastoral commons (see Calls to Action 3 and 6).

Pastoral commons are sophisticated, living socio-ecological systems that sustain landscapes, livelihoods, and cultures through generations. Where pastoralists retain secure rights, recognition, mobility, and self-governance, they sustain biodiversity, ecosystem functions, resilient livelihoods across vast landscapes, numerous social services, and unique production with great economic potential. Wherever these are weakened, the losses are profound, affecting local communities and global ecological security. What is needed are enforceable, rights-based approaches centered on community-led governance and tailored to pastoral commons systems. Conservation must not dispossess, legal recognition must not impose uniformity, and development must not dismantle functioning systems of custodial stewardship. Supporting the self-strengthening of pastoral commons requires investing in community governance, mobility, knowledge systems, and collective livelihoods. This means reshaping policies, markets, and public narratives to recognize pastoral commons systems as essential for biodiversity, climate resilience, socio-economic prosperity, cultural continuity, landscape connectivity, and sustainable futures.

ⁱ These Policy Recommendations were written by Tracy Burnett, Pau Sanosa-Cols, Francisco Godoy-Sepúlveda, Daniel Maghanjo Mwamidi, Santiago A. Parra, and Adrià Peña-Enguix, under the coordination of Pablo Domínguez, with particularly valuable contributions from the ICCA consortium pastoral group, as well as from members of the different Regional Chapters (especially Africa and Europe) of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), and from Caroline Upton and Nigel Dudley, along with other experts and civil society representatives from the Working Group on Pastoral Commons of the Global Alliance for Rangelands and Pastoralists, which is contributing support to the 2026 International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). The Pastoral Commons Working Group aims to foster collaboration between pastoral rights holders, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, civil society organizations, researchers, and public agencies to contribute to turn knowledge and lived experience on pastoral commons into coordinated action. It does so by documenting their contributions, highlighting the value of the commons to strengthen governance, and supporting legal, policy, and market conditions at different scales, thus contributing to the IYRP 2026 and wider global efforts.