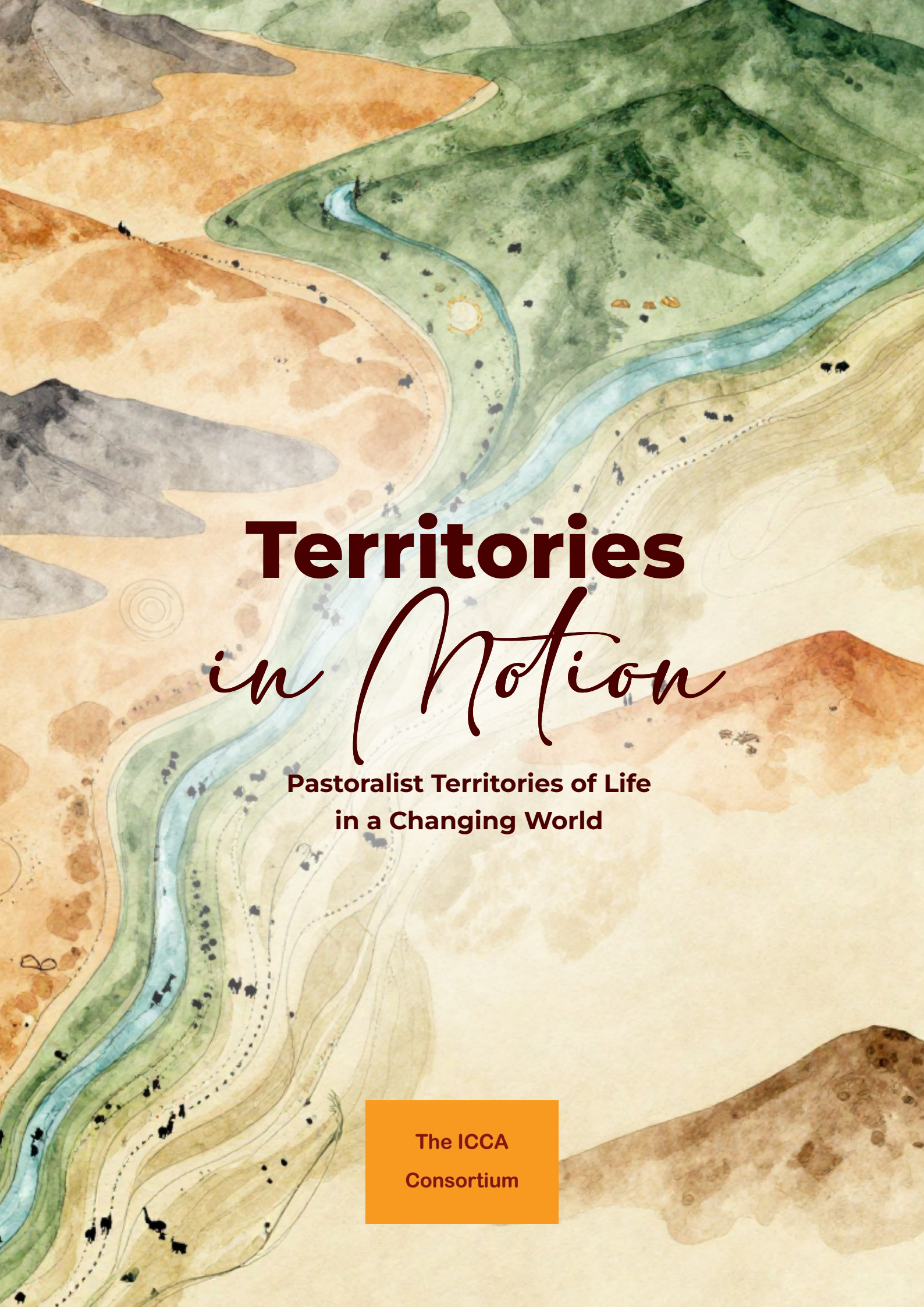


A watercolor illustration of a landscape. A blue river flows from the top right towards the bottom left. The river is bordered by green banks with small black dots representing grazing animals. The surrounding land is depicted with various shades of orange, brown, and green, suggesting different terrain types like hills, valleys, and pastures. Dotted lines indicate paths or boundaries. The overall style is artistic and hand-drawn.

Territories *in Notion*

**Pastoralist Territories of Life
in a Changing World**

**The ICCA
Consortium**



**A book for the International Year of
Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026**



INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF
**RANGELANDS AND
PASTORALISTS**
2026

Territories in Motion: Pastoralist Territories of Life in a Changing World

Dedicated to the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026

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About ICCA Consortium

The ICCA Consortium is an international association rooted in the movement for ICCAs—territories of life: territories and areas governed, conserved, and sustained by Indigenous Peoples and local communities. The Consortium supports the self-determined priorities of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, promotes appropriate recognition of their territories, and works to transform conservation, development, and policy systems toward justice, rights, care, and collective responsibility.

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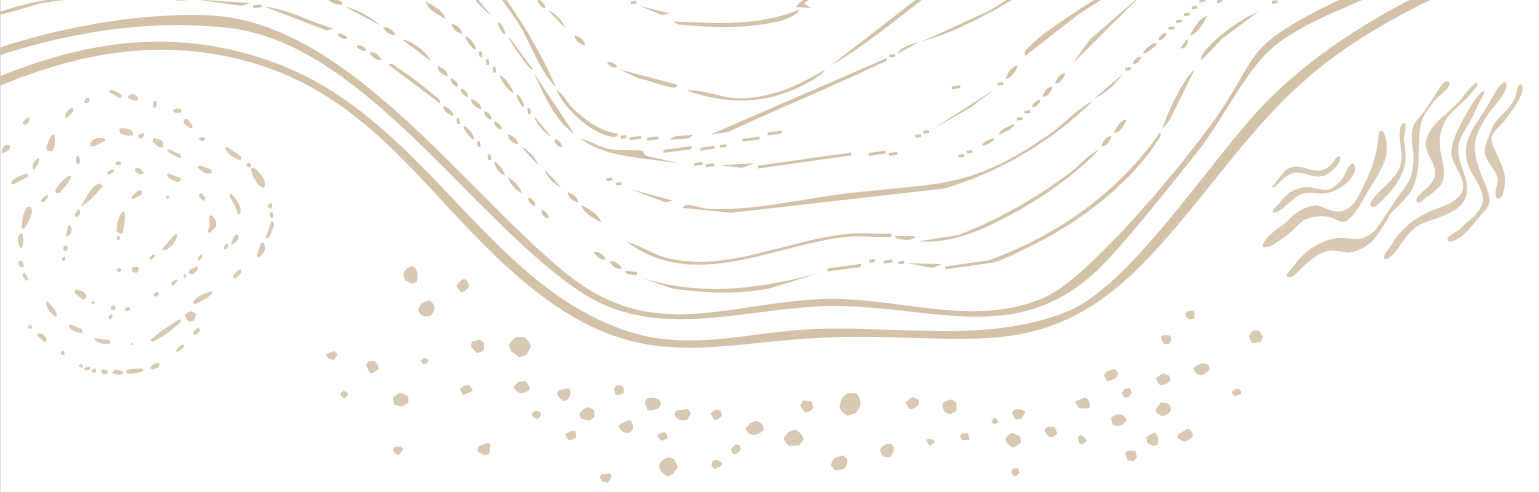
Disclaimer

The designation of geographical entities in this publication does not imply the expression of any opinion by the ICCA Consortium concerning the legal status of any country, territory, area, or boundary, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or borders.

The views expressed in this publication are intended to contribute to public understanding, dialogue, and advocacy on pastoralist territories of life. They do not necessarily represent the official position of all ICCA Consortium members, honorary members, partners, or allies.

This publication is not an academic review or a technical policy manual. It is a public-facing contribution to the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026, prepared to support wider recognition of pastoralist communities, their territories of life, and their relationships with rangelands, mobility, biodiversity, food systems, culture, rights, and governance.

AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this publication to support proofreading and the development of illustrations. All content, framing, and final editorial decisions were reviewed and approved by the author.



About this book

This is a public book designed for civil society, policy makers, conservation actors, donors, students, journalists, and readers who may not be familiar with pastoralism, ICCAs—territories of life, or the commons.

The book introduces pastoralist territories of life as living relationships among communities, animals, rangelands, waters, biodiversity, food systems, culture, mobility, rights, and governance. It explains why pastoralist mobility is not wandering, why rangelands are not empty or degraded spaces, and why pastoralist communities are essential custodians of living landscapes in a time of climate, biodiversity, and social uncertainty.

The language is intentionally accessible. While the book refers to the relationship between ICCAs—territories of life and the commons, its main focus is on the interrelationship between pastoralist peoples, nature, culture, movement, and territories of life.

Note on terminology

Throughout this book, the term **ICCAs—territories of life** refers to territories and areas conserved, governed, and sustained by Indigenous Peoples and local communities through their own values, relationships, knowledge systems, customary institutions, and collective responsibilities.

The phrase **territories of life** is used to emphasize that these places are not only conservation areas or resource management units. They are living territories shaped by culture, memory, spirituality, food systems, livelihoods, governance, and care for future generations.

The term **pastoralist territories of life** refers to pastoralist lands, waters, routes, seasonal pastures, corridors, sacred places, grazing areas, and biocultural spaces that are sustained through mobility, collective governance, ecological knowledge, and relationships between people, animals, and rangelands.

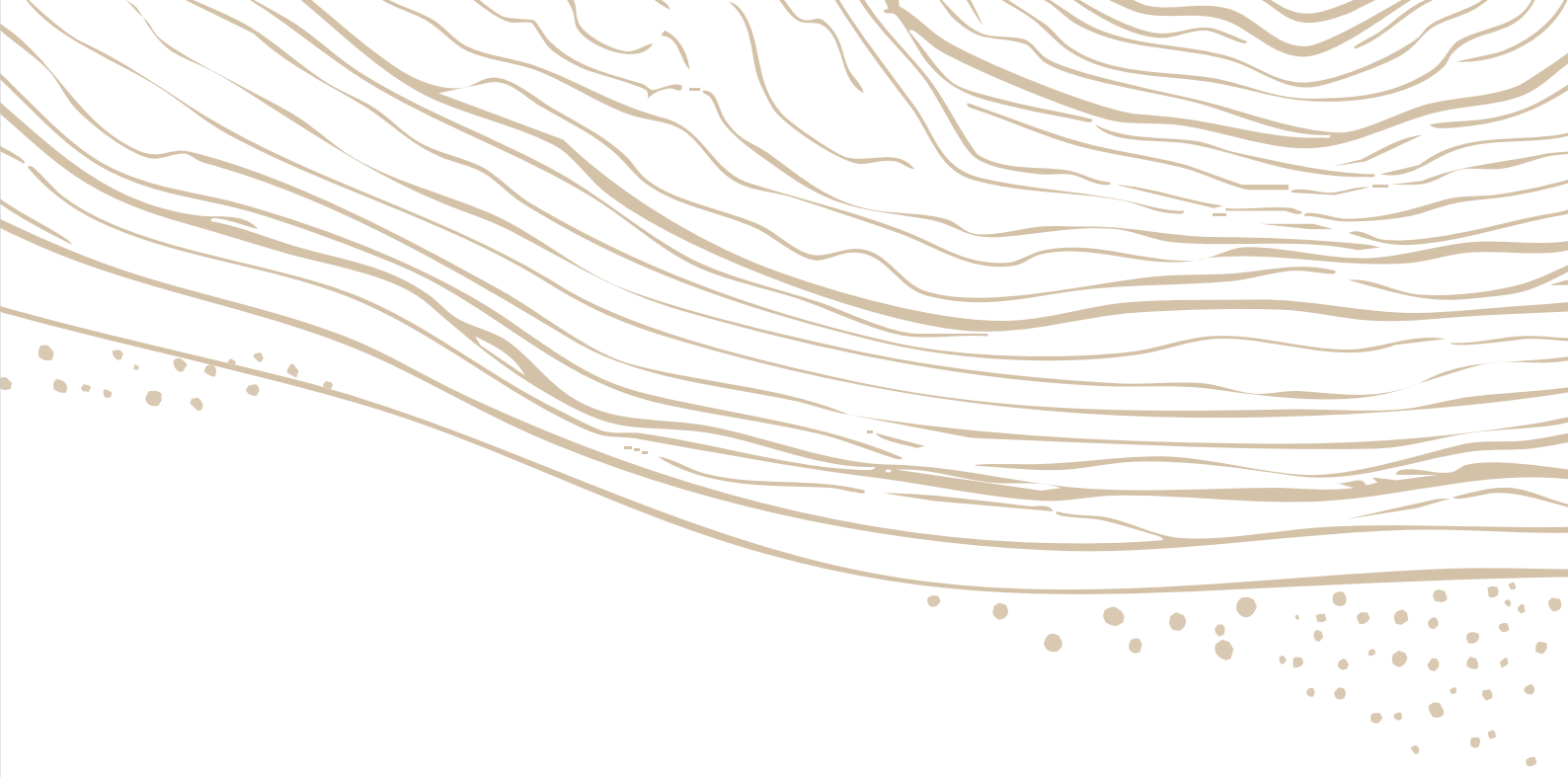
In this publication, **Indigenous Peoples and local communities** is used with respect for the diversity of peoples, communities, identities, and governance systems involved in sustaining territories of life.

Visual note

This publication does not use documentary photographs. Instead, it uses abstract and symbolic graphics inspired by movement, rangelands, routes, water points, seasonal cycles, animal tracks, topographic lines, and collective governance.

The visual concept, **Territories in Motion**, reflects one of the central messages of the book: pastoralist territories of life are not static spaces. They are living systems of movement, care, knowledge, and responsibility.





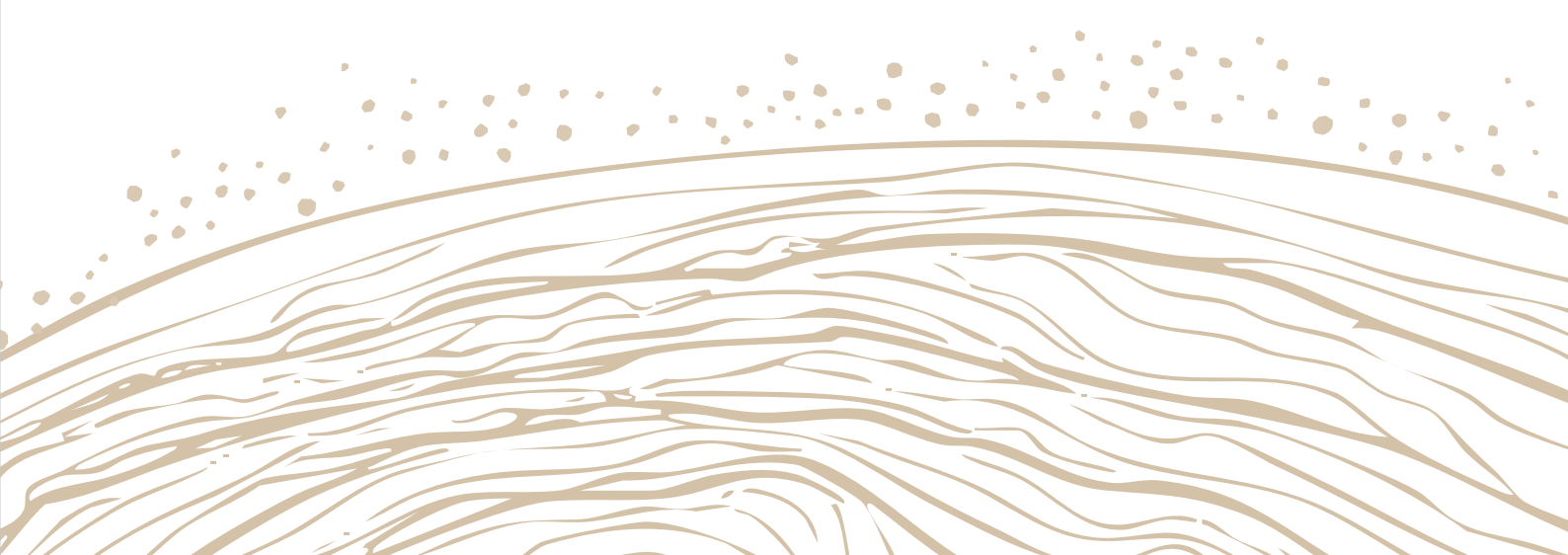
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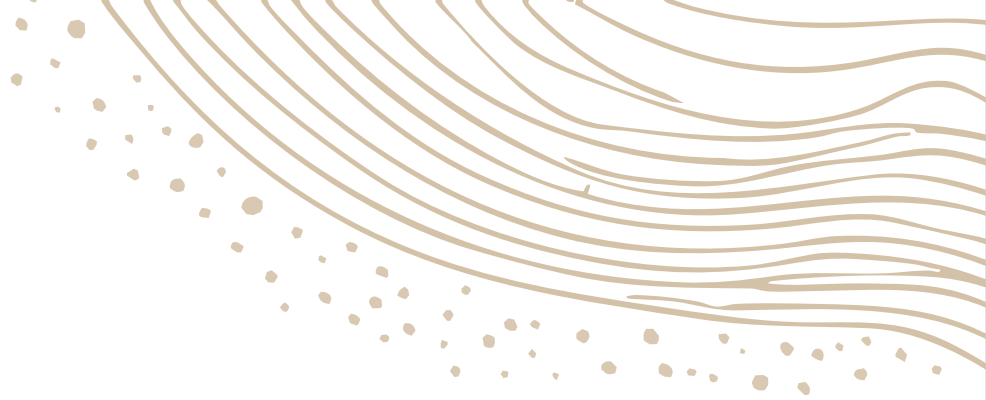
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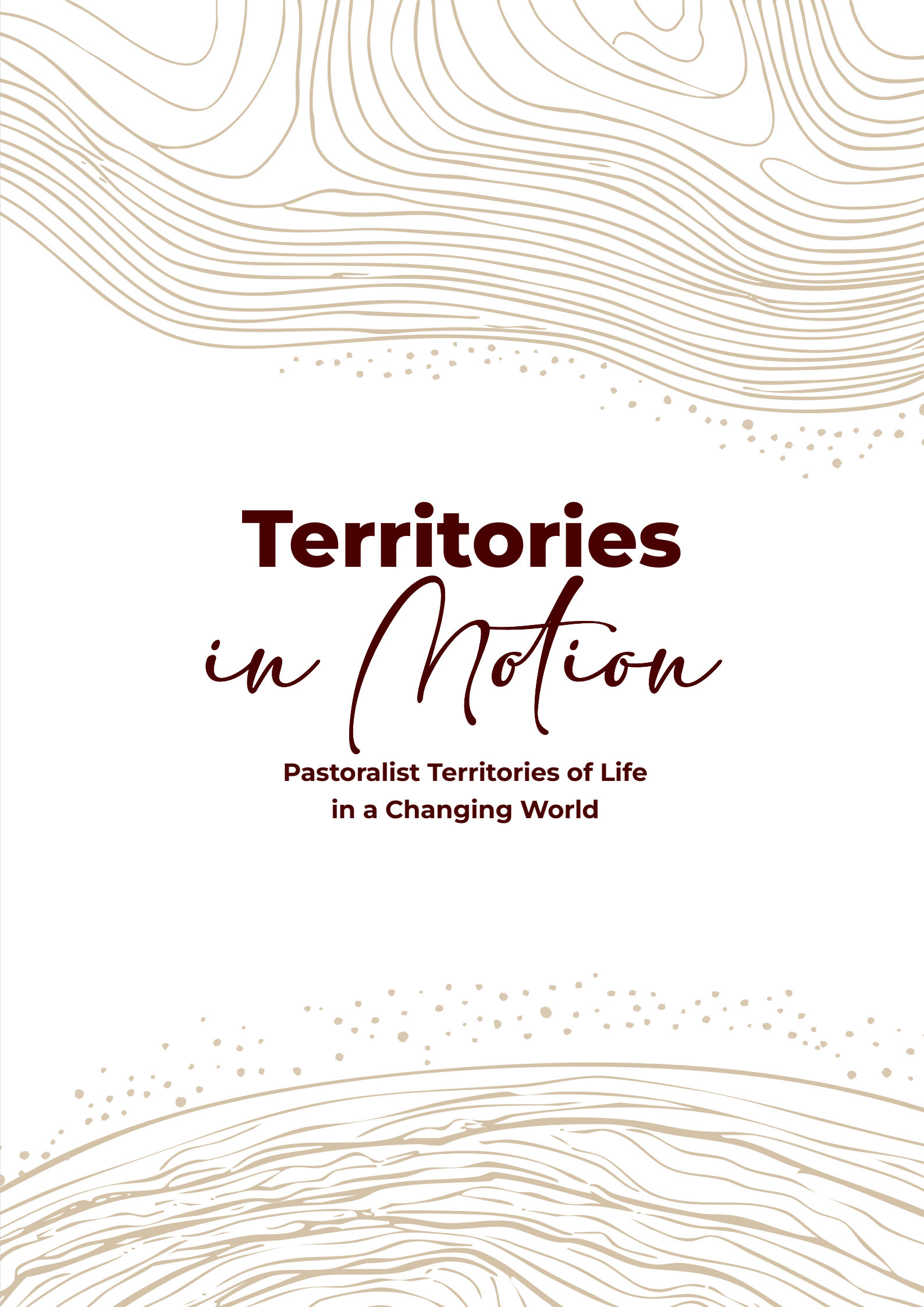
We are grateful to the pastoralist communities, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, members, honorary members, regional teams, partners, and allies whose knowledge, struggles, stories, and leadership continue to shape the movement for territories of life.

We also honor the memory of **Ghanimat Azhdari**, a young woman from the Qashqai nomadic pastoralist people in Iran, whose life, work, and commitment to Indigenous Peoples, pastoralist communities, participatory mapping, and territories of life continue to inspire many of us. Her voice and legacy remain part of this collective journey to recognize and defend the living relationships between peoples, animals, lands, waters, cultures, and future generations.

Special thanks go to the members of the ICCA Consortium's pastoralist group and wider network for their reflections, feedback, and guidance. Their contributions help ensure that this publication remains grounded in lived realities, self-determined priorities, and the many ways pastoralist peoples care for lands, waters, animals, cultures, and future generations.

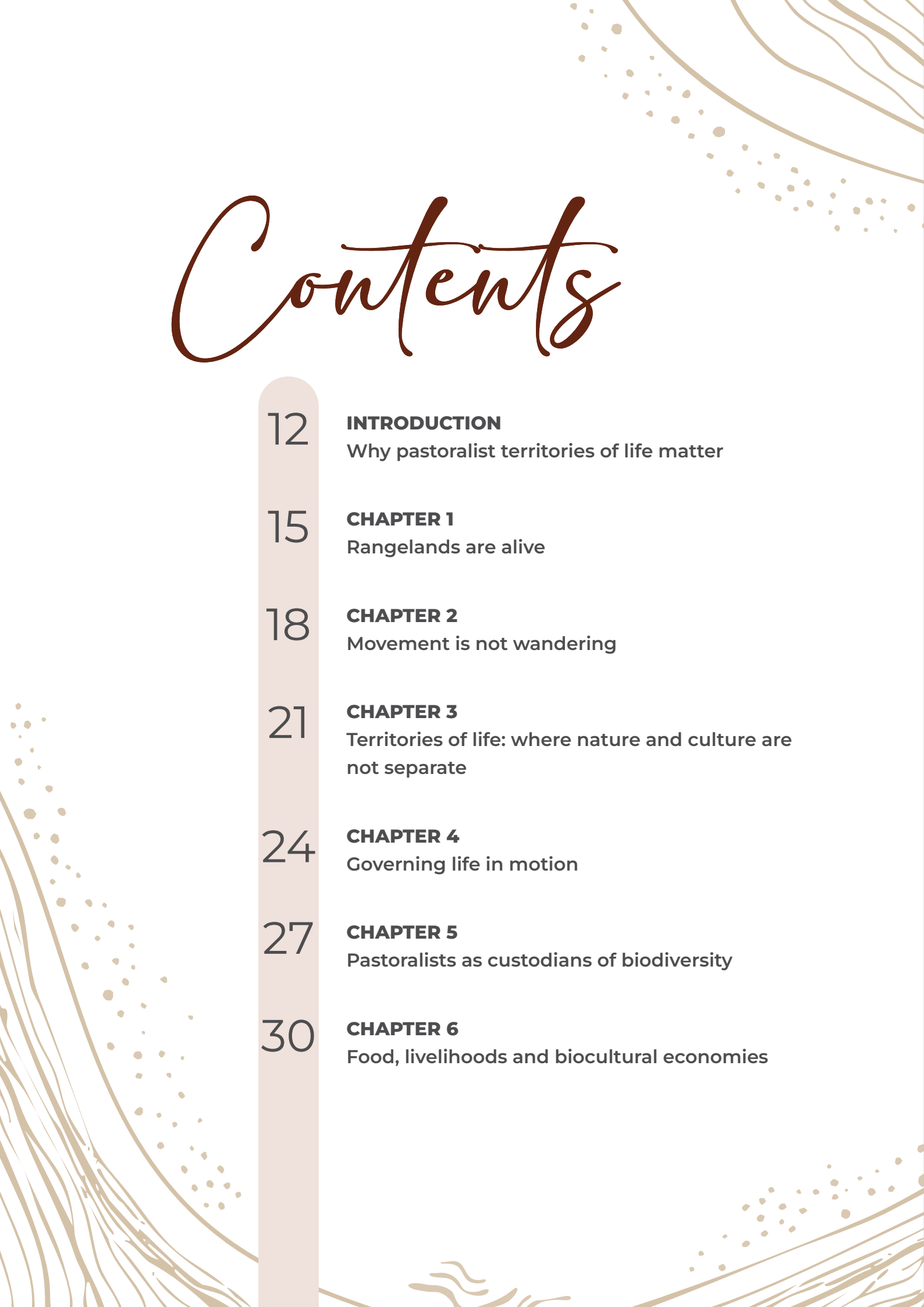




The background features a light beige color with abstract, wavy, hand-drawn lines in a slightly darker beige tone. These lines are concentrated at the top and bottom of the page, creating a sense of movement and depth. A horizontal band of small, light beige dots separates the top and bottom wavy sections, adding a textured, organic feel to the design.

Territories *in Notion*

**Pastoralist Territories of Life
in a Changing World**



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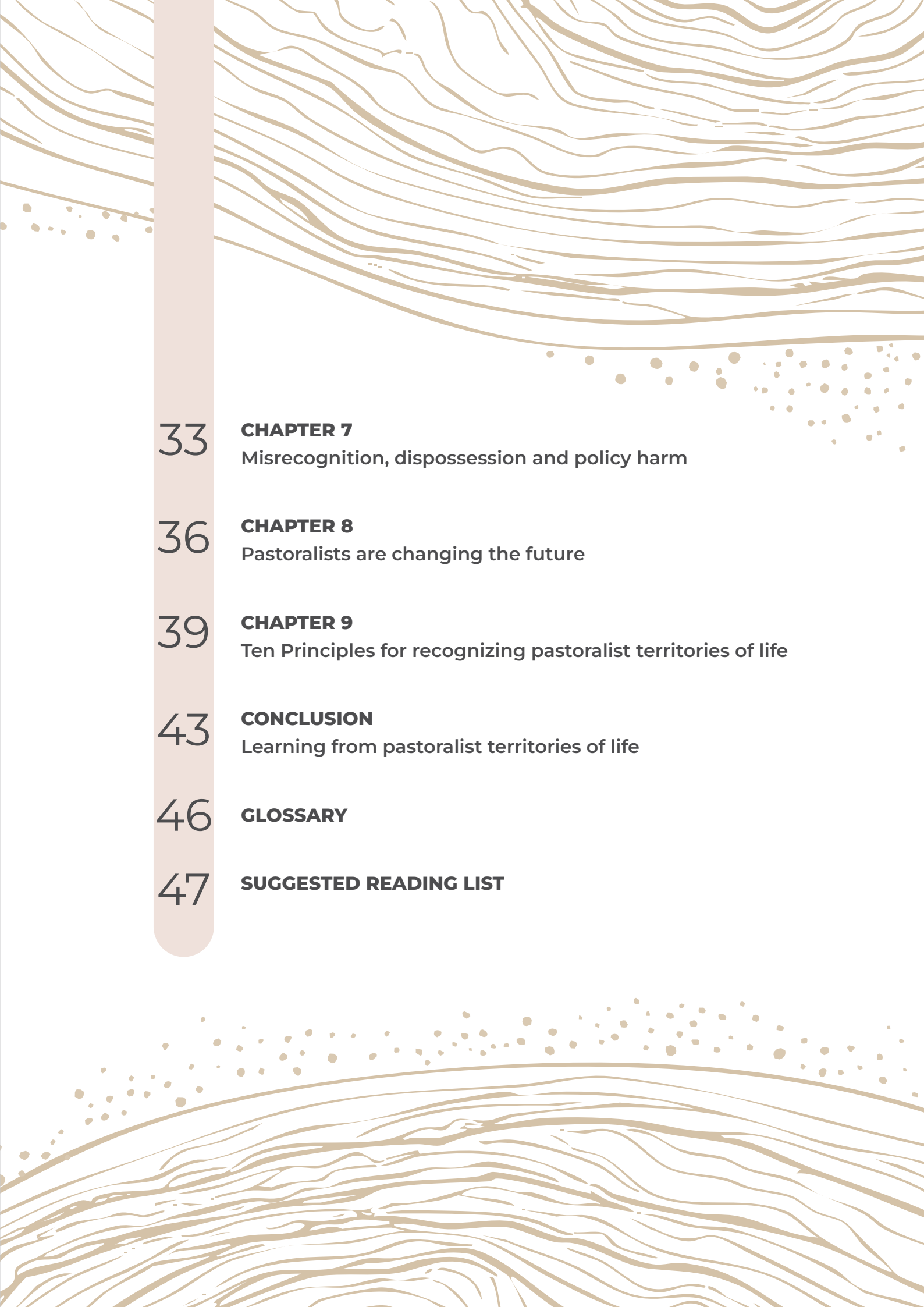
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The background is a watercolor illustration of a landscape. A blue river winds through a valley. To the left, there are green hills with trees. To the right, there are orange-brown hills with circular lines representing territories. Several black silhouettes of animals, possibly cattle or horses, are scattered across the landscape. In the distance, there are grey mountains.

Introduction

**Why pastoralist
territories of life matter**

Introduction

Why pastoralist territories of life matter

Across the world's drylands, mountains, steppes, savannas, wetlands and seasonal grasslands, pastoralist peoples have learned to live with movement. They move with animals, rain, grass, water, snow, wind and memory. Their routes may cross valleys, deserts, forests, floodplains, plateaus, national borders and protected and conserved areas. Their calendars may follow seasons, flowering plants, river levels, pasture growth, animal behavior, ancestral knowledge and community agreements. Their territories are not always marked by fences or cadastral maps, but they are deeply known, named, governed and cared for.

For many people outside pastoralist societies, this way of life is difficult to understand. Governments, development agencies, agricultural policies and conservation systems often prefer fixed places, fixed boundaries and fixed categories. They are more comfortable with villages, farms, parks, private plots and administrative zones than with seasonal routes, shared pastures, negotiated access and overlapping rights. Because of this, pastoralist communities have too often been misunderstood as wandering, backward, unproductive or harmful to nature.

This misunderstanding has had serious consequences. Around the world, pastoralists have faced sedentarization policies, loss of grazing lands, blocked migration routes, exclusion from protected areas, land privatization, infrastructure projects, mining, agribusiness expansion, conservation enclosures and climate policies that fail to recognize their rights. In many places, they have been blamed for degradation caused by the very policies that restricted their movement and weakened their governance systems.

Yet pastoralism is not a relic of the past. It is one of humanity's most sophisticated ways of living with uncertainty. Pastoralist communities have developed social, ecological and cultural systems that allow people and animals to survive in places where rainfall is unpredictable, vegetation is scattered and crop agriculture is often risky or impossible. Their knowledge is not only technical; it is relational. It is expressed in how people read the land, care for animals, decide when to move, rest pastures, share

water, resolve conflicts, maintain routes, protect sacred places and pass knowledge across generations.

The International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026 offers an important opportunity to change the global narrative. It is an opportunity to move beyond the idea that pastoralists are marginal users of marginal lands. It is a moment to recognize them as custodians of vast living landscapes and as essential actors in addressing biodiversity loss, climate change, land degradation, food insecurity and cultural erosion.

This book introduces pastoralist territories of life. A territory of life is a place, territory, route, landscape or biocultural space where Indigenous Peoples or local communities maintain deep relationships with lands, waters, biodiversity, culture and livelihood systems, and conserve and sustain them through their own values, knowledge systems and governance institutions. The term is important because it does not treat conservation as the separation of people from nature. Instead, it recognizes that many landscapes are alive because of long relationships among people, animals, plants, waters, soils, ancestors, spirits, livelihoods and responsibilities.

For pastoralists, this idea is especially powerful. Their territories are often mobile, seasonal and relational. A pastoralist territory of life may include summer pastures, winter pastures, migration corridors, water points, salt licks, resting places, sacred mountains, forests, wetlands, markets, burial places, ritual sites and emergency refuge areas. It may be shared by several groups at different times of the year. It may be governed through oral agreements, elders' councils, women's knowledge, youth labor, customary law, reciprocal arrangements and social obligations.

These territories can also be understood as commons. But commons should not be confused with open access. Pastoral commons are not empty lands where everyone takes what they want. They are collectively governed systems with rules, rights, responsibilities, sanctions, negotiations and institutions. The connection between

Territories in Motion

Pastoralist Territories of Life in a Changing World

pastoralist territories of life and the commons helps us understand that shared land can be carefully governed. But this book does not place the theory of the commons at the center. The center is life itself: the relationship between pastoralist communities and the living landscapes they sustain.

The book follows a simple path. It begins with rangelands as living systems, then explores mobility, territory, governance, biodiversity, food, misrecognition and future pathways. It does not attempt to describe every pastoralist community in the world. Pastoralism is too diverse for any single book to capture fully. Instead, it offers a public introduction to key ideas, supported by examples from different regions: Iran, Mongolia, the Sahel, East Africa, the Andes, Morocco, Spain, Italy and other pastoralist landscapes.

The main argument is straightforward: pastoralist territories of life are not degraded leftovers of history. They are living landscapes shaped by movement, care, knowledge and collective responsibility. Recognizing them is not only a matter of justice for pastoralist peoples. It is also essential for the future of biodiversity, climate resilience, food systems and peaceful coexistence on a changing planet.

Key message

Pastoralist territories of life show that nature conservation can be rooted in movement, relationship and responsibility, not in fences, exclusion and external control.



Chapter 1

Rangelands are alive

Chapter 1

Rangelands are alive

Rangelands are often described in negative terms. They are called dry, marginal, empty, remote, degraded, fragile or underused. These words reveal more about the assumptions of outsiders than about the reality of the landscapes themselves. Rangelands are not empty. They are living systems shaped by rainfall, drought, grasses, shrubs, trees, insects, birds, wild herbivores, livestock, fire, soil organisms, people and long histories of use and care.

Rangelands include drylands, savannas, steppes, shrublands, mountain pastures, high-altitude grasslands, Mediterranean grazing landscapes, floodplains and seasonal wetlands. Some are hot and arid; others are cold and windswept. Some receive rain in short bursts; others depend on snowmelt, monsoon cycles or river flooding. Many are unsuitable for intensive agriculture, but this does not mean they are unproductive. Their productivity is different. It is seasonal, dispersed and variable.

To understand pastoralism, we must first understand variability. In many rangelands, variability is not a problem to be eliminated; it is the basic condition of life. Rain may fall heavily in one valley and not at all in another. Grass may grow in one place this year and somewhere else next year. A dry-season pasture may become essential in a drought. A wetland may be used only at particular moments. A mountain slope may be too cold in winter but abundant in summer. A plain may be rich after rain and dangerous during disease outbreaks.

For pastoralists, the question is not how to impose stability on these landscapes. The question is how to live with change. Mobility, flexible access, shared knowledge and collective decision-making are answers to this question. Pastoralist systems are built to respond to variation across space and time. They are not chaotic because they move. They move because the land itself is dynamic.

Many older policies misunderstood this. They were based on the idea that rangelands should have a fixed carrying capacity, as if the same number of animals could graze the same place every year without considering rainfall,

season, vegetation, disease, fire or social agreements. When degradation appeared, pastoralists were often blamed. But in highly variable environments, degradation is frequently linked not to mobility itself, but to the restriction of mobility. When herders are confined to smaller areas, when routes are blocked, when dry-season refuges are lost, when water points are controlled by others, grazing pressure becomes concentrated. What was once a flexible system becomes a trapped system.

This is one of the most important lessons of pastoralism: movement can protect land. By moving animals across a landscape, herders distribute grazing pressure. Pastures can rest. Seeds can travel. Manure returns nutrients to the soil. Different plants respond to different grazing patterns. Open habitats are maintained. Fire risks can be reduced when dry biomass is consumed. Livestock may use vegetation that humans cannot eat and convert it into milk, meat, fiber, hides and manure.

Myth and reality

Myth: Rangelands are empty and unproductive.

Reality: Rangelands are dynamic living landscapes that sustain biodiversity, food systems, cultures and livelihoods.

Myth: Variability means disorder.

Reality: In many rangelands, variability is normal. Pastoralist governance systems are designed to work with it.

Myth: Movement causes degradation.

Reality: When governed well, mobility can distribute grazing pressure, allow recovery and support ecological diversity.

This does not mean that all grazing is automatically sustainable. Pastoralist communities themselves know that

land can be overused, water can be polluted, rules can be broken and conflicts can damage ecosystems. Pastoralism is not a romantic paradise. It is a demanding way of life that depends on knowledge, labor, restraint, cooperation and negotiation. Where governance is weakened, where inequality increases, or where market pressures push herd numbers beyond ecological limits, problems can emerge. But the solution is not to dismiss pastoralism. The solution is to understand and support the institutions that allow pastoralists to govern variability.

Rangelands are also biodiversity landscapes. Many species have evolved with grazing, browsing, trampling, seed dispersal and seasonal movement. In some places, pastoralism maintains open grasslands that would otherwise be transformed by shrub encroachment or land abandonment. In other places, mobile herding helps maintain corridors between habitats. Livestock and wildlife may share water points, pastures and migration routes, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in tension, but often within systems of coexistence that are older than modern conservation.

A rangeland seen from a satellite may look sparse. A rangeland seen through pastoralist knowledge is dense with meaning. One slope may be good for lambing. Another may be avoided because of disease. A spring may be linked to a story. A patch of forest may be reserved for emergency use. A wetland may be opened only after a certain date. A route may belong to no individual but be remembered

by many families. A pasture may be understood not only by its vegetation, but by its place in a seasonal cycle of life.

This is why the language of “empty land” is so harmful. It makes living systems appear available for appropriation. It allows governments, companies and conservation actors to treat rangelands as vacant spaces for plantations, mines, military zones, protected areas, infrastructure corridors, carbon projects or agribusiness schemes. Once a landscape is labeled empty or degraded, the people who know it may become invisible.

Pastoralist territories of life challenge this invisibility. They invite us to see rangelands as inhabited, known, loved and governed. They remind us that productivity is not only measured in tons per hectare. It can also be measured in resilience, biodiversity, cultural continuity, food diversity, social cooperation and the capacity to live with uncertainty without destroying the future.

Key message

Rangelands are not empty spaces waiting for development or protection from people. They are living landscapes whose health often depends on movement, knowledge and collective care.



Chapter 2

Movement is not wandering

Chapter 2

Movement is not wandering

To outsiders, pastoralist mobility can look like wandering. People move with animals, camps shift, routes change, and settlements may appear temporary. But what looks like disorder from outside is often a deeply organized system from within. Movement is guided by memory, observation, social agreements, animal needs, rainfall, pasture conditions, water availability, disease risks, political boundaries and spiritual relationships.

Nomadism and transhumance

Nomadism: usually refers to more flexible movement across broad landscapes, often with households and herds moving together in response to changing conditions.

Transhumance: usually refers to seasonal movement between known ecological zones, such as winter lowlands and summer highlands. In practice, many pastoralist systems combine elements of both. The important point is not the label, but the relationship between movement, ecology and governance.

Pastoral mobility takes many forms. Nomadism often involves flexible movement across broad landscapes, sometimes with whole households moving together. Transhumance usually refers to more seasonal and cyclical movement between known ecological zones, such as winter lowlands and summer highlands. Some communities move long distances; others move within smaller territories. Some walk; others use trucks, motorbikes or mixed systems. Some maintain permanent homes while moving animals seasonally. Others live more continuously in mobile camps. These categories are useful, but real life is more fluid than definitions.

What unites these systems is not a single pattern of movement, but a logic: animals and people move because resources are uneven in space and time. Grass, water, salt, shade and safety are not available everywhere at once.

Moving allows pastoralists to connect different ecological zones into one living system. A dry plain, a mountain pasture, a forest edge, a wetland and a seasonal spring may each be used at the right moment. None is sufficient alone. Together, they form a territory of life.

Movement is also a form of knowledge. Pastoralists read landscapes through signs that many outsiders would miss. They observe the color and height of grasses, the condition of animal coats, the smell of soil after rain, the behavior of insects, the timing of plant flowering, the direction of winds, the quality of water, the presence of predators, the spread of disease, and the memories of previous droughts. This knowledge is practical, but it is also cultural. It is carried in songs, stories, proverbs, place names, rituals, jokes, warnings and everyday work.

In transhumant systems, routes may be remembered across generations. A family may know where to stop, where to avoid, where animals can drink, where elders negotiated access in the past, where conflicts occurred, where marriages connected communities, where ancestors are buried, and where certain plants appear after rain. The route is not only a line of movement. It is an archive.

Pastoral movement is often governed by rules. Communities may decide when a pasture opens, when it must rest, which households may use a water point, how long a group can remain in a place, what happens during drought, and how to resolve disputes. Access may be negotiated between clans, tribes, villages or neighboring communities. Rights may be seasonal rather than permanent. A group may have priority access at one time of year and reciprocal obligations at another. These arrangements can be complex, but they are not random.

In many pastoralist societies, movement also prevents conflict. When resources are variable, fixed exclusion can create tension. Flexible access and negotiated passage allow groups to survive difficult periods. During drought, one community may allow another to use emergency grazing. Later, the relationship may be reciprocated. Such systems require trust, reputation and memory. They are fragile

Territories in Motion

Pastoralist Territories of Life in a Changing World

when external actors impose rigid boundaries or when violence, militarization or political manipulation destroys inter-community relations.

Modern borders have made movement harder. National boundaries may cut across older migration routes. Protected areas may block access to water or seasonal grazing. Farms, fences, roads, mines and urban expansion may fragment corridors. Anti-grazing laws may criminalize practices that once sustained landscapes. Even when pastoralists are legally allowed to move, bureaucratic systems may demand permits, fees, veterinary documents or administrative approvals that do not match ecological realities.

The loss of mobility can be devastating. When herds cannot move, they may be forced to remain too long in one place. Pastures may be overused. Animals may become weak. Households may depend more on purchased feed. Young people may leave. Women may carry heavier burdens. Conflicts may increase around remaining water points. Cultural knowledge linked to routes may fade. Conservation authorities may then point to concentrated grazing as evidence that pastoralists degrade land, ignoring that the degradation followed the restriction of movement.

This is why pastoralists and their allies increasingly argue that mobility is a right. It is not only a lifestyle preference. It is a condition for livelihood, culture, ecological health and survival. Rights to mobility include rights to

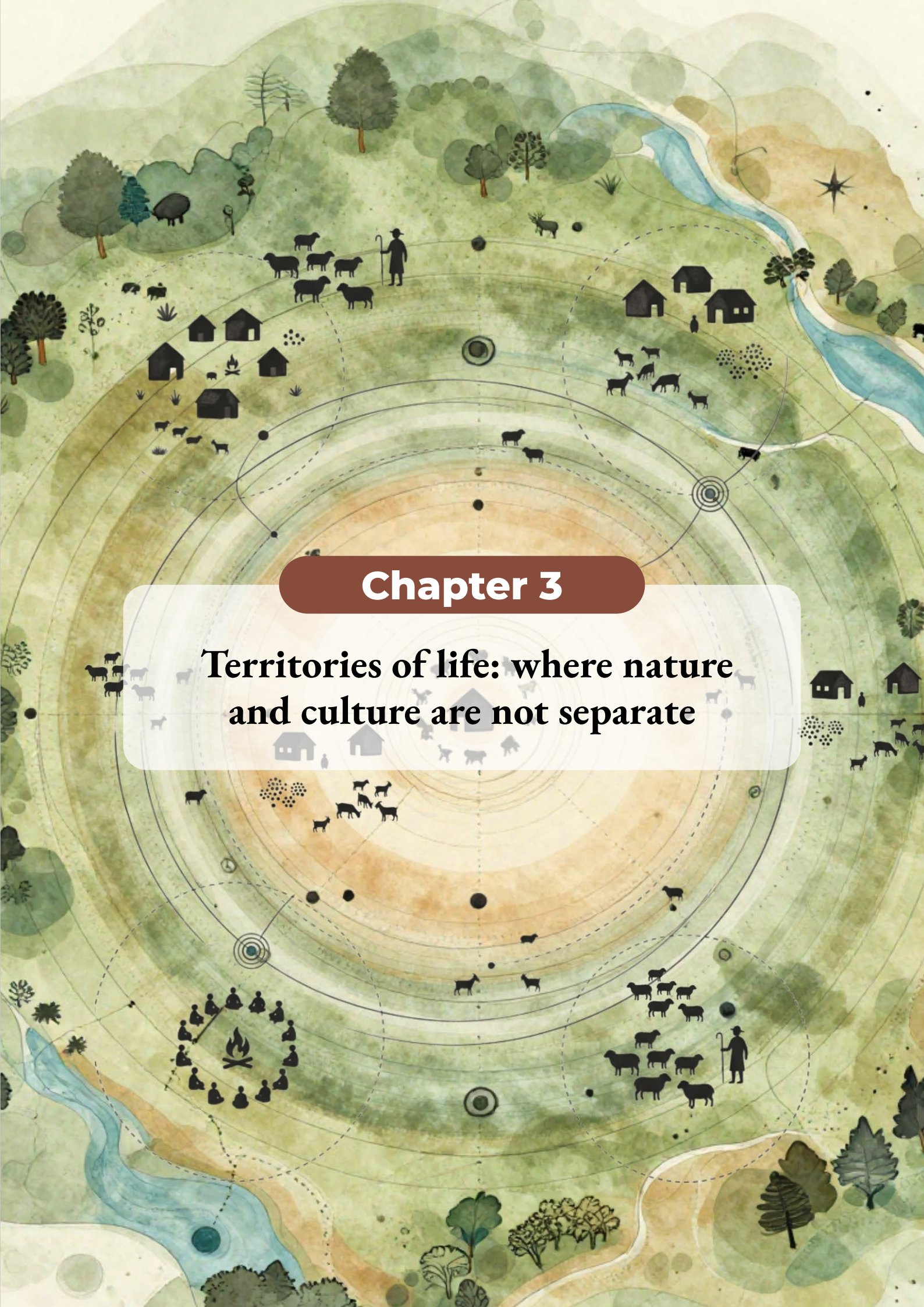
routes, corridors, water points, resting places, seasonal pastures, cross-border passage, information, security and participation in decisions that affect movement.

Movement also has a deeper meaning. It expresses a different way of understanding territory. In many contemporary legal systems, especially those shaped by sedentary ideas of property and administration, territory is imagined as a fixed area with boundaries. For pastoralists, territory may be more like a network: a set of relationships across places, seasons, communities, animals and obligations. It may expand or contract depending on rain, drought, conflict or agreements. It may include overlapping rights rather than exclusive ownership. It may be held in memory as much as in documents.

This does not make pastoral territory weak. It makes it adaptive. In a changing climate, societies everywhere are beginning to understand the value of flexibility. Pastoralists have long practiced it. Their mobility is not a failure to settle. It is a skilled response to living landscapes.

Key message

Pastoralist movement is not wandering. It is ecological knowledge in motion, governed through memory, rules, relationships and responsibility.



Chapter 3

**Territories of life: where nature
and culture are not separate**

Chapter 3

Territories of life: where nature and culture are not separate

For many pastoralist communities, land is not only land. It is memory, livelihood, identity, responsibility, kinship, spirituality and future. A spring is not only water. It may be a place of stories, conflict resolution, ritual, animal care and survival. A pasture is not only vegetation. It may be linked to a season, an elder's decision, a community agreement, a song, a drought, a birth, a wedding or a burial. A route is not only a path. It may be a thread connecting generations.

This is the heart of the idea of territories of life. A territory of life is not simply an area on a map. It is a living relationship between a community and the places, beings and processes that sustain it. It includes land, water, plants, animals, ancestors, knowledge, language, food, work, governance and care. It is conserved not because it has been emptied of people, but because people have developed ways of living with it.

In dominant conservation language, nature is often treated as something separate from human society. A forest, grassland or wetland is imagined as natural when people are absent, and degraded when people are present. This assumption has shaped many protected areas and conservation policies. It has also harmed Indigenous Peoples and local communities whose lives and governance systems have sustained landscapes for generations.

Pastoralist territories challenge this separation. In many pastoral landscapes, biodiversity and culture have developed together. Herding practices influence vegetation. Seasonal movement maintains habitat mosaics. Animal breeds are adapted to local conditions. Place names carry ecological information. Ritual closures may protect pastures. Oral histories remember droughts, conflicts, recoveries and agreements. Knowledge of grasses, water, animal health and weather is transmitted through daily life.

This is why pastoralist territories of life are biocultural. Biological diversity and cultural diversity are interwoven. A local breed is not only a genetic resource; it is part of a

community's history, economy, cuisine, songs and identity. A pasture is not only an ecosystem; it is part of a seasonal calendar, a governance system and a moral world. A milk product is not only food; it may carry women's knowledge, household dignity and cultural continuity.

The relationship between pastoralists and animals is also central. Livestock are not merely economic assets. They are companions in survival, sources of food, symbols of wealth, participants in rituals, carriers of memory and agents in shaping landscapes. Herders know individual animals: their temperaments, strengths, weaknesses, lineages and needs. Animals guide movement too. Their behavior can signal pasture quality, water stress, disease risk or approaching weather changes.

Wildlife also belongs to the story. In many rangelands, livestock and wildlife have long shared landscapes. This coexistence can be tense, especially where predators threaten herds or where conservation policies privilege wildlife tourism over pastoral livelihoods. But it can also be mutually sustaining when mobility corridors, water access and grazing systems are governed fairly. Pastoralists often hold detailed knowledge of wildlife movements, breeding seasons and habitat changes. Excluding them from conservation planning wastes this knowledge and can create conflict where cooperation is needed.

Territories of life are also moral landscapes. Rules are not only practical; they are ethical. A pasture may be closed not only because vegetation needs to recover, but because people have a responsibility not to take everything. Sharing water during drought may be necessary for survival, but it may also be a matter of honor. Breaking a grazing rule may damage more than grass; it may damage trust. Care for land, animals and community is often embedded in values that cannot be reduced to economic incentives.

This moral dimension is difficult for many policies to see. Bureaucracies tend to ask: Who owns the land? Where are the boundaries? What is the management plan?

How many animals are allowed? These questions may be important, but they are incomplete. Pastoralist territories also require other questions: Who has responsibility here? Who can move, when, and under what conditions? What relationships sustain access? Which places must rest? Which waters are shared? Which stories and obligations guide behavior? Who speaks for the territory, and who is accountable to the community?

The idea of territories of life helps make these questions visible. It gives a language for recognizing conservation that is rooted in community governance and living relationships. For pastoralists, it is especially relevant because their territories are often misunderstood by systems that expect fixed boundaries. A pastoralist territory may be more like a seasonal web than a fenced block. It may include routes and temporary rights, not only permanent occupation. It may be shared through reciprocal agreements rather than exclusive title.

Recognizing pastoralist territories of life does not mean freezing them in the past. Pastoralist societies are changing. Young people may use mobile phones, GPS, social media and new market networks. Women may organize cooperatives and claim stronger roles in decision-making. Communities may engage with governments, NGOs, scientists and global policy platforms. These changes can strengthen or weaken territories of life depending on whether they support community self-determination or impose outside agendas.

Nor should territories of life be romanticized. Pastoralist communities, like all societies, have internal inequalities,

conflicts and changing power relations. Gender, age, wealth, ethnicity and political connections can shape who benefits and who decides. A serious approach to territories of life must recognize both the strength of community governance and the need for justice within communities. Respecting pastoralists does not mean ignoring internal debates. It means supporting their capacity to address these debates through their own institutions and with full respect for human rights.

At their best, pastoralist territories of life offer a profound lesson: nature and culture are not separate worlds. They are woven together through practice, memory and responsibility. When policymakers see a pasture, they may see land use. When pastoralists see a pasture, they may see season, memory, animal health, family history, responsibility, conflict, cooperation and future. A territory of life begins when all of these dimensions are recognized together. Policy and practice that ignores this will remain incomplete. Policy and practice that learns from it can become more just, more effective and more alive.

Key message

Pastoralist territories of life are living relationships among communities, animals, lands, waters, biodiversity, memory, food, culture and responsibility.



Chapter 4

Governing life in motion

Chapter 4

Governing life in motion

Pastoralist territories of life do not sustain themselves by accident. They are governed. Their governance may not always be written in legal codes or management plans, but it exists in rules, practices, meetings, sanctions, stories, obligations and everyday decisions. It is often flexible, negotiated and layered, because the landscapes themselves are variable.

Governance in pastoralist societies begins with the practical questions of survival. Who can use which pasture? When should animals move? Which water points are open? Which areas should rest? What happens in drought? How are conflicts resolved? Who speaks to neighboring groups? How are young herders taught? Who cares for animals when families face hardship? How are widows, poorer households or families with small herds supported? These questions are not only ecological. They are social and political.

Many pastoralist communities have institutions that regulate access to pastures, forests, wetlands, water points and migration routes. These institutions may include elders' councils, clan assemblies, tribal leaders, seasonal meetings, women's networks, youth groups, religious authorities, herding cooperatives, pasture user groups or community conservancy committees. Their names and forms differ, but they often share a common purpose: to coordinate collective life in landscapes where individual survival depends on cooperation.

The rules of pastoral governance are often adapted to ecological conditions. A pasture may be opened only after grasses have seeded. A forest may be used only in emergency. A wetland may be reserved for the dry season. A migration route may be used according to an agreed calendar. A water point may be shared with neighbors under specific conditions. A group arriving too early or staying too long may face criticism, fines, exclusion or loss of reputation.

Monitoring is often social. Herders see one another. They know whose animals entered a closed pasture. They know who respected the agreement and who did not. In small-scale and mobile systems, reputation matters. A household that breaks rules may not receive help in a crisis. A leader

who favors relatives may lose legitimacy. A community that refuses reciprocal access may face the same refusal later.

Conflict resolution is central. In variable environments, disputes are inevitable. Animals cross boundaries. Rain fails. Water becomes scarce. Young herders make mistakes. External actors create new pressures. Pastoralist institutions often include mechanisms for mediation: elders may gather, witnesses may speak, compensation may be agreed, apologies may be made, and relationships may be repaired. The goal is not only to punish but to restore coexistence.

This is why pastoral territories should never be confused with open access. Open access means there are no effective rules. Pastoral territories are different. They are shared commons governed through collective norms, rights and responsibilities. Access is not simply free; it is embedded in belonging, negotiation, reciprocity and accountability.

In some places, pastoral governance is strongly linked to customary tenure. Rights may be held by clans, tribes, villages, lineages, Indigenous institutions or community associations. These rights may not look like private property. They may be seasonal, overlapping, conditional or shared. A group may have the right to pass through a route but not settle there. Another may have dry-season access to a pasture but not wet-season control. A water point may be open to outsiders during emergency but governed by local custodians in normal times.

Modern land laws often struggle to understand this complexity. They prefer clear owners, fixed boundaries and exclusive rights. But pastoral territories often work through layered rights. The same place may serve different groups at different times. The same route may connect several territories. The same water point may be part of a wider network of obligations. If law recognizes only fixed ownership, it may destroy the flexibility that makes pastoral governance work.

This is one reason why recognition must be careful. Legal recognition can help protect pastoralist territories

from land grabbing, exclusionary conservation and state neglect. It can give communities stronger voice in policy processes. It can support mapping, documentation and inter-community agreements. But if recognition forces communities to simplify their territories into rigid boundaries, it can create new problems. It may freeze flexible systems. It may empower some leaders over others. It may exclude women, youth or neighboring groups. It may turn living governance into paperwork.

Good recognition should strengthen self-governance, not replace it. It should recognize mobility, routes, corridors, water points, seasonal rights, emergency access and customary institutions. It should respect legal pluralism: the coexistence of customary law, community rules, state law and human rights. It should ensure that communities participate as rights-holders and decision-makers, not as passive beneficiaries or stakeholders.

Pastoralist governance is also changing. In Mongolia, pasture user groups have emerged in some areas to coordinate grazing and interact with local governments. In parts of East Africa, community conservancies and grazing associations have created new forms of governance that combine pastoral livelihoods with wildlife conservation, tourism and development projects. In the Sahel, pastoral committees and local land commissions may help negotiate corridors and reduce conflict. In the Andes, community assemblies continue to govern high-altitude pastures while engaging with municipalities, conservation actors or mining conflicts. In the Mediterranean, transhumant associations defend drove roads and pastoral heritage within policy systems.

These hybrid institutions can create opportunities. They can bring resources, visibility and legal support. They can help communities engage with governments and donors. They can support women's cooperatives, youth mapping, early-warning systems or ecological monitoring. But they also bring risks. External funding may distort priorities. Tourism may create inequalities. State recognition may favor formal leaders over customary accountability. Conservation projects may use the language of participation while keeping real power outside the community.

For this reason, the governance of pastoralist territories of life must always be judged by a simple question: who decides? If decisions are made by communities through accountable institutions, recognition can be empowering.

If decisions are made by governments, companies or NGOs while communities are only consulted, the language of participation can hide continued control.

Women and youth deserve special attention. In many pastoralist societies, formal authority has been dominated by men and elders. Yet women often hold essential knowledge about milk processing, animal health, household food security, medicinal plants, water use, trade, social support and cultural transmission. Youth provide herding labor, technological innovation, mapping skills and new political imagination. Strengthening pastoralist territories of life requires recognizing these roles and supporting more inclusive governance without imposing external models that ignore local realities.

Governance in motion is not easy. It requires constant negotiation. It must respond to drought, disease, markets, conflict, education, technology, state law and changing aspirations. But this is precisely its strength. Pastoralist governance has never been only about preserving old rules. It is about adapting rules while maintaining relationships of responsibility.

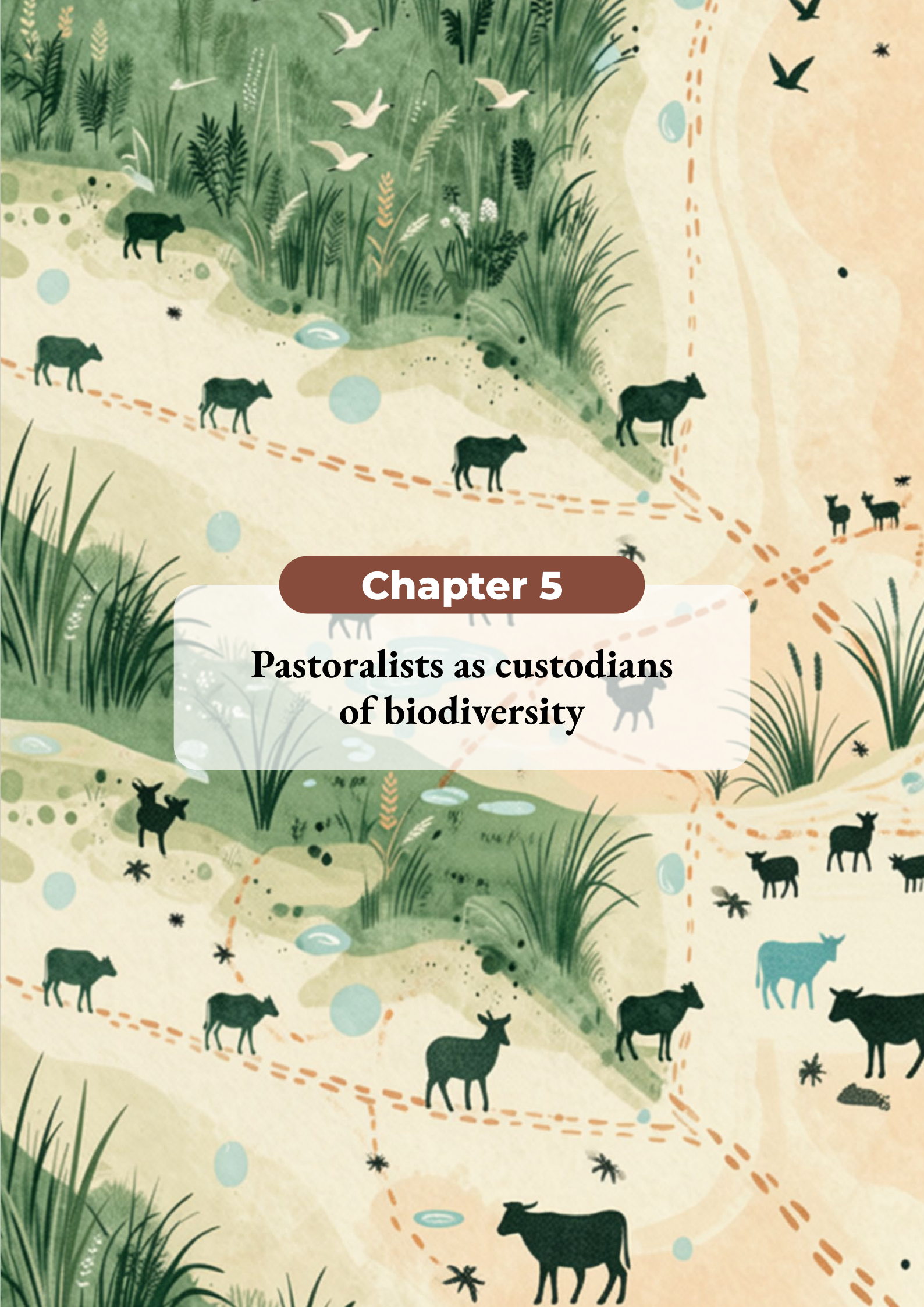
Policy note

Recognizing pastoralist territories of life requires more than recognizing land parcels. It requires recognizing systems of mobility, seasonal rights, water access, customary institutions, conflict resolution and collective responsibility.

In a world facing climate uncertainty, many societies are searching for adaptive governance. Pastoralists have practiced it for generations. Their institutions show that flexibility does not mean lack of order. Shared use does not mean lack of responsibility. Movement does not mean lack of territory. And conservation does not require removing people from the land.

Key message

Pastoralist territories of life are governed through flexible, collective and accountable institutions that match the changing realities of rangelands.



Chapter 5

Pastoralists as custodians of biodiversity

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Pastoralists as custodians of biodiversity

Pastoralists are often portrayed as a threat to nature. This image is deeply misleading. In many landscapes, pastoralists are not outside nature, nor simply users of nature. They are custodians of ecological relationships that have been shaped over generations. Their knowledge, movement and institutions can sustain biodiversity in ways that static conservation models often fail to recognize.

The idea that conservation requires the absence of people is powerful but limited. It has produced national parks, strict protected areas and wildlife reserves where communities are excluded or heavily restricted. In some contexts, strict protection may be needed to address specific threats. But when applied without understanding local governance, it can cause injustice and ecological harm. This is especially true in pastoral landscapes, where biodiversity often depends on movement, grazing, burning, resting, seed dispersal and coexistence between livestock and wildlife.

Pastoralism can support biodiversity through landscape mosaics. When herds move, they graze some areas while leaving others to rest. This creates variation in vegetation height, plant composition and habitat structure. Different species benefit from different conditions. Some plants respond well to grazing. Some birds prefer open grasslands. Some insects depend on dung. Some wild herbivores use areas after livestock have moved. In Mediterranean, African, Asian and Andean landscapes, long-term grazing has contributed to cultural landscapes rich in both biodiversity and human history.

Mobility also supports connectivity. Many species need to move across landscapes to find food, water, breeding areas or seasonal habitat. Pastoralist routes and open rangelands can function as ecological corridors. When these routes are blocked by fences, farms, infrastructure, protected-area boundaries or conflict, both livestock and wildlife may suffer. Supporting pastoral mobility can therefore support wider landscape connectivity.

Livestock themselves are part of biodiversity. Local breeds are adapted to heat, cold, altitude, drought, disease, long-distance walking and low-quality forage. They carry genetic

diversity that may become increasingly important under climate change. Industrial livestock systems often favor a narrow range of high-output breeds dependent on feed, veterinary inputs and controlled environments. Pastoralist breeds, by contrast, reflect generations of adaptation to specific landscapes. Losing pastoralism can mean losing these breeds and the knowledge systems that sustain them.

Pastoralists also contribute to soil fertility and nutrient cycling. Animals move nutrients across landscapes through manure and urine. Hooves can help incorporate organic matter into soils when grazing pressure is appropriate. Grazing can stimulate plant growth in some contexts. By consuming dry vegetation, livestock may reduce fuel loads and help lower fire risk in certain landscapes. These processes vary by ecosystem, season and management, but they show that grazing is not simply extraction. It is part of ecological circulation.

Pastoralist knowledge is also vital for monitoring environmental change. Herders observe pasture conditions, water availability, animal health, wildlife movement, invasive species, disease patterns and weather shifts. Because they move through landscapes regularly, they often detect changes long before external researchers or government agencies. Community-based monitoring can bring this knowledge into conservation, climate adaptation and land-use planning, but only if pastoralists are treated as knowledge holders, not just informants.

The language of “degradation” must be used carefully. Some rangelands are degraded. Some grazing practices are harmful. Some areas suffer from overstocking, erosion, shrub encroachment, invasive species or soil decline. But degradation is often complex. It may result from blocked mobility, land fragmentation, poorly designed water points, sedentarization, conflict, market pressures, drought, mining, industrial agriculture or conservation exclusion. Blaming pastoralists without analyzing these causes is both unjust and ineffective.

A central problem is that many conservation actors interpret variability as degradation. A dryland may look

poor in a dry year and abundant after rain. A landscape may appear sparse from a temperate agricultural perspective but be functioning well according to dryland ecology. A pasture may be temporarily grazed down as part of a wider rotation. Without local knowledge, external assessments can misread normal seasonal dynamics as ecological collapse.

Pastoralist territories of life offer a different conservation model: conservation in motion. This does not mean that everything pastoralists do is automatically conservation. It means that conservation outcomes can emerge from mobile livelihoods, customary rules and biocultural responsibilities. Resting pastures, protecting water sources, maintaining local breeds, conserving sacred sites, regulating access, moving herds and sustaining corridors can all contribute to biodiversity.

This model is especially important in the implementation of global biodiversity, climate change and desertification goals. As countries expand protected and conserved areas, there is a risk that pastoral lands will be targeted as easy spaces for conservation expansion, restoration, carbon projects or biodiversity offsets. If this happens without recognizing pastoralist rights, it could repeat old injustices under new green language. But if pastoralist territories of life are recognized as legitimate governance systems, they can contribute to these goals while strengthening community governance.

For this to happen, policy must shift from control to relationship. It must stop treating pastoralists as problems to be managed and start recognizing them as rights-holders, knowledge holders and co-custodians of living landscapes. It must support community-defined priorities, secure collective tenure, mobility rights, conflict resolution, gender-inclusive governance and intergenerational knowledge transmission. It must measure success not only by hectares protected, but by the vitality of relationships that sustain life.

Examples from different regions show the potential. In Mediterranean transhumance, seasonal grazing routes can maintain open habitats and cultural heritage. In Moroccan agdal systems, seasonal closures regulate access and allow regeneration. In parts of East Africa, community-led grazing plans can support both livestock and wildlife movement. In Andean highlands, communal governance of pastures and wetlands can protect water systems while sustaining camelid herding. In Iran, practices such as seasonal migration, rotational grazing and temporary pasture exclusion show how community rules can support vegetation recovery and landscape stewardship.

These examples are diverse and imperfect. They clearly show that nature conservation is not limited to parks without people. In many rangelands, people and animals have helped create the ecological conditions that conservation now seeks to protect.

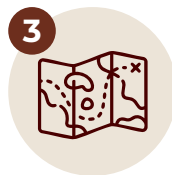
Five ways pastoralism can support nature conservation



Resting pastures through movement: seasonal mobility allows vegetation to recover.



Maintaining habitat mosaics: varied grazing patterns create diverse habitats.



Connecting landscapes: routes and corridors support movement of livestock and wildlife.



Cycling nutrients: manure, grazing and movement contribute to soil processes.



Sustaining local breeds: pastoralism protects animal genetic diversity adapted to local environments.

Key message

Pastoralists can be custodians of biodiversity through movement, restraint, knowledge and care. Conservation should recognize and support these living systems rather than replace them.



Chapter 6

Food, livelihoods and biocultural economies



Chapter 6

Food, livelihoods and biocultural economies

Pastoralism is often discussed as land use, culture or conservation. It is also a food system. Across the world's rangelands, pastoralists transform grasses, shrubs, leaves and plants that humans cannot eat into milk, meat, fiber, hides, manure and other products. They do this in landscapes where crop agriculture may be limited, risky or impossible. In doing so, they sustain families, local markets, urban consumers, cultural identities and regional economies.

Pastoral food systems are diverse. They include cow, camel, goat, sheep, yak, reindeer, llama, alpaca, buffalo and other animals depending on the region. They produce fresh milk, fermented milk, butter, yogurt, cheese, meat, blood in some cultures, wool, hair, hides and dung fuel. They support trade networks, festivals, hospitality traditions, household nutrition, women's work, youth labor and local economies.

Milk is central in many pastoralist societies. It may be consumed fresh, fermented, dried, churned into butter or transformed into cheese. Milk products often carry deep cultural meaning. They are linked to hospitality, care, ritual, women's knowledge and household dignity. In drylands and highlands where other foods may be scarce, milk can provide protein, fat, calcium and micronutrients. In many places, women play a leading role in processing and selling milk products, even when men dominate formal livestock ownership or public decision-making.

Meat is also important, but pastoralism is not only about meat production. Animals are living savings, sources of milk, manure, transport, fiber, social status, bridewealth, ritual value and emergency security. A herd is not simply a stock of commodities. It is a social and ecological institution. Decisions about selling, slaughtering, lending or breeding animals are shaped by household needs, market conditions, cultural obligations, drought risk and long-term resilience.

Pastoralist economies often include sharing and reciprocity. Herd lending, milk sharing, collective herding, labor exchange and support for poorer households can

help distribute risk. These practices are part of what may be called moral economies: systems where economic life is embedded in social obligations. Food is not only bought and sold. It is shared, gifted, exchanged and used to maintain relationships.

This matters for food security. In many regions, pastoralists supply important amounts of meat and milk to rural and urban markets. Yet their contributions are often underestimated in national statistics. Mobile production is hard to count. Informal markets are overlooked. Household consumption may not be recorded. Women's processing work may be invisible. As a result, policies often undervalue pastoralism and invest instead in sedentary agriculture, industrial livestock or imported food systems.

Pastoralism also offers lessons for sustainable food debates. Global discussions about livestock often treat all animal production as the same. But industrial, intensive feedlot systems and extensive pastoral systems are very different. Industrial systems may depend on cultivated feed, irrigation, fossil fuels, long supply chains, antibiotics and confined animals. Pastoral systems rely more directly on natural vegetation, movement and local knowledge. Their climate impacts and ecological roles must be assessed in context.

This does not mean pastoralism has no environmental impacts. Livestock produce methane. Herd sizes can become unsustainable if governance fails or markets push expansion beyond ecological limits. Purchased feed and transport can change the ecological balance of pastoral systems. But simplistic anti-livestock narratives can harm pastoralists by ignoring the difference between industrial overproduction and mobile systems adapted to rangelands.

A fair food policy must ask better questions. What kind of livestock system is being discussed? Are animals mobile or confined? Are they eating human-edible crops or using rangeland vegetation? Are local breeds being maintained? Who controls the land? Are women benefiting? Are communities governing grazing collectively? Are pastoralists able to access markets on

fair terms? Are routes and water points protected? Are cultural food systems respected?

Pastoral foods are also biocultural. A cheese, a fermented milk, a camel product, a smoked meat, a wool craft or a ritual feast may carry the story of a landscape. Recipes and processing techniques encode knowledge of climate, animal breeds, storage, taste, health and social relations. Losing pastoralism can mean losing foods, words, songs, tools, breeds and memories. Protecting pastoralist territories of life therefore means protecting food cultures as well as ecosystems.

Markets create both opportunities and risks. New demand for grass-fed, organic, local or heritage products can support pastoralists if communities control the terms of production and benefit fairly. Cooperatives can improve bargaining power. Women's milk groups can generate income and recognition. Origin labels and cultural heritage initiatives can connect pastoral products to landscape stewardship. But markets can also create dependency, inequality and pressure to increase herd numbers. Middlemen may capture profits. Certification systems may be too expensive or bureaucratic. Tourism may turn living cultures into performances for outsiders.

The challenge is to build economies that strengthen territories of life rather than extract from them. This means supporting local processing, community-controlled value chains, fair prices, women's leadership, youth opportunities, animal health services, mobile education, veterinary care, infrastructure designed for mobility, and market systems that respect seasonal production.

Food sovereignty is an important idea here. It means the right of peoples to define their own food systems in ways that reflect their cultures, ecologies and priorities. For pastoralists, food sovereignty includes the right to mobility, land, water, breeds, knowledge, markets and governance. Without these rights, pastoral food systems cannot survive.

Public message

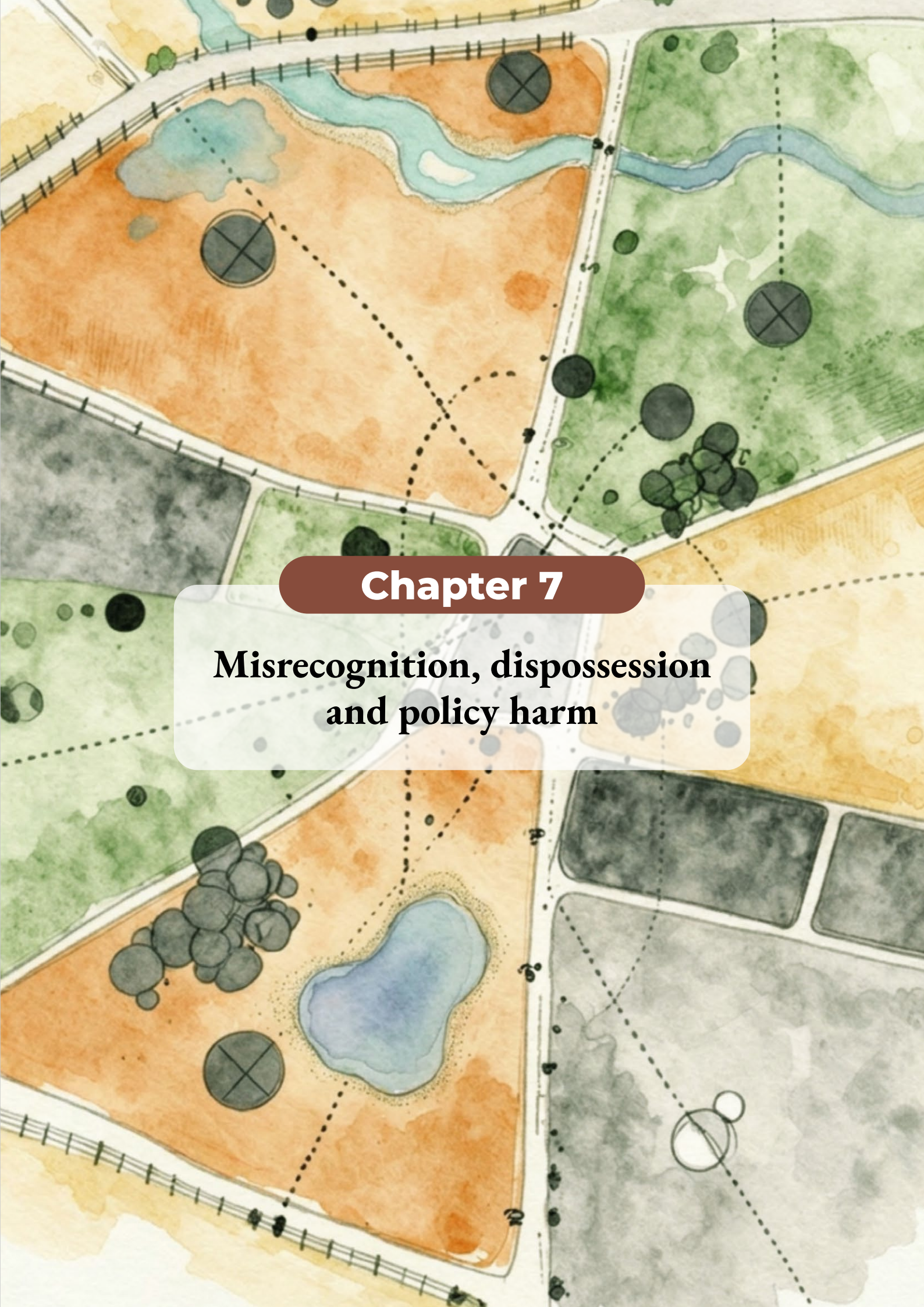
When we drink milk, eat cheese, wear wool or share meat from pastoral systems, we are not only consuming a product. We are touching a living relationship among animals, people, landscapes, seasons and knowledge.

Pastoralism also connects rural and urban worlds. Urban consumers may drink milk, eat meat or use wool without knowing the landscapes and communities behind them. Public education can help change this. Pastoral products could be presented not only as commodities, but as expressions of living rangelands. Food festivals, school programs, documentaries, public markets and storytelling campaigns can help people understand that every pastoral product carries relationships among land, animals and communities.

In a world facing climate uncertainty, food crises and cultural homogenization, pastoralist food systems offer a different vision of abundance. Not abundance through control and uniformity, but abundance through diversity, mobility, reciprocity and adaptation. They remind us that food is not only produced; it is lived.

Key message

Pastoralism is a food system, a cultural system and an ecological system. Supporting pastoralist territories of life means supporting food sovereignty, local economies and biocultural diversity.

A watercolor illustration of a landscape with various colored areas (orange, green, grey), a winding river, and several circular features marked with an 'X'. Dotted lines connect some of these features across the landscape. A central text box is overlaid on the image.

Chapter 7

Misrecognition, dispossession and policy harm

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Misrecognition, dispossession and policy harm

Many of the greatest threats to pastoralist territories of life begin with misrecognition. Before a route is blocked, before a pasture is privatized, before a community is excluded from a protected area, before a rangeland is taken for a carbon project or plantation, there is often a story that makes dispossession seem reasonable. The story says the land is empty. The people are backward. The animals are destructive. The commons are unmanaged. The solution is control.

This story has deep roots. For decades, pastoralists have been portrayed as inefficient, irrational or environmentally harmful. Their mobility has been treated as disorder. Their collective tenure has been confused with open access. Their territories have been labeled underused or degraded. Their knowledge has been dismissed as traditional in the negative sense: old, unscientific, resistant to progress.

One influential version of this story is the idea of the “tragedy of the commons.” The phrase is often used to claim that shared resources will inevitably be overused because individuals act selfishly. But this argument confuses open access with governed commons. Pastoralist territories are rarely free-for-all systems. They are governed through rules, responsibilities and social accountability. The real tragedy is not that communities share land. The real tragedy occurs when external powers undermine the institutions that make sharing work.

When states nationalize rangelands without recognizing customary rights, they may weaken local governance. When land is privatized, migration routes can be fragmented. When conservation areas exclude pastoralists from water and pasture, herds may be forced into smaller areas. When agriculture expands into corridors, conflict may increase. When development projects treat mobile peoples as administratively inconvenient, services may be designed for sedentary populations and pastoralists may be left behind.

Sedentarization has been one of the most persistent policy pressures. Governments often justify settlement by arguing that it improves service delivery, education, health care,

taxation, security or land management. Some pastoralists may choose to settle partly or fully, and their choices should be respected. The problem arises when settlement is imposed or when mobility is made impossible. Forced or pressured sedentarization can undermine livelihoods, weaken knowledge transmission, increase dependence on aid or markets, and concentrate grazing pressure.

Fortress conservation has also caused harm. This model treats nature as best protected when people are excluded. In pastoralist regions, it has led to evictions, restricted access, criminalization of grazing, conflict with park authorities and loss of sacred or livelihood spaces. In some places, pastoralists have been removed to create parks for wildlife tourism, even though their own land-use systems helped maintain the landscapes tourists come to see.

Even newer conservation approaches can reproduce old problems. Community-based conservation, carbon offsets, biodiversity credits, restoration projects and climate mitigation schemes may use the language of participation while leaving real control in the hands of governments, companies or international organizations. If pastoralists are consulted but cannot decide, if benefits are captured by elites, if mobility is restricted, or if community governance is replaced by external management plans, then green projects can become green grabbing.

Green grabbing occurs when land or resources are appropriated in the name of environmental protection. A rangeland may be declared degraded and targeted for tree planting, even if it is a healthy grassland. A pastoral territory may be enrolled in a carbon scheme that restricts grazing. A conservation corridor may be created without recognizing customary rights. A biodiversity offset may protect land for distant damage while displacing local users. These projects may appear progressive, but they can repeat colonial patterns of control.

Misrecognition also appears in data. Pastoralist contributions to food systems, biodiversity and economies are

often undercounted. Mobile populations may be missing from censuses. Informal trade may be ignored. Women's work may be invisible. Customary institutions may not appear in official governance records. Rangelands may be mapped as vacant, degraded or state-owned even when communities have governed them for generations. What is not counted is often not protected.

Policy language can be harmful when it simplifies reality. Terms such as “stakeholder” may reduce rights-holders to interested parties. “Participation” may mean attending a meeting rather than sharing power. “Sustainable management” may mean following an external plan rather than strengthening community governance. “Restoration” may mean changing a landscape to fit outside expectations rather than supporting the ecological relationships already present.

This does not mean that all state policies or conservation initiatives are harmful. Some legal reforms recognize pastoral corridors, community land, collective tenure or co-management. Some protected and conserved areas are moving toward rights-based approaches. Some governments and civil society organizations support participatory mapping, mobile services, conflict mediation and pastoralist representation. The point is not to reject all external support. The point is to ask whether support strengthens or weakens pastoralist self-governance.

A rights-based approach begins with recognition. Pastoralists are not merely beneficiaries of development or stakeholders. They are peoples, communities, citizens, knowledge holders and rights-holders. Their rights include land, water, culture, food, participation, mobility, self-governance, security and freedom from discrimination. For Indigenous pastoralists, these rights may also include

rights recognized under international Indigenous Peoples' standards, including free, prior and informed consent.

Recognition must also be practical. It is not enough to praise pastoralists in speeches while allowing their routes to be blocked. It is not enough to include them in policy documents while excluding them from decisions. It is not enough to map their territories without protecting them from land grabbing. It is not enough to count pastoral lands toward biodiversity, climate or desertification targets while restricting the communities that practice them.

The shift needed is profound but clear. Pastoralism should not be treated as a problem to be solved. It should be understood as a living system to be respected, supported and governed by its own people. Policies should be built around mobility, not against it. Conservation should be built around coexistence, not exclusion. Development should support pastoralist aspirations, not impose sedentary models. Climate action should strengthen rangeland stewardship, not create new enclosures.

The first step is to change the story. Once pastoralists are seen as custodians rather than destroyers, as knowledge holders rather than backward people, as rights-holders rather than beneficiaries, policy possibilities change. Routes become infrastructure of life. Commons become governed territories. Rangelands become living landscapes. Movement becomes intelligence. Conservation becomes relationship.

Key message

The problem is not pastoralism itself. The problem is the misrecognition of pastoralist governance, the restriction of mobility and the dispossession of territories of life.

Myth and reality

Myth: Commons inevitably lead to degradation.

Reality: Governed commons can sustain landscapes through rules, monitoring, sanctions and shared responsibility.

Myth: Settlement is always progress.

Reality: Forced sedentarization can destroy mobility-based systems and create ecological and social harm.

Myth: Green projects are always good.

Reality: Conservation, carbon and restoration projects can become green grabbing if they ignore pastoralist rights.

A watercolor illustration of a landscape. A winding river flows from the top right towards the bottom left. The left bank is a sandy, orange-brown area with sparse green grass and small bushes. Several goats and sheep are grazing here. Three people, two men and one woman, are standing together in the middle of this area. The right bank is a steep, green hillside with contour lines and some trees. A dotted line follows the curve of the river, possibly indicating a path or boundary. The overall style is soft and artistic, using a palette of greens, oranges, and browns.

Chapter 8

**Pastoralists are
changing the future**

Chapter 8

Pastoralists are changing the future

Pastoralist communities are often described through crisis: the last nomads, disappearing traditions, degraded lands, conflict, poverty and decline. These stories contain fragments of truth. Many pastoralists do face severe threats. But crisis is not the whole story. Across the world, pastoralists are adapting, organizing, resisting, innovating and shaping new futures.

Adaptation begins at the community level. Herders adjust routes, diversify herds, negotiate access, restore pastures, revive customary rules, organize cooperatives, use mobile phones, monitor weather, map territories and build alliances. Some combine herding with small-scale farming, wage labor, trade, handicrafts, tourism or seasonal work. These strategies are not always easy and may create new inequalities, but they show that pastoralism is not frozen in time. It is changing.

In some regions, communities are revitalizing customary governance. Seasonal grazing rules are being renewed. Pasture committees are being formed. Elders' knowledge is being documented. Women's groups are organizing around milk, wool, savings and local markets. Youth are mapping routes, filming stories, using social media and connecting local struggles to global movements. These efforts show that tradition and innovation are not opposites. Pastoralist futures may depend on both.

Community mapping has become an important tool. Maps can document routes, water points, sacred sites, seasonal pastures, conflict zones, wildlife corridors and areas threatened by development. But mapping must be handled carefully. Not all knowledge should be made public. Some sacred or strategic information may need protection. Community control over data is essential. A map should not become another tool for outsiders to control pastoral territories. It should support community self-determination.

Technology is also changing pastoralism. Mobile phones help herders communicate about pasture, water, markets, conflict and weather. GPS can support route documentation. Satellite information can

help track vegetation, though it must be interpreted with local knowledge. Digital storytelling can bring pastoralist voices to public audiences. Online networks can connect communities across regions. But technology is useful only when it strengthens relationships and rights. It cannot replace land, water, animals, institutions or trust.

Women are central to pastoralist futures. In many communities, women manage milk, household nutrition, small livestock, processing, trade, social support and cultural transmission. They may know medicinal plants, water sources, animal care practices and food preservation techniques. Yet they are often excluded from formal and informal decision-making. Supporting women's leadership in pastoralist territories of life is not simply a gender project; it is essential for the vitality of governance, food systems and intergenerational knowledge.

Youth are equally important. Many young pastoralists face difficult choices. Education may open opportunities but also distance them from herding. Urban work may bring income but weaken ties to territory. Some young people may feel shame because pastoralism is portrayed as backward. Others are reclaiming pastoral identity with pride, using new tools to defend old routes and imagine new futures. International and globally relevant processes, such as IYRP 2026, should create space for young pastoralists to speak for themselves, not only as inheritors of tradition but as designers of change.

Pastoralist resistance is also shaping the future. Communities have challenged evictions, opposed land grabbing, defended forests and rangelands, negotiated with governments, filed legal cases, formed federations and built international campaigns. Their struggles are not only local. They connect to global debates on biodiversity, climate justice, food sovereignty, Indigenous Peoples' rights, land governance and human rights in conservation.

The global pastoralist movement has grown through networks, alliances and policy spaces. The World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples, the IYRP movement,

regional pastoralist organizations, Indigenous networks, civil society alliances and territories of life networks have helped amplify pastoralist voices. These platforms allow communities from different continents to recognize shared challenges: blocked mobility, land loss, misrepresentation, climate stress, exclusion from policy and the need for recognition.

The phrase “movement is governance” captures a powerful idea. Pastoralists are not asking merely for the freedom to move. They are asking for recognition that movement itself is part of how landscapes are governed. Routes, corridors and seasonal access are not secondary details. They are central institutions of life.

Policy engagement is increasingly important. Pastoralists and their allies are participating in biodiversity negotiations, climate forums, desertification discussions, land rights processes, food system debates and rangeland initiatives. New global frameworks, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, especially their targets on restoration and the protection of nature, land and resources, create both risks and opportunities. If implemented through exclusionary models, they could accelerate dispossession. If implemented through rights-based recognition of territories of life, they could support pastoralist governance.

These policy spaces, frameworks, and special initiatives, including the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026, should therefore be more than a celebration. They should be a turning point. They should shift public narratives, strengthen pastoralist organizations, influence national policies, support community-led documentation, protect mobility corridors, recognize collective tenure, promote women’s and youth leadership, and connect pastoralist food systems to sustainability agendas.

Several pathways are essential.

First, legal systems must recognize mobility. This includes seasonal routes, water points, emergency grazing, transboundary movement and negotiated access. Without mobility, pastoralism cannot function.

Second, collective tenure must be protected. Pastoralist rights often do not fit private property models. Laws must recognize shared, overlapping and seasonal rights.

Third, conservation must be rights-based. Pastoralists should not be displaced or restricted in the name of nature restoration or conservation. Their territories of life should be recognized as contributions to restoration and conservation when communities define and govern them.

Fourth, pastoralist knowledge must shape policy. Herders, women, elders and youth should be involved not as symbolic participants, but as decision-makers and knowledge holders.

Fifth, public narratives must change. Media, schools, museums, food campaigns and policy spaces should present pastoralists as innovators of coexistence, not as remnants of the past.

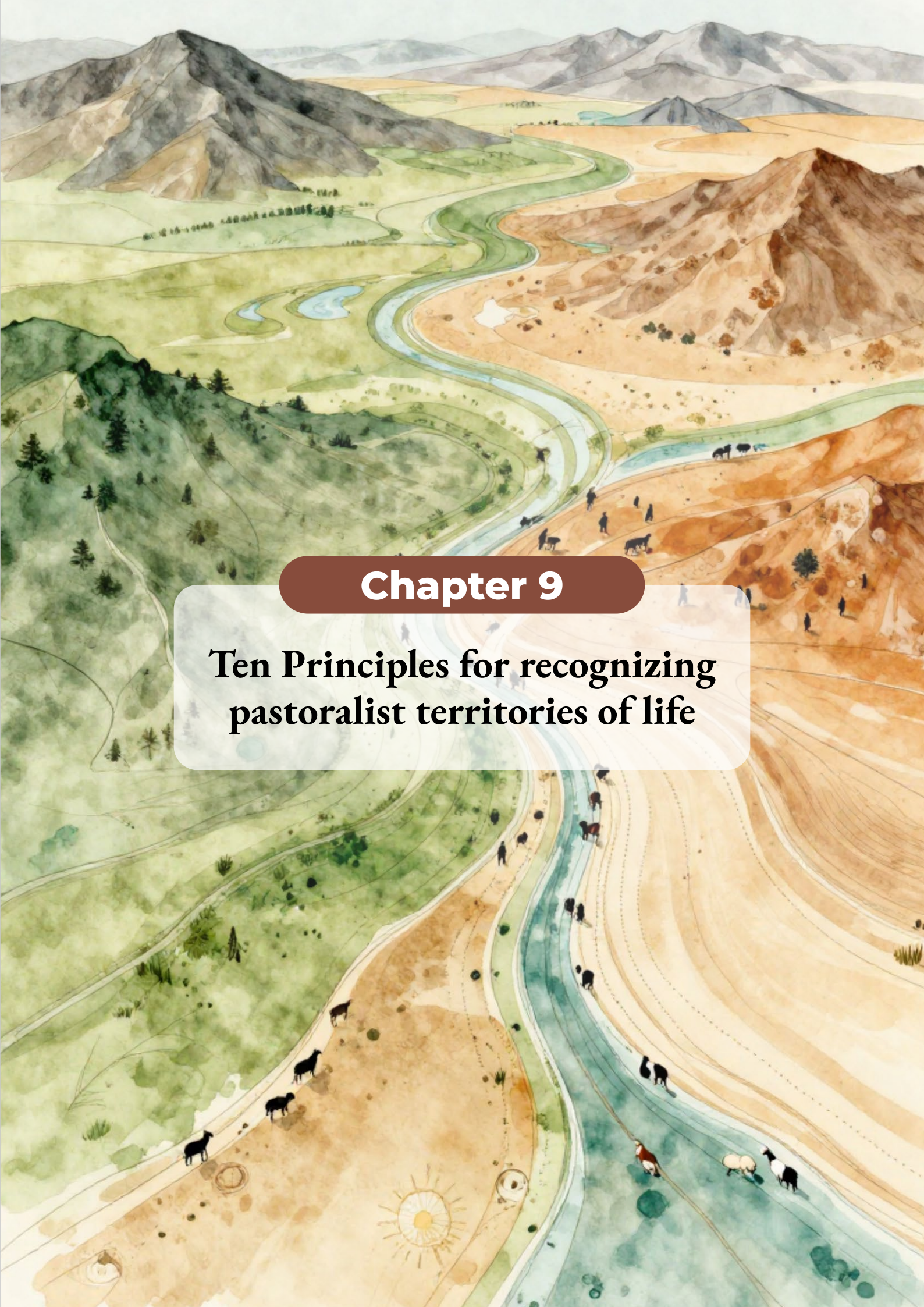
Sixth, resources must reach communities. Funding should support community governance, mapping, conflict resolution, women’s cooperatives, youth initiatives, local monitoring, language revitalization, pastoralist schools, mobile services and direct participation in policy spaces.

Finally, solidarity must be long-term. Pastoralist communities do not need short projects that disappear after producing reports. They need respectful partnerships that follow their priorities, strengthen their institutions and remain accountable to them.

Pastoralists are changing the future because they offer something the world urgently needs: ways to live with uncertainty without surrendering to chaos or control. Their systems are not perfect, but they carry principles of resilience: flexibility, reciprocity, restraint, memory, diversity and responsibility. These principles matter far beyond rangelands.

Key message

Pastoralists are not passive victims of change. They are organizing, adapting and offering living models of resilience for an uncertain world.



Chapter 9

Ten Principles for recognizing pastoralist territories of life

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Ten Principles for recognizing pastoralist territories of life

Pastoralist territories of life cannot be protected by words alone. Recognition must become policy, law, funding, institutional practice and public understanding. It must be grounded in the self-determined priorities of pastoralist communities and adapted to the diversity of pastoral systems. There is no single model that works everywhere. But there are shared principles that can guide action.

The first principle is mobility. Mobility should be treated as a governance function, not as a problem. This means protecting migration routes, corridors, resting areas, seasonal pastures, water points and cross-border passage. Roads, farms, protected areas, mines, military zones and urban expansion should be planned with pastoral mobility in mind. Environmental impact assessments should consider effects on routes and seasonal access, not only fixed settlements.

The second principle is collective tenure. Many pastoralist territories are governed through shared and overlapping rights. Policy should recognize communal land, seasonal rights, customary tenure, Indigenous territories, community conserved areas and negotiated access systems. Private titling may help some communities in some contexts, but it can also fragment commons. Legal reforms must be designed with pastoralists, not imposed on them.

The third principle is legal pluralism. Customary institutions, state law and human rights frameworks need to interact respectfully. Customary governance should be recognized where it supports community well-being and ecological stewardship, while also ensuring the rights of women, youth and marginalized groups. Legal pluralism does not mean accepting injustice inside communities. It means creating space for communities to govern themselves while upholding fundamental rights.

The fourth principle is rights-based conservation. Protected and conserved areas should not be created or expanded at the expense of pastoralist communities. Where pastoralist

territories already conserve nature, they should be recognized and supported. Conservation and restoration planning should begin by asking which communities govern the landscape, what rights exist, what knowledge is held, what institutions are active and how communities define conservation priorities.

The fifth principle is full and effective participation. Participation cannot mean simply inviting pastoralists to workshops after decisions have been made. It must include agenda-setting, decision-making authority, access to information, interpretation in relevant languages, resources for travel, time for internal community discussion and accountability to community members. Participation must be designed around mobility and pastoral calendars.

The sixth principle is support for community governance. Many pastoralist institutions have been weakened by state policies, market pressures, conflict and cultural change. Supporting them may include resources for community assemblies, inter-community negotiations, mapping, documentation, conflict resolution, local monitoring, women's leadership, youth training, language transmission and pastoralist-led research. Funding should be flexible and long-term.

The seventh principle is knowledge co-production. Scientists, policymakers and pastoralists should work together in ways that respect different knowledge systems. Satellite data can be useful, but it must be interpreted with herders' observations. Ecological monitoring can be strengthened by community knowledge. Research should return results to communities in useful forms. Data should not be extracted without consent, context or benefit.

The eighth principle is fair pastoral economies. Pastoralists need access to markets, veterinary services, mobile education, health care, financial tools, communication systems and infrastructure that support mobility rather than undermine it. Value chains should strengthen local control and fair prices. Women's economic roles should

be recognized. Pastoral products should be linked to sustainability, culture and territories of life without turning communities into branding objects.

The ninth principle is conflict sensitivity. In many regions, pastoralists are affected by armed conflict, farmer–herder tensions, border insecurity, resource competition and political manipulation. Policies must avoid blaming pastoralists collectively for conflicts rooted in complex histories of land loss, climate stress, governance failure and insecurity. Peacebuilding should protect mobility, negotiate access and strengthen local institutions.

The tenth principle is narrative change. Laws and policies matter, but public imagination also matters. If pastoralists continue to be seen as backward or destructive, good policies will struggle. Schools, media, museums, documentaries, public campaigns and food events can help shift perceptions. Pastoralists should be visible as knowledge holders, food producers, conservation actors, artists, leaders and innovators.

These principles can guide action at different levels.

At the local level, communities can document territories, revive governance systems, strengthen inclusive decision-making, negotiate agreements, monitor ecological change and transmit knowledge to younger generations.

At the national level, governments can reform land laws, recognize mobility corridors, include pastoralists in conservation and restoration strategies, support mobile services, prevent forced evictions, regulate land acquisitions and protect community governance.

At the regional level, neighboring countries can coordinate transboundary mobility, animal health, conflict resolution, drought response and pastoral trade.

At the global level, international frameworks on biodiversity, climate, desertification, land degradation, food systems and Indigenous Peoples' rights can recognize pastoralist territories of life as central to just sustainability. For the ICCA Consortium and allies, a key contribution is to help articulate pastoralist territories of life in ways that are politically useful without simplifying them. This includes supporting community-led documentation, defending rights in conservation policy, amplifying pastoralist voices, connecting regions, producing accessible materials, and ensuring that territories of life are not reduced to technical conservation categories.

The risk of co-optation is real. As terms like community conservation, nature-based solutions, restoration and territories of life become more visible, they may be used by powerful actors without changing power relations. To prevent this, recognition must remain grounded in community authority, self-determination and accountability.

Pastoralist territories of life ask policymakers to think differently. Instead of asking how to settle mobile peoples, ask how to support safe and sustainable mobility. Instead of asking how to control grazing, ask how to strengthen community governance. Instead of asking how to protect nature from people, ask how to support relationships that have sustained nature with people. Instead of asking how to bring pastoralists into existing systems, ask how existing systems must change to respect pastoralist worlds.

Policy checklist

Any policy or project affecting pastoralist territories should ask:



Does it recognize mobility as essential?



Does it protect collective tenure rights?



Does it strengthen community governance?



Does it include women and youth meaningfully?



Does it avoid forced sedentarization or enclosure?



Does it respect pastoralist knowledge?



Does it ensure pastoralists have decision-making power?



Does it prevent green grabbing?



Does it support food sovereignty and local economies?



Does it remain accountable to the communities concerned?

Key message

Recognition must move from language to practice. Pastoralist territories of life need secure rights, protected mobility, community governance, fair economies and rights-based conservation.



Conclusion

**Learning from pastoralist
territories of life**

Conclusion

Learning from pastoralist territories of life

Pastoralist territories of life offer a lesson the world urgently needs: uncertainty can be governed through relationship. In rangelands, mountains, steppes, savannas, wetlands and drylands, pastoralist communities have long faced variability. Rain shifts. Pastures change. Animals fall ill. Conflicts arise. Markets fluctuate. States intervene. Climates warm. Yet pastoralists have developed ways to respond: movement, reciprocity, shared knowledge, collective rules, moral obligations, flexible institutions and care for future generations.

These principles are not only relevant to pastoralists. They speak to the wider human condition in the present and in the future. The world is becoming more uncertain. Climate change is disrupting seasons. Biodiversity is declining. Food systems are under pressure. Conflicts over land and water are increasing. Many institutions built on control, prediction and extraction are failing. In this context, pastoralist knowledge is not marginal. It is deeply relevant.

Pastoralist territories of life show that resilience is not built by standing still. It is built by moving wisely, sharing risks, respecting limits and maintaining relationships. They show that landscapes can be conserved through use when use is governed by responsibility. They show that commons can be sustainable when communities have rights and institutions. They show that food systems can be rooted in diversity and mobility. They show that culture is not separate from ecology. They show that conservation without justice is fragile.

The central message of this book is simple: pastoralists are not remnants of the past. They are custodians of living landscapes and co-creators of sustainable futures. Their territories of life are not empty or degraded spaces. They are places of memory, biodiversity, food, movement, governance, spirituality, conflict, adaptation and hope.

Recognizing pastoralist territories of life requires a change in language, but also a change in power. It is not enough to

celebrate pastoralism during IYRP 2026 and then continue policies that fragment routes, exclude communities, privatize commons or impose conservation without consent. Recognition must protect mobility, collective tenure, customary governance, women's leadership, youth futures, local breeds, food systems, sacred places and the right of communities to define their own priorities.

This recognition also requires humility. Pastoralist societies are diverse. They face internal challenges and external pressures. They are not perfect models to be copied mechanically. But they hold knowledge that has too often been ignored. Listening to pastoralists does not mean romanticizing them. It means taking them seriously as political, ecological and cultural actors.

For civil society, the task is solidarity: supporting pastoralist organizations, defending rights, challenging harmful narratives and helping communities access policy spaces on their own terms.

For policymakers, the task is transformation: designing laws and programs that fit mobile realities rather than forcing pastoralists into sedentary categories.

For conservation actors, the task is humility and justice: recognizing that many landscapes are alive because communities have cared for them, and that conservation must support rather than replace this care.

For researchers, the task is accountability: producing knowledge with pastoralists, not only about them, and returning that knowledge in forms communities can use.

For the public, the task is imagination: seeing rangelands not as empty spaces, but as living worlds; seeing movement not as disorder, but as intelligence; seeing pastoralists not as marginal people, but as teachers of coexistence.

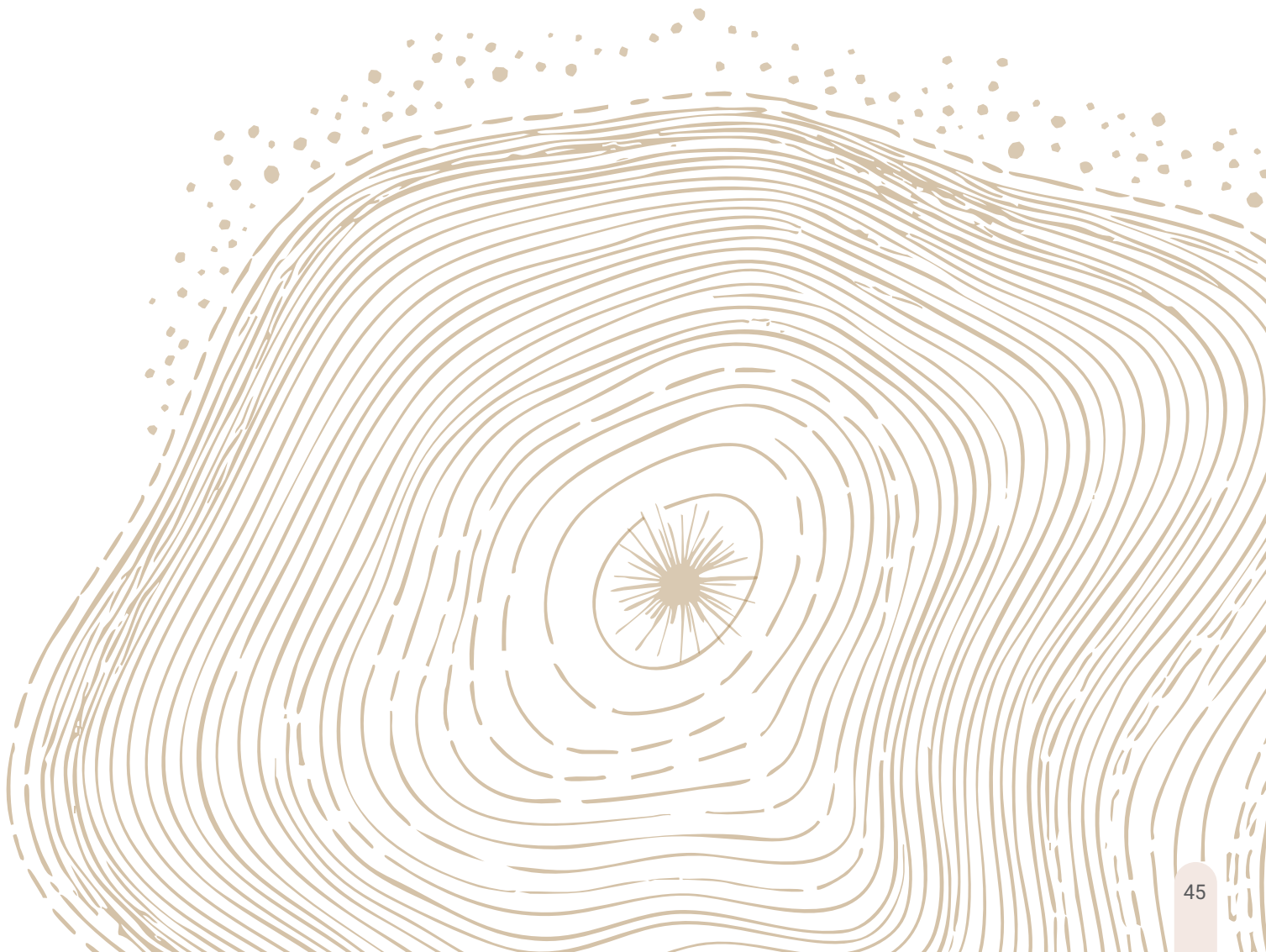
The International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026 can be a turning point if it helps create this shift. It

can amplify pastoralist voices, influence policy reforms, support community-led documentation, promote pastoralist food systems, protect routes and territories, and build alliances across regions. But its success should not be measured only by conferences, declarations or publications. It should be measured by whether pastoralist communities gain stronger rights, greater visibility, safer mobility and deeper respect.

The future of rangelands will not be secured by fences alone, nor by markets alone, nor by conservation

targets alone. It will be secured by relationships of care, responsibility and justice. Pastoralist territories of life already embody these relationships. They invite the world to learn from movement, to govern through reciprocity, and to recognize that life flourishes not through control alone, but through coexistence.

In a world searching for ways to live with uncertainty, pastoralist territories of life remind us that resilience is not built by standing still. It is built by moving with care, memory and responsibility.



Glossary

Biocultural diversity

The interconnection between biological diversity and cultural diversity. In pastoralist territories, animal breeds, languages, foods, rituals, ecological knowledge and landscapes evolve together.

Commons

Shared resources governed collectively through rules, responsibilities and institutions. Commons are not the same as open-access areas.

Customary governance

Community-based systems of rules, authority, decision-making and responsibility rooted in local histories, values and institutions.

Green grabbing

The appropriation of land or resources in the name of environmental goals such as conservation, restoration, carbon offsets or biodiversity protection.

ICCA

Indigenous and Community Conserved Area or Territory. A territory, area or biocultural space conserved by Indigenous Peoples or local communities through their own governance systems and relationships.

Mobility

The movement of people and animals across landscapes to access pasture, water, safety, markets and seasonal resources.

Nomadism

A form of pastoral mobility often involving flexible movement across broad landscapes, sometimes with whole households moving with herds.

Pastoralism

A livelihood and cultural system based on raising animals through extensive grazing, often involving mobility and collective governance of rangelands.

Rangelands

Grasslands, drylands, savannas, shrublands, steppes, mountain pastures and other landscapes used by wildlife and livestock, often shaped by variability and grazing.

Territories of life

Territories or biocultural spaces where communities maintain deep relationships with land, water, biodiversity, culture, livelihoods and governance, contributing to the conservation and continuity of life.

Transhumance

A form of pastoral mobility involving seasonal movement between known ecological zones, such as winter lowlands and summer highlands.

Suggested reading list

This book is mainly a public-facing publication and does not aim to provide a comprehensive academic bibliography. However, readers who would like to explore the themes in more depth may find the following publications, reports and resources useful. They offer accessible entry points and deeper background on pastoralism, rangelands, territories of life, commons governance, biocultural diversity, food systems, rights-based conservation and climate resilience.

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